

**Thesis title: Understanding Islamization and veiling in Post-Soviet  
Kyrgyzstan**

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## ABSTRACT

In the past two decades there has been a considerable and visible rise in the number of veiled Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan. This thesis presents the background of Islamization in Kyrgyzstan, tracing back through three important historical periods: pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet. The first period, presents the pre-Soviet practices of religion in Central Asia. The second period, illustrates the Soviet state policy with atheism as an official doctrine. The third, post-Soviet period presents how Kyrgyzstan like many other countries in transition struggled for economic, political and social stabilization. These historical shifts, changes and factors, independence and the “open door” policy may have facilitated the rise of religiosity among Kyrgyz population.

There are two main focuses in this research project. Firstly, it studies the motivations and rationale of the educated Kyrgyz women who start wearing hijabs upon reaching maturity. The focus will be on educated women from the age of 18 and above. Secondly, the study explores attitudes, views, and perspectives of different groups of the Kyrgyz population in Bishkek, the capital of the country. In doing so, it presents, analyzes and explores the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan from different angles.

The theoretical framework for the study uses social identity and rational choice theories. The empowerment and dis-empowerment concepts are chosen in order to examine and analyze how the positions/status of the interviewees (women in hijab) has changed in the new non-traditional religious context in a secular Kyrgyzstan; women change not only their appearance, but also their status, thus the study explores the consequences veiling has for Kyrgyz women.

The findings of this study suggest that the interviewed women in hijabs have different motives in veiling themselves. The findings also suggest that veiling can be both empowering and dis-empowering for women. The related tensions and insecurities cause contradictions in lives, rights and status of Kyrgyz women in hijabs. Furthermore, the eight interviewees, who were regarded as informants of secondary data, show a potential conflict dimension as a result of the Islamization process occurring in Kyrgyzstan. However, students who also were considered sources of secondary data demonstrate positive attitudes and support towards women in hijabs and Islamization trends in Kyrgyzstan.

**Key words:** veiling, hijab, women, Islam, identity, tension, post-Soviet, Kyrgyzstan, empowerment, dis-empowerment.



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## Chapter 1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a considerable rise of the number of veiled Muslim women on almost in all streets in recent decades in Kyrgyzstan and other post-Soviet countries. Veiling is the public manifestation and evidence that the Islamization process in a post-Soviet space is flourishing. Scholars, official leaders and media of Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and other states are concerned about the religious extremism, fundamentalist and non-traditional Islamic trends, which are perceived as a real threat to their countries and to the Central Asian region as a whole (Kurganskaia, 2002; Abassova, 2001, Sjukijainen, 2002, Abashin, 2002, Kurmanov, 2002).

At one of the State Defense Councils held in February 2014 the President of Kyrgyz Republic Atambayev stressed that:

After 70 years of atheism all conditions were created for religious freedom in the country. Moreover, covering with ideas and words about freedom of religion, the government has taken the religious sphere to chance. All these omissions we feel keenly now. Especially among the Muslims, especially among the Kyrgyz. In 2011, one of the so - called Muslims declared Jihad on me for setting a monument to Manas<sup>1</sup>. The number of those who are under the guise of holy Islam is increasing in the country and they are trying to bury our culture, thereby transforming us into mankurts<sup>2</sup>. Those who lose their faith, language cannot be considered as a nation. (Kutueva, 2014)

This quote indicates that the President of Kyrgyzstan has concerns about the trend of Islamization. Atambaev considers that Islamic transformations, such as veiling to be dangerous to Kyrgyz culture.

Another Central Asian leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev, the President of Kazakhstan, the neighboring country, stated in one of his interviews that he has negative attitudes towards the new Islamization processes such as wearing hijabs. Nazarbaev shares the same position as his Kyrgyz colleague. He argues that the practice is not traditional and alien; and might be dangerous for preserving national symbols, characters and culture.

It is interesting why these new Islamic practices are becoming popular, especially young people who so readily start practicing non-traditional Islam. Some scholars suggest that one of the reasons why the Islamic Identity is embraced so readily in the territories of Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian states is the link between national or ethnic identity with Islam in Central Asia that is being emphasized (Heyat 2004, 2008; Kurganskaia, 2002;

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<sup>1</sup> Manas is a hero from a traditional epic poem of the Kyrgyz people

<sup>2</sup> Mankurt is a term used to refer to a man who does not remembers his roots, his homeland, his mother; character in a novel by Chingiz Aitmatov, Kyrgyz writer during Soviet times.

Abbasova, 2001). However, hijab wearing being a manifestation of belonging to Islam is considered to be contradictory to the cultural practices and historical background of Kyrgyz people. Particular examples and facts of these contradictions are presented in the following section.

## **1.1 Background of Kyrgyzstan**

*Modern Kyrgyzstan is a jumble of dramatically confused and overlaid identities. At the crossroads between East and West, with the ancient Silk Road running through the capital city of Bishkek, the people of Kyrgyzstan have for centuries been subject to prevailing rulers – from the Mongols to the Russians. (Handrahan, 2004, p. 208)*

This section will highlight the role of religion in three historical periods of Kyrgyzstan that are relevant to this research project: namely pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The pre-Soviet period refers to the Silk Road times' religious practices from seventh till twentieth century. Soviet Era covers 70 years' experience under the atheistic regime from 1917 till 1991. The post-Soviet period covers the recent two decades of independence of Kyrgyzstan describing the transformations and changes that facilitated the Islamization processes.

### **Pre-Soviet Era and religion**

Kyrgyzstan, a secular and democratic Central Asian state, is situated among one of the routes of the Silk Road that “served as a bridge of interchanges not only of the goods, but also of knowledge and spiritual values between East and West” (Mokeyev, 2006, p. 125). These connections made it possible for the local tribes that inhabited Central Asia to share different ideas and values and peacefully coexist in various religious systems whether they were polytheistic (nature and animal cults, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism) or monotheistic system (Christianity and Islam) (Abu Hasan, 2002). For example, the nomadic Kyrgyz people practiced ancient indigenous beliefs and practices, such as shamanism and totemism.

The Silk Road led to an influx of many new religious beliefs. These ideas and beliefs were brought into Central Asia via interactions and exchange, whereas Islam was imposed by force in Central Asia. The nomadic tribes which inhabited the current Kyrgyzstan territories were considered to be some of the most persistent enemies of Islam in Central Asia. Although the Arab conquest of Central Asia began in seventh and eighth centuries it took two centuries before Islam became entrenched in this region (Goryacheva, 2010). In Central Asia Islam was spread first among the settled population. Being imported, Islam had to adapt and to absorb

local pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions. From middle of tenth century nomadic tribes of Central Asia, among which were Kyrgyz people, generally began embracing Islam. Sufi orders were travelling along the Silk Road; being mobile these Islam preachers were active and effective in their missionary efforts among the nomadic tribes, such as the Kyrgyz people (Abu Hasan, 2002). Sufi school and philosophy helped to found the output to remain the legacy of Kyrgyz shamanistic past. Therefore, Sufi ideas and philosophy that “God and the human soul are the same” were popular in Central Asia (Kadyrov, 2003, p. 43); whereas the dogmatic and traditional forms of Islam with mosques were not available and useful for the nomadic Kyrgyz (Kadyrov, 2003). This gradual adaptation was effective, and the majority of Central Asian people became Muslims. As a result, when Kyrgyz tribes entered Russian Empire, the second half of nineteenth - early twentieth centuries the overwhelming number of Kyrgyz people classified themselves as Sunni Muslims.

### **Soviet Era and religion**

In 1876 Kyrgyz territories were brought under the control of the Russian Empire and for about 40 years Kyrgyz people were ruled by the Russian Empire. This ended in 1917 when the October Russian Revolution brought to power a new government and a new Communist regime. The Russian Empire died and its territories and possessions come under the Soviet Rule. The Soviet Era lasted for 70 years. During this period the rule of atheism became the official doctrine for all Soviet people as well as for Kyrgyz. Religious practices were restricted and access to religious knowledge was denied. In addition to the lack of access to religion, Kyrgyz people were isolated in the Soviet Union’s antagonism towards the values and ideas of the non-socialist block. It is important to mention that in addition to the history of atheism propaganda and isolation behind the “Iron Curtain”<sup>3</sup>, there were also positive changes. In other words, being part of the Soviet Union also opened up new development opportunities for the Kyrgyz people. The 70 years of the Soviet Era left a legacy of economic and social development, emancipation of women, well-functioning education and health systems and etc. (Heyat, 2002). By the end of the Soviet Era Kyrgyz were under a strong cultural influence from Russia, they were Russified; many western values and policies were introduced and adopted.

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<sup>3</sup> The political, military, and ideological barrier that was erected by the Soviet Union after World War II when it sealed off itself and its allies from open contact with the West and other noncommunist states

## **Post-Soviet Era and religion in modern Kyrgyzstan**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and declaration of independence in 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic has gone through the great changes. Kyrgyzstan, as many other countries in transition struggled for economic, political and social stabilization. Over two decades of independence with an “open door” policy that has led not only to the liberation of economic market, but also opened doors to people and ideas from different countries. Kyrgyzstan, as the other post-Soviet countries, has received political and material support from external sources. Among supporters of the young Republic, were not only Western countries such as the USA, Germany, and Great Britain and other EU countries, but also Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and other Muslim states. The Soviet times’ restrictions of religion were over and the “open-door” policy of Kyrgyzstan and lack of control from the state has led to the unimpeded flow of different kinds of religious schools including Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), Islam movements (radical, fundamental and traditional), and sectarianism. At the same time another Muslim Central Asian country such as Uzbekistan, which also was part of the USSR, have intentionally excluded these kinds of outside influences and kept their “doors closed” (Karaev, 2005). Presumably, Uzbekistan pursued a policy of isolation because of the potential problems which Kyrgyzstan is facing today.

The Islamization occurring in Kyrgyzstan is an interesting phenomenon for two reasons. Firstly, the propaganda of atheism during the Soviet era had a dramatic influence among citizens. As religion was considered the “opium for the people” it was replaced by the Communist ideology. A second reason goes far back into history, prior to the Soviet era. Mirkasymov (2003) writes that “although Central Asian population is predominantly Muslim they had radically different Islamic practices from the Middle Eastern Islamic countries”. Kyrgyz people, being nomads, were less influenced by traditional Islam. According to the materials of UNESCO International Forum “Culture and Religion in Central Asia” in 1999 “Sufism has had the greatest influence on religious beliefs and practices in Central Asia” (cited in Heyat, 2004, p. 277). Sufi mysticism and pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions of the nomadic Kyrgyz, such as beliefs in cults of saints, cults of nature, ancestor worship, idolatry, and shamanism were incorporated together (Heyat, 2004).

Due to the traditional nomadic style of life and its Soviet past, most of Kyrgyzstan’s population is nominally Sunni Muslim with Sufi philosophy, as it better fit with the nomadic life style. But the interest in the newly imported Islamic practices is growing, and there are different reasons including as part of a search for national identity to prestige to be Muslim

which are described by local and international scholars (Heyat 2004, 2008; Kurganskaia, 2002; Abbasova, 2001, Ivanova & Tutlis, 2000). However, today's Islamic trends which are being propagated in the Kyrgyz Republic differ from the traditional beliefs and practices of the Kyrgyz people. For example, the new Islamic movements such as Tabligi Zhamaat or Wahhabis/Salafi school or other conservative orthodox Sunni schools of Islam introduce different variants of Islam, that are not traditional in Central Asia. Such Islamic practices are new and not inherently for Kyrgyz, especially those who live in the northern part of the republic, the moderate Muslim nomads.

Within this complicated history the Kyrgyz people have chosen different religious paths. Being free from the political and religious restrictions of the Soviet times people were free to choose. Some started easily embracing the Islamization. At the same time there are people who remain secular and share westernized values. With independence Kyrgyz people got access to various religious practices and schools, but there is a question as to whether they will be able to peacefully coexist and share different ideologies and religions as it used to be during the Silk Road. With this project, I am questioning whether it will be possible that Kyrgyzstan will be able to live peacefully today when there is a polarization in the Kyrgyz society? More specifically, polarization between the generation of Russified secular population, which grew up during the Soviet Era that faces the new generation - the religious Muslim practitioners, such as women in hijabs.

## **1.2 Topics in earlier studies**

The growing interest in Islam in the post-Soviet space was studied by researcher and writer Farideh Heyat. She conducted two studies where she took into consideration Islamization trends in two Muslim post-Soviet counties: Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan. The first study was conducted in Southern Kyrgyzstan, where Heyat (2004) in her article "Re-Islamization in Kyrgyzstan: gender, new poverty and the moral dimension" provides information on preconditions and motives that account for the rise of religiosity in Southern Kyrgyzstan, which shares borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, two other Muslim post-Soviet countries. In her second article "New Veiling in Azerbaijan: Gender and Globalized Islam" Heyat (2008) focuses on the post-Soviet transformations that facilitated the rise of interest in religion in Azerbaijan. Both counties, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijap being part of one state had the same history when they had been under forced atheism for about 70 years. My own research explores some common socio-cultural factors between Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan. As such, the two studies conducted by Heyat can be helpful for my own project

to understand the reasons behind Islamization, particularly regarding motives of women in hijabs who see veiling as a symbolic action. In other words, it will be valuable to take into account the findings of Heyat about the reasons of Islamization and wearing hijab, and thus to analyze the characteristics of the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan.

When Heyat (2004) conducted her work in Southern Kyrgyzstan she emphasized that the Islamization was in rise in Kyrgyzstan. She stated that number of mosques dramatically increased from 39 in 1991 to officially registered 931 in 2001. The number of Islamic institutions also increased – 38 schools (madrassas) and seven higher educational institutions, whereas there were no Islamic institutions in Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet era. In addition, there is a rise in number of people going on pilgrimage, or Hajj to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. Heyat (2004) also noted a rise in the numbers of veiled Muslim women in the Kyrgyzstan and other Muslim post-Soviet countries, an observation which is central to my study.

During my fieldwork I updated this data. The recent data from the Kyrgyz State Commission for Religious Affairs (2013) shows that numbers continue considerably increasing. The commission registered that in Kyrgyzstan by 2013 there were approximately 2400 mosques, 10 higher educational institutions (six in the north, four - in the south), with 1124 students; 61 madrassas (29 - north, 32 - south) with 2510 students, one international and three state universities have religions studies departments (State Commission, 2013).

A local Kyrgyz scholar, Cholpon Chotaeva (2003), problematizes the Islamization stating that “during the transition Islam is becoming an instrument for overcoming mass alienation and social inequality, it has begun to serve as a psychological sheet anchor in the sea of instability and social changes”. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, in the chaos and the ideological vacuum people started looking for their new identities, meaning of lives in order to adapt to new conditions such as social and economic instability, joblessness, lack of security, rise of criminalization and moral degradation and etc. (Heyat, 2004; Louw, 2007). According to Farideh Heyat (2004; 2008) rise of religiosity in the post-Soviet space can be explained as a survival and coping mechanism, where religion is perceived as panacea and protection from illnesses, chaos, and immoral behavior.

According to Heyat (2004) little is known about the adverse impact of the new, imported Islamic ideologies and their local adaptation on gender relations and the position of women in Central Asia. In addition to that it will be interesting to compare the results of similar work of Heyat (2008) on motivation of young educated women in Azerbaijan to start veiling. Azerbaijan is another post-Soviet Muslim country which was historically more



religious and more patriarchal in comparison to Kyrgyzstan. A second difference is that it borders two Muslim countries Turkey (Sunni) and Iran (Shia) which have long histories in practicing Islam.

In her study conducted in Azerbaijan, Heyat (2008) extended her observations. In her study the young educated women in Azerbaijan in hijabs whom she had chance to interview listed the following reasons and motives to become veiled: search for security, inner-peace, relieve from anxiety caused by uncertainty, stability, membership, return to traditions, gaining respect, greater degree of mobility as parents and husbands let them go out more frequently, religion as panacea from immoral behavior, poverty, crisis, difficult situation, popular (Heyat, 2008, p. 365- 368). In addition to that Heyat (2008) emphasized that Islamic ideology is close to Azerbaijani traditional patriarchal view of society, so it fit in the traditional context (p. 372).

Heyat (2004) in her study of re-Islamization in the South of Kyrgyzstan argued that interest in Islam which is non-traditional Islam of Central Asia began to grow in Kyrgyz society as a survival and healing strategy. Heyat (2004, p. 281), cited local scholar Bakiyeva (1999) to show connections with the rise of Islamization in the country:

With the collapse of other value systems, people have clung to religious values – which have fulfilled the function of a kind of social therapy, making life’s difficulties easier to bear. Islam is also seen as a way of improving the moral health of society. Morality and Islam have become identified one with the other in the general consciousness, and Islam’s educational function is being confirmed. The poverty and unemployment and the demoralisation of the able bodied jobless that have accompanied the slump of the post-Soviet transition period have strengthened Islam’s role as a means of providing practical form of help to people suffering from a loss of a sense of meaning in their lives.

Two other scholars problematized the Islamization issues that were studied in the current research project. According to Abashin (2002) the new Islamic movements do not encourage the popular rituals of indigenous Central Asian people “such as Sufism and worshipping of saints (pilgrimages to their burials, certain rites, etc.)” as they require the believers to live according to the Koran and Sunnah which should be regarded “as the only regulatory instrument of life for the faithful”. According to Laumulin (2012) “some five or six years ago this [Islamization] was a mere formality, while today, Muslims are demonstrating much greater interest in Islam and its meanings” and this radical change “breeds disagreements inside society” as “religious principle of fairness may stir up protest feelings”. Laumulin (2012) believes that rise of interest in Islam might cause tension within the society.

### **1.3 Problem statement**

In the last two decades, the new ideology, the non-traditional version of Islam has been being imported to moderate Muslim Kyrgyz. It should be emphasized here that Kyrgyz are one of the less religious Muslim groups in Central Asia. In Kyrgyz culture, for example, only married and elderly women wear shawls on their heads and long hair was considered to be one of the most beautiful features of women. Today's hijab trend is not only about covering the head with shawl or headscarf, but it is also about covering the whole body from men's eyes. As it was emphasized by Heyat (2004) it is unclear how these new practices of Islam and their local adaptation are influencing the position of women in Central Asia, and what the consequences of re-Islamization are. Heyat (2004) tends to believe that this public manifestation of the religion radicalization, such as veiling (mostly young women) increases patriarchal attitudes in the Kyrgyz society.

The focus of the current research project is to study the motivations and rationale of the educated Kyrgyz women who start wearing hijabs upon reaching maturity, the age of 18 and above for men and women. In addition, attitudes, views, and perspectives of different groups of Kyrgyz population in Bishkek, the capital of the country are analyzed and presented to explore the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan. These groups are represented by: government representatives working with religion issues, journalist with expertise in religious issues, experts in gender and religious issues, religious male respondents, and about 100 students from two secular universities in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The youth of Kyrgyzstan have an interest in Islam and eagerly embraces religious ideology, whereas older people who grew in secular Soviet Era are more resistant. It is hard to change them, whereas youth is susceptible and tends to normalize the Islamization process. In addition, according to the report of the Ministry of education and science of the Kyrgyz Republic, the population of the Kyrgyz Republic has high levels of education: "almost each fifth out of the total employed population has higher or incomplete education" (Ministry of education, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, the students were selected to represent the young educated population, who grew up during the independence period.

This study aims to provide insights about the reasons why educated women are choosing to become religious and start wearing hijabs. It also aims to explore different perspectives towards the Islamization process in order to examine the conflict potential of these social changes in Kyrgyzstan. Hence, through giving the voice to the Kyrgyz women in hijabs and analyzing perspectives of different actors related to social change such as rise of

religiosity this study seeks to illustrate wider and complex processes and transition characteristics of Islamization in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

## **1.4 Research questions**

Several interesting questions have to be asked and raised here taking into account the above mentioned data and information about historical background and changes which occurred in Kyrgyzstan within the last two decades. The study focuses on two research questions: why Kyrgyz women adopt the veil, and what others think about the Islamization process. The main question of this study is to understand the reasons and rationale for educated Kyrgyz women to start wearing hijabs. To study veiling phenomena interviewees were asked to share their reflections and motives for choosing to wear hijabs. In this way, the study aims to illustrate how veiled women justify and rationalize their choice. In addition, the research focuses on the consequences of their choice to become veiled. Therefore, interviewees were asked to share their experiences of their identity transformation and how their families and social networks perceived these changes. To be able to focus on the first goal of the thesis the following questions were formulated:

- Why educated women in Kyrgyzstan start wearing hijabs upon reaching maturity (from 18 years old) when no one forces them to veil?
- What are their motives and rationale?
- How are they influenced and by whom?

In addition to studying the motives of the educated Kyrgyz women to start wearing hijabs the study aims to focus on viewpoints of other representatives of the Kyrgyz population for understanding the Islamization processes in today's Kyrgyzstan. The thesis aims to provide insights and perspectives of different groups such as students, experts, government representatives and male religious insiders towards the Islamization processes. I formulated the following questions to focus on the second goal of the research project:

- What attitudes do sampled students have towards women in hijabs and towards Islamic movements in the country?
- What is the position (official or personal) of the government representatives whose work is related to religion issues towards Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan?
- What is the attitude towards Islamization within the society, state and Mass Media?

- How tolerant are the religious representatives towards the secular population?
- Is there a tension between secular and pro-Islam citizens?

## **1.5 Finding my thesis**

My interest to the issue concerning veiling of young women was sparked by the reporting on the First Russian Channel in 2012. A conflict occurred in a small village in Stavropol region (next to Caucasus) in the Russian Federation where five first year school girls were not allowed to go to school in veils. This was my first experience in seeing everyday religious conflict at local level that was reported at the federal level in Russia. After this report, I became interested in exploring Islamization processes in Kyrgyzstan. I was interested in why religion was on the rise in post-Soviet counties. My attention was drawn to the motives of wearing hijabs and how these changes influence the lives of veiled women in Kyrgyzstan. I was also curious to know how veiling and other non-traditional practices of Islam are perceived by different groups such as families of women in hijabs, educated youth – students; how Islamization in Kyrgyzstan is evaluated by experts, scholars, state representatives and religious male representatives. Bringing in multiple different perspectives from different people made my task more difficult, but my plan was to bring these diverse strands together to provide preliminary analysis of different viewpoints and make a prognosis of the future conflict potentials in Kyrgyzstan due to Islamization.

In the beginning I wanted to better understand why educated Kyrgyz women were choosing to become veiled of their own free will. Their choice to wear hijab was done when they were adults and not like the first year school girls in Stavropol who did not have any choice. My plan was to focus on new veiling phenomena in Kyrgyzstan among educated adult Kyrgyz women. However, the focus of the research project broadened as the main motivation for conducting this study was to estimate how these Islamization processes, such as veiling might have impact on life of educated and secular women like me. I was concerned about the consequences of this kind of change on the status of women who chose to wear hijab; and how polarization between secular and religious groups might cause tension between these groups; and future of Kyrgyzstan, whether it will remain secular. I understood that I wanted to understand not only the veiling phenomena and make visible the reflections of women in hijabs, but as this manifestation was a social framework I also wanted to find and explore different perspectives of the Islamization consequences and potential conflict predisposition. Unexpectedly for me, by the end of my fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan in 2013 I have learned something personal from doing this research. After interviews with women in hijabs and

religious male informants, I felt that I had better understanding of them and my feelings were less antagonistic.

## **1.6 Structure of thesis paper**

The thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on methodological issues of the study. Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical framework of the research project. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 focus on informant's data presentation and analysis. Finally, Chapter 6 presents a summary and conclusion.

## **Chapter 2. Methodological framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss methodological issues related to the choice of the study area, methods and process of data collection and respondents' recruitment issues during the fieldwork. Particular attention will be devoted to insider and outsider status, as this membership issue was a challenge for me during my fieldwork and interviews with women in hijabs in the Kyrgyz Republic.

### **2.2 Study area**

Kyrgyzstan is a small Central Asian country, which used to be part of the Soviet Union. The population of Kyrgyz Republic consists of 5.7 million people. According to the National Statistical Committee (2014), Kyrgyz ethnic group is the largest (72.6%), then goes Uzbek (14.5%) and Russian (6.2%); and other ethnic minorities (6.7%). There are two official languages: Kyrgyz which belongs to Turkic language family and Russian - cultural heritage of Soviet times. The interviews and questionnaire were in Russian language, which is still widely spoken in the capital and cities of Kyrgyzstan. The research was conducted in Bishkek, capital and the largest city of Kyrgyzstan from 3<sup>rd</sup> of June - 27<sup>th</sup> of August, 2013. One interview with religious male respondent was conducted in February 2014.

Bishkek city is located in the northern part of the country and has approximately one million residents. Bishkek was selected as study area due to the several reasons. Firstly, in Bishkek you can find representatives from all parts of the country due to the internal migration from urban and rural areas after 1990s. Secondly, Bishkek is located in Chui province which has the highest proportion of non-ethnic Kyrgyz (Schuler, 2007). Third, capital attracts youth from peripheries to get higher education in Bishkek universities and institutions. Bishkek presents a good range of possibilities from the centre and peripheries, a broad diversity of groups, and being center gives good access to government representatives and experts for the study.

Taking into account the Muslim background of Kyrgyzstan, the majority of population is interested in Islam, which has a variety forms and different schools from moderate to radical and extremist movements which are not regulated by the government. For Kyrgyzstan, being a weak country in transition that might have not only serious social changes such as an increase of number of women in hijabs, but also face political changes in the future as religious part of population will increase year by year and want to protect their interests.



Bishkek being a center makes it possible to meet informants with different backgrounds: the primary data informants represented by women in hijabs and secondary data informants such as government representatives, experts, and students. I believe that these informants could elucidate why Islam is in rise in Kyrgyzstan and what consequences of the Islamization were.

## **2.3 Informants**

### **2.3.1 Anonymity of informants**

Ethical issues had been a major concern as the current topic is sensitive. I designed consent forms for participants of the research in order to make them aware of their rights, and so that they understood the purpose of the research project (Appendix 1). None of the participants of the research should be put in danger or uncomfortable or troublesome situations. The journalist, experts in religion and gender issues and government representative being public figures agreed to state their profession and names openly<sup>4</sup>. One of the government representatives asked for a guaranteed anonymity in the middle of the interview session.

The necessary steps were taken to safeguard the identities of women in hijabs, as well as male religious informants, students, and one of the state representatives. In order to guarantee their anonymity some of the personal data of interviewees was given without reference to informants; names of interviewees were changed; except for one woman in hijab, Jamal Frontbek kyzy founder of religious NGO “Mutakalim”. She was interviewed as an official person, as well as Muslim women’s rights activist<sup>5</sup>. There is a possibility that informants’ security issues might affect the contextualization of informants’ narratives. Consequently, the protection of my informants’ identities is taken here as a serious consideration.

### **2.3.2 Informant size and selection**

According to Corbetta (2003) informants should be selected according to their characteristics such as “their belonging to certain social categories or having been through some particular experience” (p. 265). Thus, key informants are those who have special expertise or knowledge about the studied phenomena (Corbetta, 2003).

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<sup>4</sup> All experts and government representatives were asked whether they wanted to stay anonymous

<sup>5</sup> Some of Jamal’s previous interviews from local newspaper and magazine were used in this paper

In the beginning of my fieldwork I contacted and agreed to interview 12 women in hijabs, but during the fieldwork I was able to interview nine women in hijabs. I recognize that a small amount of informants does not construct a truly statistical sample and cannot be generalized to a larger population. However, qualitative research tends to “focus on one or a small number of cases, to use intensive interviews or depth analysis” (King et al. 1994, p.4). The purpose of this study was not to generalize collected data to a larger population, but to use advantages of qualitative research such as its ability to study social and cultural aspects of people in-depth (Myers, 2013). Qualitative method allows gathering comprehensive data with details and particularities as emotions, motivations, symbols, and their meanings, experiences, usual routines, and other subjective aspects of informants’ lives (Berg & Lune, 2012). The detailed discussion of the methodological data collection approaches will be presented later in this chapter.

In addition to the primary data I was able to recruit secondary data respondents: two government representatives whose work was related to religion issues, two religious male respondents, one journalist who had experience working with religious issues, three experts from non-governmental organizations (universities and NGOs) who were represented by one expert in gender issues, and two experts in religion issues. In addition, 95 students from two secular universities took part in the study and were representing young educated population. The secondary data informants were recruited in order to study Islamization trends and processes in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. All in all during fieldwork 17 in–depth semi-structured interviews were conducted and 95 students filled out self-completion questionnaires.

