



**SPECIFICITIES OF WORKING WITH WOMEN
IN RURAL COMMUNITIES
WITHIN THE ETHNOGENDER CONTEXT OF THE
KYRGYZ REPUBLIC**

Bishkek-2023

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The situation of rural women in the Kyrgyz Republic demands special attention and calls for changes in support methods, as rural communities cannot equally and fully integrate universal values into their context without additional efforts. The gap between the amount of efforts and resources invested in supporting the expansion of rights for rural women and the resulting outcomes is widening. The situation calls for an analysis and consideration of the ethnogender context, which dictates the need for changing support methods for women, taking into account the hierarchy of values and the set of cultural codes that conflict with the paradigm of absolute gender equality. This conflict negatively affects the effectiveness of state policies regarding gender equality, as their implementers operate within a particular and understudied ethnogender environment. The report gains particular relevance in the context of expanding women's political rights through the introduction of a 30% gender quota in local kenesh elections, as some communities are experiencing growing frustration from male deputies who question the fairness and effectiveness of the quota. The report serves as a continuation of the discussion on the influence of the ethnogender context on the status of women in rural communities of the Kyrgyz Republic. It provides practical recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of work in the field of gender equality and expanding women's economic and political rights. A separate section is dedicated to the necessary changes within the "agents of change," such as NPOs and development projects. A distinctive feature of the report is the inclusion of controversial and ambiguous conclusions and opinions voiced by men. However, it should be noted that the inclusion of these perspectives does not imply endorsement or agreement from the report's authors. The report is primarily aimed at development projects and NPOs working in the field of gender equality in rural communities. It is also intended for individuals responsible for implementing relevant government policies, as well as researchers and academic circles (such as political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.) interested in further studying the aspects of the influence of the ethnogender context on the status of women in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Electronic version of the review is available in Russian and English on the LSG Best Practices Portal at: www.myktyaimak.gov.kg and on the Development Policy Institute website at: www.dpi.kg

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Summary

Despite the impressive efforts made by international development partners and civil society organizations over the past three decades to expand women's economic, social, and political rights, the situation of women in the Kyrgyz Republic, particularly in rural areas, has not improved. The question of transforming support methods for women is becoming increasingly prominent among practitioners working with rural communities. The relevance of this question is heightened by the contradiction between the strengthening of traditionalist positions in rural communities due to poverty and declining educational quality, and the global factors of transformation, such as geopolitical turbulence and digitalization.

In the global system of values, human rights and their equality, regardless of gender, are established in a manner that aims to be truly universal and applicable to every inhabitant of the planet. This represents a notable strength of the aforementioned system of values. However, simultaneously, this also constitutes a weakness, as communities that have significant disparities in their developmental contexts may not equally and to the same extent absorb universal values. They are not always capable of integrating these values into their own context without additional efforts. In the Kyrgyz Republic, less than one-third of the population understands that human rights possess a universal and inherent nature¹. Furthermore, the capacity for effective assimilation is further reduced by the tendency of international organizations involved in the implementation and integration of values to employ universal approaches and solutions, often without sufficient adaptation to the unique regional contexts, lacking in-depth and scholarly comprehension. In many cases, adaptation is primarily focused on linguistic and superficial cultural manifestations, while profound psychological, historical, religious, and other processes remain untouched and unaccounted for.

As a result, there is a growing gap between the volume of efforts and resources dedicated to supporting the expansion of rights for rural women in the Kyrgyz Republic and the actual outcomes achieved. Being one of the leading organizations in the field of local development in the Kyrgyz Republic, the Development Policy Institute has been gathering empirical evidence on the narrowing opportunities for women and studying practices to support them over the past decade. It highlights that the majority of the tools employed have only been effective in influencing a small, progressive segment of women, while the majority of women in need of support remain out of reach. Furthermore, the number of marginalized and vulnerable women who remain excluded from development projects is increasing². These observations prompted the Development Policy Institute (DPI) to organize a discussion dedicated to studying the ethnogender context of the Kyrgyz Republic, in order to gain a better understanding of its impact on the situation and to develop an appropriate response. In 2022, this process took the form of a discussion seminar involving representatives from civil society organizations across Central Asian countries. As a result, recommendations were formulated for transforming interventions aimed at achieving gender equality in rural communities. These recommendations were directed towards central and subnational governance bodies, donors, and civil society organizations in the region. This report delves further into the analysis of how the ethnogender context influences the status of women in rural communities within the Kyrgyz Republic. It presents practical recommendations intended for international development projects and non-profit organizations (NPOs) involved in initiatives related to gender equality and the empowerment of women.

One of the report's key findings is that the ethnogender context forces a change in the "entry points" for gender equality issues at the rural level, prioritising family in its broadest sense (including generational kinship and community ties) over the individual rights. Cumulative practice demonstrates that the discourse emphasizing the value of the family and the importance of both male and female contributions to the family is widely embraced by rural communities throughout Kyrgyzstan. However, the discourse from the perspective of equal human rights in its absolute and idealized form is not fully accepted or absorbed by the communities to the extent desired. The perpetuation of family being at the top of the value system is facilitated by the ongoing spread of Islam.

