Improvement in Reproductive Health in Central Asia: How Much and for Whom?

Dr. Cynthia Buckley delivered the REEEC New Directions lecture on the evening of January 30 entitled “Improvement in Reproductive Health in Central Asia: How Much and for Whom?” In framing the discussion, Dr. Buckley spoke of the need for partnering qualitative area studies knowledge with quantitative analysis in order to produce an accurate picture of the situation in question. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, Dr. Buckley’s initiative explores and analyzes reproductive health environments in Central Asia in addition to conducting a cross-case comparison of individual Central Asian states. Integral to the question of reproductive health is whether Central Asia as a whole has seen a positive change in women’s reproductive rights or, through coercion and exploitation, are those rights still infringed upon?

Generally, attitudes as to the status of women throughout Central Asia have remained constant, meaning that today, most women still do not exercise any control over how many or few children they wish to have. In practice, access to contraceptives is limited and, where available, there is a distinct lack of choice, forcing most women to use IUDs. This is especially true of women who hail from poor social conditions. Political leaders favor the lower birth rate these policies have engendered because of a supposed economic pay-off, premised on the thought that with fewer children, there is not a budgetary strain caused by infrastructure such as schools and day care facilities. However, as noted in the lecture, with the Central Asian states lacking a liberal economy, a significant percentage of the working class use their skills in Russia and contribute to its economy, instead of their own.

Though varied throughout Central Asia, generally there is a substantial deficit in reproductive health knowledge. Combined with social and financial impediments to access and implementation, Central Asia is now the only region in the world where documented cases of HIV/AIDS are increasing. Dr. Buckley highlighted how this fact, in company with a host of other problems, runs contrary to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, which among other things, recognized women’s reproductive health as a fundamental human right and, for the first time, also included women in the discussion.

The project has a three-tiered approach outline under the following: knowledge, attitudes and practice. The International Conference on Population and Development realized the importance of education, but did not effectively engage the realities of attitudes and practice. In the very traditional cultures of Central Asia, the failure to alter attitudes and thus practice meant that access to education and reproductive health care was still not an option for all. Indeed, throughout Central Asia, access to reproductive healthcare, including education, is still markedly low. In a place where HIV/AIDS is growing, more than half of all women are unaware of ways to prevent infection. Furthermore, women who are the beneficiaries of reproductive health services are those already married and financially better positioned.

Kate Butterworth is a first-year MA student in Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies who is interested in the Caucasus.