### **2.3.3 Gaining access to informants**

When selecting my informants I used the non-probability sampling that is most effective when one needs to study a certain cultural domain with “knowledgeable experts within” (Tongco, 2007, p. 147). Based on this consideration, the “knowledgeable experts” within the studied sub-culture I had simple selection criteria for the primary data informants: women who were in hijabs, adults (older than 18), citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

I hoped to gain access to respondents with different backgrounds. But due to the limited time of research and sensitive character of the current topic I decided that the most optimal way to make the first contacts with women in hijabs would be via common friends, colleagues and acquaintances<sup>6</sup>. In addition to that I used snowball technique where informants were asked to assist researcher in reaching other potential subjects. With this sampling

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<sup>6</sup> It is almost impossible to recruit a woman in hijabs without prior introduction by some friend or acquaintance.

approach researcher establishes the initial contact with a “small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others” (Bryman, 2012, p. 202). Bryman (2012) states that snowball sampling is applicable in cases when there is no “accessible sampling frame for the population from which the sample is to be taken” (p. 202). Therefore, this sampling technique was useful and helped in recruiting nine women in hijabs. It should be mentioned here that it was easy to find women in hijabs in Bishkek through my social networks. Thus, in the beginning of my fieldwork I contacted and agreed to interview 12 respondents in hijabs, but it was challenging to persuade to participate and to negotiate with them the interview meeting time. I assume that some of respondents did not agree to be interviewed as women in hijabs in most of the cases are socially isolated as they strongly associate themselves with their sub-culture. So, as a result I managed to organize seven face to face interviews with women in hijabs in Bishkek and two interviews via Skype with Kyrgyz women in hijabs who were working abroad at the time of my fieldwork. It is interesting that although I recruited my research respondents using the snowball technique and through acquaintances, group of interviewed women in hijabs was not homogeneous. The snowball technique offered real benefits for my research as it helped to get access to and reach the isolated part of the population such as veiled women in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

In addition to interviews with women in hijabs I gathered information from the secondary data respondents. The snowball technique helped to recruit two experts in religion from two Bishkek Universities who studied Islamization in Kyrgyzstan and one expert in gender, a university associate professor and a representative of a local NGO, and one government representative whose work was related to religious issues. Whereas, the other government representative who was from the State Commission for Religious Affairs was reached via her office administration, and one journalist with work experience with religious issues was recruited via internet social network.

After coming to Bishkek for the fieldwork I tried to make contacts with mullahs, the mosque leaders, who were also targeted in the beginning of the fieldwork. Unfortunately, my concerns about having problems in recruiting mullahs were confirmed and I was not granted access to interview mullahs. I tried to recruit mullahs from mosques in Bishkek through my respondents and social networks, but as women in hijabs are not frequent visitors of mosques in Central Asia, as they mostly prefer to pray at homes or other private places it was difficult to recruit mullahs for the interview. Moreover, when I contacted via phone with two mullahs they refused to participate in the interview, stating that they were busy and did not have time for interviews. But I can speculate that strong gender segregation issue in Islam and social gap

between religious life and secular sector made mullahs reluctant to talk to the outsider, female non-religious researcher.

After my unsuccessful endeavor to interview mullahs, I decided to give up making contacts with them, and focused on religious male respondents. I decided to refer to this group of informants as they are not considered as just a couple of religious males. Rather, they can be identified as ‘spiritual entrepreneurs’ who are independently aspiring people and unofficially perform some of the functions of mullahs. Thus, these “unofficial” religion figures are often invited to pray for the special gatherings, such as remembering the anniversary of a family members’ death or birthday. Also they are welcomed during Ramadan month, or other religious holidays. It is an accepted practice in the Kyrgyz families, even if they consider themselves to be non-religious, families invite a person to perform prayers in Arabic during spiritually important events.

I was surprised how religious male respondents were motivated, open and eager to share their experiences, knowledge and observations about Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. It is worth noting religious men are in demand among population that is uneducated about religion. So, two religious male respondents being permanently unemployed were socially active and managed to apply their knowledge to disseminate information about Islam, and through reading of Quran and citing other religious books were rewarded with respect, money and other bonuses by their surroundings.

The last group of the secondary data informants were represented by students from the secular universities in Bishkek. They were targeted in order to explore Islamization processes among young educated people in Bishkek. Not all what was planned was possible to achieve. From the beginning of the research project I planned to use online Survey Monkey program so the randomly sampled group of students would fill out online self-completion questionnaires about their attitudes towards Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. Unfortunately, my plan failed as my fieldwork coincided with summer holidays in the majority of universities in Bishkek. Universities which had well-developed internal university based email systems were closed due to summer holidays. So, as a result, I had only two available universities without internal university based email systems that were open during the period of my fieldwork. University administrations authorized me with one day access to students who were having their last exams. Precisely 95 students from economical and humanitarian departments filled out paper based questionnaires where they were asked to indicate the most preferable answers. The detailed discussion regarding the self-completion questionnaire is presented in the following section.

## **2.4 Data collection methods**

In order to answer the proposed research questions, the study uses and combines both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. These two methodological approaches were used in order to explore the Islamization phenomena in Kyrgyzstan from different perspectives by involving different groups of informants. According to Sandelowski (2000) “researchers increasingly have used mixed method techniques to expand the scope of, and deepen their insights from, their studies” (p. 246). Thus, I chose the quantitative method as it is suitable to identify attitudes of student respondents towards Islamization phenomenon. The qualitative method is required here as an in-depth case study method which enables understanding and analyzing motivations, rationale, views, and perspectives of educated women to wear hijabs and explore perspectives of government representatives and experts towards the Islamization trends and processes in Kyrgyzstan.

### **2.4.1 Qualitative interview as method of data collection**

According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994) “qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others - to indwell and at the same time to be aware of how one's own bias and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 123, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). Tesch (1990) defined qualitative data as “any data that are not quantitative, i.e., qualitative data all data that cannot be expressed in numbers”; “not many phenomena in the human world come naturally in quantities” (p. 1-3). As any method, qualitative method of data collection has the pros and cons. Advantages of this method is its ability to study social, cultural and political aspects of people or organizations in-depth. Whereas the major disadvantage of the qualitative research is its inability to generalize data to a large population as small sample of case study does not count much for statistical analysis (Myers, 2013).

The qualitative part of the research project was based on the data collected during the fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan and included face to face interviews which were tape recorded and were aimed to obtain insights from women in hijab's perspective, as well as perspectives of religious male informants, the government representatives and experts in journalism, religious and gender issues. Unfortunately, due to the short time I could spend in Kyrgyzstan during my fieldwork I was not able to conduct a pilot study to test my research instrument.

### **2.4.2 Observation**

Another qualitative data collection instrument which was used during the fieldwork was observation. It is a widely used methodology in many disciplines, which originally grew up within anthropology. According to Berg and Lune (2012) researcher “must watch and listen only to certain portions of what happens” in order to focus their attention to what they want to explore (p. 224). During my interviews with women in hijabs I focused on appearance of women in hijabs. The women in hijabs who participated in the study covered their hair with the scarf, so their hair was not shown. Scarfs were different colors, but predominantly black. Women’s faces and hands were exposed. The majority had covered their bodies with loose dresses or loose long sleeve tops and long skirts. Three of the interviewees were in black dresses and black headscarves. The other interviewees preferred to adapt western clothes to Islamic rules: long sleeves and skirts, whereas one of the interviewees was in long loose shirt and loose jeans and in colored headscarf. Some of interviewees wore make-up.

An interesting observation was made during the interview with one of the religious male informants. As the interview was conducted in the café, in the secular “outsiders” territory he demonstrated interest and positive attitudes towards his new experience. For example, he was amazed by the beautiful design on the served coffee. And when the interview was over he took a picture of the menu with Latte coffee which he tasted for the first time in his life. The interview lasted more than three hours. He expressed delight about the pleasant interior of the café and did not want to leave, although he did state that it was sinful to listen to the music which was playing at the café.

By the end of my field trip I have made another observation. It is important to note that the dates of my research coincided with Ramadan month - from 8<sup>th</sup> July till 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013. I consider that this circumstance helped me in recruitment of religious respondents as they were willing to participate as they believed that they cannot reject my polite request to participate in the research and of course should share their knowledge about Islam.

### **2.4.3 Interviewing**

Qualitative data can be collected via interviews, questionnaires, observation, documents and texts analysis, and researcher’s impressions and reflections (Myers, 2013). I believe that such social phenomenon as veiling would be best understood and explored through the use of qualitative interview method: collection of respondent’s stories, descriptions of their experiences, their emotions and rationales. Qualitative interview differs from an ordinary conversation or dialogue, it is a “guided conversation in which the



interviewer establishes the topic and ensures that the interview is conducted according to the cognitive aims set” (Corbetta, 2003, p. 265). When conducting research I used a non-standardized instrument in data collection, that is, semi-structured interviews. In this kind of interview researcher refers to the interview guidelines where the order of the topics and the wording of the questions “are left to the interviewer’s discretion ... the content, but not the form, of the questions is predetermined” (Corbetta, 2003, p. 270-272). I chose semi-structured interview as it is flexible and “sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of research question while also leaving space for study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study” (Galletta, 2012, pp. 1-2). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to “prompt the participant, rephrase questions, and make changes according to the interview situation” (Galletta, 2012, p. 75). Semi-structured interview enables the interviewer not only to choose the order of questions or appropriateness of wording, but also to pay attention to particular topics for in-depth study and able to rise any questions and topics which would be relevant during the course of the interview in case if she or he considers themes to be important to be investigated for the study (Corbetta, 2003).

When developing interview guidelines for respondents from different groups (women in hijabs, religious male respondents, experts, and government representatives) I was focused on my research questions. All respondents were interviewed once. For women in hijabs I used semi-structured interview which consisted of 27 questions, where three questions focused on the basic demographic information and the rest were open-ended such as: when and why did they start wearing hijabs, what made them interested in Islam, by whom and how were they influenced, what were their motives and rationale, how their lives changed after they started wearing hijabs and etc. (Appendix 2).

Place of interviews was in all cases discussed with the respondents, so that respondents with sensitive topic felt comfortable and safe. American University of Central Asia, my first Alma Mater allowed me to use one of its study rooms so I could conduct interviews. But only two women in hijabs were willing to be interviewed there. Two of interviews were conducted at work places of the respondents and, one in the park and two interviews were conducted at homes of the women in hijabs. I believe my flexibility in choosing place enabled good development of rapport with respondents and was beneficial for interviews in smoothing over the imbalance between the researcher and the informants.

Semi-structured interview guidelines for the ‘religious entrepreneurs’, the religious male respondents, consisted of seven questions focused on state/society relationships towards Islam and their perspectives about the Islamization in Kyrgyzstan (Appendix 2). The main

difficulty during interviews with religious male respondents was to make them to answer to questions as they got used to disseminate information about Islam and cite Quran and hadiths, but “lost skills” of having dialogue about nonreligious topics. So, monologue was a typical type of conversation for both religious male respondents. One interview lasted one hour and a half and the other three hours. First interview was conducted in the study room provided by American University of Central Asia. Although this respondent agreed to meet for the interview in the proposed place, he confessed that he had antipathy towards American government. I was surprised that the male respondent did not reject my invitation to the proposed place, which he associated with antagonistic and foreign elements.

The interview with the second respondent was not conducted during the fieldwork, and it was his initiative to meet with me during my visit of Kyrgyzstan in February 2014. Due to the lack of the space to conduct the interview and cold weather we had to conduct interview in a small and quiet café.

All interviews with government representatives and experts in journalism, religious and gender issues had similar semi-structured interview guidelines which consisted of 14 questions (Appendix 2). They were asked about reasons of rise of number of women in hijabs in Kyrgyzstan and future prognosis of Islamization trends, their personal attitude and assessment of the Islamization processes, position of government and society towards these social changes. The average interview was one hour; the shortest was half an hour and the longest an hour and a half. Interviews were conducted at the work places of the respondents. In the end of the interviews government representatives and experts were asked to indicate their level of association with Islam (Appendix 2: question 14). This self-categorization measurement tool was proposed by Mael (1988) to measure self-categorization as perceived overlap between individual’s self-concept and the social category or organization (Mael, cited in Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000, p. 564-566).

#### **2.4.4 Quantitative interview as method of data collection**

According to King et al. (1994) “quantitative research uses numbers and statistical methods ... it abstracts from particular instances to seek general description or to test causal hypotheses; it seeks measurements and analyses that are easily replicable by other researchers” (King et al. 1994, p. 3-4). Quantitative research method was used to collect data from students from Bishkek universities. With the use of this kind of data collection I wanted to explore what attitudes the sampled students from the secular universities had towards women in hijabs, and other Islamization changes in the Kyrgyz Republic. Sampled students

were asked to fill out self-completion questionnaires. Questionnaire consisted of 19 groups of questions: six demographic questions, and the rest of questions asked students to indicate the level of agreement or disagreement with the proposed statements or choose from the list of statements the most preferable/close answer/answers (Appendix 3). Questionnaires were handed out to students in classes and after completion were collected back. Students in average used 20 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. According to Myers (2013) the major disadvantage of quantitative research method is that “many of the social and cultural aspects of organizations are lost or are treated in a superficial manner” (p. 8). In addition, this kind of questioning has limitations such as the inability to ask extended number of questions so respondents would not become tired or greater risk of missing data, however, this instrument was effective in recruiting and engaging a higher quantity of students in a short period of time.

A vignette technique was used in questionnaires. This method helped to avoid ethical dilemmas and it was used in order to get access to subject's attitudes or opinions in a given hypothetical situation. Therefore, this technique was useful in investigating sensitive topics such as religion as in the case of the current study. In addition, social distance scale was used to measure the willingness of students to participate in social relations with women in hijabs. This social distance scale was created by Emory Bogardus in 1930s as a tool for measuring the willingness of people to participate in social relations with other kinds of people (Scott & Marshall, 2009). The self-categorization item developed by Mael (1988) to measure overlap between one's self-concept and other group was also included in the questionnaire (Mael, cited in Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000, p. 564-566). In this case it was used to measure students' self-categorization with the Muslim community.

## **2.5 Fieldwork experience/self-reflection**

One of the main methodological challenges of the data collection was membership status. Coming from the same country and speaking the same language, and sharing the same gender did not grant me membership in the sub-culture of women in hijabs. I was aware and prepared for challenges with my “outsiderness” and my limited knowledge in Islam. I had concerns how my background, being a non-religious person, and how my motive to conduct this research about reasons why number of women in hijabs rises in Kyrgyzstan would affect my respondents in hijabs during the fieldwork. I tried to be open to their questions and honestly informed them about my background and my academic interest in this particular topic. I tried to be open to their experiences and be conscious about how my self-presentation,

and the fact that I did not belong to their group influenced the way my respondents presented themselves during interviews. In addition to my awareness about how my background affected the way how respondents presented their stories and defended their positions, I tried to be self-reflective how my personal experience and opinion influenced my assumptions, mood and hypothesis during the interviews with religious informants - women in hijabs and religious male informants.

### **2.5.1 Self-reflection**

Self-reflection is a critically important for the qualitative research. Reflexivity defined by Barbara Babcock (1980) “is the capacity of language and of thought” to direct one’s observation of one’s experience, thus “becoming an object to itself ... mirroring of the self”; by turning to the self, researcher becomes aware of her or his limits as interpreters to make a distinction between “what is ‘real’ and what is ‘fiction,’ between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’” (Babcock, cited in Foley, 2002, p. 473). By means of critical exploration of the self-and-other relationships in the fieldwork researcher avoids producing discriminating interpretations and minimizes her or his bias (Foley, 2002; Roof, 2011). In such reflexive exploration researcher should be aware of her or his own position, ideas, interests, and be aware about her or his role in the conducted research. This critical self-reflexivity helps to “make explicit how inter-subjective elements impact on data collection and analysis” and enhances trustworthiness of the research (Finlay, 2002, p. 211). Researchers use reflexivity as a methodological tool in order to make their study to be trusted and valid, however some scholars claim that there is a danger for researchers to get lost in narcissistic and self-indulgent self-analysis (Pillow, 2003; Finlay, 2002). According to Pillow (2003) to be reflexive “requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher’s self-location (for example, gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position, and interests influence all stages of the research process” (p. 178).

Making use of reflexivity, I move to discussion of insider and outsider status of a researcher. As this insider/outsider status issue was a challenge for me during my fieldwork. Here I will question whether researcher has to be a member of the studied group to know its experiences and its perspectives regarding religious practices of women in hijabs in Kyrgyzstan. The status of the researcher should be identified as it raises number of issues which have impact on the relationship between the informants and the researcher. Who is insider and who is outsider? How being insider or outsider makes an impact on the relationship between the study participants and the researcher?

One of the earliest definitions of insider research was suggested by Robert Merton in 1972 where he defines “the insider as an individual who possesses a priori intimate knowledge of the community and its members” (Merton, cited in Hellowell, 2006, p. 484.). According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009) insider research refers to when researchers share language, the characteristic role, or experience with the study participants. An insider is considered to be a part of the culture, and have the same membership identity – for example, gender, age, class, ethnicity and etc. (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). In my case, when I interviewed women in hijabs, I came from the same country, spoke the same language and had the same historical and gender background. From this perspective I exhibited some aspects that could be considered as insider researcher. Logically an outsider is someone who has no insider characteristics. According to, Hallowell (2006) outsider researcher “is where the researcher is not a priori familiar with the setting and people s/he is researching” (p. 485).

So what are the benefits of being insider? First of all being an insider gives common ground from which to begin the research. For many access to the group would not be possible if the researcher was not a member of the group (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p 58). In my case, if I were male researcher women in hijabs might not agree to take part in my research. My gender and state membership gave access to the group of women in hijabs, even though in some degree I was also an outsider, a non-religious person. These membership issues were addressed by Watson (1999) and Armstrong (2001), where they argued that membership in the group studied by the researcher provides access to participants, as they are more open and have higher level of trust and level of safety (cited by Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58). In other words, acceptance, membership provides a level of trust and openness of participants in insider research. The second benefit is the possibility to speak from within a culture (Turner, 1994, p. 86, cited in Harvey, 2011, p. 226). Being part of the culture enhances the depth and breadth of understanding a population (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

In the case that the research is focused on religious phenomena Darshan Singh (1991) states that understanding of religious people becomes a very important and critical issue. According to Singh (1991), religion is “an area which is not easily accessible to the outsider, foreigner or non-participant” and “inner meaning of religion unfolds only through participation; by following the prescribed path and discipline” (Singh, 1991, p. 3, cited in Knott, 2005, p. 244). But here I tend to agree with other scholars such as Kristensen (1973) and van der Leeuw (1963) who were, cited by Knott (2005). Kristensen (1973) argued that “all religious phenomena were ‘unique, autonomous and incomparable’, yet capable of understanding by means of empathy, that is, by reliving in one’s own experience that which

appears to be alien” (Kristensen, cited in Knott, 2005, p. 245). And van der Leeuw (1963) emphasized that although it was impossible to “apprehend religion or the sacred in and of itself, it was possible to understand its manifestations and appearances” (Leeuw, cited in Knott, 2005, p. 245).

In recent decades two different approaches studying religious phenomenon have emerged. The first one requires objective, outsider position in that “the aim of the scholar of religion should not be to get inside the experience and meaning of religious phenomena, but to build upon the benefits of critical distance to explain religion from the outside” (Knott, 2005, p. 245). And the second approach focuses on reflexivity, and it requires greater awareness in that one should “research and write consciously from within their context and standpoint whether as insiders or outsiders” (Knott, 2005, p. 245). Taking into account these arguments I will move to the challenges of being insider researcher.

According to Kanuha (2000) such issues as objectivity, reflexivity, and authenticity of a research project can be a challenge as an insider researcher may “know too much” and be “too close to the project and may be too similar to those being studied” (Kanuha, 2000, p. 444, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 57). That is why an insider researcher should gather data with “eyes open”, and assume that knows nothing about the studied phenomenon (Asselin, 2003, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). Furthermore, Asselin (2003) warns that researcher should be aware that being part of the culture does not mean that researcher will understand and know everything about the subculture.

Another challenge of insider research is related to difficulties in separating from the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Closeness with participants might affect the analysis as an insider researcher might be in confluence with her or his study participants. So this closeness might force the researcher to leave out some data results that would not be consistent with the researchers ideas about her or his group. This mechanism is called in-group bias or in-group favoritism - a “tendency to favor the in-group” when evaluating it (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 38). On the other hand, this closeness to the group might affect participants of the research in other ways as well. Participants may make assumptions that the researcher is similar and familiar with their individual experiences and therefore fail to explain truly their experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Some interesting arguments that support the outsider position have been suggested by Fay (1996), where he states that being a member of the studied group does not provide sufficient ability to “know” the experience of that group, as “knowing implies being able to identify, describe and explain” (Fay, 1996, p. 20, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009 p. 59). Fay



suggests four reasons to support the outsider’s position. He brings several arguments stating that being outsider researcher can facilitate the knowing of the group. First, Fay (1996) argued that someone from the outside might be able to more adequately and sufficiently interpret the experience of the studied group. In this case distance between the participants and the researcher is required for exploration and research of the participant’s experiences. The second argument states that because of the complexity of human experience (e.g. confusing, mixed motives, thoughts, feelings and goals and etc.) another might sometimes be able to see through these overlapping and confusing features, whereas the insider may not. Fay (1996) emphasized that “there is no self-understanding without other-understanding” (Fay, 1996, p. 24, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009 p. 59). The third argument states that outsiders sometimes might be able to see the wider perspective of the studied phenomenon; see connections and patterns which might not be seen by insider’s internal experience. Fourth, it was argued that people tend to “hide ourselves from ourselves out of fear, self-protection, and guilt”, thus the outsiders might be able to explore and see more clearly other group experiences and “can override the self-deception” (Fay, 1996, cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009 p. 59). From this discussion, I can confidently state that insider and outsider status perspectives have advantages and challenges, and researchers should be aware of their relations with the studied groups. In the next section I would like to present continuum with outsider to insider extremes to discuss contemporary research debate of the insider/outsider problem.

Junker and Gold were the first scholars who identified the outsider to insider perspective continuum in 1950s. They broke it into four role conceptions: complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer and complete participant (Knott, 2005, p. 246).

<b>OUTSIDER</b>		<b>INSIDER</b>	
Complete Observer	Observer-as-Participant	Participant-as-Observer	Complete Participant

Many contemporary researchers (see Labaree, 2002) suggest that to some degree researcher can be simultaneously be an insider, and to some degree outsider (Hallawell, 2006, p. 490). So there might be not “one continuum but about a multiple series of parallel ones” (Hallawell, 2006, p. 490). Here I point to the argument of Harvey where he states that there are “no ‘insiders’ who are not sometimes ‘outside’ to some degree in relation to those they observe” (Harvey, 2011, p. 227). In my case being a female interviewing other females have

elements of insider membership, as we have common gender identity. But at the same time when I am a female who does not wear hijab interviews Muslim females in hijabs, I have other parallel outsider position based on religious dimension.

### **2.5.2 Being local**

My personal accounts and position towards the women in hijabs had both insider and outsider elements. From the one hand, I was insider as I was a part of Kyrgyz culture and had prior knowledge about the country and spoke the same language. However, as it was stated by Asselin (2003) being part of the culture does not mean that the researcher understands and knows the subculture (cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Women in hijabs and I were aware about my outsider position, as I was not member of Muslim group. Coming from Northern part of the country, and being raised by “russified” parents in the capital of the country, Bishkek, and studying at American and European universities I consider myself to have liberal as well as non-religious views. I personally could not understand how an independent, secular country with moderate Muslim practices before the Soviets and with history of atheism and secular education system during the Soviet Era was moving toward becoming religious; where educated, women start wearing hijabs, change their life styles, and start thinking and behaving differently. In addition, I did not have prior knowledge of the subculture, and about Islam; I was not familiar with women in hijabs and male religious ‘entrepreneurs’ before I conducted interviews. Thus, being part of the culture, I was not close and did not know much about the studied subculture members. However, I was interested in exploring their motivations and rationale of changing their identities. I believed that my skills and knowledge in Psychology and my genuine interest and curiosity would help me, as an outsider, in getting open and honest interviews with women in hijabs.

### **2.5.3 Same gender/cross-gender interviewing**

An unexpected observation occurred during interviews with religious male respondents. They were less shy and had less “hostile” attitude towards me (female researcher who studies in the foreign country and who is nonreligious) than I expected before the interviews. They could openly and critically discuss issues about their religious communities with the researcher. Having conducted two interviews with religious male respondents and nine women in hijabs I had some grounds to compare how open and welcoming were religious male respondents in comparison with female religious respondents. So, I can conclude that although women in hijabs in whole were comfortable to talk to non-believer, I

personally felt that religious male respondents who might have perceived that the researcher has high degree of “outsiderness” were more relaxed and comfortable during the interview. It should be also noted that during the interviews with women in hijabs, I noticed that they defended their positions and were less critical when discussing religious topics and attributes, such as hijab wearing or polygamy. It was also interesting to notice that in cases when I and my respondents had similar interests or similar educations, there was some familiarity between us and it felt more comfortable, relaxed, so that they were able to openly share their stories during the interviews.

## **2.6 Summary**

This chapter focused on methodological issues of the research. Data was collected in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan from June until August in 2013 and one interview was conducted in February 2014. In order to study perspectives and motivations of educated women who started wearing hijabs, views, opinions and attitudes of the secondary data informants towards the Islamization processes in Kyrgyzstan, I used both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. All in all during fieldwork 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted (nine women in hijabs, two government representatives, two religious male respondents, one journalist, three experts; and 95 students filled out self-completion questionnaires). I used different approaches for recruiting respondents: women in hijabs, religious male respondents, experts and one government representative were recruited with the help of the snowball technique; students were recruited via university and another government representative who was representing the State Commission for Religious Affairs was recruited via the state commission’s administration; and journalist was recruited through internet social networks. Eventually, my research experience showed that being woman from the same country, speaking the same language and being non-religious person had its impact on my respondents. Issues of sameness and difference, are complex and as Harvey (2011) stated “all degrees along the ‘insider/outsider’ continuum can establish both bridges and barriers” (p. 226). My gender status gave easier access to women in hijabs and it was advantageous, but my atheistic views probably influenced the way my religious respondents presented themselves.

## **Chapter 3. Theoretical framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a theoretical framework for the study of the veiling phenomena in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Firstly, I will refer to findings of two eminent social psychologists, Henri Tajfel and John Turner who developed social identity theory. Wearing hijab is a social manifestation and social identity theory is central in highlighting the identity formation of newly veiled women in Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, the course of identity change will be discussed from the perspective of rational choice of religion. With the concept of the rational choice I seek to discuss how identity of women in hijabs was transformed due to certain rational strategies. These two theoretical frameworks supplement each other as both are explanatory theories which get at motives why women started wearing hijabs. Social identity theory is used to explain almost entirely unconscious motives, whereas rational choice theory presents interviewees' conscious choice to become veiled. Thus these theories used together as complementary theories on exploring the veiling motives. Finally, I will focus how new transformations of identity and lifestyles of women in hijabs might be empowering or dis-empowering as by wearing hijabs women change their status within the society.

This conceptual framework was selected as apparently empowerment of veiling seems to be attractive for women in Kyrgyzstan. However, the empowerment and dis-empowerment concepts are used in analysis of the costs and benefits of interviewees choice. This conceptual framework aims to explain not only motives of women to cover themselves, but also to explain the realities on the ground, thus empowerment and dis-empowerment polarity perspectives helps to illuminate what was heard and observed during the fieldwork. I believe that these three perspectives will help to trace religious experiences of interviewees, the women in hijabs in today's Kyrgyzstan.

People were probably interested in religion from the dawn of human history. Even the secularization trends and weakening of institutional religion "it has a way of reviving" and remains to be one of the important concerns of people all over the world (Allport, 1978, p. 3). Religious sentiment does not appeal to one single dominator which would explain the emotions, rationale and intentions to become religious. The simplistic approach in analyzing religious experience of all human beings is not acceptable here as there are pluralistic and varied religious experiences in each individual case.

The first explanatory theory which is used for studying motives for why women would start wearing hijabs is a social identity theory. From the beginning of the current study I

included social identity theory which was developed by Tajfel and Turner in late 1970s as this conceptualization of social identification and the self-categorization processes related to interpretation of such phenomena as veiling in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The reason for choice of this conceptualization of identity is that when women in Bishkek started identifying themselves as Muslims they made themselves distinct according to their religious identity and by wearing hijabs. The social identity theory will help to explain the social change phenomenon of why the interviewed Kyrgyz women become veiled. In addition, this theoretical perspectives help to understand relationships between the self and others. The second conceptualization which is used in the analysis of the research project is the rational choice theory was included based on the findings of the fieldwork. In addition, concepts of empowerment and dis-empowerment were built in order to highlight the reflections of interviewees. Thus, the selection of theoretical framework was guided by the collected field data. With the intention to accentuate as best as possible the research questions and field data findings this conceptualization framework is introduced to speak for and present the study informants.