Another significant conclusion drawn from the report is that the country continues to uphold a set of deeply ingrained meta-codes of behavior that have been characteristic of the local population for centuries. These meta-codes include a sense of proportion and restraint in expressing emotions, a multitude of taboo topics related to gender relations, a strong commitment to tradition and customs, and a profound inclination to safeguard familial and personal information. Within the context of transformation, an additional factor is emerging alongside the centuries-old meta-codes, namely the increasing influence of radical ideas in interpreting Islamic values. This influence is beginning to have a notable impact on long-standing meta-codes, including the revered value of respecting elders. The existing set of codes clashes with the paradigm of absolute gender equality, giving rise to negative connotations associated with the concepts of "gender" and "gender equality." This detrimental perception

¹ Assessment of the civic consciousness level of the population of the Kyrgyz Republic. Analytical Report. "Smart Jaran" Association, "PIL" LLC, Central Asian University, Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation, 2022. // <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/civic-literacy.pdf>

² For more information about the scope of DPI's activities, visit www.dpi.kg.

is particularly concerning due to the fact that public policy implementers, represented by subnational government leaders, are themselves members of the local communities and cannot entirely detach themselves from their surroundings and cultural codes. As a result, they may lack comprehension of or alignment with the values and directives proclaimed in national-level policies. As a consequence, this generally leads to a diminished effectiveness of public policies in the realm of gender equality and, in certain instances, even outright acts of sabotage.

The pursuit of innovative approaches to address gender equality issues is particularly pertinent within the framework of the state's policy to enhance women's political rights, which includes the implementation of a 30% gender quota in local kenesh elections. As a result of the quota introduced in 2021, 37% or 3351 mandates of local kenesh deputies were obtained by women,³ with approximately 2000 women becoming deputies for the first time. Even during the election stage, it became evident that women deputies were facing a significant challenge: it was not merely enough to attain the position of a deputy, but also to prove themselves as successful and effective representatives in order to achieve tangible results. In 2023, during the midpoint of the electoral cycle, it becomes imperative to evaluate the situation in municipalities where women assumed deputy positions solely through the quota system. In these communities, there is a noticeable increase in frustration among male deputies who express doubts regarding the fairness and effectiveness of the quota system. Ensuring the continuation of a quota system for the forthcoming electoral cycle in 2025 is of paramount importance, as a single electoral cycle falls short in attaining enduring advancements in gender equality within rural communities. International observation suggests that women's political representation must be targeted for many years before most citizens will change their attitudes toward women in politics and public life⁴.

The report presents recommendations aimed at addressing key challenges concerning women's economic empowerment. These challenges include the absence of public spaces and opportunities for families, inadequate development initiatives targeting girls and women, an overemphasis on infrastructure-focused socio-economic programs at the expense of fostering conditions for human development, a perpetuation of gender discrimination stereotypes leading to a detrimental "vicious circle," limited governmental capacity and motivation to enhance gender equality, and outdated models for integrating women into the economy.

The recommendations concerning women's political empowerment focus on addressing various aspects, including the devaluation of women's contributions, insufficient public recognition and encouragement, enhancing women's capacity for coalition-building, addressing men's fears and perceptions of injustice, and elevating the social status of daughter-in-law, as it currently acts as a constraint on political rights.

A dedicated section is allocated to addressing the required modifications within the "agents of change," namely NPOs and development projects. This section highlights several identified issues, including: a partial and formal acceptance of universal values and gender equality, inadequate proficiency in engaging with specific community types, gender imbalance in personnel composition, contention and language as sources of tension, limited community response to messages conveyed by traditional advocates of women's empowerment, and an uneven and fragmented focus on political empowerment and economic opportunities.

In the process of gathering information, deliberate efforts were made to assemble male groups of participants, which consisted of representatives from the local political elites as well as employees engaged in development projects and NPOs. Therefore, a distinctive feature of the report was the inclusion of controversial and ambiguous conclusions and opinions voiced by male participants. The authors took this step in order to draw attention to the position of a significant part of the male population. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the inclusion of controversial opinions does not indicate alignment or agreement on the part of the authors of the report.

The report is addressed primarily to development projects and NPOs working to achieve gender equality in rural communities, politicians responsible for relevant public policies, as well as researchers and academics (political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.) interested in further study of the impact of the ethnogender context on the status of women in the Kyrgyz Republic.

To continue the discussion and further elaborate the recommendations, the authors of the report invite you to contact them at ndobretsova@dpi.kg and amusaeva@dpi.kg

³ Data of the Central Commission for Elections and Referendums of the Kyrgyz Republic as of 09.01.2023 // <https://shailoo.gov.kg/ru/zhenshiny-i-vybory/zhenshiny-v-predstavitelnyh-organah/>

⁴ Clayton, Amanda. "Electoral Gender Quotas and Attitudes Toward Traditional Leaders: A Policy Experiment on Lesotho." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 33.4 (2014): 1007-26.

Information about the Project

The project "Specificities of Women's Empowerment in Rural Communities within a Central Asian Ethnogender Context" was implemented by the Development Policy Institute together with the Local Government Academy of Central Asia from November 2022 to March 2023 with the support of the Civil Society Initiative of the University of Central Asia.

The objective of this project is to foster the adoption and integration of the Central Asian Ethnogender Model's recommendations into the operational strategies employed when engaging with rural communities in Kyrgyzstan. The focus lies in the realm of gender equality, specifically within the context of the model itself, while duly considering its pertinent factors. To accomplish this objective, the project successfully undertook the following endeavors: discern the factors that both facilitate and impede the execution of suggestions pertaining to the gender dynamics within rural communities of Kyrgyzstan, targeting both men and women; adapt certain recommendations initially formulated for the entire regional landscape into a comprehensive array of precise policies specific to the local governance of the Kyrgyz Republic, thereby fostering the pursuit of gender parity and the empowerment of women in political and economic domains; instigate additional discourse regarding the Central Asian gender context, engaging the scholarly community.