### **3.2 Social Identity Theory**

Since 1990s, social identity theory is now accepted as “one of the mainstream social psychology’s most significant general theories of the relationship between self and group” (Hogg, 2006, p. 111). It is integrated approach with “concepts, theories, or analyses dealing with different aspects of social identity processes and phenomena” (Hogg, 2006, p. 113); in Tajfel’s original version it was stated as “multilevel nonreductionist analysis of self and group” (Hogg, 2006, p. 112). The social identity theory provides useful analytical tools for understanding social identity phenomena from different perspectives as it embraces significant social aspects and concepts.

According to Tajfel, social identity was defined as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1972, cited in Hogg, 2006 p. 113). According to Hogg and his colleagues (1995) the basic idea of the social identity theory is that social category (e.g. nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, sex and other), “to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the self-concept” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 259). Within this theory there are “interrelated concepts and subtheories that focus on social-cognitive, motivational, social-interactive and macrosocial facets of group life” (Hogg, 2006, p. 111). According to Hogg (2006), “social identity theory addresses phenomena such as prejudice,

discrimination, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, intergroup conflict, conformity, normative behavior, leadership, deviance, and group cohesiveness ... self-conception, motivation ... and social influence” (Hogg, 2006, p.111-113). This theory does not focus on isolated processes or interactions, but is addressed as diverse social phenomena. Social identity theory is not only about intergroup relations and group process, but it is the theory that also focuses on the social self; it discusses social identification and the self-categorization processes.

Today’s Kyrgyz society is struggling and competing between different ideals, normative models social practices renegotiating past and present perspectives. Thus, society is dividing and expression of identity is causing conflict which can be illustrated why finding of the current research project where boundaries between Muslim believers and secular part of society cause frustration and tension. In other words, change produced by veiling phenomenon challenges normative behavior of the secular population as it deviates from their perspectives, and this change increases discrimination and stereotyped attitude towards the minority, the veiled women.

### **3.2.1 Social categorization**

In addition to social identification process there is another important interrelated concept in social identity theory which is called social categorization. Social categorization supplements and provides links between social identification processes that “link self-attitude (identity) with normative behavior”; more effectively “link society with individual social behavior” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 266-267). Social categorization is related to the cognitive aspect of the social identity theory. According to this concept by simple division of people into two distinct groups, categories (‘we’ and ‘they’) we start the process of social categorization, which starts creating an atmosphere of oneness, feeling of belongingness, trust, solidarity and other patterns of the in-group liking and simultaneously “trigger intergroup discrimination” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 38; Tajfel, 1978). According to Sumner (1906) “one of the most distinctive features of group life and intergroup relations is ethnocentrism, or positive distinctiveness - a belief that ‘we’ are better than ‘them’ in every positive way” (Sumner, cited in Hogg, 2006, p. 120). In other words, the awareness of the presence of an out-group, or “others” creates greater homogeneity within the in-group and individuals tend to enhance their self-esteem creating positive group identity.

Turner (1981) suggests that the presence of “other” helps to create identification as an in-group member which is associated with the salience of the other group (out-group/s). It is interesting that researchers found that there is no need for prior hostility, conflict of interests,

self-interest or any strategy for favoring in-group members and discriminating against out-groups. The presence of an out-group is enough for in-group favoritism and symbolizes the existence of a boundary which causes intergroup discrimination (Hewstone & Cairns, 2001). This boundary is clearly seen in the current case of veiled women and non-veiled women in Bishkek.

Taking into account the atheistic past of Kyrgyz people during the Soviet period and the Islamization process during its independence it is important to examine the conflict potential. In Kyrgyzstan today, there is a grouping and division for religious insiders and secular groups associated with outsiders. The division already exists that this categorization with first or second group will tend to enhance homogeneity within both groups and hostile and discriminating atmosphere would go with this division process. This divisional trend for insiders and outsiders and conflict potentials will be presented in the Chapter 4 when discussing attitudes and perspectives of secondary data informants towards Islamization process and veiling in Kyrgyzstan.

People have as many social identities “as there are groups they belong to” (Hogg, 2006, p. 115). One person might simultaneously belong to several groups such as: females, parent, doctor, mother, Kyrgyz citizen with mixed Ukrainian and Kyrgyz origin. Such category memberships have different levels of importance to individuals. However, when a situation or a context changes the identity also transforms. This process can be observed in the context of the post-Soviet transformation in the last 20 years in Kyrgyzstan. According to social identity theorists, identification is the essence of groupness: “people can be in a common-bond or a common-identity group, but if they have no sense of belonging, do not identify, and do not define and evaluate self in terms of the properties of the group, then they are unlikely to think, feel, and behave as group members” (Hogg, 2006, p. 117). In other words, if the person has a strong sense of groupness as Kyrgyz Muslim women in the current study, then they start behaving and thinking according to their self-concept, a category as members of Muslim women’s group. And as veiling is one of the ascribed attributes of Islam, they change their dress styles, behavior, and their way of thinking in order to conform with the group they assume to belong to.

According to Brewer (2001) there are four social identity types: person-based social identities, relational social identities, group-based social identities and collective identities. In this chapter I will focus only on the first two types the person-based social identities and relational social identities as these types best conceptualize findings from the fieldwork.

Person-based social identities refer to the question ‘Who am I?’ in terms of a social category member. The emphasis here is on the different kind of associations regarding the membership and belonging to a specific social category. This question ‘Who am I?’ which refers to self-identification was and remains especially important in the transitional period, when old categories such as communist, or soviet people no longer applicable and do not apply to the new history of Kyrgyz people. New categories and group belonging associations should be considered, constructed and accepted. Further, this study does not focus upon national identity transformation in the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, the identity change experiences in the context of today’s Kyrgyzstan are relevant and vividly captured from the interviewees’ narratives.

The second, relational social identities are defined as “the self in relation to others” where person has role identities that correspond to the concept of the “interdependent self” (Brewer, 2001, p. 118). Examples of relational identities are family relations such as parent-child, sister-brother, occupational role relationships such as seller-customer and personal relationships such as friendships and interpersonal relationships within teams, clubs and other (Brewer, 2001). According to Hogg (2006) “in collective cultures group membership can be defined in terms of people’s relationships to one another ... your network of relationships locates you within the group and maintains your membership” (Oyserman et al., 2002, cited in Hogg, 2006, p. 116). It is important to mention that Kyrgyz people historically belong to the collectivist culture, before, during and after the Soviet era. That is why it should be emphasized that “collectivist norms prioritize the group over the individual and thus encourage social identity and group-oriented behavior” (Hogg, 2006, p. 116). As social roles are prescribed by our surrounding this type of social identity is an important foundation for my investigation of motives of women in hijabs.

Social identity both “describes and prescribes one’s attributes as a member of that group – that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 259-260). As members of one group (in-group) generally are placed in the same social environment, they are exposed to the same information and have the same perspective, and usually their prototypes are analogous and become shared (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 261). Group prototypes make group a distinct entity, but these prototypes are also strongly influenced by the out-group prototypes. That is why social identity is a “highly dynamic” and responsive construct that mediates to the social and contextual factors such as, for example, intergroup relations (Hogg et al., 1995).



By categorizing people as in-group and out-group members, we transform our lenses through which we see people: instead of seeing individuals we start seeing and evaluating people through lenses of prototypes in case of this study our lenses are directed to women in hijabs, where hijab is a prototype for categorizing women in Islam. We see categories and measure attributes, stereotypes, depersonalizing people from both in-group and out-group: perceiving people as having positive or negative attributes of a category and not as individual (Hogg, 2006). This could be seen in the next chapter when discussing and analyzing secondary data informant's perspectives.

### **3.2.2 Social identity motives**

What are the motives and drives which might make Kyrgyz women categorize themselves as Muslim believers and become members of a Muslim religious group? There are two motivation processes relevant to this study: self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction. According to Sedikides and Strube (1997) motives for positive social identity is related to one of the most basic human motives for self-esteem and self-enhancement. This argument is supported by the self-esteem hypothesis developed by Abrams and Hogg (1988). The hypothesis suggests that identification with a group and intergroup behavior builds up and raises self-esteem. According to Hogg (2006) "self-enhancement is undeniably involved in social identity processes", however, "the link between individual self-esteem and positive group distinctiveness is not always that tight" (p. 120). Although social identities can be devalued or stigmatized and can depress self-esteem, "people are exceedingly adept at buffering themselves from the self-evaluative consequences of stigma" (Crocker, Major & Steele, 1998, cited in Hogg, 2006, p. 120). Examples of this adaptation to devaluation and stigmatization will be illustrated in Chapter 5 when discussing narratives of interviewees when during the transformation period Muslim Kyrgyz women in hijabs faced the negative reactions of families towards their veiling but remained resistant and managed not to let to devalue their self-esteem. They remained of the same opinion and continued wearing hijabs.

The second social identity motive is uncertainty reduction. People strive to reduce subjective uncertainty about their social world and their place within it (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This motive is closely related to social categorization as this process helps to reduce uncertainty. Through categorization people know who they are and who are others, they know how to behave and how others might behave, they get to know how to interact with other people making behavior predictable, they know how they should feel and behave within their groups and outside of the groups in order to avoid harm (Hogg, 2006, p. 120-201). Social

uncertainty and instability is often associated with orthodox and extremist groups and ideological belief systems (Hogg & Blaylock, 2012; Furnham & Procter, 1989). Hogg (2006) suggests that “the more self-conceptually uncertain one is, the more one strives to belong, particularly to the groups that effectively reduce uncertainty – such groups are distinctive, with high entitativity and simple, clear, prescriptive, and consensual prototype” (p. 121). Thus, when interviewees describe their motivations of becoming veiled some of them state that they were driven by a search for meaning of life issues that are related to the uncertainty reduction motive.

The last concept in this section is a concept of fitness. Fit has two variances: comparative fit or normative fit. Turner and his colleagues (1994) bring an example how the fitness aspects work:

[T]o categorize a group of people as Catholics as opposed to Protestants, they must not only differ (in attitude and action, etc.) from Protestants more than from one another (comparative fit) but must also do so in the right direction on specific content dimensions of comparisons. [T]heir similarities and differences must be consistent with our normative beliefs and theories about the substantive social meaning of the social category. (Turner et al., 1994, p. 455).

Normative fit reflects not only beliefs and theories but also “individual’s motives, desires, memories, knowledge, habits, and so forth” (Turner et al., 1994, p. 459-460). The concept of normative fitness is particularly useful in the discussion of hypocrisy discourse in the Chapter 5. Some interviewees emphasized that when a woman associates herself with a Muslim group, she as believer, should manifest that by wearing hijab, otherwise she would be perceived as hypocrite.

### **3.3 Rational choice theory in religion**

Social identity theory and rational choice theory supplement each other as both illuminate the motives why subjects of this study adopt such religious practice as wearing hijab. Unlike to the social identity theory rational choice theory explains interviewees’ conscious choice. Thus, discussing motives from both unconscious (mostly, but not entirely) and conscious perspectives these explanatory theories complement each other.

It was discussed in the Introduction Chapter, Kyrgyzstan is a secular state and when Kyrgyz women start wearing hijabs they do so voluntarily, at least the women in the current study made this their personal choices. Thus, it can be said that in Kyrgyz context women make rational choices when they choose to transform their identities and become religious and

start veiling as adults. For this reason it can be assumed that “individuals act as if they were rationally weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and as if they were choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits” (Iannaccone, 1997, p. 26). In other words, respondents used means-ends calculations when they made choices to turn to Islam. However, it should be emphasized that for the interviewees in this study perhaps it was difficult to determine whether they were rationalizing or they were rational when making choices to wear hijab.

Rational choice theory of religion (RCTR) suggests that rationality, here we assume not only religious rationality, relies on psychological egoistic, selfish motives (Jerolmack & Porpora, 2004). In other words, RCTR considers rationality particularly from instrumental reasoning which has self-serving and self-satisfying nature. Instrumental rationality defined by Weber is a rationality which is goal oriented, when a person seeks for means to achieve or solve something (Weber, 1922, cited in Jerolmack & Porpora, 2004).

Jerolmack and Porpora (2004) argue that RCTR excludes non-selfish motives for religious experiences and sentiment. This theory does not take into consideration such perspectives as normative rationality and epistemic rationality. According to Spickard (1998) normative or value rationality which he calls “deontological” is a reasoning based on “value or ideal” (p. 104). Normative rationality is distinct from instrumental rationality as values and norms are “followed without regard to benefit or cost” (Spickard, 1998, p.104). Another difference is that normative values are consistent, normative action is considered as a duty or rule, whereas instrumental or goal oriented rationality is pursued by calculations of benefits and means of reaching its goals. Spickard (1998, p. 104), quoted Weber (1922, pp. 24-25) to give examples for normative rationality:

Examples of pure value-rational orientation would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call .... In our terminology, value-rational action always involves 'commands' or 'demands' which, in the actor's opinion, are binding on him. (Weber, 1922, quoted by Spickard, 1998, p. 104)

This normative rationality concept also overlaps with normative fitness which was presented in the previous section. These two concepts would be applicable in analyzing hypocrisy discourse from both sides as identity fitness and rational choice to wear hijab.

The third type of rationality is an epistemic rationality, which was described by Spickard (1998) as “cathekontic”. This rationality is related to ethics and beliefs. Epistemic

rationality like normative rationality is distinct from instrumental reasoning. Cathekontic rationality according to Spickard (1998) can be defined as “responsibilities” (p. 105). Spickard brings examples how the same sacrificing action might make distinct all these three rationalities. If person uses instrumental reasoning he would lose his or her life “to maximize the group’s happiness”, normative rationalist would do the same action but that would be “for duty to an ideal”, and epistemic rationalist person might sacrifice his or her life to save someone’s life because he or she might feel that it is his or her “responsibility to do so” (Spickard, 1998, p.105). These rationality concepts would be valuable in analyzing motives and choices of interviewees to start and continue the practice of veiling.

### **3.4 Empowerment and dis-empowerment**

*Different people use empowerment to mean different things  
(Mosedale, 2005, p. 244)*

Another theoretical concept used in this thesis is empowerment. Although the empowerment and dis-empowerment polarity is not fully supplementing to the analysis of motives for adopting veiling in Kyrgyzstan, this conceptual framework is aimed to illuminate the positive and negative consequences of hijab wearing. When discussing positive changes of veiling, the empowerment concept is becoming part of the analysis of motives as for some interviewees the practice of wearing hijab apparently was attractive and empowering and had positive effects. But when analyzing and comparing benefits and costs interviewees in hijabs, we had to acknowledge the other perspective on veiling, when the hijab was dis-empowering for the subjects of the study. The discussion of hijab wearing offers to examine not only motives of wearing hijab, but also the consequences of veiling.

This concept will help in determining whether women in hijabs in Bishkek enjoy freedom of movement after they become covered? Do they have employment problems/obstacles? Are they economically and socially protected? Being inspired by the conceptualization of empowerment as a choice, freedom, capability to decide/choose about what kind of life to live, I became interested in finding out how empowering or dis-empowering veiling is for women in Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, in the analysis chapter I will focus on such practical dimensions as the ability of women to move freely in society, the presence of religious discrimination in employment, and social exclusion issues. Isolation and social exclusion prevent women in hijabs from participating fully in social and economic life (Bennett, 2002). Overall, this kind of discrimination prevents them from realizing their full potential resulting in suppression of human rights and the denial of women’s potential to

participate fully in their society due to the decrease of their capabilities and choices (Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2005; Dreze & Sen, 2002).

The term of empowerment has originated from the theoretical debates within development issues, but this approach has arisen out of practical experiences and contribution of women in developing countries (Rowlands, 1997; Batliwala, 1993). It was debated among development activists and practitioners in “search for effective ways of supporting women and enabling them to make changes” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 7). However, this study was not focused on development issues. This concept is taken into consideration in order to investigate how empowering or dis-empowering changes might be for individual’s identity in the context of new Kyrgyz veiling phenomena. We do bear in mind the current situation in Kyrgyzstan and that its ideological context and gender hierarchies have changed in the past 23 year, during the post-Soviet transformation period. But the thesis purpose is not to analyze the last trends of gender relations in economic, political or cultural spheres in the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. However, it is interesting to observe and analyze the positions of the interviewees’ (women in hijab), and how this has changed in the new non-traditional religious context in the secular Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the concept of empowerment is the best in reflecting how women in hijab are experiencing these changes.

First I will define what “empowerment” means. The root of this concept arises from the word power. Some define power as “the ability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something against their will” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 9). This use of power can be seen at different levels from the international, national or personal. Power can be associated with influence, violence, threat, conflict, and war, but it can be also “associated with other forms of interaction” like exchanging services or resources for certain information or agreements (Rowlands, 1997, p. 10).

If one was to describe the power dynamics between two genders, male and female, power would predominantly be exercised by men over women, where men have more and women have less resources and influence, where men would dominant at social, economic, political, and cultural levels (Rowlands, 1997). In other words, when defining power in this dominant assumption then “if women gain power it will be at men’s expense” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 11). Thus, when speaking about empowerment within the gender analysis we understand it as fight against women’s oppression and barriers which do not allow them to exercise power, thereby empowerment in this context would be aimed to ensure equal opportunities for both women and men.

According to Malhotra et al., (2002) empowerment has a variety of definitions and concepts which describe it; “the term has been used more often to advocate for certain types of policies and intervention strategies” by different organization such as the United Nations, Association for Women in Development, the Department for International Development (DFID) and other; gender and feminist activists “often promote empowerment of individuals and organizations of women” (Malhotra et al., 2002, p. 4). Bennett (2002) notes that the given definitions were operational, and that they “outline the process” and give guidelines, but they do not describe the outcome.

Mosedale (2005) in her article “Towards a Framework for Assessing Empowerment” describes four aspects of empowerment. Firstly, one must have the experience of being dis-empowered in order to change one’s position and gain power. To illustrate this Mosedale (2005) discusses how women as a group are dis-empowered in relation to men. Secondly, no one can empower the dis-empowered; on the contrary in order to change their status, the dis-empowered must claim it. Thirdly, empowerment by its definition is about making choices and decisions which are significant in their lives, it is about being able to achieve the desired outcome. Finally, Mosedale (2005) states that empowerment is an ongoing process without final and absolute target: “people are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time” (p. 244). These aspects of empowerment will be useful in giving guidelines for discussing and analyzing status and daily experiences of women in hijabs.

### **3.4.1 Social inclusion**

Bennett (2002) uses two separate concepts in her framework such as “empowerment” and “social inclusion”. Bennett (2002) describes empowerment as “the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them.” (p. 13). Social inclusion is defined as “the removal of institutional barriers and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities” (Bennett, 2002, p. 13). From the discussion it can be suggested that social exclusion or isolation of women in hijabs could dis-empower them as it might limit their mobility or freedom of movement and decrease their participation in socioeconomic and political activities and vice versa social inclusion could enhance their opportunities and freedoms.

### **3.4.2 Choice**

Naila Kabeer (2005) when describing empowerment uses such concepts as “choice” and “change”. The term of power in her framework is understood as “the ability to make choices”. Empowerment according to Kabeer (2005) is related to “the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” and “dis-empowerment” is defined as “to be denied choice” (p. 14). Thus, empowerment refers to change. Kabeer (2005) notes that the certain conditions should be fulfilled in order to enable a person to make a real choice. The first condition is that there should be alternatives. Inabilities to satisfy basic needs, absence of choice and alternatives make people depended and dis-empowered generating inequality based on gender, race, class, ethnicity and etc. Second condition is that alternatives should be seen, people should be aware of existence of alternatives. According to Kabeer (2005) in most cases power relations effectively function when they are perceived and accepted as natural and it is unquestioned. Kabeer (2005) emphasizes that some choices are more important as they have greater consequences: “choices that may be important for the quality of one’s day-to-day life” or strategic choices as “where to live, whether and whom to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has custody over children, freedom of movement and association, and so on” (p. 14). Taking into consideration the transformations in lives of Kyrgyz women who started veiling it is important to examine the consequences of these changes, precisely whether they able to make strategic and significant choices that influence their lives.

### **3.4.3 Capability**

The failure to achieve one’s goal or not being able to choose can be taken as an expression of dis-empowerment as a person is not able to achieve well-being outcomes (Kabeer, 1999). As we find empowerment as ability to choose the concept of capability should be taken in to account and examined in this discussion. Sen (2008) defines it as following:

The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various ‘doings and beings’, with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings. (Sen, 2008, p. 271).

In other words, life can be viewed as “a sequence of things the person does, or states of being he or she achieves, and these constitute a collection of ‘functionings’—doings and

beings the person achieves” (Dreze & Sen, 2002, p. 35). While person is functioning he or she makes different combinations of choices. Dreze and Sen (2002) suggest that capability is related to freedom — “the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead” (pp. 35-36). Sen (2005) refers to such concept as human rights when discussing capabilities: “There are many human rights that can be seen as rights to particular capabilities” (p. 151). It is important to mention here one of the most important indicators of women’s empowerment such as capability of freedom of movement as it is a part of the human rights which stated and proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 in Article 1 and Article 13: “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and “everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state”. The freedom rights of all human beings are recognized universally, but no one should forget about the role of discrimination which can decrease freedoms and their capacities such as freedom of movement, when women in hijabs are deprived of their rights to move freely in the society.

### **3.5 Summary**

In this chapter I presented the conceptualization framework of the thesis. As the central component of the thesis was to study the motives and rationales of Kyrgyz of women who started veiling in the post-Soviet period I introduced three conceptual perspectives: social identity theory, rational choice theory and empowerment/dis-empowerment polarity. Firstly, I referred to the social identity theory to introduce identity formation and self-categorization mechanisms and to illustrate different types of motivates to change identity such as self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction as these concepts help to understand and explain the causes and reasons why people associate themselves with a certain group.

Further, I presented rational choice theory in religion to illustrate what kind of rationalities women in hijabs used to justify their choices to become veiled. Three types of rationalities were used to analyze the case of Kyrgyz women in hijabs: instrumental, normative and epistemic. These rationality types help to demonstrate whether motives were selfish and self-serving or non-selfish: whether veiling was used as a mean to reach certain goals or being covered was considered as a normative rule and duty or was considered as ethical issue and a responsibility of religious person? These two theories, social identity theory and rational choice theory overlap as both are explanatory theories, which supplement each other in studying motives for veiling from different perspectives, illuminating unconscious and conscious motives.



Finally, I have chosen to focus on empowerment and dis-empowerment in order to analyze and indicate what kind of changes, benefits or obstacles women in hijabs face due to their new status in the society. Several dimensions of empowerment were considered in order to correspond to the context of the study. Empowerment in this chapter was conceptualized in terms, such as choice, capability and social inclusion. Empowerment and dis-empowerment are two opposite sides of the power relations process. Veiling phenomena in Kyrgyzstan is a transformation process, thus different perspective and spheres were analyzed: power relations of women in hijabs were questioned in terms of their capability to make choices and decisions. The above suggested dimensions of empowerment contain different indicators for potential position of women in hijabs in social arena. Motives, rationalities and transformation consequences of Islamization in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan will be further examined in the next two chapters which focus on data presentation and analysis.

## **Chapter 4. Data presentation and analysis of secondary data**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will present and analyze the secondary data informant's perspectives towards Islamization in Kyrgyzstan<sup>7</sup>. The secondary data is presented by different groups of people with different backgrounds these are: two government representatives, two male religious respondents, one journalist, and two experts in religion and one expert in gender issues and 95 students. Unlike the eight interviewees (experts, religious male informants and government representatives), students were asked to fill out questionnaires (see Appendix 3). Firstly, I will present the background of the secondary data informants. These respondents' backgrounds will be discussed separately, by dividing them by groups: religious male respondents, experts and students. Secondly, there will be two separate sections for discussion and analysis of the attitudes and perspectives of the secondary data. One section will focus on attitudes and perspectives of interviewees such as experts, government representatives and male religious informants towards the Islamization trends in Kyrgyzstan. The other section will analyze the received data of students from Bishkek and there I will apply theoretical concepts and perspectives presented in the preceding chapter.

The focal point in both analysis sections will be the conflict potential of Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. The opinions of the secondary data informants is presented here in order to better understand what consequences the Islamization process has and might have in the near future. The complex and larger perspective presented by these different positions will form the basis of the two questions which motivated me to conduct this study: 1. What potential conflicts and tensions are created due to the polarization of the society? 2. What consequences will bring veiling phenomena for secular Kyrgyz women: will there be freedom of choice to wear or not to wear hijab?

### **4.2 Informant presentation**

#### **4.2.1 Informants' background**

##### **Male religious respondents**

This section presents the educational and occupational and marital backgrounds of two male religious respondents. The respondents were single and unemployed at the time of the fieldwork. One of them was originally from Bishkek and the other was from the southern

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<sup>7</sup> The translations of the interview extracts were done by me with minor editing for better understanding

region. The interviewees were aged 26 and 30. Both informants were members of the Salafi<sup>8</sup> movement which is translated as “early Muslims” or “predecessors”. This movement is rooted in Saudi Arabia and is considered to have radical and fundamentalist ideas which are politicizing Islam. Salafi reject different perspectives and innovations, as it is considered to be bid'ah – sinful. New practices and interpretations are not permitted by Islam. The followers of the Salafi movement who participated in the interview had carefully trimmed short beards and their dresses did not mark their religious identities.

One of the informants, Azamat was interested in politics, and intended to make a career in politics. He had specialization in Law and was a postgraduate student at one of local universities. The other male respondent, Nurdin, had a higher education degree but did not specify in which field. As it was mentioned in the Methodological Chapter religious males can unofficially perform the roles of mullahs<sup>9</sup>.

### **The experts and government representatives**

This section presents occupational and gender backgrounds of experts and professionals (Appendix 4: Table 1). Four experts and two authorities participated in the current study: one journalist, two experts in religion and one expert in gender issues as well as two government representatives. Three professionals were female and three were male. All professionals, except the journalist, had both academic and practical backgrounds, so they had information about the recent trends in their fields. One of the respondents had been a member of a Muslim religious movement - Tabligi Zhamaat. This movement was founded in the first quarter of the last century in India. It is considered to be apolitical religious movement. In recent years the number of the local Tabligi Zhamaat missionaries has been increasing; they are playing a great role in the recruitment of male population in Kyrgyzstan. Many Kyrgyzstan citizens who are members of Tabligi Zhamaat missionaries go to Pakistan, India and Bangladesh to participate in the Tabligi Zhamaat conferences, or schools. Tabligi Zhamaat, however, is prohibited and considered to be an extremist movement in Russia and other Central Asian countries, except Kyrgyzstan (Oturbaev, 2014).

### **The students**

This section will focus on gender backgrounds and the university distribution of the students who participated in the study (Appendix 4: Table 2). Diagram 1 shows the age of

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<sup>8</sup> As a rule, the supporters of Wahhabi ideas call themselves Salafis

<sup>9</sup> In Muslim world this title is given to local Islamic clerics or mosque leaders

students. Diagrams 2-4 tell us about the students' ancestral background or origins<sup>10</sup>. Diagram 5 demonstrates how students are positioning themselves in terms of their belonging to Islam (Appendix 4).

All in all 95 students from two secular Bishkek universities participated in the survey: 46 students from Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University (KRSU) and 49 from Bishkek Humanitarian University (BHU) (Table 2). The majority of the respondents were female (73.7%), but if we stratify students by university and gender then we can say that KRSU had almost equal number of female and male students, whereas BHU had only 8% of male students representation. This difference in gender representation can be explained. BHU is a liberal arts university. In a traditional society such as Kyrgyz these differences can be accounted for by gendered patterns of educational and occupational choices which are evident in BHU. Thus, humanitarian disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, psychology and other social sciences are more likely to be associated with female than male professions. These educational differences and occupational aspirations and plans can be attributed to expectations and the values of the society which are assumed to influence female and male choices (Eccles, 1994).

The students were aged between 18 to 39 years old (Diagram 1). The majority of students about 77% were from 18 to 21 years old. Students come from all seven provinces of Kyrgyzstan – Osh, Jalal-Abad, Baktan provinces in the South and Chui, Talas, Naryn, and Issyk-Kul (I-K) in the North (Diagram 2-4). The majority of the students, however, come from the northern part of the country: 82.2% of students stated that they grew up in the northern parts of the Republic, indicating having the mother's and father's northern origins, 77.8% and 63.2% respectively. About 28 % of students named Bishkek as a place where they grew up.

Of the majority of the students, who participated in the survey, 80% associated themselves with Islam. They indicated that their identities were formed differing by degrees from close together but separate to complete overlap with Islam (Appendix 3: question 17). These students (80%) who identified themselves with Islam were divided into three groups (Diagram 5). The first group consisted of students who identified that they had low degree of overlap when their identity was overlapping with Islam (14.7%). The second group of students indicated that they had moderate degree of overlapping identities (29.5%). The third,

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<sup>10</sup> In Kyrgyz culture the belonging to ancestors' land and region is a meaningful identity factor. Thus, when Kyrgyz are asked where they are from, they give information about their father's and grandfather's land, place and not where they were born or grew up. This kind of kinship belonging still divides Kyrgyz by regions and influences their attitudes and perceptions towards many social phenomenon

the largest, group consisted of students who stated that they had strong overlapping associations with Islam (35.8%). Whereas, only 20% of the respondents classified themselves as far apart from Islam and did not identify themselves within Islam.

This data suggests that there is a support for Islamization processes among the majority of the students who participated in this research project. It was also indicated that the majority of the students who participated in the study come originally from the northern Kyrgyzstan. This fact can point to the assumption that Islamization trends are popular not only in the southern regions as it is frequently believed to be true, but the popularity of Islam is also growing in the north.

### **4.3 Attitudes and perspectives of the secondary data interviewees**

Comparison and division among different groups establishes differentiation rather than fusion. The previous Chapter 3 discussed the phenomenon of division/categorization by groups into insiders and outsiders, categorization to us and them (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel (1978) emphasized that social distinctiveness of groups might be dangerous as it creates disintegration and psychological/social barriers. In the situation of Kyrgyzstan where there is already a division into secular and religious Muslim groups the conflict of values is inevitable. Tajfel (1978) believed that the conflict of values could be resolved through the justification of maintaining the status quo or through developing new ideologies.

The "inferior" group which has lower status, or considered to be a minority, such as religious practitioners in Kyrgyzstan, have no total consensus about the future of their interrelations with the majority that are represented by secular group. Today the religious community is an alternative to poor and corrupted government system. The conflict between comparative social identities might "lead to prediction of intense hostility in intergroup attitudes and of market discrimination in intergroup behavior" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 97). The increase of number of the believers inevitably creates an increase in social and psychological separation. Religion might become the main increasingly salient social and political issue in Kyrgyzstan: starting with the widespread use of religious language, symbols, later leading to increased demands for rights of religious people. The informants of the secondary data have different backgrounds representing religious insiders and secular government representatives and professionals, the outsiders.

### 4.3.1 Religious male interviewees

Precious and unanticipated data was drawn from the interviews with the religious male interviewees. These insiders in the religious community, the two male religious ‘entrepreneurs’, presented ideas that were not expected because I entered the interviews with stereotyped lens and personal bias. Their reflections tend to show that people’s ideas about Islamization are not that easy to classify as the Islamization process is mosaic and has multifold interpretations and perceptions.

I will start with Nurdin’s narrative, the Salafi movement follower. In his perspective there are many problems which are related to the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan. The first problem that was named by Nurdin was related to recruitment in Islam. He states it in the following: “there is an attempt to recruit and become a cause when other person turns to Islam. The biggest mistake is that the majority of the [Kyrgyz] Muslims are illiterate [in term of religion], they neither have knowledge of the Quran, nor the rules of Shari’ah”. He recalls that many Kyrgyz go to the Friday prayers at the mosque, but they do not pray daily (5 times per day). They go once a week to the mosque for the prayers and do not know why are they doing it. They just know that they must and according to Nurdin it is a mistake. From his perspective a person should have “pure intensions” and purpose in order to practice religion. The type of Islam which is propagated and practiced in Kyrgyzstan, in Nurdin’s view is not the correct type:

Today’s Kyrgyz Muslims use many Islam terms without knowing the meaning of the terms, heard it and started using it. [...] All Muslims whom I know all of them have the Quran, but not all of them have read the Quran, but almost everyone is interpreting the Holy Quran, although they do not have such a right as the right to interpret is given to those who have the relevant knowledge. There is a terrible mess. [...] We have symbiosis of pagan traditions of ancestors and Islam, so as we could we carry it [religion].

When Nurdin indicates religious illiteracy he refers to the Tabligi Zhamaat movement, which belongs to the Sufi school thought. One of the aims of this movement is to propagate, but for Nurdin a member of the Salafi group it is “unacceptable to share knowledge having only a superficial knowledge of Islam.” This intolerance to Tabligi Zhamaat Nurdin indicates when he states that he is against the new practices of Islam which are visible in Bishkek streets, such as Tabligi Zhamaat followers who are wearing long beards and Pakistani style clothes. He believes that they are negatively influencing the image of Islam as media or other actors:

Muslims should be an example, in my understanding. The modern Muslim should be better, he should keep up with the time. We should be front runners. We should act as an example to Muslims in order to aspire people to be like us. But at the moment we are avoided due to the way we are depicted by the media and the West.

The other problem according to Nurdin is that some newly recruited Muslim practitioners are using religion for different reasons: “People are trying to use religion as a cover and this is a big problem. Many people do not understand the essence of Islam”. Nurdin suggests that religion in Kyrgyzstan is often understood as prestigious so it has a demonstrative character that only focuses on outward appearances such as beards, or hijab wearing. He states that “it is not from the heart, but from the head.” He assumes that this misinterpretation and misuse of Islam in Kyrgyzstan when Muslim brothers are “evading the religious rules, and are ruled by their passions” is not acceptable: “I do not agree with how this process [Islamization] is going on”.

In addition to religious illiteracy and the demonstrative character of religious practice Nurdin states that there are also problems with the clergy or the mufti’s<sup>11</sup> office. He names a problem of corruption within the mufti’s office when clerics organize lists of Kyrgyz who want to go to pilgrimage or Hajj. He also indicates that there is a weak structure of the mufti’s office that is not able to control the variety of Islamic groups in Kyrgyzstan. Nurdin has concerns about divisions within the Muslim community, but he emphasizes that the main problem with the division is that different Islamic movements and groups in Kyrgyzstan are not controlled by anyone and this might be dangerous. This conflict within the Muslim community will be discussed by experts in religion later in this chapter.

Nurdin is also not satisfied with how other spiritual actors are performing their duties. He states that people become imams<sup>12</sup> because this position gives them better possibilities of earning money: “all is done because of the money”. As for alims<sup>13</sup> they have lost the fear of God. And it is very important position as people come to alims to learn. Nurdin states these individuals can perform praying or give religious lectures while being intoxicated by anasha, a local variety of marijuana: “Blatantly, shamelessly and openly, I do not know, I have a complaint, anger to all these practices. There is no fear of God”.

Nurdin also has concerns about such religious practice as wearing hijabs: “I do not believe in these hijabs”. Nurdin states that he knew a lot of girls who openly declared that

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<sup>11</sup> Mufti – a supreme spiritual head of state in the Sunni Muslim who has the right to decide religious legal issues; expert of Sharia, and in interpreting of the Qur’an

<sup>12</sup> Imam – a spiritual person performing worship in the mosque

<sup>13</sup> Alim – a spiritual person who has competent education and studied Quran and Sharia laws at religious school/university

they were tired of carousals and needed to wear the hijab to get married: “Many people think that if they put on the hijab, then they will be looked as pious and will get married. But where is the guarantee that you will meet a true believer and not someone who also pretends”. Nurdin adds: “if I marry a girl in hijab, I would make sure that her chastity was not violated, as out of 100%, 80% are not chaste. Having spent some time with men they start putting on hijabs. There are 15% who are clean. Hypocrisy is both among the religious men and women”.

Concerning the integration of Muslim believers into society Nurdin believes that it depends on the people. He assumes that those who have religious education will have integration problems: “I do not know why so many study at religious universities, it is enough for us to have only one university, the state we live in is not very big. It is not a profession as a lawyer or economist. You cannot just study at any religious university/institute”. He believes that there must be a certain number of people who need to do what is necessary, study religion at university to fulfill their official duties such as being imam or alim or mufti.

To sum up, Nurdin complains that religion in Kyrgyzstan is used as a cover and many sinful acts are done by Muslim brothers as they are religiously illiterate and have superficial knowledge and evade the true Islamic rules and duties. In fact Nurdin feels that there are few pure believers, and being disappointed by misinterpretation of Islam by his group members he confesses that: “I myself believe in pure-minded non-religious people rather than to Muslims who are misinterpreting Islam and only demonstrate their religiosity. [...] I myself being a Muslim, in the recent times was harmed by Muslims”. For example, when he after the car accident was in the hospital his girlfriend who wore hijab abandoned him in difficult time. She, according to Nurdin, let him down and that was not a proper behavior for a true believer. Taking into account his reflections it can be concluded that Nurdin is tolerant to secular part of population and critical towards his in-group members, the Muslim believers.

The second religious male informant, Azamat was the initiator of the interview session. The most difficult interview was conducted with Azamat, the second religious male informant, as it was almost impossible to have a dialogue with him. As it was discussed in the Methodology Chapter these religious male informants did not easily engage in dialogue. A monologue was a usual type of conversation for them. Being members of the religious community their role as ‘spiritual entrepreneurs’ and their task was to disseminate information about Islam and to recruit. Almost all my attempts to ask questions were ignored and he would continue telling about different religious scholars and citing Quran. Azamat was performing his role as a recruiter. I had to let him to talk and fulfill his role. Almost at the end



of the interview when he felt that he had accomplished his task I managed to get him to focus on several questions. Therefore, I cannot quote or discuss much of the reflections of Azamat as he was mostly interested in informing and possibly converting me.

Azamat, is also a Salafi movement follower as Nurdin. As Azamat is interested in politics I asked him about religious political parties and leaders in Kyrgyzstan. He states that practicing Muslims do not vote: “They do not participate at any elections as there are no leaders whom they could follow, who would represent the religious community”. It is important to mention that Azamat is also as Nurdin, the previous religious male informant, set against the Tabligi Zhamaat movement followers: “I have a cousin. He is from Tabligi Zhamaat we always have arguments and cannot stand each other”. Azamat believes that the Tabligi Zhamaat followers are religiously illiterate and do not have the right to disseminate the information about Islam and recruit people. Leaving their families for weeks and months and doing aggressive recruitment by going to other regions and districts Tabligi Zhamaat members, the local missionaries were going from house to house calling people to Islam. According to Azamat’s views that is wrong. Azamat considers that such movements as Tabligi Zhamaat hurt the image of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan. He judges the way they are dressed in Pakistani style clothes (short rubbers boots or galoshes and long robes), have long and untrimmed beards. Azamat believed that their appearance frighten off people from Islam. Thus, he himself was concerned with his outward appearance. Azamat had a well-trimmed and short beard and was dressed in secular clothes. He believes that as a future politician he should not scare away the secular population. He wants to fit the norms of the majority.

In addition he perceives practicing Muslim community as a minority:

I cannot follow Shari’ah laws now. For example, I cannot go and start jihad [holy war/struggle]. Let’s say I can kill a few policemen and then what? I will be caught and put in jail. I cannot come up to women and demand that they wear hijabs, or cut off the hands of thieves. We [practicing Muslims] are minority.

Azamat understands that in the situation when the majority of the population follows the secular laws and accepts secular norms, religious Shari’ah laws would not be accepted or allowed to be practiced at least when “practitioners” are in the minority. Therefore, having political ambitions Azamat is looking for initiating Islamic political party in Kyrgyzstan. Both religious male informants are not satisfied with the current political and economic situation in Kyrgyzstan. Both informants honestly state that if some religious leader calls for jihad they would join him. It can be assumed that religious part of the population would support political

and social changes and eager to protect and control Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan at government/political level.

#### **4.3.2 Experts and government representatives**

Different hypothesis and explanations were suggested by local and international scholars for Islamization in Kyrgyzstan, such as ideological vacuum, poverty, influence from outside, search for national identity and other reasons (Heyat, 2004; Kurganskaia, 2002; Abbasova, 2001; Chotaeva, 2003). The following section discusses the perspectives of experts in journalism, gender and religious issues and government representatives whose work is related to religious issues in Kyrgyzstan. Some of the interviewees emphasized similar hypothesis and explanation as scholars, but they also presented other perspectives which help to study Islamization from different angles.

##### **Government representatives**

Two interviews were conducted with representatives from the State: Nazira Kurbanova, a female representative from the State Commission for Religious Affairs and one retired male government representative who wanted to remain anonymous. This section will start from presentation of the perspectives of Nazira Kurbanova who indicated that her identity was formed by moderate degree overlap with Islam (Appendix 4: Table 1).

Dr. Kurbanova, a female representative from the State Commission for Religious Affairs, suggests that there are three reasons for Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. The first reason is that Kyrgyz's national identity is associated with having a Muslim background. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, people gained access to practice religion which had been forbidden for 70 years. Dr. Kurbanova suggests that in the period of the ideological vacuum in 1990s, communist ideology was replaced by religion:

I always say that if to use metaphor in relation to our Kyrgyz people and religion, they were hungry for 70 years, and then during the 90s they had a buffet restaurant with 200 dishes, as a consequence there is indigestion. Our people were not ready for western liberal democracy.

Kurbanova argues that “hunger” for religious experience, knowledge and practice was something new for the post-Soviet people and could be satisfied in full in the period of independence. It can be assumed that in Kurbanova's perspective democratic and liberal politics had negative impact on a young country that needed gradual transition as its experience being under the totalitarian regime could be compared with a long fasting or starvation and as it is a well-known medicine fact that overeating after starvation can lead to a

really life-threatening conditions. In relationship to the study I would highlight that freedom of religion and access to it made the Kyrgyz society diverse, and polarized and different kind of religious schools and movements rushed to feed the 70 years of hunger for religion.

The second reason for the rise of Islamization, according to Dr. Kurbanova, was an external one. The help from the Arabic and Muslim countries, as she called it was “a hand of help”. Muslim brothers supported Kyrgyz people so they would become true Muslims. Kurbanova states that was done through financial support, such as financial investments in the construction of mosques, introduction of dawat<sup>14</sup> practice, publishing of Quran and other religious literature; helping with the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, development of halal industry, introduction of such attributes in clothing as hijabs, Arab clothing, their traditions, and customs. In other words, Kurbanova stresses such external factor as “Muslim brother’s” help in the analysis of the current Islamization trends in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, interest in religion was not only about lack of religion during the Soviet times, but also external factors that affected people’s choices today.

The third reason named by Kurbanova is internal factor. She names the social, economic and spiritual disorientation of people in the transformation period when independent Kyrgyz people had to go through hardships in the transition from the old system: from planned economy and communist ideology to capitalist market system. People used to rely on government, but now as Kurbanova notes people had to take care of themselves:

Weak government, corruption, political instability, dramatic stratification of the society with only 10% of rich, whereas in Soviet times there was no such stratification. Collective farming was in the past. The majority of citizens were socially vulnerable, poor, outsiders, and lost their life orientations. People were left with nothing, were prostrate.

Nazira Kurbanova concludes that religion was used as a protection stating that: “the only way out was to turn to religion”. Kurbanova supports this argument that religion is used as a salvation by exemplifying the results of the recent survey done by the State Commission for Religious Affairs: “we had a survey in the Islamic University and the majority of the students are from rural area, from families that cannot afford paying tuition fees. All Islamic universities have no tuition fees. Of course they [poor] will study in these free universities”. She also adds that now religion is used as protection not only by poor and vulnerable, but also by businessmen, and successful rich people. The rich also think about spirituality. Islam is in

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<sup>14</sup> Movement for the propagation of the Holy Quran and Sunnah when Islam follower go to propagation to other cities and regions for 3 or 40 days or months.

a great demand. She believes that it is “ethics, philosophy, law, politics, Islam and politics are inseparable. This is the reason why Islam is politicized”. It is being used as a protective mechanism and religion starts occupying other spheres of life, such as business and politics.

Kurbanova supports Islamization as she considers that Islam embraces absolutely all general human values: “it calls only for the good, peace, charity, and generally if people lived in accordance with Islam without violating its canons and not inventing anything else then there is actually would be a paradise”.

Nevertheless, Dr. Kurbanova suggests that the nonaligned agency that deals with Muslim religious issues, referred to here as the Spiritual Administration of Kyrgyz Republic, should work in collaboration with the government and it should create and develop moderate Kyrgyz Islam where Islam should not be in conflict with Kyrgyz traditions and customs and culture. She considers that Islamic values should be integrated into the State ideology as that is “a question of national security”.

An interesting and contradicting perspective is demonstrated by the representative of the State Commission for the State Affairs when Kurbanova states that pure Islam without new inventions and interpretations would make Muslim people live in peace and be happy. At the same time she urges the creation of an Islam with a “Kyrgyz face”. She also mentions that today the Muslim community, such as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims faces a very big problem. This problem is related to the liberal laws in the Kyrgyz Republic which have encouraged the uncontrolled and easy penetration of variety religious movements and groups into the country. Kurbanova emphasizes that everyone must understand that every religious group and religion has its ideology and “if someone argues and opposes other ideologies then you understand what this means, a conflict”. She appeals for the hardening of state’s position and control over different religious movements and groups in order to protect youth from turning to radical religious movements and as alternative develop moderate Muslim ideology which would be loyal to the government.

When asked about how she sees Islamization in the next five years, Kurbanova states that the State would be focusing on integration of Muslim believers into society. One of the examples is to integrate Islam and local traditions and customs. The other is to integrate the graduates of Islamic schools into civil society. In order to do this the government is making attempts to license Islamic institutions and schools and to introduce secular subjects<sup>15</sup>. It is

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<sup>15</sup> Kanybek Osmonaliev and Akylbek Zheenbekov, the Kyrgyz Republic parliament deputies, initiated the project law on religious education, which is for licensing all existing Islamic universities and religious educational organizations. In spring 2013 there were parliamentary hearings, where the chairman of the religion, education, culture and sports commission, Osmonaliev, presented the law project. On 3rd of October 2013 the project law was approved by the parliament (Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2014).

believed that this will lessen the split between ideology and general world views, or between the secular and the religious parts of the population. At that this policy will help the state to reduce the number of religious universities and institutions as not all of them will be licensed. The discussions between the government and religious institutions were hotly debated as the latter does not want any interventions in their business.

An interesting interview was conducted with the second state expert who in the middle of a 40 minute interview asked that his name should not be mentioned. It is important to take note of this, as in the first part of the interview before he asked to be an anonymous expert, he was aggressive and impatient: “next question”, “you should know that”. But when he asked for anonymity there was a shift, and he changed his attitude to the interview process, and started openly expressing his fears. He actually encouraged me to study Islamization processes and make a prognosis as a conflictologist. He indicated that he had a large overlap of his identity with Islam (Appendix 4: Table 1).

The ex-government representative believes that there are many reasons for Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. But he states that, often in idiomatic terms, it is obvious for him that this phenomena is related to democratization of the state during the 20 years of independence. He as a previous state expert links the democratization and liberal policies of the state with the Islamization processes. Thus, he considers that:

Of course now there is a struggle for the mass consciousness, especially many external forces are much interested in young people. Now Kyrgyzstan has become like all post-Soviet countries an object where to spread the democracy, the Western model. The way I see it, there is also globalization, a small globalization – Islamization. And these forces compete for the mass consciousness. Now we see the fruits because instincts are triggered. If all earlier saluted that you are a communist, that have membership [in the party] it was honorable, profitable, all the ways were open. And now how can you show off? That you are God-fearing. It is in demand among the population.

He also refers to the ideological vacuum discourse when the “Russian orthodox Marxist-Leninist theology has gone back”. The anonymous expert here refers to the social environment of the people who become interested in Islam and he equates believers as equal to people who simply follow fashion, whether this is a dress, or religion. On the other hand, he states that people in rural areas are brainwashed:

[...] there is a hunger for information. Well, let's say, in the villages people do not have access [to the information]. People generally speaking are being stewed in their own juice. And where they are going? They used to go to village clubs or gathering [during the Soviet times]. Now they go to the mosque. And what are they said in the mosque? You know, that is the question. There they are brainwashed.

Most young people willingly go there, because of answers they get there, there they can spend time, and listen to clever speeches.

He states that due to “the level of damage caused by the militant atheism”, Kyrgyz people taken great strides forward in the last twenty years. However, he assesses Kyrgyz as “bad Muslims” who are: “neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring. It is said that we are Muslims and we do not understand anything in Islam. We even could not pronounce the name of the Prophet, and what the Muslims we are”. He also warns that visual attributes such as religious clothes and beards are only the beginning of the process and now according to this retired representative of the government no one has actually information about the situation on the ground related to the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan:

Allah knows, because no one controls the situation, no person or organization or a state agency [does not know]. The devil knows what's going on. And the terrible cumulative processes are occurring there. [...] Look they are accumulating, gradually and when it blows up and you will not know what hit you. It would be like a grenade.

The anonymous expert emphasizes that Islam is like an innovation for Kyrgyz, and while occupying its place in the society it is inevitable that there is a struggle between the new and the old: “We can see that our ancient culture, customs and traditions are at risk of being replaced by Shari’ah [norms]. And this is not fitting. That is why there is a struggle that is nothing to joke about”. According to him there are several stages of the Islamization:

First is to suggest through dawat that they [Muslim believers] live true lives, and it naturally motivate to come to Islam. Second stage is that they begin to recruit various organizations. Third stage is to set specific goals which they seek. [...] Zhamaat [Tabligi Zhamaat movement] now they have filtered into all villages, mosques, they are very well settled as imams and spread their ideas. They are already, in my opinion, have enveloped seventy per cent of Kyrgyzstan. See they started from village, district, province, and now they have got to Muftiat. Soon there is a new stage - politicization. Then they will make an alternative to the secular power.

The retired government representative adds that such methods of recruitment as pilgrimage to Mekka, Hajj is to recruit the “creams of the society”:

It is not the poor when people are sent for free [sponsored] Hajj. These are the intellectuals, not an ordinary people. I precisely can say as an authoritative person there are no ordinary people. Ordinary mortals do not get there, you know. Only famous people, writers, journalists, scientists, who are interested in Islam are sent there for free. There is a definite purpose for sponsoring these free trips.

He continues stating that Islam will take its own, because it is a very influential religion: “There is a layer of citizens who are Westernized, lead western lifestyle, we have this layer, we also have former atheists, and we have here also Christians. They all will fight. Well, still Islam will take its place and will continue to develop. Like I said, this is a small globalization”. Although today this struggle of new and old, secular and religious is more or less peaceful, the informant worries that there is no guarantee that there will eventually be other forms with more extremist agendas:

It is a well-known fact that many things can cover under religion. Therefore, I fear for Kyrgyzstan as it can be put in such dangerous position [civil war] because a religious person is to some extent is a fanatic; he is the bearer of these ideas. And he will always stand up for [his believe] by any means. And it is hard to convince him, a very dangerous man, because when people are not educated or are monotheist this is like majestic in appearance, but essentially weak. Still, sometime it will affect all.

It can be concluded that the ex-representative of the State considers the Islamization process as dangerous and an “invader’s” ideology that is in conflict with all members of the non-Islam community in Kyrgyzstan. This perspective is also shared by the next expert, Dilya Usupova, a journalist.

### **The journalist**

Dilya Usupova, a journalist from the local news agency [www.24.kg](http://www.24.kg) indicated that she had very small overlap of her identity with Islam (Table 1). Usupova names similar factors that were causing an increase of Islamization as the state representatives did. She includes the ideological vacuum after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and social factors such as poverty, poor education, interest in new, and open access to information. Usupova also indicated Arabic influence stating that they are investing in free religious education in Kyrgyzstan because the Arab states want to have their influence and embrace Central Asian countries via religious propaganda. According to the journalist’s perspective actors of religion are poor, undereducated, rural, southerners, who have limited access to other kind of information. She calls them “a lost generation”. Growing up during the 90s, these children were left to themselves when their parents were adjusting to new market economy relations. Usupova perceives religion as a doctrine for people who need guidance/structure in difficult times.

Concerning women in hijabs she states that: “it is a great to have individual beliefs and when she holds to her belief. But I cannot understand those who think that it is an obvious attempt to follow the fashion”. Usupova’s attitude towards Muslim practitioners was

illustrated when she brought three stories when she met Muslim believers who had inappropriate behavior: a woman smoking in hijab, an unmarried young woman in hijab hugging her boyfriend and a halal taxi driver cursing while driving his car. She believed that many practicing Muslims are hypocritical. In addition, she compares the position of Muslim woman in hijab as following: “[...] she is a strange creature, not even a human; she does not see or know anything. There are many examples when she becomes a primitive animal that has fears, has its instincts, and its intellect is secondary”. Taking into account these comments and stories, it can be assumed that Usupova has a negative image of new Muslims in Kyrgyzstan.

Different from Dr. Kurbanova and anonymous ex-government representative, Usupova stresses the conflict potential of Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan from the inter-faith perspective. The journalist brought several cases when Christian churches were looted and Christian cemeteries were vandalized, whereas there were no records of such cases in relation to Muslim mosques or cemeteries. In Usupova’s perspective “peaceful coexistence of two religions [Christianity and Islam] is one of the most important conditions for the country”. In order to achieve this, the journalist considers that government should control the religious situation in the country, for example, by regulating licensing policies of religious education institutions. The State Commission for Religious Affairs should work more on increasing awareness about degrees of Islamization, that is to say distinctions between moderate versus radical Islam movements. Instead she believes that the State Commission for Religious Affairs is just counting numbers of religious organizations and religious followers. When asked about the future prognosis of the Islamization process in the next five years Usupova stated that the cultural background of Kyrgyz people and 70 years of atheism with western values would be powerful enough to maintain Kyrgyzstan as a democratic and not Muslim state.

### **Experts in religion issues**

Two experts in religion representing non-governmental perspectives were interviewed for this study: Bakyt Baltabarov from the Bishkek Humanitarian University and Emil Nasritdinov from the American University of Central Asia. I will start this discussion about perspectives and attitudes of experts of religion with Bakyt Baltabarov’s reflections.

Baltabarov indicated that he had moderate overlap of his identity with Islam (Table 1). The religious expert from the Bishkek Humanitarian University, Baltabarov, also mentions the ideological vacuum which was “filled with” different religious trends and values: “many



young people started getting religious education in Arabic countries, or in Pakistan, Russia, Caucasus, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Those who got education in Islamic countries introduced/brought colors/nuances of these countries and fostered these values among the local population, our Kyrgyz citizens". Baltabarov's prognosis indicates that in the near future different Islamic trends and schools would compete with each other at the government level. He has concerns that government and the State Commission for Religious Affairs do not control this situation effectively. In addition to that there is a possibility of a split among religious groups because as he stated earlier there are different ideological Islamic trends, for example between those who studied in Turkey and those who studied in Pakistan. Baltabarov assumes that this is the most dangerous thing with which Kyrgyz society will face in the future. But at the same time he contradicts to himself when he states that although there is a Muslim Renaissance in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, the Islamization trend and increase of the number of believers, Baltabarov states that with respect to the total number of the population this rise will not be significant.

The second expert in religion is Emil Nasritdinov, Associate Professor from the American University of Central Asia. As it was presented in the Background Section of this chapter, Nasridinov is a member of the Tabligi Zhamaat movement which originated in India, Pakistan and considered to be apolitical and peaceful movement. Being practicing Muslim he indicated that he had moderate overlap of his identity with Islam (Table 1). The peacefulness of the movement could be seen in Nasridinov's calm voice and openness during the interview. At the interview I suffered from the sore throat and could not read the questions because I was not able to speak for long without coughing, so I kept my voice for explanation of questions and clarification of the interviewees' answers. When I asked Dr. Nasritdinov to read the question he had very positive reaction to this option to read the questions for himself and simultaneously provide answers.

Nasritdinov supports his colleagues concerns. Being a member of the Tabligi Zhamaat, one of the religious movements of Sufi school he knows about the split from an insider's perspective:

In our country there is sometimes a fear of some Islamic movements. It is related to pressure from representatives of other Muslim movements. They see that Tabligi Zhamaat is very popular and there are many movements which consider that Tabligi Zhamaat is bid'ah. Bad'ah is a sin to introduce innovations in religion. Many think that our practices such as to go for propagation for three or forty days was not practiced in Islam before. [...] There is a conflict in the city [Bishkek] between the followers of Dawat [Tabligi Zhamaat's practice] and Salafi. The first and the last do not like each other.

[...] In Saudi Arabia it [Tabligi Zhamaat] is illegal. And as the influence of Saudi Arabia is very impressive. It can be seen as there are many mosques financed [by Saudi Arabia] and built here [Kyrgyzstan].

Internal split within the Muslim community that is between Salafi and Tabligi Zhamaat movements according to Nasritdinov lies in the following: “we are following Sunnahs, the way how Prophet lived and practiced, whereas not focusing on knowledge”. Tabligi Zhamaat focuses on the practice of religion such as praying, fasting, compulsory charity and propagation. In addition to the internal split within religious groups Nasritdinov states that there is a split between believers and non-believers: “we have a new generation which grew up in Islam. Consequently you can see the increase in the number of girls and women who from youth, under the influence of their parents practice Islam and lead Muslim styles of life. It is becoming popular it is like fashion”. These was exemplified by the demand for women in hijabs as there are also male Muslims, a new generation who aim to date and marry women in hijabs: “They are not looking for girls whom they will have to be reformed or be re-educated”.

An interesting argumentation is presented by Nasritdinov when he states that for young men who start practicing and following the Tabligi Zhamaat movement it is perceived as a revolution, these men are not conservative, as they do not revert to old traditions. On the contrary, they are “against the current”: “people stare at them when the young men has a long beard, wears long dress. Everyone asks them: “why are in skirt” this is a real revolution. And hijab is also [revolution]”.