Amidst the project's execution, the recommendations directed towards Local Self-Government (LSG) entities, Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs), and donors, devised by the participants of the deliberative workshop—comprising representatives from NPOs hailing from four countries: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan—underwent revision⁵.

While conducting the focus groups, the recommendations were elucidated and refined within the framework of the three realms of support for women:

- 1) expansion of women's economic rights;
- 2) expansion of women's political rights;
- 3) necessary changes by the stakeholders themselves.

To authenticate and refine the recommendations, they were deliberated upon in 11 distinct focus groups, comprising a total of 112 participants, including 67 female individuals. Focus groups were conducted separately: 5 focus groups with men and 5 focus groups with women. The qualitative composition of the participants comprised 94 individuals representing LSG bodies and local communities, of which 55 were women. Additionally, there were 41 local kenesh deputies and experts of *aiyl okmotu*, as well as 58 representatives from informal civil society organizations and local communities. Residents of municipalities of Chui oblast (Lenin AA, Alameda district, Dzhek AA, Issyk-Ata district, Besh-Terek AA, Moscow district) and Osh oblast (Madyn AA, Kara-Suu district, Gulistan AA, Nookat district) were invited to focus groups. In addition, a focus group with specialists and experts in gender issues from NPOs and development projects was held, which was attended by 18 people, including six men.

Consultations were conducted with N. Shalygina, a Ph.D. in History and Senior Researcher at the Center for Gender Studies of the Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Dr. Shalygina, being a pioneer in ethnogender studies within the post-Soviet region, affirmed that the ethnogender approach has gained widespread acceptance in the field of gender sociology over the past decade. She further emphasized that a key challenge lies in reconciling the divergent perspectives between the pluralistic gender paradigm prevalent in the Global West and the adherence to traditional values observed in the Global South.

Building upon the outcomes of the focus groups, refined recommendations were formulated and directed towards LSG bodies, NPOs, and development projects engaged in the advancement of women's empowerment matters. Focus groups identified facilitators and barriers to implementation and more detailed recommendations, and a short-term action plan to support the 30% gender quota was developed.

⁵ The Central Asian Gender Context: Proposals for Transmuting Interventions to Attain Gender Parity in Rural Communities. A review of the results of the discussion workshop. LGACA, DPI. Bishkek, 2022
<http://dpi.kg/ru/library/full/367.html>

Some Factors in the Ethnogender Context of the Kyrgyz Republic

МСУ. Работают женщины.
Решение принимают мужчины



The notion of "gender context" emanates from and is intertwined with the realm of scholarly inquiry, specifically within the field of ethnogender studies. Ethnogender research is founded upon an interdisciplinary approach that amalgamates insights from various fields, including sociology, history, psychology, demography, art history, linguistics, and other disciplines that directly or indirectly explore matters pertaining to gender behavior. The objective of ethnogender studies is to demonstrate and substantiate the authentic diversity and cultural autonomy of distinct gender arrangements worldwide. It aims to unveil the objective conditions that give rise to and shape their evolution, influenced by a multitude of regional factors such as climate, landscape, economy, genetics, and more⁶. Ethnogender studies were initially focused on the comparative examination of the characteristics of male and female behavior, as well as the concept of biological determinism (the undeniable binary opposition of "male" and "female" in sociocultural processes). To some extent, this approach aimed to provide an alternative perspective to the concepts of the social construction of gender. It challenged the notion that biological sex should be regarded only as a natural foundation that gives rise to enduring behavioral, psychological, cultural, and other distinctions between men and women⁷. Ethnogender studies then transformed into a symbiotic understanding of biological dichotomies and social construction.

Ethnogender studies are conducted in various countries. Within the region of the former Soviet Union, the Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IEA RAS) has emerged as a leading institution in this regard. It was at this institute where the Sector of Ethnogender Studies (SEGS) was established in the early 1990s, solidifying its leading role in the field. The research is being conducted at the Kazakh Humanities and Law Innovative University, Emporia State College of Liberal Arts & Sciences (Kansas, USA), as well as in Mexico and other countries. Researchers from Kazakhstan have notably proven the impact of ethnogender dynamics on national security⁸, unveiling pertinent concerns and historical facets regarding the evolution of ethnogender in diverse nations and the consequent shaping of distinctive political cultures in public administration.

Attitudes towards ethnogender studies fluctuate, contingent upon the researchers' adherence to fundamental principles of gender. Nonetheless, a prevailing consensus among researchers is that disregarding the ethnogender typologies that have evolved within distinct political and cultural milieus would be a significant error. For instance, ethnogender studies conducted in the countries of the North Caucasus have highlighted the shifting values and their impact on local communities. It has been observed that while the adat system (the traditional mountain laws) held significant influence in the past, there is now an increasing role of the Shariat code of laws. This societal shift has led to a distinct understanding that gender equality, constitutionally enshrined within the Russian Federation, assumes a unique *interpretation and implementation* in the North Caucasus region⁹. In light of ethnogender studies, the authors propose innovative approaches to engage with rural communities, suggesting that rural women should be recognized as a distinct target demographic. Simultaneously, it is imperative to acknowledge the diversity within populations residing in specific regions and consider their unique living conditions. Forge closer collaborations with locally established non-governmental organizations that actively engage in women-centric initiatives within the regions. Establish gender research centers aimed at fostering gender consciousness within society, advocating for a gender perspective in the social sciences and humanities, advancing the development of gender-focused curricula within the education system, accumulating experience in utilizing gender methodologies in scientific and expert projects, and implementing gender education programs¹⁰.