### **The gender expert**

The next interesting argument regarding the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan is presented by Gulnara Ibraeva, a national gender expert and Associate Professor at the Sociology Department at the American University of Central Asia. Ibraeva indicated that she had little association with Islam (Table 1). She states five reasons why non-traditional Islam practice is becoming stronger in Kyrgyzstan. Firstly, she names cultural interventions of the Arab countries with serious financial investments as having effect on rise of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. Second, Ibraeva mentions that the role of men and women in the new market system changes and men are trying to use their chances to restore their patriarchal roles within their families and society in general: “whereas position of women at all points (political, economic, social-cultural, symbolic) can be described with such terms as loss and regression”. Third, society is trying to find some tools or measures to stabilize basic institutes which are in

crisis, such as the family, which is under pressure with commercialization and capitalization of values transferring relationships within the family to the realm of capitalistic values and interest in benefits. Forth, mass culture brings attractive images of the society where Islamic patriarchy predominates and where women wear hijabs. The final reason according to Ibraeva is that there are certain pragmatic advantages for women with “low trade quality” and it is a strategy – wearing hijabs. But she has no answer to the motives of women who can be having “high quality” stating that this topic should be studied and analyzed.

Her prognosis of the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan for the next five year is as following: “I think that we are doomed to “progress” in this sphere. Process will become broader and deeper. Ibraeva evaluated the progress as follows:

It is obvious that now it is painful and uncomfortable for women in hijabs when they are in the most public places, but as soon as their quantity will reach critical point and they become a majority those women who are not in hijabs will start having discomfort and this will rise in geographical progression.

She believes that rise of the Islamization is inevitable and that could influence and change the current position of the secular population. Furthermore, Ibraeva warns about the risks that there might be coup d'état and transition of power to the most radical elites with Shari'ah moods”. To the question how does the imported Islam ideologies influence gender relation and position of women in Kyrgyzstan Ibraeva states that it is only beginning to change: “now many young men who got married women in hijabs are amazed not to find such characteristics as meekness and obedience in their wives”. She considers that this symbolic representation will rapidly change, as well as thinking and behavior patterns: “appearance will seek to be in compliance with all aspects there will a balance and it will be a basis for formation of new female roles” which could change women’s position in family and society; making their position and role secondary.

### **Empowerment and dis-empowerment of women in Islam**

Two female experts also emphasize how dis-empowering veiling can be for women in Kyrgyzstan. Usupova, a journalist and Kurbanova, a female expert from the State Commission for Religious Affairs, consider that Islamization in Kyrgyzstan has a negative impact on status of Muslim females. Here I refer to the journalist’s quote: “Islamic ideology has negative effects on women: woman must stay at home, she must give birth, she does not have voice and rights and she should be from time to time beaten”. Kurbanova, an expert from the State Commission for Religious Affairs presents another example when veiling dis-

empowered Muslim women: “Our men understood that they can have second, third and fourth wives. So men can live with his second or third wife without registration of their marriage and then leave the family and children without living allowances. Our society is not ready for polygamy”. These perspectives of the government and Mass Media representatives are particularly interesting as these reflections could be compared with the individual reflections of women in hijabs when they indicated how veiling is empowering or dis-empowering them.

#### **4.4 Students’ attitudes and perspectives**

As was presented in the background section of this chapter, the majority of the students indicated, although in different degrees, 80% believed that their identity had overlapped with Islam. It is not surprising that students generally had positive attitudes towards women in hijabs and Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. 64.2% of students stated that they wanted to live in the Secular state, whereas 22.1% stated that they wanted to live in the Islamic state with Shari’ah law (Table 3). The findings of the survey support the Tajfel and Turner’s social categorization theory, when individuals demonstrate in-group favoritism, in-group liking (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This in-group favoritism indicates that there is a boundary between the in-group and out-group members which causes intergroup tension and trigger discrimination and division by category – us and them (Hewstone & Cains, 2001).

#### **Interest in Islam/Islam as a salvation**

Two additional questions in the survey were related to Islam, where students were asked to indicate their interest in Islam and estimate whether they believed that Islamic norms and rules were perceived as a salvation from degradation, amoral behavior and alcoholization of Kyrgyz society. The majority of the respondent (71.6%) stated that they were interested in Islam (Diagram 6) and 73.6% of the student believed that Islam was a salvation for Kyrgyz people (Diagram 7).

#### **Student’s relation to Islam**

About half of the students (54 %) stated that they had friend or relative who wore hijab (Table 4). Although the majority of students stated that they were Muslims (80%), however not all of them practiced Islam. Though it is considered to be duty of the Muslims only 29.5% stated that they were fasting during Ramadan month, 10.5% indicated that they were praying five times per day, and 31.6% of students at least once visited mosque. There was, however, high percentage of students who celebrated Muslim holidays (70.5%). These

results suggest that students associate themselves as members of Muslim group, however, the majority of them do not practice Islam. It is interesting to compare the presented results: Table 3, Table 4 and Table 7. Although students in general did not practice Islam they supported Islamization – 22.1% wanted to live in Islamic state and 73.6% of students perceived as a salvation. In other words, students had positive associations about Islam.

### **Social distance**

The social distance measurement tool was used to show how close students perceived Islamization in Kyrgyzstan in the context how willing they were to have social relations with women in hijabs. This technique was created by Bogardus which measures willingness of people to participate in social relation with other group of people. In Table 5 students demonstrated high percentage of acceptance of women in hijabs as a family member (54.7%), as a friend (73.7%), as a next door neighbor (76.8%), as a colleague (77.9%), and as a street neighbor (82.1%). Only 6.3% students stated that they would not admit women in hijabs to live in Kyrgyzstan. According to these results we can conclude that there is a high level of acceptance of women in hijabs among students.

### **The vignette methodology**

The vignette methodology helped to reveal the students position towards young women in hijabs (Table 6). Students were given two similar situations/stories about two young women who studied at one of the Bishkek universities. Both wanted to become bankers after graduation from the university. Only one marker was different in each case: the way young women were dressed. Woman A was wearing jeans and t-shirt and Woman B was in hijab (Appendix 4: questions 18-19).

Students tended to agree that the young woman in hijab (Woman B) was more likely to be a good wife (89.5%), be respected (92.6%), feel secure (84.2%), and be faithful (90.6%). Whereas the young woman in jeans and t-shirt (Woman A) was believed to have more free choice (89.6%), be more active (83.2%), easier to talk to (84.2%), and be a broad-minded person (86.3%). The greatest differences between Woman A and Woman B were indicated in three categories, where Woman A in casual clothes in comparison with Woman B in hijab had the following evaluation: 90.5% of students believed that Woman B was obedient, whereas Woman A was believed to be less obedient (52.4%); 79% of students stated that after marriage Woman B would stay at home with children, and only 21% stated that Woman A

would do the same choice; 90.5% of students trusted that Woman A would be able to make a good career, whereas only 43.2% stated that Woman B had chance to make a good career.

### **Opinion of students about women in hijabs**

In addition to the vignette methodology, I will present several diagrams (8-15) which illustrate thoughts and opinion of students about young women in hijabs. 38.9% of students tended to agree with the statement - "I do not care about women in hijabs", whereas 48.4% disagreed with this statement (Diagram 8). Thus, it can be suggested that this topic was not neutral for the students in the survey. Students assumed that "everyone has right to choose what to wear" (91.6%). It can be assumed that students agreed that women were free to choose to wear hijabs or other type of clothes (Diagram 9). 93.7% of students stated that they were not scared Muslim women in hijabs (Diagram 10).

The majority of students stated that they did not feel uncomfortable when they saw women in hijab in public places (78.9%) (Diagram 11). Students stated that they respected and supported young women in hijab, 89.5% and 68.4% respectively (Diagram 12-13). An interesting results where shown when students were asked whether they wished that there were more young women in hijabs, 53.7% tended to disagree and 46.3% of students tended to agree with the statement (Diagram 14). The majority of respondents (73.7%) disagreed with the statement that the increase in the number of women in hijabs would have negative impact to Kyrgyzstan's future (Diagram 15).

Different research methods and tools indicated that students who participated in the survey had positive views towards Islamization. This finding support the experts' and government representatives' consideration that new generation of 90s was more likely to embrace and support Islam.

## **4.5 Summary**

The perspectives of the secondary data informants' were presented and analyzed in this chapter. Different perspectives and opinions were presented for making an analysis and better understanding of the Islamization trends in Kyrgyzstan. Presentation of these perspectives made possible to present complexity and diversity of the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan.

The results indicated that, there are many problems and conflict potential is very high in the Kyrgyz society due to the rise of Islmization. The problems such as religious illiteracy, corrupted and weak clergy and mufti's office, demonstrative character of religious practice,

misinterpretation of Islam and Quran and etc. Experts, government representatives and religious male informants emphasized that there is a polarization, division and split of the society. Society is divided not only between believers and secular population, but also there is a split within the Muslim religious community, such as split between the Salafi and Tabligi Zhamaat movements. Some of the informants referred to lack of control over different religious movements and groups due to the liberal politics of the state; stating that liberal laws were causing a danger to young state. Not only the experts, but also some of the informants who were religious insiders were also afraid of misinterpretation of Islam. Some of the informants, both insiders and outsiders, believed that diversity of religious groups was dangerous as they were uncontrolled. Informants suggested that Islamization process should be controlled and work for the integration of the society should be fulfilled.

Although it was believed that the practicing Muslim groups were perceived as a minority the experts and other informants had a prognosis that Islamization process will continue developing and the number of Muslim believers will be increasing annually. This was exemplified by one of the state representatives, Dr. Kurbanova when indicated that Islam is popular not only among the poor and illiterate, but it is occupying other layers of the society and spheres of life. And while gaining popularity Islamic practices have started influencing and changing the social order. For example, as it was emphasized by female experts the Islamization processes are dis-empowering Muslim women.

Even though the majority of the interviewees did not believe in the possibility that Kyrgyzstan would become in future an Islamic state, informants believed that the Islamization process will change the society and there is a possibility of change of political regime when Islamic parties would come to power.

The young educated generation which was represented by the students who participated in the survey, on the contrary, demonstrated positive attitudes towards the Islamization trends. The young students did not perceive Islamization and social religious manifestation, such as wearing hijabs as dangerous or causing conflict or split in society. Moreover, the majority of the students supported and respected women in hijabs; and were interested in Islam.

## **Chapter 5. Data presentation and analysis – Women in hijabs**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter addresses the main issues of the field data collected from the primary data informants, namely individual narratives and reflections of women in hijabs<sup>16</sup>. First, the presentation of primary data informant's background will be the focus. Education, age, marital status, occupation and where informants grew up and lived as well as their surroundings will be introduced. Surrounding is understood here as a milieu, a person's social environment such as family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, class-mates and people in general with whom women in hijabs encounter in public places. These background factors might influence their choices over changing their identity and life style. Second, by examining and analyzing the reflections and stories of women in hijabs and applying theoretical concepts and perspectives discussed in the preceding chapter, this chapter aims to explore the motives and the rationale for why educated Kyrgyz women from moderate Muslim families have started to wear hijabs. Moreover, how their surroundings influenced their choices to change their lives will also be assessed. To visualize external factors I am using timelines for each interviewee. The stories of informants will reveal how the wearing of hijabs in Bishkek causes increased tensions and conflicts within society, how such tensions play out in the home and in public. Finally, I will explore how wearing of hijab can empower or dis-empower Kyrgyz women in Bishkek. I will discuss the women in hijabs' ability to control their lives, their mobility and freedom of movement, and how society reacts to these changes whether it includes or excludes them.

### **5.2 Informant presentation**

#### **5.2.1 Informant's Background**

##### **Women in hijabs - education and occupation**

All in all nine women in hijabs were interviewed for the study. Table 7 illustrates the educational, occupational, marital and being/living abroad backgrounds of women in hijabs. Eight women in hijabs had higher university degrees and one was a student enrolled at the university. Interviewees had the following specializations: Economics, Law, International relations, Social Sciences, Linguistics, Trade, Psychology, Management, and Muslim theology. Two of the interviewees were international Master Degree holders, and one of them was obtaining her Master Degree in Kyrgyzstan. Also, three interviewees studied at such

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<sup>16</sup> The translations of the interview extracts were done by me with minor editing for better understanding



faculties as the Arabic languages or Muslim theology at the universities in Bishkek. Six of the interviewees were employed; two of them were working but not in their area of specialization.

### **Women in hijabs – age, marital status**

The informants were aged between 19 and 46. Five were married and had children, while the rest were single. One of the informants who worked abroad lived with friends, whereas other single women in hijabs lived at home with parents and siblings. Two of interviewees had second marriages after having a divorce or becoming a widow.

Seven informants were living in Bishkek. Three of the interviewees were originally from Bishkek and two were from the south regions: one was from Osh city, the second largest city in Kyrgyzstan and another from Jalal-Abad province which is about 49 km from Osh city. Southern parts of the country are considered to be more traditional and more religious than northern parts of the country as they are bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and located in Fergana Valley<sup>17</sup> that “was a home to more religious Muslims than any other part of Central Asia” (Crosston, 2006, p. 41). Four interviewees were from the three northern regions: Chui province is where Bishkek city is located, so it’s the nearest location to the capital, then there is Issyk-Kul which is 230 km from Bishkek and Naryn city which is located 186 km from the border with China and 310 km from Bishkek. Although not all respondents were originally from Bishkek, seven out of nine had strongly associated themselves with Bishkek city.

In total six respondents had been working, studying or traveling abroad. Three interviewees had experience studying and living abroad as adults in the following countries: China, South Korea, UAE and Hungary. One was working in Czech Republic and the other two interviewees visited Turkey and Germany. Two of them were currently working and living abroad. According to Dolby (2004) the experience of studying abroad “provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself—particularly one’s national identity—in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self” (p. 150). In other words, living abroad affects individual’s attitudes; this kind of experience is likely to shape and change individual’s ideas, views, and values. And as identity is “a constant process of formation and change” (Dolby, 2001, p. 13) new experiences, new cultures, and new impressions have some effect on our choices.

To summarize, the captured and presented background information of women in hijabs suggests that respondents are in most cases well integrated into society where they live, and have opportunities to work even though they changed their lifestyles.

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<sup>17</sup> Fergana Valley is a region in Central Asia which is spread across territories of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

## **Position towards the future of Kyrgyzstan**

When the interviewees, women in hijabs were asked what they thought about the future of Kyrgyzstan, whether it would remain a secular state, or become an Islamic state with Shari'ah law all interviewees stated that Kyrgyzstan would remain secular. However, they emphasize that Islam will become stronger and the number of believers will increase. One of the interviewees, Ainura explains her position that Kyrgyzstan remains secular stating that there is a part of population with the Soviet background, and that it is difficult to change them: "even if you look at my parents, they are believers, but anyway they have other attitudes as they grew up during the Soviet times. And those who are already being brought up in religion they are completely different".

I asked the informants to suggest any Islamic/Muslim state as a model for Kyrgyzstan. As a result, interviewees suggested eight states: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, and Iran. The countries Malaysia and Saudi Arabia were named several times. Three interviewees named Malaysia and two named Saudi Arabia. The other three interviews stated that there was no any state that could be a model for Kyrgyzstan. Being asked to name a model state several women in hijabs also reflected on which states they did not want as a model. Some of the states which were suggested as a model, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey by some of the informants were considered to be unacceptable by others. In addition to these two states, Pakistan was also named as a bad model. These reflections illustrate that there is a diversity of Islamization perspectives within the Muslim community and that is why there is no agreement or one vision or one understanding.

### **5.2.2 Reactions of family and surrounding towards identity change**

A human being is a social creature; his or her choices are partially or in some degree influenced by their surroundings. According to Dawkins (2006), an evolutionary biologist, "most of what is unusual about man can be summed up in one word: 'culture'" (p. 189). In his work Dawkins (2006) argues that "cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission" (p. 189). In other words, human beings are programmed to copy, and imitate norms of their cultures in order to survive. And the key unit in cultural transmission according to his theory is imitation which is related to memory. Dawkins uses the abbreviation of the Greek word 'mimeme' as 'meme', which is translated as imitation of things. In modern world we catch these memes from different sources while we listen to other people, from reading, lectures, conversations, personal examples, TV and Internet. In order to illustrate how this type of imitation works Dawkins (2006) quotes his colleague Humphrey (1986):

[...] memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this isn't just a way of talking – the meme for, say, 'belief in life after death' is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over. (Humphrey, quoted by Dawkins, 2006, p. 192)

Dawkins (2006) argues that “some memes are more successful in the meme-pool than others” (p. 194). As genes memes also have natural selection principle. Other researchers such as Morris and her colleagues (2011) argue that “[...] memes might modify an attractor landscape by widening, flattening, and deepening a basin of attraction in a manner that is predictably correlated to meme fitness, i.e. a meme's success in becoming integrated into the belief system of the individual.” (p. 6). In other words not all ideas, messages and information are successfully ‘swallowed and digested’. Selection of memes heavily depends on what cultural environment considers favorable and advantageous. There must be advantages which make women to start wearing hijabs and remain resilient in their decisions despite the lack of support from family and friends. These specific benefits and advantages and why women in Bishkek chose veiling will be discussed in the next section. This section will explore the obstacles women in hijabs who participate in the study faced in Bishkek.

Seven out of nine interviewees indicated that their families had negative reactions towards their choices to become veiled. I begin with Jamal's story as she was one of the first women to wear hijab, after Kyrgyzstan became independent. I met Jamal in her NGO office - “Mutakalim”. In her interview to local Muslim magazine “*Minaret*” Jamal states that her NGO aims to promote Islam through conducting trainings for women in hijabs, helping them to defend their rights in their families and in society, helping women to choose the right direction in the Shari'ah, and providing correct information about Islam (anonymous, 2009).

As the event of her transformation coincided with the transitional period in Kyrgyzstan, the reactions of pro-communist relatives who grew up and lived during the Soviet period - in the regime without religion – her decision to become religious and her new appearance was not accepted and understood by her family as it was new and unfamiliar for them. This was exemplified by Jamal in the following terms:

Everyone was shocked. It was 1994. Everyone was far from religion; they did not have any understanding about that. Some of my relatives said that I got crazy and I needed to be placed to the mental house. They thought that something wrong was happening to me.

However, other interviewees who had started wearing hijabs quite recently had also experienced negative attitudes towards their choices. Ainura a student at the linguistic department who grew up surrounded by moderate Muslim parents who had been only practicing Namaz (praying five times a day) for more than 10 years describes her parents' attitude and reaction to her choice to wear hijab as following:

The reaction of my family was terrible. Although my parents pray, they did not approve my decision to wear hijab. They consider that praying is a duty, but they do not fulfill other duties such as getting knowledge and live according to Shari'ah law. Although my mother prayed she did not wear hijab. That is why they did not have influence on my decision. When I started wearing hijab they would question me why did I cover myself saying that I was so beautiful. They would say that I am stupid. Not only relatives, but also classmates and friends, every, every, everyone was negative. I have lost many friends.

On the contrary, a marketing specialist Aina who works in Dubai, states that when she became veiled in 2012 her family which was also religious as in Ainura's case supported Aina's decision:

My grandfather was a mullah in his village. My family has stronger faith compared to other families that have been deeply influenced by atheistic preaching of the Soviet Union [...] My family was happy although, no one wears hijab in my family, yet.

Nurjan, who works in a public management, states that her family demonstrated mixed views and attitudes towards her choice to wear hijab: "The reaction was very interesting. Men supported, but women were skeptical, conflicting and in rage. My Mom was concerned that I would not get married." Begaim, who works in trade, had also similar experience when female members of the family had been negative concerning her choice to become covered: "men in my family were calm and restrained, whereas mother, aunt and sisters were against. [...] In several months all settled down". But Begaim adds that when some time passed her family got used to and accepted her new style of life:

Now my hijab does not disturb anyone. Extended family members<sup>18</sup> were not enthusiastic, but observing my everyday life. They understood that I am not oppressed and moreover I am very active.

It is noteworthy that families were not against religion practices such as praying or fasting. For example, Anara, a sewing businesswoman, indicates that the reaction of relatives and acquaintances was negative to her hijab wearing:

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<sup>18</sup> Kyrgyz families have close relationship with extended family member. In my family for example my mother's sister is like a second mother and her children are like my brothers.

Everyone would say pray if you want, but why wear hijab? Believe in your heart and that is enough, or you can wear something more beautiful, it is not necessary, you could cover yourself differently.

Nazira comes from a mixed family which is diverse both in religion and nationality. Her mother is Russian with Christian background and her father is Kyrgyz with Muslim background. Both parents were not religious. A change in her appearance was perceived by both parents as a new image:

In the beginning they did not understand. They thought that it was a new image, like Bedouin style. [...] but when I wore black hijab they automatically became negative. Once when my Papa was in a bad mood he said that I would not leave the house if I were dressed up [in hijab]. They found that wild.

Only two out of nine interviewees emphasize that their choices to wear hijabs were supported by their family members, but despite this fact all nine interviewees without an exception indicate that the choice to wear hijabs was their own. Several interviewees had relatives or family members who had been religious, but none of them had close relatives in hijabs. When it comes to wider social networks, most of the respondents had a few, if any of friends and acquaintances who wore hijabs. Three interviewees started practicing and wearing hijabs being abroad, far from their families and friends. Begaim indicated that: “it was easy [to veil], as I lived in another country”.

The interviewee’s mother, who had negative attitude to her daughter’s choice to wear hijab started helping Nurjan in shopping: “Now there are moments when Mom suggests me headscarves saying for example that it is from light and breathing fabric. She became adapted to it”. In addition, Nurjan had an interesting point about generation gap and level of acceptance of women in hijabs:

Young generation is more open, because young generation knows such notions as individualism. They know what individual is and what personal choice is. [...] and old generation have difficulties in understanding such concept as personal choice.

As shown above the majority of interviewees reported that they did not get approval and support from their families in their decision to wear hijabs. However, the question of hijab eventually turned out not to damage relationships within families, but turned to be a source of conflict with friends, at school, work and public places. This was particularly exemplified by a current student, Ainura:

Now my family got used to it and some of friends also, but sometimes there are some people who would say – are you not hot in that, you look like Wahhabi, or a suicide attacker or they stare at me.

Furthermore, Ainura reports that her surrounding at the university did not normalize her practice and she had to change university after she started covering:

It was so difficult, because there were cavils from lecturers, they were annoyed how I looked like, and you could see it in their eyes. I was the only one at my department who was covered. In my current university there are much more women in hijabs. Of course there are also cases when someone cavils, but it makes me glad that I am not the only one.

It is important to mention here that Farideh Heyat a researcher who conducted research in 2004 in the South of Kyrgyzstan suggested that Islamic custom in Kyrgyzstan is “interpreted in an orthodox, Sunni tradition, and often in a fundamentalist form, that has a very restrictive view of women and gender relations” (p. 282). Considering this phenomenon in today’s Kyrgyzstan, it not surprising that interviewees prioritized veiling over the reactions and negative attitudes of their families and surrounding. However, at the same time, as it was described in the observation section in Chapter 2, half of the interviewees were not wearing black orthodox hijabs, on the contrary they mixed modern clothes and used different colors in their wardrobe. This trend of modernization of hijab and attitudes to the orthodox hijab style were exemplified by Begaim and Nurjan:

Niqab, burqa – these are traditional clothing of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen. In Quran Allah does not say anything about niqab, for example, face and hands should be open. I am not going to wear such clothes [...] I personally wear bright colors and people are amazed why I am not in black. I buy regular clothes and combine it so it would not contradict Shari’ah law.” (Begaim)

I had a choice. The first year when I started veiling I wore probably very traditional [black hijab and black loose dress] and to be honest I felt comfortable in black. But I made a choice whether I scare people away, and they stop talking to me and thereby I limit the opportunity to share some knowledge about it [Islam] or I adapt and still preserve my own way. And by adapting I’m not deterring them from obtaining knowledge and remaining open for their questions about Islam. I noticed that the more you civilly dressed I do not know so let’s say dressed in modern style the more you win their favor. [...] It is a question of integration. (Nurjan)

Here Nurjan refers to religious responsibility to disseminate information about Islam among other and not to “deter them” she adapted her hijab style to more moderate one. This rational choice of moderate style of hijab instead of the orthodox black style can be analyzed

as an epistemic rationality, which is defined as “responsibility” (Spickard. 1998). Nurjan assumes that she has a responsibility to disseminate information about Islam. Even though she felt comfortable in black hijab she sacrificed her comfort so that her appearance would not prevent others to approach to her with questions. Nurjan might feel that it is her responsibility to integrate and win favor of her social environment. These reflections of Begaim and Nurjan present how by modernizing their hijab styles Kyrgyz women make attempts to adapt and integrate into society. The choice of non-orthodox hijab and adoption with a more moderate and modern style hijab might confirm that interviewees were seeking ways to manifest their religious choices while at the same time being tolerated by their families and the society.

To sum up, the appearance transformations of women who started veiling were perceived by their families and social environment as negative changes and as a result women in hijabs’ identities were devaluated and stigmatized (Hogg, 2006). However, they remained resistant and managed to buffer up their self-evaluation. They continued wearing hijabs and the others had to accept it.

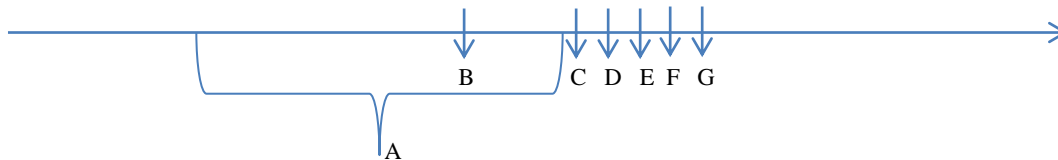
### **5.3 Motives for women to wear hijabs**

Heyat (2008) reveals in her study of veiling in Azerbaijan, in the largest country in the Caucasus which was part of the Soviet Union, that “tensions and insecurities in the independent era that have reinforced the rise of Islamic Ideology” (p. 362). Like veiling in Azerbaijan, Heyat (2004) earlier conducted a similar study in South of Kyrgyzstan, where according to her findings “vulnerabilities resulting from high unemployment, mass poverty, social insecurity and moral malaise associated with the corruption of the state and sexual degradation of women have played a major role in increased following for the new Islamicism and the success of groups promoting them” (p. 275).

All interviewees without an exception stated that they made their own choices to start wearing hijabs. However, it is noteworthy that some of the interviewees describe how their surrounding - friends, acquaintances, family members, or social environment - influenced them to become interested in Islam and become covered. For example, in Nurjan’s case her experience studying at the international program outside of Kyrgyzstan in non-Muslim state has played a great role that she became interested in Islam and started veiling (see Timeline 1). There she met Muslims from different countries and became interested, whereas in Kyrgyzstan she was not interested in that at all, on the contrary she was interested in non-Muslim religions:

Before Islam I was interested in studying other religions such as Christianity and Buddhism. Maybe I became interested in Islam because I was studying at an international school where I met representatives of different Islamic states from Africa, Sudan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Palestine, Egypt, Bangladesh and many, other countries. It was so diverse and I had opportunity to learn how Islam is practiced in each country. And in Kyrgyzstan I did not have any desire to learn religion, Islam, as it is presented in a very negative way.

### Timeline 1. Nurjan



Nurjan was born in 1980s.  
**A** - was interested in Christianity and Buddhism, **B** - Graduated from secular university in Kyrgyzstan,  
**C** - MA degree abroad in international school in non-Muslim state, **D**- met Muslims from different countries and became interested in Islam, **E** – got access to information and started reading Quran, **F** – started praying and visiting mosque, **G** – started wearing hijab

In addition, interviews revealed that religion and hijabs were used as a coping strategy, protection, normative fitness, search for meaning of life, self-identification, or a marriage strategy. In order to visualize these factors/motives I use timelines for each interviewee.

#### 5.3.1 Hijab and protection

When justifying their choices to wear hijabs the majority of interviewees suggest that hijab has a protective function, giving a sense of security to women in hijabs. Here interviewees use instrumental reasoning where hijab is considered to be an instrument or mean to achieve particular goal – to be protected (Jeromack & Porpora, 2004). Interviewees highlight functions of hijab as protector against physical violence, sexual harassment and insulting remarks. For example, Anara, a sewing businesswoman exemplifies hijab as physical protection against rape:

[...] if I had a daughter and she would start becoming feminine I would wear her in hijab so no one would not look at her. Do you know how many?! Pedophilia! There are five year old girls who are being raped. [...] There are that kind of old men or young men from villages, who are single and do not have anyone, they are sort of mentally ill [...] Of course girls should be protected.

For Anara the physical beauty of woman is dangerous. She considers that beauty should be hidden and beautiful girl during her puberty should start wearing dark clothes so as not to attract attention. Anara believes that beauty should be saved and protected from “the gazes of boys, compliments which can spoil girl so that she becomes proud of her beauty and



think that all boys belong to her”. Her comments were contradictory in relation to her own personal experience in the past when she was young she would pay a lot of attention to people’s opinion about her appearance and clothes: “I was crazy about fashion. [...] I used to be a super woman of fashion. I could sew or knit a new garment in one night and go to the university so everyone would be amazed”.

The perception of protection of hijab against harassment from men was emphasized by another interviewee, Rahat, she states that:

Hijab has increased my personal space, there are no men who stare, there is no harassment, no comments from arrogant men and I do not hear insulting remarks any more.

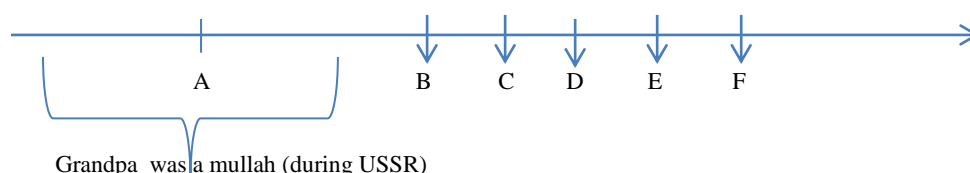
For Rahat hijab protects her both physically and verbally from men. This sense of security was also illustrated by Aina in the following:

Hijab protects from unwanted looks of men, it provides more safety, because by nature often covered women are not targets of rape or victims of other similar harassment than uncovered women.

In Aina’s case it is important to demonstrate how her surrounding motivated her to become veiled (see Timeline 2). Even though Aina, states that no one influenced her decision, she describes how living among practicing Muslims in an Islamic state motivated her to explore Islam:

I was born Muslim, and had faith in my soul since I remember myself. Nobody has influenced my decision. I started exploring my religion more. I was living in Dubai where the environment had a blend of all cultures and people had better understanding of Islam. The more I explored, the more I wanted to follow the rules ascribed for women in my religion. It was my choice and my right, and I have made a choice to live the life that is according to Islam. I personally, dreamed of wearing hijab for almost a year, but was delaying each time. Finally, when Ramadan of 2012 was approaching I decided to go ahead with it.

### Timeline 2. Aina



**A** – “I was born Muslim” in 1980s, **B** - Graduated from secular university in Kyrgyzstan, **C** – MA degree abroad in non-Muslim state, **D** – started working and living in Dubai, **E** – in 2011 started dreaming about wearing hijab, **F** – during fasting in 2012 started wearing hijab.

In addition to living and working in the Islamic state, Aina's grandfather was a mullah in a village during the Soviet times and her family was more influenced by religious ideas. External factors such as religious background of her family and place of residence are significant preconditions for her decision. Protection, however, was one of the main motivations for her to start wearing hijab when living in Dubai. She names protection from harassment from men and being treated with respect as one of the main benefits of the hijab.

Nariza uses personal security points in order to persuade her parents that she made a right choice when started wearing hijab:

Every time I show to my parents that there are pluses [of being veiled]. For example, elementary in news you can see that some girl was raped or about thefts. I started telling them – “What if the fact that I am covered would protect me? People would think and maybe there would not be any violence committed against me.

Mira, a housewife with linguistics background from the Islamic University, also exemplifies the positive function of hijab as it changes men's attitude and behavior in the following way:

I feel good and protected. I do not catch somebody's eyes. No one harasses women in hijabs at streets because by wearing hijab woman is not just a body and a sexual object for men, she becomes a person. She is the treasure for her husband. She is primarily a mother, a sister, and a wife. Western woman will not understand it as she is transmitted from one to another as a thing (a marijuana cigarette) in a circle, and then thrown out.

Although during the interview it was easy for Mira to name advantages of being veiled, but she could not recall what had made her interested in Islam or hijabs. But when she was asked who or what had influenced her, Mira describes how her surrounding influenced her decision: “My teachers of Arabian language, my father and my husband had some effect on my decision”. Mira states that she did not practice Islam before she enrolled to the Islamic University:

I began to know Islam only at the university [Islamic university]. I studied with girls in hijabs, they used to tell a lot. I began to read religious literature and then I married to a man who was practicing Islam.

Although Mira emphasizes that her main motivation to start wearing hijabs was to: “obey the will of the creator, and to find his contentment” she started wearing hijab only when she had broadened her religious knowledge and understanding and got married. These external influences can be visualized in the following Timeline 3.

### Timeline 3. Mira



Mira was born in 1980s.

**A** – enrolled to Islamic university, language department, **B** – met at university women in hijabs, **C** – started reading Islamic literature, **D** – married religious man, **E** – teacher, father and husband motivated her to wear hijab, **F** – started wearing hijab.

Some of interviewees view wearing hijab as protection of their dignity and a marker that a woman should be respected and admired. This particularly is exemplified by Nurjan:

One of the pluses of wearing hijab in our society is that you feel protected from aggressiveness of men. In general I have noticed that hijab makes men more respectful and they look with admiration.

#### 5.3.2 If you call yourself Muslim, then be Muslim

Another interesting field reflection concerning the reasons to wear hijab is related to hypocrisy discourse. While explaining why interviewees started wearing hijab they justify their choice describing those female Muslim believers who do not wear hijab as hypocrites. Two concepts, the normative fitness (Turner et al., 1994) and the normative rationality (Spickard, 1998) are particularly useful in analyzing the hypocrisy discourse. According to Turner et al. (1994) in order to fit in certain group, such as Muslim community, one should have similar and consistent normative characteristic, such as hijab in case of religious Muslim females. In the case of the normative rationality, normative values should be consistent with actions. So these interviewees justify their choice to wear hijabs as a normative action or a duty in order to be consistent to their religious values (Spickard, 1998).

For example in Nazira's view Muslim believers should fully accept their identity:

If you aspire then you should correspond [...] you should not be hypocrite, saying yes I am Muslim and at the same time saying no hijab is not for me. [...] if you call yourself just a believer, or someone who believes in God [...] and you do not belong to any religion it is one thing. But if particularly you aspire yourself to be in Islam [...] it is a law, God's law that it is a duty [to wear hijab] for every female Muslim believer.

Nurjan is another interviewee who associates women who call themselves Muslims but not wearing hijab as being hypocrites:

I started thinking what Islam means. In literal translation it is submission to the will of the God. Then I started thinking why do I practice Islam. I thought that if I cannot submit and do not wear differently, I felt I was hypocrite. As I would say I am Muslim, I believe in God, and I trust in God and the way I was

dressed and elementary when choosing clothes I did not trust in God. [...] I used to pray and then covered my head with headscarf, but after praying I would take it off and moved on. I thought that was a making a pencil whip. [...] if I say I am Muslim then I trust my life to God. I wanted that he would be glad with the way I am dressed. [...] I wanted have a balance.

It is important to highlight this hypocrisy discourse where Muslim women in hijab insist that all female believers should wear hijabs. Another interesting fact is that both interviewees started wearing hijabs when their surrounding would not cause them much discomfort when they started covering. For example, Nurjan started wearing hijab when she was studying abroad, because no one from her family or surrounding would be near to protest and object. Another interviewee Nazira, who comes from a mixed family, and currently an unemployed young woman, did not start wearing hijab right after she became interested in Islam. It took several years. Nazira became interested in Islam at high school when she started learning about Islam and fasting. She was not sure about how her surrounding and family would accept hijab. She started veiling only when she graduated from the university, and quit her job. She picked the time when she did not have any social pressures like classmates or colleagues. Both interviewees, Nazira and Nurjan, emphasize that it is hypocritical when someone calls herself a Muslim and does not wear hijab. These interviewees, however, started veiling when they could maximally avoid the social pressure and this illustrates that they are also hypocritical, even though they justify passionately their choices.

### **5.3.3 Looking for meaning of life – “Why I am as a matter of fact in the world”**

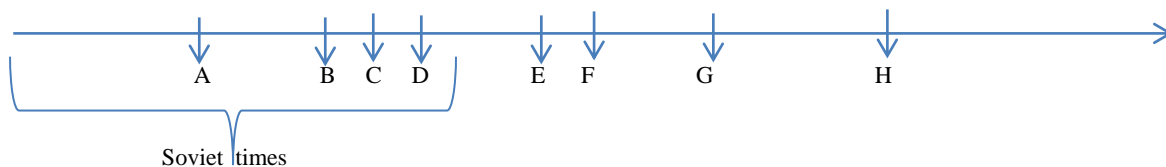
Historically people would need religion in order to find the meaning of life and use it in difficult and unfortunate times as a coping strategy. According to Heyat (2004) “in Central Asia the post-Soviet changes and consequent new poverty, insecurities and chaos have been in tandem with greater demand for religion and its guiding role in daily life.” (p. 286). In her similar study “New veiling in Azerbaijan” Heyat (2008) is relying on accounts of her respondents who indicated that women were inspired to wear hijabs and become religious when facing difficult times in their lives “such as bereavement or serious ill health, just prior to their conversion.” (p. 371). Hogg and Terry (2000) support this idea when religion is needed as a guideline for people when they suggest that one of the social identity motives is related to striving to reduce uncertainty about their lives. By distinguishing oneself from others, in this case from non-believers, women in hijab are making personal choices that provide them with guidelines related to their perceptions of themselves and how are they supposed to act and live in order to reduce uncertainty. The interviewees in the current study

describe similar motives to become religious when they indicate that their primary motives were a search for a meaning of life and reduction of uncertainty. For example, Jamal, in her interview she gave in 2007 to one of the newspapers (Malevanaya, 2007), describes her interest in becoming religious as following:

From childhood I started thinking about the meaning of life. I used to ask: “why do we live?” I remember one summer, the last days of August, first of September I should have gone to second grade. I used to spend my holidays at my grandfather’s house. We were lying under the pear tree and I asked: “Grandpa, why do we live?” He looked at me in surprise and started explaining [...]. These discussions were very interesting.

Jamal’s story can be described as particularly interesting (see Timeline 4). She was born and grew up during the Soviet times. When she was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student, when the Kyrgyz Republic was a part of the USSR she met a veiled woman for the first time in her life. She became interested and approached her to talk and heard about Islam. After this meeting Jamal became interested and went to the library. There she found a Quran and started reading it. Later after graduation from high school Jamal, against her parents’ plans, started studying at the Islamic university in Bishkek and wearing hijab (Malevanaya, 2007). Now she is a head of Muslim NGO, which protects Muslim women’s rights and promotes Islam.

#### Timeline 4. Jamal



Jamal was born in 1970s

**A** – Had questions about meaning of life and discussed that with her grandfather, **B** – at 10<sup>th</sup> grade, during the Soviet period, for the first time met covered Muslim woman, **C** – approached to her and got information about Islam, **D** – went to library and started reading Quran, **E** – was enrolled to Islamic university in 1994, **F** – started wearing hijab in 1994-1995, **G** – became a founder of an Islamic NGO and activist for Muslim’s rights in 1999, **H** – got married to religious man.

It is noteworthy that the other two interviewees, Anara and Rahat indicate their self-identification with Islam was a coping strategy in difficult periods of their life and at a time of crisis. Anara became a widow with small children in her mid-thirties. She lost purpose in her life as it was her husband. She remembers how she would not sleep at night and worried about how she would bring up her sons. She worried whether she would be able to give them an education. In Anara’s words her motivation to start wearing hijab is captured in the following:

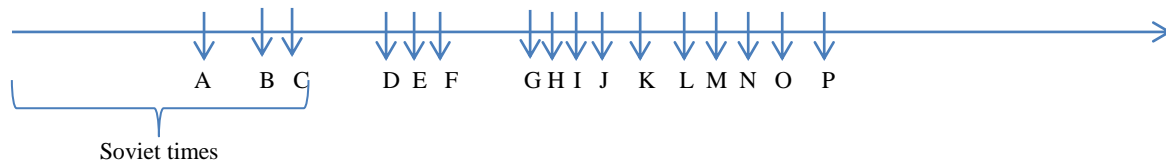
I wanted to know why I am as a matter of fact in the world. Why do I need to give birth? I want to know why I exist, because I like my mother-in-law gave birth, was also taking care, and feeding my children. And suddenly her son dies being 34 years old, so young. Do you understand?

She had existential questions and wanted to find answers. For the first time when she faced Islam she was in her mid-thirties, and it happened when her eldest son told her that she should go to the mosque:

In general my son said me to go to the mosque, my son said: “go to the mosque, Allah will give you everything”. It was a son who said me, he was still small. And then I was surprised that there is Allah. [...] I thought how Allah may give me something and who is Allah? And I went to the mosque for the first time. Before I left [abroad] for the first time I heard about the mosque.

After that visit of the mosque in 2004 Anara left to go abroad to work and there she started praying, and then met a Christian man, who later converted to Islam and they married. But she did not start wearing hijab until she came back to Kyrgyzstan in 2006 (see Timeline 5). It is worth noting that Anara used to have negative attitudes and stereotypes about Islam. Anara who grew up during the Soviet times, questioned Islam and associated it with terrorism before she started practicing it.

### Timeline 5. Anara



Anara was born in 1960s  
**A** – graduated from secular university in 1980s , **B** – got married, **C**- had children, **D** – husband dies, **E** – she loses the meaning of life (husband), **F** – she is alone with children, **G** – 13-14 year old son visits mosque in 2004, **H** – son recommends her to go to the mosque, **I** – she goes to the mosque, **J** – she leaves abroad to work to non-Muslim state in 2004, **K** – starts praying abroad, **L** – starts dating Christian man, **M** – he becomes converted to Islam, **N** – they get married, **O** – she comes back to Kyrgyzstan in 2006, **P** – starts wearing hijab in 2006

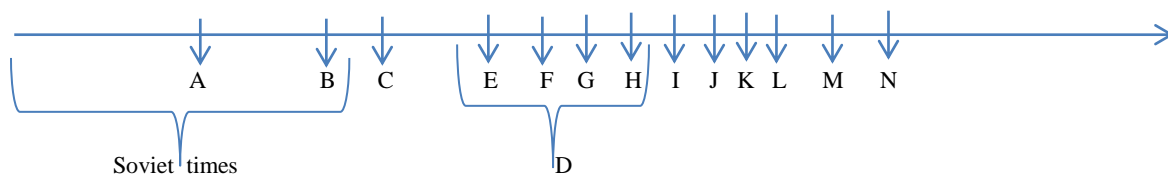
Rahat, the interviewee with linguistics and psychology backgrounds, states that she had similar motivation related to existential issues as Anara had, which made her religious:

I was in crisis, I was 30 years old. Old values did not work and I needed new and was looking for new values. I had existential questions such as why do I live. I was in crisis. I was bankrupt. My mother died and I inherited a little brother from my mother.

Rahat names economic problems, the loss of her mother and caring for her little brother who was perceived as a burden in those circumstances was trigger for her to turn to Islam (see Timeline 6). In Rahat’s case even though she was interested in Christianity, her

Muslim colleagues came to her in a time of need, when she was experiencing difficulties in her life and wanted to reduce uncertainty. These colleagues were supporting her in crisis and encouraged to practice Islam. Rahat mentioned that among her relatives only her grandmother read namaz (praying). Even though she states that she saw her frequently, and that her grandmother did not influence her much, it can be assumed that this image would have affected her choice to become a religious Muslim follower, rather than a Christian.

### Timeline 6. Rahat



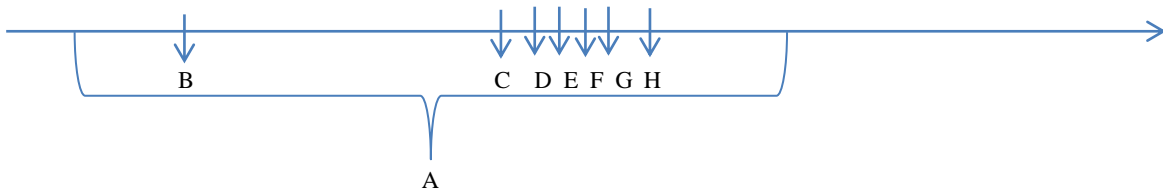
Rahat was born in 1970s.  
**A** - Grandmother practicing Islam during USSR (praying), **B** – born in 1970s, **C** –graduated from secular university, **D** - was interested in Christianity, **E** - single mother, **F** - bankrupt, **G** - mother died, **H** – had to take care of her younger brother, **I** - was influenced by Muslim colleagues, **J** – started wearing hijab, **K** – married to religious man, **L** - graduated from Arabian studies, **M** – her oldest daughter started wearing hijab, **N** – graduated from Psychology department

Another interviewee, Ainura, a student, appealed to Islam for gaining relief when she lost her cousin with whom she grew up with. Islam became her coping strategy in crisis. After his unexpected death in early adulthood she was frightened of death so in addition to this fear she had sleeping problems (see Timeline 7). When explaining her choice to become religious Ainura refers to the instrumental reasoning or goal-oriented rationality (Jerolmack & Porpora, 2004). Religion was used here as a relief, a mean to solve Ainura’s problems:

[...] in winter when my cousin died, he was young, he was 21. It was difficult. I could not fell asleep as I had thought that if I close my eyes I would not wake up again. And when I started praying I felt pure and I found relieve for my soul in this religion [started praying] and during winter I did not notice, but when spring and summer came I started feeling uncomfortable in short sleeve t-shirts and skirts and decided to cover myself. I started wearing hijab.

Ainura, as well as Anara and Rahat, whose reflections were presented earlier, was experiencing an existential crisis, due to the death of a relative and the fear of death. For these three women religion in these difficult periods became means to gaining relief and peace of mind.

### Timeline 7. Ainura



Ainura was born in 1990s.

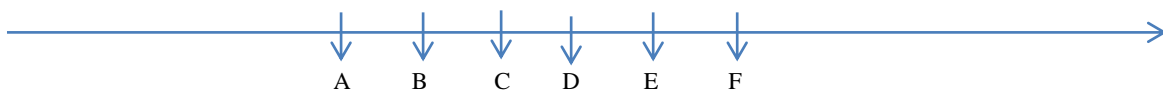
**A** – her father has been praying in 2000s, **B** – her mother started praying, **C** – Ainura started reading religious literature (Autumn 2011), **D** - her cousin brother dies (Winter 2011), **E** – she got afraid of death, **F** - felt anxiety and had sleeping problems, **G** – started praying for gaining relief, **H** – started wearing hijab (Spring 2012), **I** – changed university

For Begaim, who was born in 1980s, and grew up in independent Kyrgyzstan, it was a gradual process, without the experience of crisis or loss, but it also started from existential questions and search for meaning of life: “As I got older, I began to ask questions about life and death, the beginnings of life and origin of a man, I was thinking, questioning! I think it is natural.” Although Begaim states that it was a gradual process she indicates that her peers and aunt were practicing Muslims:

I started practicing fasting when I was 15 years old, then started praying at 21, and wearing hijab from 23 years old. There was no one special who influenced me, although there were Muslim friends. Everything was done consciously, everything was studied.

From this statement we can assume that Begaim’s surrounding had an effect on why she became interested in Islam and gradually became covered (see Timeline 8).

### Timeline 8. Begaim



**A** – had religious Muslim friends, **B** – started fasting when was 15 years old, **C**- in 21 started praying, **D** – studied abroad in non-Muslim state, **E** - started wearing hijab in 23, **F** – got married to religious man

#### 5.3.4 Hijab as bargain

Interesting narratives were heard concerning hijab becoming a marriage strategy so allowed women to rationalize their choices as actions that maximize benefits (Iannaccone, 1997). According to Kandiyoti (1988) by analyzing women’s strategies and coping mechanisms within the patriarchal systems in their cultural context we can capture and “reveal how men and women resist, accommodate, adapt and conflict with each other over resources, rights and responsibilities” (p. 285). In discussing the field narratives of interviewees related to marriage strategies I will use “patriarchal bargain” a concept that was



used by Kandiyoti (1988) to describe women's coping strategy in the patriarchal society. According to the reflections of interviewees some women start veiling in order to get married and enhance stability and security in their lives by increasing responsibility and control by men. According to Azari (1983) young women in Iran adopt veiling because this restriction imposed by religion was "a small price that had to be paid in exchange for the security, stability and presumed respect this order promised them" (Azari, 1983, p. 68, quoted by Kandiyati, 1988, p. 283). For this reason it can be assumed that women are making costs and benefits calculation when choosing to become veiled to reach their goals – to get married.

Although, Iranian context regarding the veiling is quite difficult to be compared with Kyrgyzstan's, as Kyrgyz women are making their choices whereas Iranian women were imposed to be veiled by the regime which came to power after the revolution in 1979 (Abu-Odeh, 1991; Nafisi, 2003). The imposition of the veil had a symbolic significance as it was a sign of "the complete victory of the Islamic aspect of the revolution" (Nafisi, 2003). However, women in both countries used and use religion and veiling as a copying strategy to achieve certain goals in the patriarchal society, the only difference is that Iranian women did not have choice to veil or not to veil and had to find how to benefit from the given situation, whereas for Kyrgyz women veiling is an alternative choice to reach their goals. For example, a complex and contradictory bargain is illustrated by Rahat when she is describing stereotypes about women in hijab. She notes that hijab helps a woman become more attractive for marriage:

There are people who think that they [women in hijabs] are the purest and nicest people. But there are those who think as one female police officer to whom I talked. She said that these are prostitutes in hijabs who cover themselves. That they are depraved and wear hijab as it is easier to get married. And it is true, it is easier to get married in hijabs, they are in demand. Not only young women, but even aged women, it is easier to get married.

This view of motivation to wear hijab as a marriage strategy is also reflected by Jamal, a leader of a religious NGO:

Maybe people have positive stereotypes. They think that they [women in hijabs] are quiet. Now it is a fashion, young women who want to get married start wearing headscarves and practicing Islam.

Furthermore this marriage strategy is captured in Nazira's descriptions of her future husband. Nazira is a single, unemployed young woman and she does not plan to work. She describes clearly this marriage deal as following:

The husband should be responsible for the family; consequently he should be able to earn and be enterprising. I consider this characteristic. [...] husband provides his wife; it is very important character of men. [...] And men apparently want to see wives who are calm, humble women, who know their place, and will not jump above her head, but woman who is wise in her own way, and so I think that now, for example, value of Muslim women became higher.

Hence, behind this strategy it can be assumed that certain types of arrangements between women and men are negotiated and discussed. So, future husbands in exchange for security and economic stability expect that their future wives in hijabs would be as Nurjan stated: “super submissive, super taciturn, obedient, overall super wife and daughter-in-law”.

### **5.3.5 Self-identification**

Self-identification is another motivation that is defined by one of the interviewees who was questioning her personal identification within two religious groups as she comes from a mixed family with Christian and Muslim backgrounds. Tajfel’s and Turner’s theory of self-categorization and Brewer’s (2001) person-based and relational social identities suggest that it is important for the individual to know where she or he belongs to, or what specific social category she or he can refer to in order to define the terms of relationships with other people. When person relates him or herself to a certain group, a category (Muslim women) social categorization mechanism starts working creating such important and valuable intergroup relations as belonging, solidarity, in-group favoritism and these in-group status tends to enhance member’s self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1981). This idea/knowledge/sense of belonging within a certain social group has a great significance for each individual (Hogg, 2006). The importance of the social categorization mechanism and intergroup relations is supported by the Brewer’s (2001) concepts - person-based and relational social identities. Before choosing specific social category Nazira, one of the interviewees needed to refer to a question about her personal identity – “Who she is?” in terms of her individuals association regarding the specific social group – Christian or Muslim. Only when this interviewee made a choice and identified herself as a member of a specific social category, when Nazira chose to identify herself with a Muslim group she could define herself in relation to others. After identifying herself Nazira could define her relational social role identities and therefore to correspond to her group and identify her relationships with her social environment.

Nazira states that before high school she never thought about religion (see Timeline 9). When asked about her nationality and religion background she would say that she believes in God, but did not want to follow any particular religion. One day, however, as Nazira states:

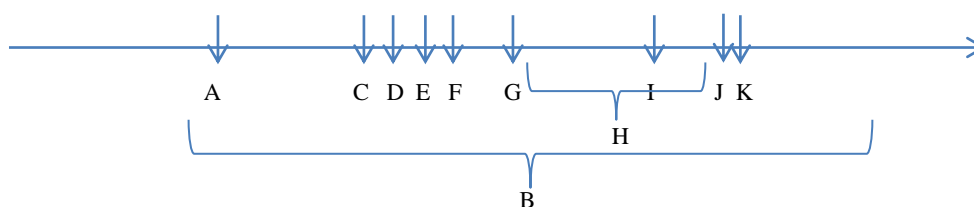
I was taken up with religion and started learning more about Islam. Closer to the senior classes we become more conscious and everyone wants to identify themselves with some group. So everyone at school used to ask me who I was, what was my nationality, what were my religious beliefs, because I am a representative of two nationalities which are so contradictory.

When she was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student she was motivated to explore her self-identification. One day after school as Nazira dramatically and emotionally told me: “Something shifted in me and I became interested in religion. I found a Muslim religious book at home. I started reading it and became for the first interested in Islam”. Later she started fasting, and continued studying religious literature and then she had thoughts about wearing hijab:

I was brought into religion and apparently environment had an effect. We do not live in a Christian state, even though at that time we did not have many people who practiced [Islam], there were only certain groups, but at least it is still the fact that the majority of the population identify themselves as Muslims. [...] If you are a Muslim then wear and behave in compliance with the requirements of Islam”.

With all these questions about nationality and religion at school, as well as Nazira’s family background influenced her to start searching who she was. Being motivated and driven by self-identification and self-categorization questions she found her identity in group identity of the majority – Muslims.

### Timeline 9. Nazira



Nazira was born in 1990s.  
**A** – was born in a mixed family (Christian and Muslim parents), **B** – self-identification process “Who am I”, **C** - at high school many asked her what was her nationality, her religion, **D** - started to questioning which group she belonged to, **E**- at 10<sup>th</sup> grade she found book about history of Islam, started reading, **F** - started fasting, **G** – enrolled in secular university, **H** – started thinking about hijab, but was not sure how her surrounding would accept it, **I** – graduated from university, **J** – quit job, **K** – started wearing hijab.

## **5.4 Empowerment or dis-empowerment**

### **5.4.1 How does the veil empower women?**

The following section will discuss how hijab is empowering or dis-empowering Kyrgyz women. Kyrgyzstan being secular state currently does not have laws such as in Iran or Saudi Arabia where government encourages and even obliges women to wear the hijab. As it was stated by all interviewees in hijabs in the current research project, even though there were external factors, they made their choices voluntarily without anyone's pressure. Women in this discussion adopted hijabs as adults and come from moderate Muslim families in Bishkek. This analysis will be more of a personal reflection from interviewees who participated in the current study.

According to Mosedale (2005) dis-empowered women can empower themselves when they can change their status/position and gain/claim power. In cases when interviewees highlighted the hijab's protective function, these may be considered in terms of veiling as empowering a woman as they become 'untouchable' in public by men and changing their status becoming powerful in protecting their bodies from sexual harassment. Abu-Odeh (1991) describes the empowering of the veil in the following: "her sense of the 'untouchability' of her body is usually very strong, in contrast to the woman who is not veiled. [...] It is also true that veiled women's exposure to male intrusions in the first place is considerably less than the others" (p. 1530). In other words, by adopting a veil woman becomes powerful as "the veil meant to shield them from such sexual approaches; when such approaches are actually made, they are looked as being outrageous, both by the veiled women themselves and the public" (Abu-Odeh, 1991, p. 1531).

Another example when veiling is empowering for women was expressed by Rahat when she describes how her religious status enables her now to have the right to choose places she can visit, such as family gatherings, celebrations of birthdays, weddings, funeral and etc. Kyrgyz have a traditional culture where family and collective gatherings play an important part in their social life and it is obligatory to visit these gatherings:

Now I have the right to choose. It has become easier to live. It is not necessary to follow secular norms such as clothes, hair style and you may not go to the gathering to put in an appearance, you save money. I must go to the funerals and that is all. I do not go for birthday celebrations. And before I was told that I should go, I should not be separated from the society, I went and I did not like to be there. Now I have a choice whether I go or do not go, no one forces me. (Rahat)

It is also obligatory that a guest should bring money or an expensive gift for these gatherings. As it was presented in the Chapter 3 the “ability to make choices” was used by Kabeer (2005) to describe empowerment. Therefore, hijab and her practice of Islam give Rahat alternatives. Relationships with her family are maintained, but she is free from these compulsory visits.