"In most parts of Central Asia, the population is more familiar with women's issues than with gender theory. Men's judgment of this problem is different from women's. In other words, questions of the "Eastern" man's attitude to gender issues and the man's willingness to allow a woman to be on the same social level with him at all remain common. Traditionally, many tend to attribute the difference in the social status of women and men and the inequality of their rights to biological reasons. An analysis of historical, ethnographic, and cultural evidence reveals that social factors, such as societal norms and traditions shaped over time, play an equally significant role in shaping the contrasting roles of women and men. Religious underpinnings, longstanding traditions, and established ways of life within these contexts often lay the groundwork for gender inequality, particularly towards women, within the respective communities. The challenges highlighted are further compounded by economic difficulties, which curtail

⁶Shalygina N. V., Snezhkova I. A. Formation and Prospects for the Development of Ethnogender Studies in Russia // Vlast. 2019. Vol. 27. No. 4. p. 170-174. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31171/vlast.v27i4.6625>.

⁷ Shevchenko, Z. V. (Stacking.). (2016). Dictionary of gender terms. Cherkasy: Vidavets Chabanenko Yu. Retrieved from <http://a-z-gender.net/teoriya-socialnogo-konstruirovaniya-gendera.html>

⁸ Gulmira URANKHAEVA, Gulnar BAYPEISOVA, Samat SMOILOV, Aliya TOLYSBAEVA, Aizat MUKATAEVA, Assiya KENZHEBULATOVA. Some Aspects of Ethno-Gender Realization: Historical-Political Analysis, Astra Salvensis, VI (2018), no. 12, p. 83-92.

⁹ Kharaeva L.F., Kuchukova Z.A. Gender and Ethnogender. - Nalchik: Print Center Publishing House, 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid.

individuals' capacity to attain financial security. Consequently, women face additional barriers within the family structure, impeding their ability to exercise control over their own livelihoods¹¹.

Without taking into account ethnogender factors, it is impossible to achieve any significant improvements in gender equality. These studies are especially relevant for the countries of Central Asia, which are significantly affected by three key factors that hinder the development of women in particular: the decline in the quality and accessibility of education, poverty, and the growing influence of Islam and the spread of its radical movements. The aforementioned factors, in conjunction with the political and cultural backdrop, contribute to the development of a distinct regional gender context, necessitating thorough examination and the adaptation of interventions accordingly. The region has yet to properly articulate the specificities of the Central Asian gender context, but a first step in this direction was taken by the Local Government Academy of Central Asia in partnership with the Development Policy Institute in 2022, which resulted in an analytical report that formed the basis for the development of this report.

At the core of the United Nations' established global value system lie the principles of human rights and gender equality. During the formulation and establishment of rights, careful consideration was given to eliminate any regional contextual biases or specific features and characteristics that could undermine their universal applicability. The formulation of these rights is designed to ensure their true universality, encompassing every individual inhabiting the planet. This represents a notable strength of the aforementioned system of values. However, simultaneously, this also constitutes a weakness, as communities that have significant disparities in their developmental contexts may not equally and to the same extent absorb universal values. They are not always capable of integrating these values into their own context without additional efforts. In the Kyrgyz Republic, less than one-third of the population understands that human rights possess a universal and inherent nature¹². Furthermore, the capacity for effective assimilation is further reduced by the tendency of international organizations involved in the implementation and integration of values to employ universal approaches and solutions, often without sufficient adaptation to the unique regional contexts, lacking in-depth and scholarly comprehension. In many cases, adaptation is primarily focused on linguistic and superficial cultural manifestations, while profound psychological, historical, religious, and other processes remain untouched and unaccounted for. This is evidenced by the absence of ethnogender studies, such as those found in the Kyrgyz Republic, which could facilitate the formulation of a gender context specific to the country. Such studies would enhance the effectiveness of actions aimed at achieving gender equality, taking into consideration the national characteristics of the value system and its hierarchical structure.

Ulziyisuren JAMSRAN, UN Women Representative in Central Asia: "We find ourselves at a pivotal juncture, standing midway between the realization or non-realization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The attainment of gender equality necessitates a hastened pace, a fundamental reassessment of approaches, and a comprehensive transformation across multiple levels. In order to select the most effective gender intervention practices, it is imperative to meticulously assemble and comprehend their applicability within the Central Asian region. It is crucial to gain an understanding of the areas where existing approaches are ineffective and do not justify the expenditure of time and resources."¹³.

Hierarchy of values

Human rights position the individual at the core of the value system and at the apex of the pyramid. While not undermining the significance of this construct, it remains valuable to explore the hypothesis that, in the context of the Kyrgyz Republic, the interests of the family, societal perceptions of the family ("what people will say"), and the perpetuation of the family unit as an economic safeguard for parents occupy a central position within the value system. This hypothesis finds support in various indicators, such as the presence of close kinship relations, the resilience of familial and clan ties, and the prioritization of national bonds compared to other factors, among others.

In the context of this study, the term "family" encompasses the conventional understanding that extends beyond the scope of a single spouse to include parents, siblings, and other immediate relatives and close friends. Notably, a significant portion of the population, approximately 66%, actively participates in traditional solidarity

¹¹ Gender aspects in the context of integrated water resources management. Report on the study of representative households in the following republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Tashkent, 2005.

¹² Assessment of the civic consciousness level of the population of the Kyrgyz Republic. Analytical Report. "Smart Jaran" Association, "PIL" LLC, Central Asian University, Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation, 2022. // <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/civic-literacy.pdf>

¹³ Quoted from the opening remarks of the Central Asian Gender Context workshop held in February 2022.

groups known as "sherine."¹⁴ For the majority of citizens in the Kyrgyz Republic, it is within this environment and its associated interests that the utmost value is placed. Consequently, when considering the qualities of a "good citizen," an overwhelming majority of Kyrgyz citizens regard the capacity to love their family, engage in meaningful work, and cultivate friendships (ranking first with 97%), alongside the ability to give birth to and/or raise children (96%), as the most vital aspects.¹⁵

Empirical evidence demonstrates that the discourse emphasizing the value of the family and the importance of both men and women contributing to the family is well received by rural communities across the entire region. However, the discourse from the perspective of equal human rights in its absolute and idealized form is not fully accepted or absorbed by the communities to the extent desired. The prioritization of family values is significant due to the family's role in shaping attitudes towards human rights. Regardless of governmental policies and official positions, the true perception of gender equality takes shape within the family unit. The institution of the family is experiencing transformations within Kyrgyzstani society, yet it continues to maintain its prominent position in the hierarchy of values. Currently, it is challenging to assert the prevalence of non-binary or incomplete families, although there is an increasing number of instances referred to as "remote"¹⁶ marriages or informal unions.

The perpetuation of family being at the top of the value system is facilitated by the ongoing spread of Islam. According to Beishenova¹⁷, in countries where Islam is the predominant religion, if modernization exerts adverse effects on the institution of the family and traditional gender relations, it is often met with resistance or, at the very least, the aspects that are perceived as directly detrimental are rejected.

Considering the potential hierarchical prioritization of the family over gender equality within the region, and the significant role of the family in shaping attitudes towards gender equality, interventions at various levels, particularly within local communities, ought to be grounded in the interests of the family and cultural values. Such interventions should acknowledge and emphasize the mutual contributions of both genders towards establishing and nurturing thriving families. Furthermore, numerous gender equality challenges originate at the family level and exert a more significant impact on the status of women within the local community than initially perceived. Surprisingly, the position of a married woman, particularly the status of a daughter-in-law, proved to be a decisive factor in local elections in the Kyrgyz Republic. Despite the apparent qualifications and merits, local communities were reluctant to acknowledge the leadership role of a woman with the status of "kelin" (daughter-in-law), deeming her an outsider regardless of the length of time she had resided within the community. Another significant factor that influenced the election outcome was the number of relatives a candidate had. Although age was not the most determining factor, older candidates tended to receive more mandates. These aspects warrant further discussion, but their collective nature demonstrates that traditional and even patriarchal gender role models still prevail in many communities throughout Kyrgyzstan.

A widespread discriminatory perception persists, wherein women are often viewed through a lens of "utilitarian" value, which distorts their inherent equal status. This perception places the burden on women to continually prove their worth, undermining the notion of inherent equality. In order for a woman to be perceived as valuable to her family and society, she often faces expectations such as bearing multiple children, as the birth of an only child may be seen as self-serving. Additionally, she may need to earn equal or higher income than men to have a voice within the family and exercise her rights. Economic success may be required to participate in decision-making processes. Furthermore, it may take years of work to earn respect and support from her community, for instance, in electoral processes. It is often expected that any action taken by a woman should benefit other members of the community. Simultaneously, men often possess a pre-existing "value" within this context. Their voice in the family holds significant weight, irrespective of their earnings. They receive support from the community as a given. Men are not required to seek permission to be absent from the household or engage in public life, among other privileges.

¹⁴ Assessment of the civic consciousness level of the population of the Kyrgyz Republic. Analytical Report. "Smart Jaran" Association, "PIL" LLC, Central Asian University, Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation, 2022. // <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/civic-literacy.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This is what sociologists call families in which one of the spouses goes away for a long time to earn money.

¹⁷ Beishenova A.T. Changes in the paradigm of traditional Kyrgyz society due to its acceptance of Islam DOI: 10.24411/2312-8267-2019-10401// <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/izmenenie-paradigmy-traditsionnogo-kyrgyzskogo-obschestva-v-svyazi-s-prinyatiem-im-islama>

Cultural Codes¹⁸

A comprehensive examination of the extent to which cultural codes have already undergone transformation and the ongoing direction of such transformations within rural communities of the Kyrgyz Republic is imperative. Practical observations indicate that the country continues to preserve a set of meta-codes of behavior that have been ingrained within the local population for centuries. These meta-codes encompass traits such as a sense of proportion, restraint in expressing emotions, a multitude of taboo subjects related to gender relations, adherence to traditions and customs, a strong emphasis on safeguarding family-related information, and various others. Within the context of transformation, an additional factor is emerging alongside the centuries-old meta-codes, namely the increasing influence of radical ideas in interpreting Islamic values. This influence is beginning to have a notable impact on long-standing meta-codes, including the revered value of respecting elders. The events that took place in the autumn of 2020 in the Kyrgyz Republic, which prominently featured a generational conflict and the rejection of the older generation's role and contribution by the younger population, were facilitated by the erosion of traditional values influenced by radical religious ideologies. These dynamics led to a demand for generational change and the assigning of blame to the older generation for the country's challenges. There is a notable observation that within local communities, the term "gender" itself has acquired negative connotations, leading to a distortion in its understanding when combined with phrases such as "gender and NPOs," "gender and LGBT," or "gender and Western values." This association has caused a sense of rejection as it is seen as a symbol of an external culture, carrying potential risks and destructive intentions towards communities and families. There exists an opinion suggesting that the discourse on gender equality poses a threat to national security, as it is erroneously linked to family planning, fertility reduction, and population decline (which, in reality, may not be occurring). On a domestic level, individuals associate the decrease in the number of children in families with the perceived influence of discussions on gender-related issues. Gender is also perceived as a potential threat, particularly in terms of the transfer of power to women or the notion of women dominating over men. These distortions in perception create a fertile environment for the proliferation of false values and stereotypes. These include the objectification of women, where girls may aspire to secure a financially advantageous marriage, perpetuating the idea of a "lavish life without exertion" reliant on men, promoting irrational consumption, downplaying the value of education and independence, and other related notions. False stereotypes are also generated regarding men, who are believed to have an obligation to earn money through any means necessary and to exhibit physical strength, among other expectations. Paradoxically, this trend is active even in religious communities.