#### **5.4.2 How does the veil dis-empower women?**

Daily experience for veiling protects women from unwelcome harassment on the streets, so men are discouraged from invading their personal space. Veiling can also weaken women, and close access to work, and study. Women in hijabs become dis-empowered as they fail to achieve their career goals and became incapable to choose their paths, thus being limited in doing what they want and being whom they wanted to be (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 2008; Dreze & Sen, 2002). For example, negative and discouraging remarks at the university and in public places made Ainura, a student, feel uncomfortable. Being unable to confront her negative experience and discrimination in the previous institution Ainura had to change it to another university in order to feel comfortable and be able to finish her education. In addition to that experience she has daily experiences which make her feel uncomfortable. For example she describes one case when she went to a super market:

Once I went to the super market there was no one except sellers and guards. I was in black hijab. They stared at me, they were horrified. It was so quiet when the seller served me.

Another interviewee, Rahat, names several disempowering traps for women in hijabs. From her personal experience there are public places that she cannot visit since she became covered. Here I do not refer to cafes or other non-halal - forbidden places where people drink alcohol. It is important to mention here that she refers to the limitation of the most important women’s empowerment indicators as right of freedom of movement (Sen, 2005). Rahat states:

I cannot go to swimming pool, because they do not allow swimming in swimsuit for Muslim. I cannot go to sauna, as in Islam it is not allowed to look at naked women. And women at sauna mocked with provocative sayings: “why are you covered? Is something wrong?” Boundaries are violated. Everyone looks and it is uncomfortable.

Rahat reflected on another example of the disempowerment of the veil. She describes that there are difficulties when women in hijabs want to work, limiting women in hijabs in

achieving career goals and what kind of life to lead (Dreze & Sen, 2002). Rahat exemplifies it as following:

There are difficulties, if you are in a headscarf they will not offer you position. They took me because I had social networks, if I did not have acquaintances I would not have job. People are afraid, the information from Mass Media is different, they say [women in hijabs] are backward, oppressed, and belong to terrorist sects. At my previous job place they offered to take off my headscarf, they told me that I am damaging their image, as that was a secular school, and they were thinking that people would be frightened. And I did not agree to stay there. At my current work as a teacher I have to make clear boundaries not to talk about religion with students.

In her reflections about problems in the work place Nurjan states that she did not have problems while working, but there are always problems in the process of hiring. She calls it a problem of the “first contact”:

There are no difficulties when working, but there problems when you are looking for a job. It happens when a person is not favorable when you are only getting to familiarize yourself with the company, or with the employer. So this is about the first contact. And then when people start talking to you, they see you and not what is on your head [hijab]. So they start evaluation you and not the stereotypes.

As a Muslims’ rights activist and a leader of religious NGO Jamal shares information about how her organization tried to help women in restoring their rights to work and to attend lectures at universities:

There were many in my experience cases when women had problems in finding jobs. Our organization has engaged many actions in protecting the rights of Muslim women. There was a case when stewardess started wearing hijab and she was fired for that. We fought for her rights. There were university and institute professors who were not allowed to work. There were university students, who were not allowed to attend classes. Particular big case was in the Kyrgyz State National University last year when 18 students were not allowed to study at Eastern Department. Now they are continuing their studies. Every year we face with misunderstanding at schools and universities when administration puts charters of schools or universities higher than the Constitution<sup>19</sup>.

In her reflections Jamal complains about employers who discriminate women in hijabs and describes the obstacles women in hijabs have with finding desired jobs:

When our girls [women in hijabs] want to work in the governmental service, they are not hired because of their headscarves. Employers have stereotypes. They believe that she is backward. They assume that

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<sup>19</sup> article 32 about freedom of religion: everyone is free to choose and to have religious and other beliefs (Kyrgyz Constitution, 2010)

she will be praying five times a day, and that she will not be productive, and that she has low abilities to work. But they do not consider that there are Muslim women who have five degrees, who know five languages. Yes, let's say there is such a woman. And on the other hand there is simply a hostility that she is in a headscarf. They got used to a dress code.

In marriages women in hijabs are also dis-empowered. According to Rahat who has a practicing Muslim husband, their marriage is not registered officially. There was only a ceremony in the mosque which is called nikah<sup>20</sup>. Rahat states that women in hijabs are insecure as they do not have the capacity to make important decisions within their families such as insisting on official registration of marriages and nikah does not grant security in marriage:

Husbands are also not liable, he can whenever he wants to say talaq [I divorce you] and you leave and that all. And women here are not protected. There is no any guarantee. Islam that we have here [in Kyrgyzstan] is more masculine. It is more convenient for men than for women.

In the current situation in Kyrgyzstan, the nikah or the unregistered marriage that is conducted in the mosque by mullahs weakens and makes woman vulnerable. Although nikah ceremony is conducted also for a Muslim couple that might not practice Islam, it is more likely that the secular couple would officially register their marriage than religious couple. In other words, for the secular couple with Muslim background nikah is optional and secondary marriage ceremony, whereas for religious it is obligatory and the official registration is secondary.

Rahat adds that: “if a man is responsible and practicing Islam in a right way then the woman lives well and she is protected, but if a husband has his own understanding and interpretations then a woman is suffering”. In case of divorce or the death of a husband woman whose marriage was only conducted in nikah ceremony cannot be protected by the State as the marriage was not registered. The question of the official state registration of the marriage in religious Muslim families does not appear to be a choice for Rahat.

Another interviewee, Ainura, in her reflections indicates that for women in hijabs it is natural to be dependent on their husbands:

If you are disobeying your husband you will be punished. If your husband is not satisfied with you then you displease Allah. And Allah will not accept your praying and your good deeds. [...] Divorce is the most odious thing in Islam.

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<sup>20</sup> Islamic marriage, in Kyrgyzstan, nikah ceremonies are not registered and in most cases no marriage contract are bound between husband and wife.

In addition, Ainura states that: “I notice that many husbands who came to Islam start forcing their wives to wear hijabs. But men themselves do not change, and as there were patriarchal relationships, of course there should be patriarchal relationships, but they should respect their wives, but they treat them as they used to treat before becoming religious”. In other words, women are those who most often experience radical changes in their lives, they start wearing non-traditional clothes, such as hijabs, impose self-restrictions, change their character and behavior, try to become obedient wives, pleasing husbands and Allah, whereas men do not go through such transformations.

Discussing the status of Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan with Nurjan, she succinctly sums it up:

If we are taking 10 point scale it would be four or five. It is below the average. Honestly saying status of women in Kyrgyzstan is very weak, very. It is like to be a second-rated. And if you are a Muslim woman, then you are below the second-class. It is especially can be seen in a secular society, you know. Let's say that secular society treats Muslim woman lower than an ordinary woman. But if you are in a traditional society, then you [a Muslim woman] are slightly higher than the average woman.

Nurjan adds that according to her experience the same woman in hijab would be treated differently if she would be in the rural areas. People in the countryside would be more respectful towards veiled woman than an ordinary one without hijab. In fact, she states that for women in hijab in Kyrgyzstan, if she is living in the city and surrounded by secular society she would be perceived as if she were falling behind an ordinary woman, and not living a full life and be perceived as backward.

In an interview with, Jamal, I asked her about the status or role of Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan, Jamal stated:

I would say there is no definite role for woman in hijab and there is either no definite status. And no one gives her status. But she has a role not a state status, she might have role within the society. She has role within the family in bringing up children. And maybe in the future she will also have a role in the society, in politics and so on. I would say that Muslim women have vulnerable status, of course, because no one hires Muslim woman for the position higher than a teacher.

Taking in to account these reflections it can be suggested that Kyrgyz women in hijabs are socially isolated or excluded due to the social and institutional barriers and limited access to diverse opportunities (Bennett, 2002). The fact that women in hijabs are limited in their mobility, freedom and rights, as well as limited in their opportunities to participate in different



activities are dis-empowering them. Discrimination of women in hijabs in the Kyrgyz society decreases their capabilities, dignity and rights.

## **5.5 Summary**

This chapter presented and analyzed the range of narratives and reflections of the primary data informants, women in hijabs. The results indicated a variety motives, rationalities and factors both internal and external and investigated why Kyrgyz women who participated in this study started veiling. It also focused on the positive and negative experiences of the interviewees when they made their choices to become veiled. Firstly, the reflections and stories of the interviewees revealed that veiling was used as a coping strategy, protection, search for meaning of life, self-identification, and as a marriage strategy. Secondly, the results indicated that veiling both empowered and dis-empowered women in hijabs in certain ways. The present interviewees demonstrated that veiling limited Kyrgyz women in their capacity to make decisions; they lacked freedom of movement; they were socially excluded and faced socioeconomic barriers. In addition, informants' reflections suggested that women in hijabs had to deal with different types of conflicts on a daily basis and faced discrimination both in private and public spheres. At the same time it was also found that women in hijabs were empowered by veiling. For example, interviewees considered that hijab offered them was protection and gave them power over their bodies in public places, making them 'untouchable' to sexual harassment and unwelcome male attention.

Furthermore, some of the interviewees were critical towards status of women in hijabs in Kyrgyzstan when they reflected about socioeconomic barriers. These informants were also critical in relation to the future of Kyrgyz society and spoke about the maintenance of the secular Soviet past and historical background. At the same time they were uncritical and tried to keep their personal opinions in many issues related to Islam such as polygamy and nikah ceremony. Taken together, in the context of the today's independent Kyrgyzstan religion is becoming a salient social category. The Islamization creates an atmosphere of oneness, gives support and positive beliefs Muslim community/groups are better than non-believers (Hogg, 2006). It is questionable, however, how Islamization process will develop. It is important to work on integrating religious and secular groups so these and other social groups would peacefully coexist in the context of diversity in Kyrgyz society.

## **Chapter 6. Summary and Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This study has explored why educated Kyrgyz women began wearing hijabs and what perspectives and accounts other social actors have about Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, the study focused on how veiled Kyrgyz women rationalized and justified their motives for wearing hijabs. In addition, the study investigated different perspectives and attitudes presented by male religious insiders, government representatives and experts in journalism, gender and religious issues, as well as students from secular universities in the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the study also set out to illuminate the potential for how Islamization might influence Kyrgyz society in the future.

The thesis was organized in six chapters. The Introduction Chapter of the thesis outlined the historical background of Kyrgyzstan in order to present the relevant information and contextual framework of social and political transformations and changes starting from the Silk Road times to contemporary independent Kyrgyzstan: pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet eras. It should be emphasized that the historical context of Kyrgyzstan demonstrated attitudes and positions of relations people towards religion during three different periods. The first historical period I focused on was the Silk Road era when nomadic Kyrgyz and other people who inhabited Central Asia openly interacted and interchanged values, ideas and goods between each other and at the same time could peacefully coexist and practice different religions. In addition, Kyrgyz being nomads were less influenced by traditional Islam. The pre-Islamic nomadic beliefs and traditions such as animism, shamanism and ancestor worship were harmonized and incorporate together with the Islam practices, such as the Sufi mysticism and ideology (Heyat, 2004). The second important period that was overviewed in the Introduction Chapter discussed the Soviet experience of Kyrgyz people when there was no access to religious practices. Atheism and communist ideology were the official doctrines for 70 years. The third period gave an overview to the Kyrgyz independence period or post-Soviet times. It was illustrated how new Islamic movements and other orthodox Islamic schools have been readily embraced by the Kyrgyz population in order to fill the ideological vacuum that formed after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Thus, eagerness to satisfy interest and ‘hunger’ for religious information and practices was stimulated by earlier restrictions. Examining these transformations provides context into the on-going Islamization processes in contemporary Kyrgyz society. The analysis of the context contributes to understanding factors and reasons of the contemporary rise of Islamization that occurred during the last two decades. Although

religion was understood differently during these three historical periods the experience and background also illustrated how knowledge of the past could contribute to learning in present and in the future to coexist peacefully together in spite of differences.

The Methodological Chapter focused on data collection methods and tools as well as fieldwork experiences and reflections. The study was based on nine qualitative interviews with Kyrgyz women in hijabs (primary data informants). In addition, eight qualitative interviews were conducted with male religious respondents, government representatives, experts in gender and religious issues and one journalist. About 100 students from two secular universities in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, were selected to represent the young educated population who grew up during the independence period. Students were asked to fill out questionnaires. These eight interviewees and students were regarded as secondary data informants of the study. Different perspectives that were presented by the secondary data informants contributed to a better understanding about the complexity of the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan.

Furthermore, the Theoretical framework Chapter outlined the conceptual framework of the thesis. This framework was used to better understand, discuss and analyze the received data in the following Data presentation and analysis chapters - Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. The conceptual framework presented by the social identity theory, rational choice theory and empowerment/dis-empowerment perspectives contributed to an analysis of motives, and rationale of women to veil, as well as helped to indicate how changes of identity influenced changing status of women in hijabs within the society. In addition, social identity theory was utilized to understand the relationships between two distinct groups, such as religious Muslim and secular groups.

Finally, this sixth chapter summarizes the findings of the study. Bringing various theoretical approaches, including social identity theory, and rational choice theory, this chapter reflects on motives and rationale of women in hijabs to veil and discusses how the Islamization divides the society and creates boundaries causing tension, conflict and frustration in the Kyrgyz society.

## **6.2 Findings**

The analysis of the reflections and narratives of the interviewed women in hijabs demonstrated that informants had different motives, reasons and justifications for veiling themselves as motives and sentiments various and unique as personality itself (Allport, 1978).

Being citizens of the secular state these women made voluntary personal choices, thus, they identified the following rationalities and motives. Firstly, women in hijabs used means-ends calculations when they chose to veil. Thus, they used instrumental rationality that individuals followed with regards to achieving particular self-serving goals (Jerolmack & Porpora, 2004; Iannaccone, 1997). In respect to this rationality, interviewees indicated that hijab protected them from sexual harassment and made them 'untouchable' against both verbal and physical violence in public. For some of these women, religion and veiling was also used as means to produce some relief in times of crisis and loss. Furthermore, the narratives of women hijabs indicated that some women adopted veiling to reach their goals, such as getting married. In other words, hijab was used as a marriage strategy that was helping them to become more attractive for marriage. In this way hijab was used as a possible strategy that allowed them to enhance their economic stability and bring security in to their lives. This importantly included gaining the respect of men.

Secondly, veiling was justified as an illustration of their normative fitness and normative values (Turner et al., 1994; Spickard, 1998). Interviewees rationalized their choice to become veiled with reference as being consistent with the normative fitness, with the ascribed characteristics of the Muslim group. In this case wearing of hijab was both in terms of emotional and value significance used to define their belonging to the certain social group, to enhance self-esteem, through a feeling of belonging providing a sense of common bond and oneness, and creating positive in-group identity (Hogg et al., 1995; Hogg, 2006; Turner, 1981; Turner et al., 1994). Therefore, for interviewees, for Muslim women it was important to manifest their Muslim identity through veiling, otherwise they could be called hypocrites by other members of the Muslim community. In addition to normative fitness, veiling was justified from the perspective of the normative rationality: to be consistent with normative values and actions. Unlike instrumental rationality, normative rationality is not followed for selfish motives and rationale, on the contrary, normative rationality is pursued according to rules and obligations (Spickard, 1998). Therefore, being reasoned based on values and duties several interviewees believed that veiling was a duty and a rule that was consistent with their religious values.

Thirdly, for the interviewees religion and veiling were used as a coping strategy in times of crisis or when they were insecure and had difficult times. Similar accounts were also indicated in Heyat's (2004; 2008) studies conducted in South of Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan. Religion and belonging to the Muslim group provided women in hijabs with guidance and brought stability, as in difficult times and crisis as people are striving to reduce uncertainty

about their future (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus, when women suffered from uncertainty and instability they strived to belong to a certain group where they could effectively reduce uncertainty, by knowing how to interact with the world and other people, and by being supported by in-group members (Hogg, 2006).

Finally, self-identification/categorization and belonging a certain social group motives were identified during the fieldwork. When individual relates him or herself to a certain social category, such as Muslim group, he or she can refer to important normative behavior rules of the in-group she or he belongs to (Brewer, 2001; Hogg, 2006). When veiling woman can refer to the Muslim group's norms to define her role and status, it is important in terms of defining the individual's relations with the in-group members and other social groups. In addition, a sense of belonging is valuable and important to each person as it enhances the individual's and in-group's self-esteem and creates solidarity and trust (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg, 2006). Moreover, according to Hogg et al., (1995) it is important to know to which social category a person belongs, as it "provides a definition of who one is in terms of the self-concept" (p. 259). So, when women categorized themselves with a Muslim group they were guided by basic human motives to identify with a group and to build a positive social identity (Sedikines & Strube, 1997; Abrams & Hogg, 1988, Hogg, 2006).

Furthermore, the analysis of the eight interviewees and students who were regarded as secondary data informants demonstrated how complex, multifaceted and diverse the Islamization process is in Kyrgyzstan. The results indicated that attitudes towards the Islamization and veiling were contrasted in the degree of acceptance of the other, in this case, women in hijabs. The majority of the interviewees of the secondary data indicated that the Kyrgyz society is divided and split not only between believers and non-believers, but there are also tensions and conflicts within the religious Muslim groups. In other words, there was a split not only between the secular part of society and Muslim believers, but also inter-faith division for Christian and Muslim, as well as a generation gap – Soviet versus post-Soviet. Informants suggested that Islamization in Kyrgyzstan is transforming the social, educational, political spheres of life. In other words, the rise in number of the Muslim believers influences different layers of the population, including poor and rich, rural and urban, south and north, and gains power in private and public spaces. It was believed that religious Muslim groups were perceived as a minority, but it was also emphasized that there was a tendency/disposition that the number of believers would continue to increase, thus it would replace today's majority, the secular part of the population.

Some of the experts and one religious male ‘entrepreneur’ emphasized that liberal politics of the state and lack of control over different religious Muslim groups and schools was dangerous, according to the informants’ prognosis. However, women in hijabs and some of the secondary data informants, as well as the majority of students believed that Kyrgyzstan will remain a democratic and secular state at least in the near future. They believed that a secular future would not exclude Muslim groups and prevent them practicing religion. Differing from the experts’ attitudes and positions, students from two secular universities in Bishkek, who also participated in the study demonstrated positive attitudes and supported women in hijabs and the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, the study revealed that veiling was both empowering and dis-empowering Kyrgyz women. Taking into account this fact and the discrimination tendency against women in hijabs it is important to realize integration and inclusion policies and laws, such as protecting women in hijabs’ rights, strengthening policies to encourage official registrations of marriages after nikah ceremonies, protecting women’s rights of freedoms of movement and etc. To remove social and economic barriers that limit women in hijabs achieving their educational or career goals it is important for the government and society to address these negative transformation consequences, such as unregistered marriage and discrimination by employers. As the study revealed, there are conservative as well as non-traditional, modern interpretations of Islam and fashionable, trendy, and colorful adaptations of hijab styles. Moreover, there are active, emancipated and mobile women in hijabs developing strong careers and working to be future leaders of Kyrgyzstan. But there are also those who refuse to be socioeconomically integrated and be influenced by orthodox Islamic practices, who want to live lives opposite to secular lifestyles.

Consequently, this study suggests that integration and social inclusion problems should be addressed and studied further. Due to the current changes and transitions in Kyrgyzstan it will be strategically significant to manage the situation of polarization and discrimination against women in hijabs in private and public spaces, as well as to address the challenges as the society continues in its transitional period. This is important because the traditional diversity and peaceful coexistence of new and old, Muslim and Christian, and multi-ethnic peoples can and should be maintained and preserved. Kyrgyzstan is a democratic state with a range of different identities. I hope it will have an inclusive future where diversity and tolerance to both religious and secular groups will be possible. I, like many in Kyrgyzstan, think fondly upon the image of the Silk Road, when people were open to the

new, the unfamiliar and the different, and were eager for different ideas and the sharing of their culture, music, and thought that flowed as freely as any other spice along the road.

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## **Appendix 1 – Consent form for interviewees**

Dear interviewee,

My name is Asel Myrzabekova, am MA student in University of Tromsø. I am conducting research on contemporary Islamic practices in Kyrgyzstan. As a part of my MA research project I want to investigate the strong symbolic act of women in Kyrgyzstan who started to wear hijabs being adults (from 18 to 30 years old).

You are invited to participate in the interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. At any time, you can refuse to participate in the study. You need to answer to the proposed questions as you really think at the moment.

Initial findings from this questionnaire will be used only as a part of my research project.

If you have further questions you may contact directly my research supervisor, Prof. James R. Lewis, at my University via email [james.lewis@uit.no](mailto:james.lewis@uit.no).

Thanks for your time and help.

Asel Myrzabekova  
University of Tromsø  
Norway  
[aselyam@gmail.com](mailto:aselyam@gmail.com)

## Consent form for students

Dear respondent,

I am a student at Center for Peace Studies at the University of Tromsø, Norway. I am conducting research on contemporary Islamic practices in Kyrgyzstan. As a part of my MA research project I want to investigate the strong symbolic act of women in Kyrgyzstan who started to wear hijabs. I'm interested in motives, reasons of educated women who started wearing hijabs being adults.

If you would like to participate in this research, please complete the following questionnaire. Your participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. By the end of August 2014, the data will be made anonymous. This means that background information will be categorized so that it no longer can be traceable back to individuals.

At any time, you can refuse to participate in the study. You are invited to fill out questionnaire; it will take you no more than 10-20 minutes. You need to answer to the proposed questions as you really think at the moment. Do not spend much time on thinking; there are no right or wrong answers.

Initial findings from this questionnaire will be used only as a part of my research project..

If you have further questions you may contact directly my research supervisor, Prof. James R. Lewis, at University of Tromsø in Norway via email [james.lewis@uit.no](mailto:james.lewis@uit.no)

Thanks for your help.

Asel Myrzabekova  
University of Tromsø  
Norway

[aselyam@gmail.com](mailto:aselyam@gmail.com)

## Appendix 2 - Interview guidelines

### Interview guideline: women in hijabs

1. Age
2. Education (name of school, institution and specialization)
3. Origin
4. When did you convert to Islam? Start wearing Hijab?
5. Who or what influenced your decision?
6. What was your motivation?
7. How do you practice Islam?
8. What do you think about niqab<sup>21</sup>.
9. Have you fasted before wearing hijab?
10. Are there any relatives or friends who believed before your conversion?
11. How did your family and friends react to your decision? Did they understand and support you?
12. Does your new lifestyle and new way of dressing impact your relationships with other people (friends/familiars/work and etc.)?
13. How do you feel when you are outside in public places? Do people look at you? In what way?
14. Could you name a few plusses and a few minuses of wearing hijab?
15. Name 2-3 things you did before conversion but cannot do now?
16. What drastically/radically changed in your life after you started wearing hijab? 2-3 things
17. Do you work? Where? Are there any difficulties at work or with finding a job?
18. Are you married? If yes, does he also practice Islam?
19. Could you name 3-5 characteristics of an ideal husband?
20. What stereotypes do you think people have about women who wear hijab?
21. Do you know whether it is possible to go to school in hijab?
22. What is your attitude towards Kyrgyz who do not practice Islam (don't pray, do not fast, and do not visit mosques)?
23. Do you see future of Kyrgyzstan as remaining a secular state, or becoming an Islamic state with sharia law? Why?
24. Is there another Islamic country which, in your opinion, should be taken as model for Kyrgyzstan? Turkey, Saudi Arabia?
25. How do you see role and status of Muslim women in Kyrgyz society today?
26. What do you feel about polygamy?
27. What is your attitude to the nikah<sup>22</sup> ceremony, unofficial wedding?

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<sup>21</sup> Niqab - a cloth which covers the face of Muslim women

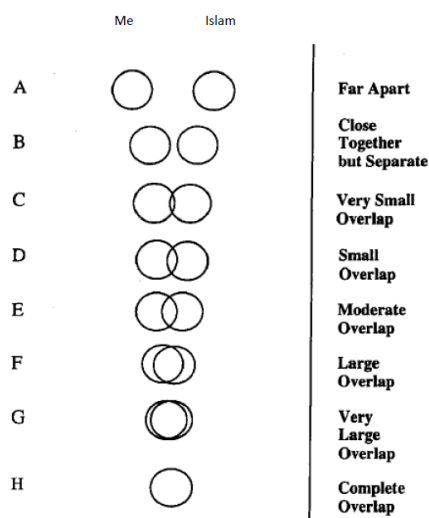
<sup>22</sup> Nikah – Islamic marriage ceremony, which is considered to be unofficial wedding according to Kyrgyz law.

### **Interview guideline: religious male informants**

1. Is there any support from the government, the larger society or the mass media for Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan? (examples)
2. How would you assess the general attitude of the society to Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan
3. Is there another Islamic country which, in your opinion, should be taken as model for Kyrgyzstan? Turkey, Saudi Arabia?
4. Do you see future of Kyrgyzstan as remaining a secular state, or becoming an Islamic state with sharia law? Why?
5. What do you think about young women in Kyrgyzstan who convert to Islam and start wearing hijabs?
6. Women wear hijabs as part of belonging to Islam. Is there anything comparable for men who convert to Islam?
7. What is your attitude towards Kyrgyz who do not practice Islam (don't pray, do not fast, and do not visit mosques)?

**Interview guideline: journalist and expert in gender and religious issues and government representatives**

1. In general Kyrgyz people before and during Soviet times were considered less religious than our neighbors, such as the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmens. Do you think this has changed? Do you think that currently there is a major interest in religion? How would you explain the youth who are interested in religion (Islam)?
2. Islam is widely used as a business brand: fashion, souvenirs, hajj, halal food, halal taxi. What do you think about that?
3. What kind of Islamic movements are prevailing in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia?
4. What is your prognosis concerning the process of Islamization in Kyrgyzstan over the next 5 years?
5. What do you think is the primary reason educated women start wearing hijabs in Kyrgyz society?
6. Do you think this veiling causes tension in the society?
7. What do you think is the impact of the new, imported Islamic ideologies on local gender relations and the position of women in Kyrgyzstan?
8. How do you think the recruitment of youth into Islam in Kyrgyzstan will influence the image of the country?
9. Do you think these changes require the state to develop stricter policies and more control over Islamic movements and religious organizations? (including institutions such as madrassas and mosques)
10. What is your personal position about Kyrgyzstan becoming an Islamic state with Sharia laws?
11. Why do you think all Islamic education is free (example of Islamic Institutes)?
12. Why do you think Islamic education is free and some pilgrimages to Mecca sponsored? Is it a recruitment technique?
13. How does this funding affect the recruitment of poor people?
14. Please choose your perceived overlap between You and Islam. (Here you choose how close you are to Islam. For example, if you consider that Islam and You do not have any connections and you are far apart from Islam you mark A. But if Islam is a big part of your life and it is extremely valuable and meaningful to you then you mark H - complete overlap).



## Appendix 3 - Questionnaire for students

### 1. Age

### 2. Sex

- Female  
 Male

### 3. Where are you from?

- Batken  
 Jalal-Abad  
 Issyk-Kul  
 Naryn  
 Osh  
 Talas  
 Chui  
 Bishkek

Other (please specify)

### 4. Where is your Mother from?

- Batken  
 Jalal-Abad  
 Issyk-Kul  
 Naryn  
 Osh  
 Talas  
 Chui  
 Bishkek

Other (please specify)



**5. Where is your Father from?**

- Batken
- Jalal-Abad
- Issyk-Kul
- Naryn
- Osh
- Talas
- Chui
- Bishkek

Other (please specify)

**6. Name your University**

**7. Do you have a relative, friend of familiar, who is from 18 to 30 years old, who wears hijab?**

- Yes
- No

**8. Have you practiced any of these Islamic practices  
(You can choose several answers)**

- Pray 5 times per day
- Fasting
- Celebrate religious holidays (Islamic)
- At least once went to the mosque
- None
- Other (please specify)

**9. Here are 6 statements. If you agree then mark the statement. You can mark several statements.**

- Would admit to have a woman in hijab as a relative by marriage (wife or sister-in-law)
- Would admit a woman in hijab as a personal friend
- Would admit a woman in hijab as neighbor on my street
- Would admit a woman in hijab to work alongside me in my job
- Would admit a woman in hijab to live next door
- Would exclude women in hijab from my country

**10. What do you think about young women in hijabs?**

(Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements)

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Slightly disagree</b>	<b>Slightly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
I do not care						
Everyone has right to choose what to wear						
I am scared of Muslim women in hijabs						
I do not feel comfortable when I see women in hijabs in streets or other public places						
I respect young women in hijabs						
I support young women in hijabs						
I wish there were more young women in hijabs						
I believe that increase in number of women in hijabs will have negative impact to the Kyrgyzstan's future						
There are many young women in my university who wear hijabs						

**11. I am interested in Islam**

(Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree)

- |                          |                       |                          |                       |                       |                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Strongly disagree</b> | <b>Disagree</b>       | <b>Slightly disagree</b> | <b>Slightly agree</b> | <b>Agree</b>          | <b>Strongly agree</b> |
| <input type="radio"/>    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**12. Islamic norms and rules are salvation from degradation, amoral behavior and alcoholization of Kyrgyz society**

(Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree)

- |                          |                       |                          |                       |                       |                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Strongly disagree</b> | <b>Disagree</b>       | <b>Slightly disagree</b> | <b>Slightly agree</b> | <b>Agree</b>          | <b>Strongly agree</b> |
| <input type="radio"/>    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**13. Do you notice Islamic messages**

- |                    | <b>Never</b>          | <b>At least once a week</b> | <b>At least once a month</b> | <b>At least once a year</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>on TV</b>       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>       | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>       |
| <b>on Radio</b>    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>       | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>       |
| <b>newspapers</b>  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>       | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>       |
| <b>magazines</b>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>       | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>       |
| <b>advertising</b> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>       | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>       |
| <b>people</b>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>       | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>       |

Other (please specify)

**14. What kind of education you consider to be important:**

- Secular education only
- Religious education only
- Both
- Other (please specify)

**15. What future Kyrgyzstan are you for**

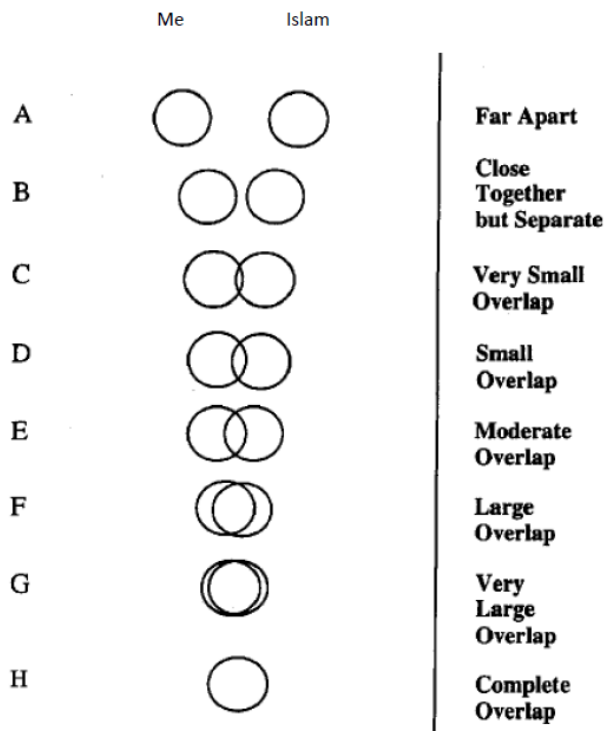
- Secular state
- Islamic state with Sharia law

Other (please specify)

**16. Please specify your answer to the question #16. Why are you for the Secular or Islamic State?**

Please specify your answer to the question #15. Why are you for the Secular or Islamic State?