Political Divide

Negative connotations surrounding gender equality are particularly concerning due to the fact that public policy implementers, including subnational government leaders who are members of local communities, cannot entirely detach themselves from their surroundings and cultural codes. As a result, they may lack a comprehensive understanding of or alignment with the values and objectives articulated in national-level policies. This disconnect poses challenges for effective implementation of gender equality measures at the local level. It is crucial to recognize that the majority of local leaders are men who, without wholeheartedly embracing and championing the principles embedded in national policies, inadvertently perpetuate the perception of gender inequality through their passive resistance and subsequent inaction. Their lack of proactive engagement hinders progress towards achieving gender equality. Given the current dynamics, it would be overly optimistic to anticipate that government policies and programs, written in a language that feels distant and employing terminology that irritates communities, will have a substantial impact on gender equality within rural communities. The situation is worsened by the fact that the term "gender" is often used independently of "equality,"¹⁹ resulting in a perception of unfairness among men and an interpretation of all state gender policies as favoring women exclusively.

¹⁸A cultural code serves as a key to comprehending a particular type of culture, encompassing the distinctive cultural traits inherited by a community from their ancestors. It represents encoded information in various forms that enable the identification and understanding of a specific culture. The cultural code establishes a collection of images that are interconnected with a range of stereotypes within the collective consciousness. The cultural unconscious encompasses elements that are not explicitly articulated or consciously recognized, but instead remain concealed from conscious comprehension. Nevertheless, these hidden aspects manifest themselves through actions and behaviors within a given culture. The cultural code of a nation helps to understand its behavioral reactions and it determines the people's psychology.

¹⁹ Based on the empirical observations conducted by the staff of the Development Policy Institute, who have regular direct contact with thousands of members from rural communities across all regions of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Digitalization

The question of the extent and directions of the impact of digitalization on the gender context of the Kyrgyz Republic remains unresolved and necessitates focused research. The impact of digitalization on governance and society is undeniable, as it accelerates and transforms numerous processes. The increased accessibility of digital communications can both reinforce positive trends and amplify negative ones, such as the rapid dissemination of negative stereotypes. It is crucial to recognize that in the context of empowering any group, the digitalization of governance is inevitably accompanied by risks of division²⁰, inequality, and exclusion. These risks often have a more pronounced impact on women compared to men.

Digital divide ("owning" vs. "not owning"): dividing people into groups that have or do not have access to a given digital technology. This division emerges between countries, notably between developed and developing nations, with the least developed countries experiencing an especially significant divide. However, the digital divide is not solely limited to disparities between countries but also exists within countries. This divide encompasses variations between urban and rural populations, gender groups, different age brackets, as well as privileged and marginalized communities. Individuals facing multiple deprivations, often referred to as multidimensional poverty, are especially vulnerable and disadvantaged. Their circumstances involve not only low incomes but also limited access to essential utilities, healthcare services, and educational opportunities. Rural women in the Kyrgyz Republic are indeed part of the vulnerable group affected by the digital divide.

Another notable effect is the *digital divide*, which manifests in the disparity between individuals' ability to fully benefit from digital technologies ("using" vs. "using more"). For instance, the mere possession of a smartphone by two individuals does not automatically imply that they are equally proficient in utilizing the device. This discrepancy in utilization is frequently attributed to factors such as the affordability and speed of internet access, as well as the functionality and cost of devices. These factors further contribute to the vulnerability of rural women to this risk within the digital divide.

The third effect is *digital exclusion*, which impacts groups of people who are marginalized and excluded from active participation in social life due to limited skills, inadequate internet access, and insufficient quality of internet connection. In the Kyrgyz Republic, there are several dozen villages that still lack access to the internet, leaving residents of these communities completely excluded from digital processes and opportunities. The vulnerability of specific gender and age groups in this situation has not been thoroughly studied or assessed.

²⁰ Read more from: Dobretsova N., Roberts T. Digitalization as a threat? Political thinking on digitalization for LSG bodies of the Kyrgyz Republic // Municipality, No. 1, 2023. <http://www.municipalitet.kg/ru/article/full/3033.html>

Local Elections in the Context of the Gender Quota



In 2021, the elections for deputies of local keneshes in the Kyrgyz Republic took place. A notable development in these elections was the implementation of a 30% quota for female deputies. This quota was introduced on August 8, 2019, through the signing of the Law "On Amendments and Additions to the Constitutional Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On Elections of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic and Deputies of the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic' and the Constitutional Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On Referendum'."

A quota is a policy measure implemented with the aim of achieving gender equality through a mechanical approach. The law previously aimed to establish equal conditions for both men and women in elections to local keneshes. Nevertheless, with each subsequent term, the proportion of women in local keneshes has experienced a decline. Multiple factors contributed to this decline, including reasons that are not specifically addressed by the law. These factors encompass gender roles within the family, the influence of stereotypes, prejudice, and other societal dynamics that can hinder women's representation in local keneshes.

It was crucial to reintroduce the understanding that women, who comprise half of the country's population, should have representation in local keneshes. This is particularly significant considering that local keneshes address issues and challenges that directly affect women, such as access to clean drinking water, sanitation facilities in villages and towns, quality of education, and availability of preschool education. Three decades ago, it was common to observe a higher proportion of women than men in the local keneshes of the Kyrgyz SSR, and this was generally accepted without any sense of peculiarity or criticism. In order to return women to their rightful place in local keneshes and to change the attitudes of communities toward this issue, such a mechanical measure as the introduction of quotas was needed.

During the electoral campaign, female candidates garnered support from both the central government and international NPOs. The following factors contributed to the women's success²¹:

- the woman's age was not an obstacle to her participation in local elections;
- securing victory in elections relies less on activism displayed during the campaign period and more on demonstrated leadership qualities and recognition within the local community.
- women are less likely to be suspected of corruption;
- many believe that women make more valid promises than men;
- support of the spouse, children, and immediate family is crucial for the female candidate.

At the local level, support for women candidates was not unequivocal and pronounced, with a significant factor being the internal reluctance of many women to engage in political struggle. Thus, among the key obstacles were the following²²:

- public denial of the role of women in local politics is still widely visible, but does not suppress support for women MPs;
- women have fewer financial resources to participate in elections;
- women lack knowledge about how to become a deputy (election campaign) and HOW TO BE a deputy;
- men have more opportunities for informal communication with voters, more recreational venues and more accessible public spaces, and more opportunities to reach and persuade voters.

The quota implementation results: 37% or 3351 mandates of local kenesh deputies were allocated to women²³, thereby bringing about a dramatic shift in the gender composition of the deputy corps. Following the 2016 local elections, the representation of women in rural local keneshes decreased by 2% to 13%. However, during the transition of mandates, the proportion of women further declined to 10.7%. The overall outcomes of the 2021 elections highlight the significant number of women deputies who secured substantial vote counts. Moreover, numerous local keneshes surpassed the legally established quota for female representation. Specifically, 150 keneshes boasted more than 40% women deputies, with 15 keneshes surpassing the 50% mark. Notably, the Naiman Aiyl Aimak of Naryn Province set a remarkable record with an almost 73% proportion of women deputies. Nevertheless, in approximately one-third of the municipalities, the representation of women deputies stands precisely at the quota level or even falls below the mandated minimum. In these particular ayil aimaks, it was not uncommon for women to secure deputy positions through the quota system, despite receiving fewer votes compared to their male counterparts.

Even during the election stage, it became evident that women deputies were facing a significant challenge: it was not merely enough to attain the position of a deputy, but also to prove themselves as successful and effective representatives in order to achieve tangible results. In 2023, midway through the electoral cycle, it is crucial to

²¹ The Political Destiny of Women in Local Government // The Municipality, No. 6, 2021.

<http://www.municipalitet.kg/ru/article/full/2567.html>

²² Ibid.

²³ Data of the Central Commission for Elections and Referendums of the Kyrgyz Republic as of 09.01.2023 //

<https://shailoo.gov.kg/ru/zhenshiny-i-vybory/zhenshiny-v-predstavitelnyh-organah/>

evaluate the situation in municipalities where women secured deputy positions solely through quotas. This assessment is necessary to ensure improved outcomes in the upcoming 2025 electoral cycle. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that while the quota serves as a temporary and technical measure, its continuation in 2025 is crucial. One election cycle alone is insufficient to bring about lasting transformations in gender equality within rural communities. An illustrative example is the randomized political experiment conducted in Lesotho, a country in South Africa, wherein single-member local districts were exclusively reserved for women candidates. The findings of the experiment revealed that, on the whole, the quota had a limited impact on gender equality. The experiment did not yield substantial evidence indicating that the quota influenced average levels of public gender bias. Furthermore, the quota failed to bring about significant changes in overt taste discrimination or implicit gender bias across the entire sample. The authors concluded that women's political presence probably needs to be targeted for many years before most citizens will change their attitudes toward women in public life²⁴.

²⁴ Clayton, Amanda. "Electoral Gender Quotas and Attitudes Toward Traditional Leaders: A Policy Experiment on Lesotho." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 33.4 (2014): 1007-26.

Expanding Women's Economic Rights



Салтанат КАЙБЫЛДАЕВА

The limited availability of public spaces and opportunities for the growth and advancement of girls and women remains a prominent issue.

The traditional way of life in rural communities of the Kyrgyz Republic often discourages women from actively participating in activities outside their homes, hindering their opportunities for self-development and involvement in paid work. There is a prevailing belief that a woman's time is entirely occupied by household chores and family responsibilities, leading to the notion that she does not require organized leisure or opportunities for personal development. Unlike men who have various social spaces available to them such as teahouses, gyms, coffee shops, and bathhouses, women in rural areas often lack similar spaces where they can gather and engage in social activities. Contrary to the prevailing belief, it is important to note that in many villages, there are actually sufficient places and spaces where women could potentially organize their leisure activities. For instance, there are gyms available in almost every school, as well as various clubs that can cater to women's interests and socialization. The LSG authorities will not interfere with this. However, women themselves must organize themselves into a group and create the conditions for development.