**17. Me and Islam** (see below). Please choose your perceived overlap between You and Islam. (Here you choose how close you are to Islam. For example, if you consider that Islam and You do not have any connections and you are far apart from Islam you mark A. But if Islam is a big part of your life and it is extremely valuable and meaningful to you then you mark H - complete overlap).



**18. In the next two questionnaire items, you will be asked to give your personal evaluations concerning two young women (Woman A and Woman B):  
 Woman A studies at the University in Bishkek. She wears jeans and t-shirts. She is smart. After graduation she wants to work as a banker. What do you think about young Woman A?**

<b>Woman A</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Slightly disagree</b>	<b>Slightly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
She has free choice						
She is active						
She will be a good wife						
She is dangerous						
After marriage she will stay at home with children						
She can make good career						
She is obedient						
She is easy to talk to						
She is faithful						
She is broad-minded						
She is respected						
She feels secure						
I would like to be her friend						

**19. Young Woman B studies at the University in Bishkek. She wears hijab. She is smart. After graduation she wants to work as a banker. What do you think about Woman B?**

<b>Woman B</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Slightly disagree</b>	<b>Slightly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
She has free choice						
She is active						
She will be a good wife						
She is dangerous						
After marriage she will stay at home with children						
She can make good career						
She is obedient						
She is easy to talk to						
She is faithful						
She is broad-minded						
She is respected						
She feels secure						
I would like to be her friend						

## Appendix 4 - tables and diagrams

### Tables

**Table 1: Experts' occupational and gender background**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Area of Expertise</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Additional information</b>	<b>The level of association with Islam</b>
Dilya Usupova	Journalist who had experience working with religious issues in Kyrgyzstan	Female	Journalist in the Local Information Agency <a href="http://www.24.kg">www.24.kg</a>	Very small self-identification with Islam
Nazira Kurbanov	Representative from the State Commission for Religious Affairs	Female	Doctor of History, Head of History Department (History of Kyrgyzstan and Ethnology) at the Kyrgyz State University named by I. Arabaev	Moderate self-identification with Islam
Bakyt Baltabarov	Expert in religion issues	Male	Candidate of Sciences (Sociology), published book "Religion and socio-political processes in Kyrgyzstan", Head of Sociology Department at one of the Bishkek Humanitarian University	Moderate self-identification with Islam
Emil Nasritdinov	Expert in religion issues	Male	Associate Professor at Anthropology Department at the American University of Central Asia. PhD from the University of Melbourne. His broad research interests include migration, urban anthropology, religion and development.	Moderate self-identification with Islam
Gulnara Ibraeva	Expert in gender issues	Female	Associate Professor at Sociology Department at the American University of Central Asia. National gender expert.	Close but separate self-identification with Islam
Anonymous expert	Representative from the State (retired)	Male		Large self-identification with Islam

**Table 2: Gender and University distribution of the Students**

		Universities		Total
		KRSU	BSU	
Sex	F	25 (54%)	45 (92%)	70 (73.7%)
	M	21 (46%)	4 (8%)	25 (26.3%)
Total		46 (48.4%)	49 (51.6%)	95 (100%)

**Table 3. What do you hope for in Kyrgyzstan's future?**

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Civil state	61	64.2
	Religious state	21	22.1
	Democratic state	1	1.1
	Total	83	87.4
Missing	System	12	12.6
Total		95	100.0

**Table 4. Students relation to Islam: percentage of students who practiced Islam and had relative or friend who is from 18 to 30 years old who wears hijab (\*Missing age data for 1 record).**

Students who had/practiced*	Yes	No
Friend/relative wears hijab	53.7%	45.3%
Fasting	29.5%	69.5%
Praying 5 times a day	10.5%	88.4%
Visiting mosque	31.6%	68.4%
Muslim holidays	70.5%	28.4%

**Table 5. Would you admit woman in hijab as family member, friend, street neighbor, colleague, or allow them to live in the country.**

I would admit to have ... in hijab	Yes	No	Missing data (records)
Family member*	54.7%	43.2%	2
Friend*	73.7%	24.2%	2
Colleague*	77.9%	17.9%	4
Next door neighbor*	76.8%	17.9%	5
Street neighbor*	82.1%	14.7%	3
Would not allow them to live in the country	6.3%	-	



**Table 6. Vignette method**

<b>Students tend to agree that Girl A/Girl B is/has/will</b>	<b>Girl A (jeans and t-shirt)</b>	<b>Girl B (in hijab)</b>
Free choice	89.6%	72.6%
Active	83.2%	72.6%
Good wife	76.9%	89.5%
Dangerous	14.8%	10.6%
Obedient	52.4%	90.5%
Easy to talk to	84.2%	75.7%
Stay with children	21%	79%
Good career	90.5%	43.2%
respected	85.2%	92.6%
Feels protected	71.6%	84.2%
Faithful	74.8%	90.6%
Broad minded	86.3%	77.9%
I want to be her friend	79.9%	81.1%

**Table 7: Women in Hijabs – educational, occupational, marital backgrounds, and experience from being or living abroad.**

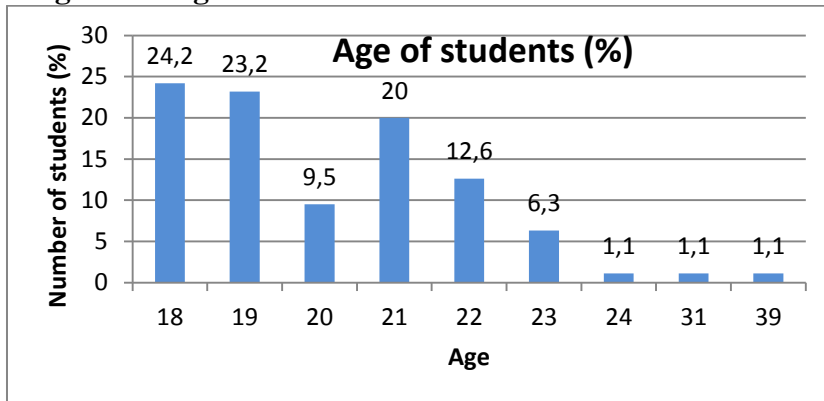
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Specialization/field of occupation</b>	<b>Had been abroad/living abroad</b>	<b>Married</b>
Anara	Higher	Economics/ sewing businesswoman	X	X
Jamal <sup>1</sup>	Higher	Economics, Law, Muslim theology/Postgraduate student/head of NGO	X	X
Aina	Higher + MA Degree	International relations/ Marketing	X	
Mira	Higher	Linguistics /Unemployed		X
Begaim	Higher	International Trade/Trade	X	X
Rahat	Higher (more than 1 university)	Linguistics, Psychology/Teacher		X
Ainura	Higher	Linguistics/Student	X	
Nurjan	Higher + MA Degree	Management/Management	X	
Nazira	Higher	Social Sciences/Unemployed		

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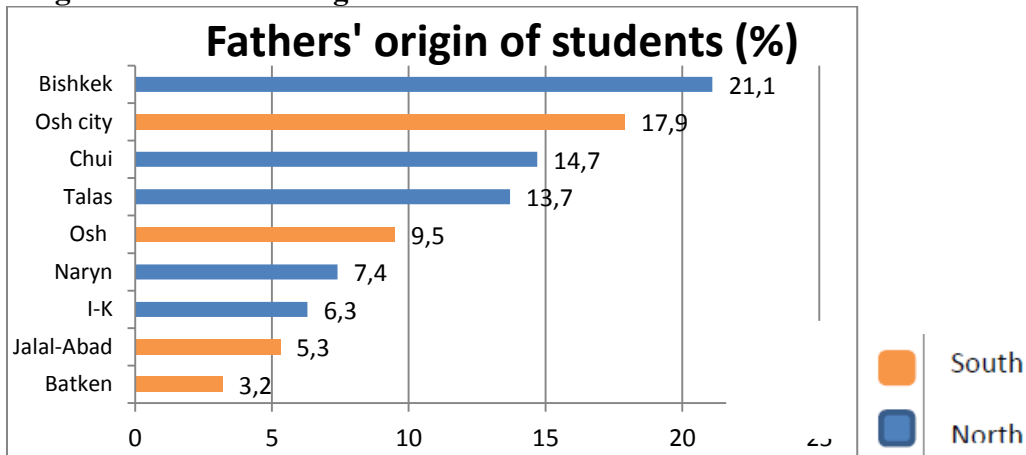
<sup>1</sup> Not a pseudonym

## Diagrams

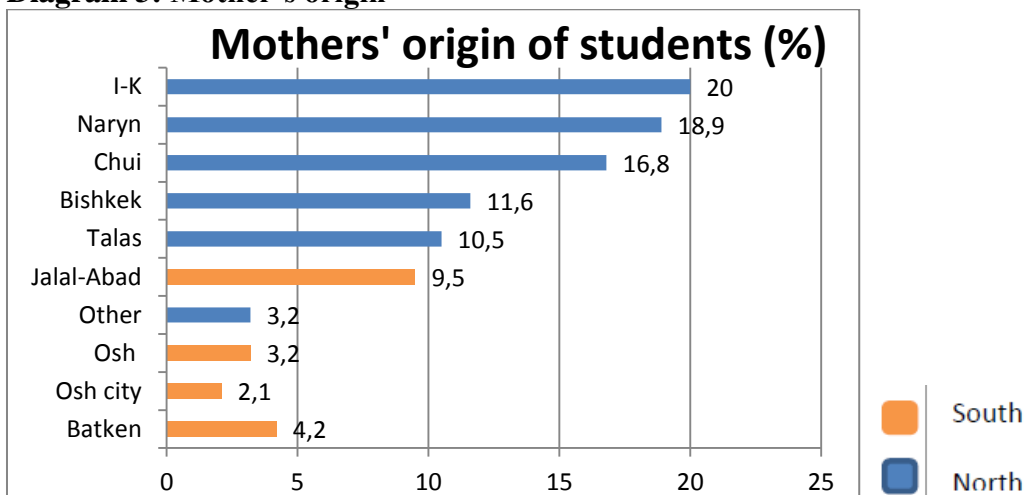
**Diagram 1: Age of students**



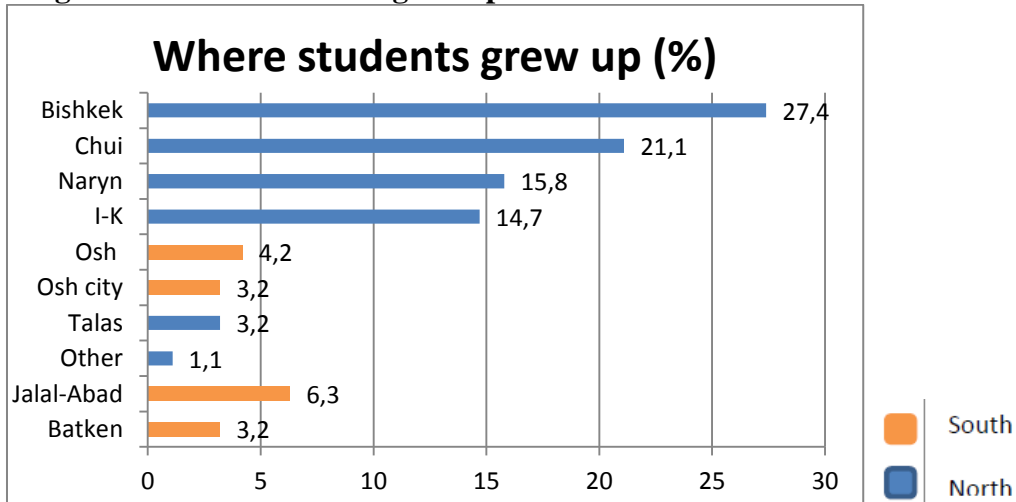
**Diagram 2: Fathers' origin**



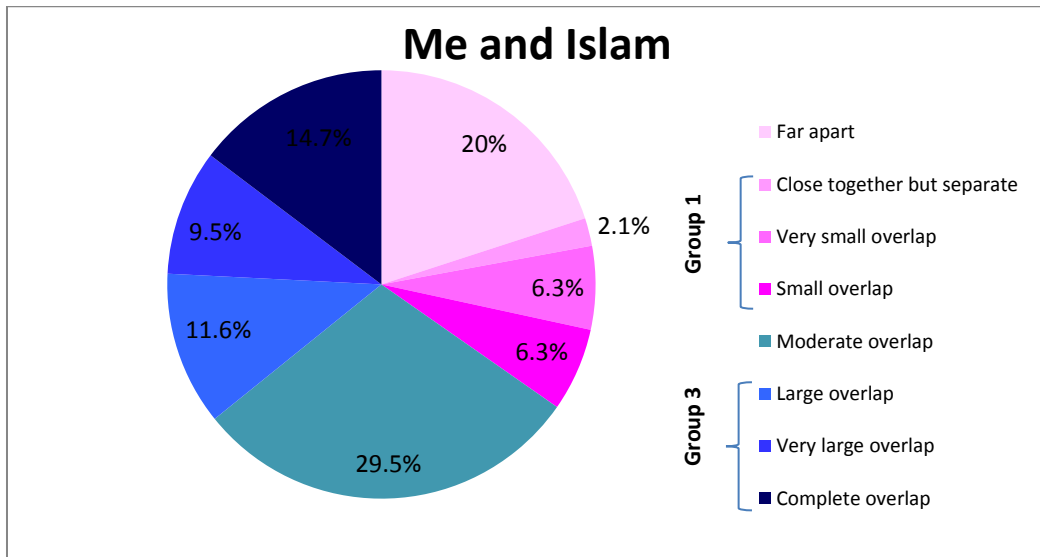
**Diagram 3: Mother's origin**



**Diagram 4: Where students grew up**

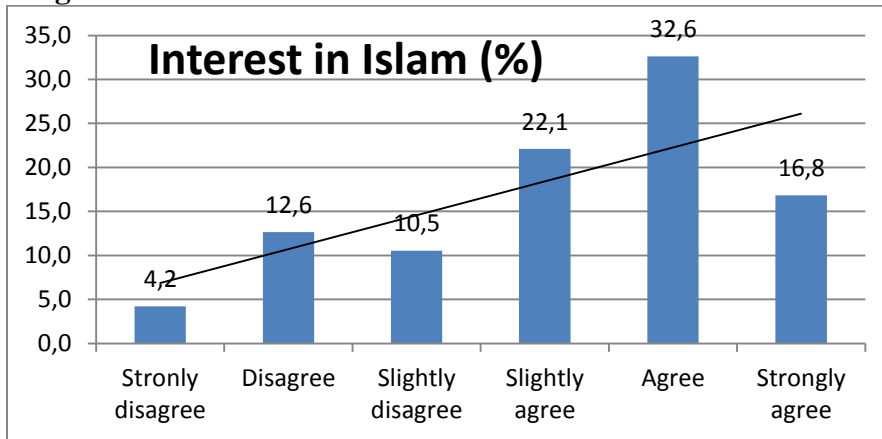


**Diagram 5: Students positioning themselves in their belonging to Islam**

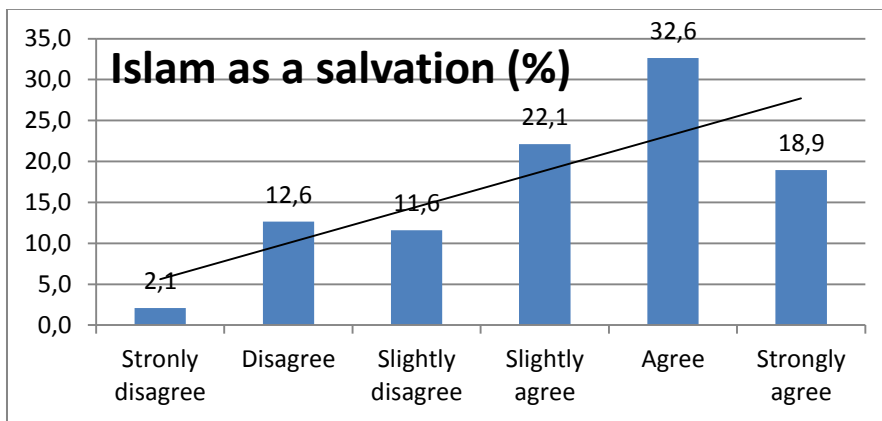


**Diagram 6-15: What do you think about young women in hijabs?**

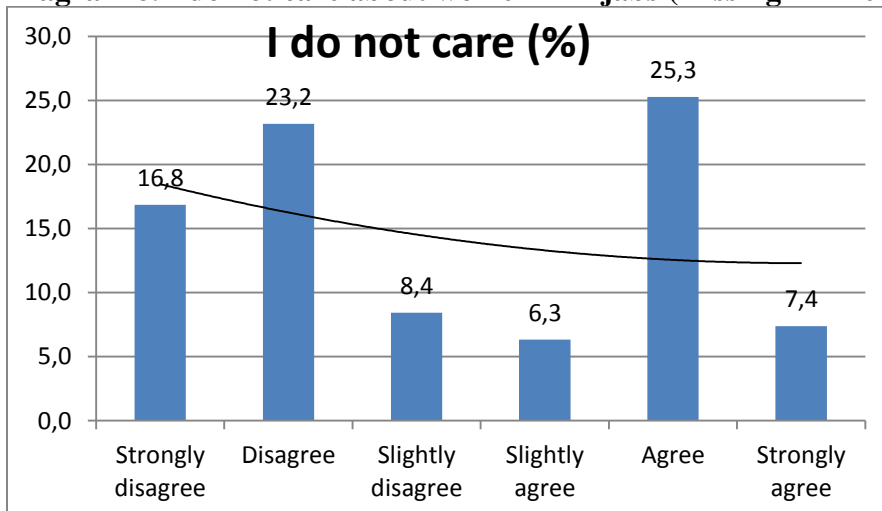
**Diagram 6. I am interested in Islam**



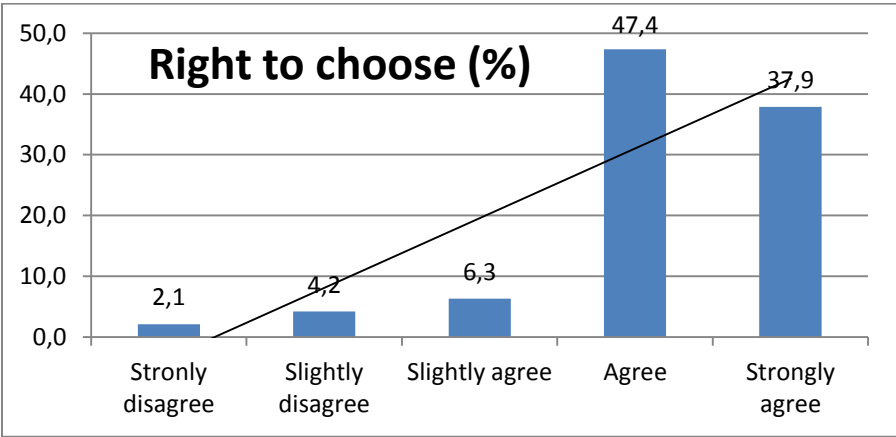
**Diagram 7. Islamic norms and rules are salvation from degradation, amoral behavior and alcoholism of Kyrgyz society**



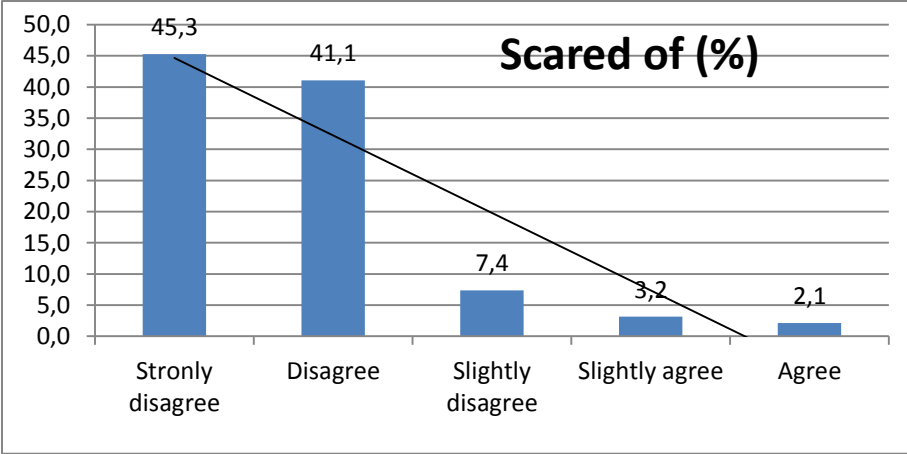
**Diagram 8. I do not care about women in hijabs (missing - 12 records)**



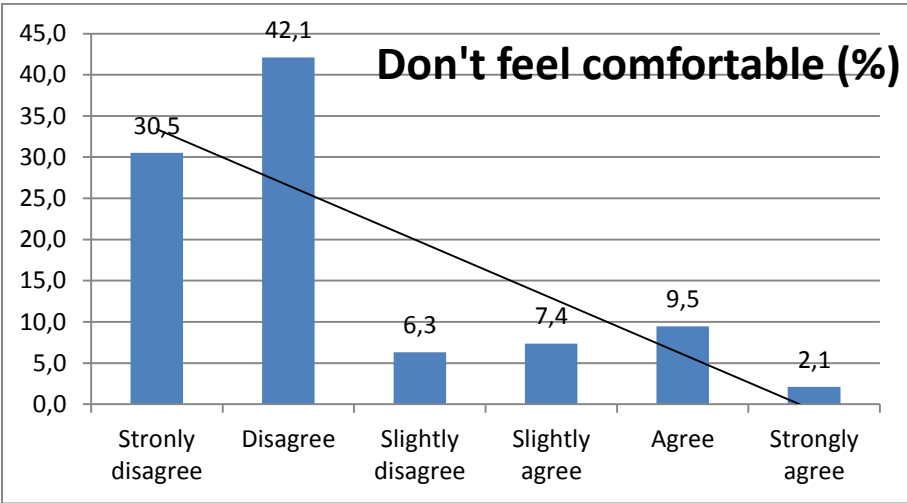
**Diagram 9. Right to choose to wear (missing – 2 records)**



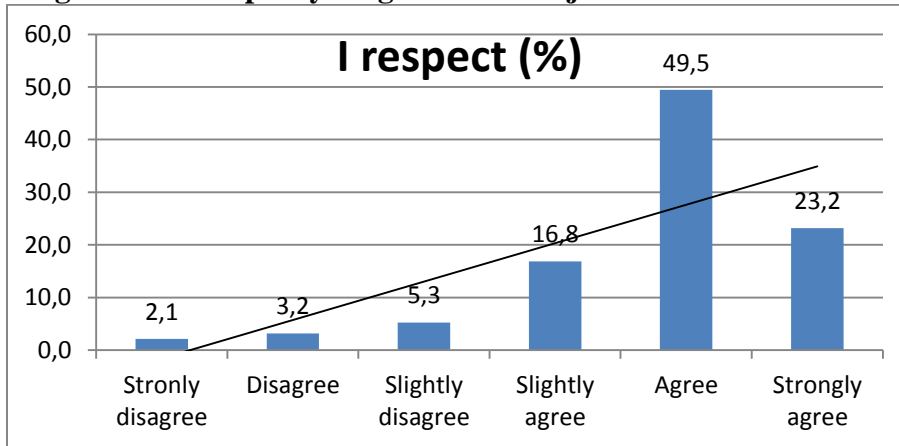
**Diagram 10. I am scared of Muslim women in hijabs (missing – 1 record)**



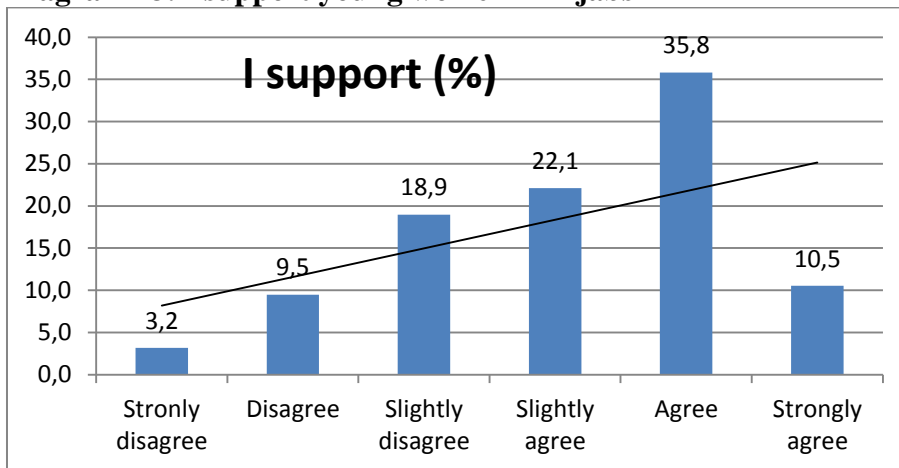
**Diagram 11. I do not feel comfortable when I see women in hijabs in streets or other public places (missing – 2 records)**



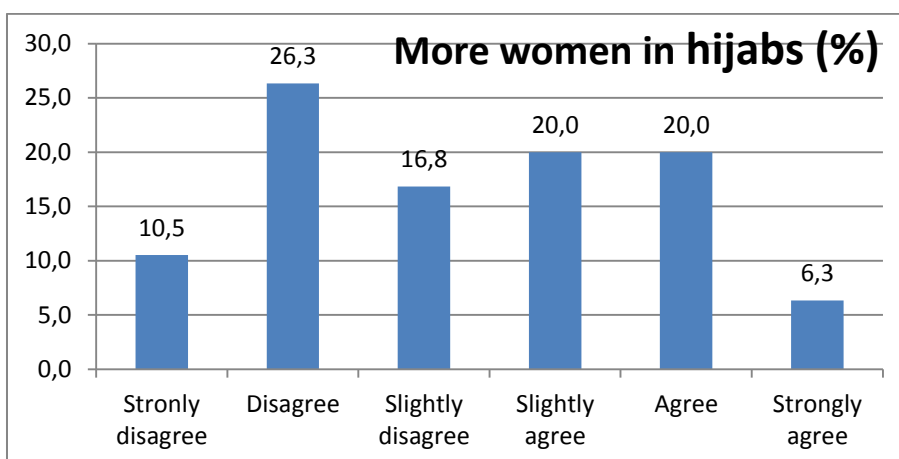
**Diagram 12. I respect young women in hijabs**



**Diagram 13. I support young women in hijabs**



**Diagram 14. I wish there were more young women in hijabs**



**Diagram 15. I believe that increase in number of women in hijabs will have negative impact to the Kyrgyzstan's future**