CASES

In a notable example, within one of the *aiyl aimaks* (AA) in Jalal-Abad province, a dedicated two-story building has been established. This facility comprises a fitness room exclusively for women, a hairdressing salon, and a workshop tailored for sewing and handicraft activities. Within the sports complex, specific sections have been established to cater to women's participation, i.e. soccer and wrestling. In one of the AAs in Chui Oblast, the women's wrestling section was unfortunately closed due to parental pressure. The decision was influenced by concerns related to the coach being a man, considering wrestling is a contact sport. At about the same time, another AA in Chui Oblast opened a women's wrestling section led by a female coach, whose salary was financed from the local budget.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Propose and advocate for the implementation of a comprehensive program aimed at facilitating the establishment of public spaces catering specifically to the needs of women and girls residing in small towns, particularly those in rural regions. It should be a place for family time, etc. Public spaces will also serve as catalysts for promoting girls' leadership skills and enhancing their ability to engage in constructive dialogues with boys and other societal groups.

Socio-economic development programs often prioritize infrastructure development, yet fail to adequately address the necessary conditions for holistic human development.

Socio-economic development programs primarily prioritize infrastructure enhancements, while often neglecting the establishment of conducive conditions for comprehensive human development. The technocratic approach to industrialization and infrastructure development tends to overlook intangible human needs, in stark contrast to the concept of human development. The latter asserts that true human well-being and happiness can only be achieved through the fulfillment of intangible needs and fostering socialization. Nevertheless, in situations where the satisfaction of basic needs remains at a notably low level, such as observed in rural communities in Kyrgyzstan over the past twenty-five years, a technocratic approach becomes somewhat inevitable. Throughout the entire period of Kyrgyzstan's independence, the notion of assistance to individuals has predominantly been confined to providing aid to the vulnerable, which has primarily been perceived as mere material support, such as distributing food kits or purchasing coal. The provision of benefits to women, specifically mothers, for the benefit of their children is regarded as an effective social policy. In contrast, the core principle of an inclusive development policy is to transition underdeveloped groups from being mere recipients of resources to becoming active contributors who equally participate in generating benefits and their subsequent distribution. In the absence of inclusive development, both women and men face the risk of being marginalized and becoming vulnerable parties, as revealed through the reluctance expressed by men during focus groups to openly voice their needs due to the fear of being perceived as weak.

CASES

In an *aiyl aimak*, where women MPs represent 45% of the total members, the Socio-Economic Development Program incorporates specific measures aimed at addressing the needs of women as a vulnerable group. Notably, a budget allocation of 100,000 soms has been dedicated to enhancing the reproductive health of future mothers. This funding will facilitate medical examinations, including tomography tests, for girls and women from impoverished families. Additionally, plans are underway to establish an "Eneler-kana" within the *aiyl okmotu* building, providing a dedicated

space for nursing mothers and pregnant visitors. Moreover, the program includes annual financial literacy courses targeting 22 women, with a five-year duration and a coverage of 110 women from 11 villages.

During the focus group discussions, male MPs leveled accusations against their female counterparts, alleging tendencies towards conflict, intrigue, and exaggeration. A women's group within the same municipality provided an explanation attributing the discontent to a gender-based conflict among the deputies. The conflict stemmed from the male deputies' intention to privatize the central square in the village with the aim of establishing auto repair shops, while the female deputies opposed this decision, advocating for the preservation of the square as a communal space for the villagers' relaxation and leisure activities. However, the square does not function properly, and no workshops have appeared in the village.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative to transition ²⁵gradually from passive material assistance to proactive development initiatives, which encompass the implementation of active gender budgeting. At the local level, such measures may encompass the establishment of specific provisions for businesses managed by women, the creation of employment opportunities targeting women and vulnerable groups, initiatives focused on enhancing financial literacy and other soft skills, tailored conditions for self-employed women and artisans, mentoring support programs, and scholarship programs aimed at empowering girls, among other interventions.

Incorporating inclusive development measures within socio-economic development programs is indispensable. Such measures aim to establish an enabling environment for human development and self-fulfillment, encompassing initiatives like retraining programs, career guidance services, spaces for recreational activities, courses focused on enhancing "soft" skills, and the establishment of gender-responsive sports and recreational facilities.

Measures of inclusive development should strive to fortify and broaden the egalitarian family model, wherein the cultivation of human rights is prioritized, and the needs of all family members are taken into account. This entails providing spaces for family recreation and organizing activities that cater to the interests of every family member. It is necessary to study and take into account the needs of different family members, including men and women of different ages, such as fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, older children, younger children, kaiyn-jurt ²⁶, etc.). However, special tools and skills are needed to understand the needs of men, as many men do not openly acknowledge their needs.

Cultural and sports events should be organized with broad participation, avoiding the involvement of only specific "routine" families. It is important to promote traditions such as "it is shameful not to participate," "everyone participates," and "el emne deit"²⁷. It is also necessary to train specialists in organizing leisure activities and creating conditions for development, taking into account the ethno-gender context. For example, both male and female coaches can be trained for sports activities.

The "vicious circle" of gender discrimination stereotypes

Boys within their family environment and peer groups are conditioned to believe that assisting women is shameful and makes them "hen-pecked". The notion of men being the "breadwinners" and solely responsible for the family's financial well-being while women are seen as consumers and, therefore, have lesser voting rights is prevalent. Inequality affects both men and women.

SEPARATE OPINION (MEN). Either economic requirements for men should be lowered or raised for women to achieve equal positions. Otherwise, it results in the expectation that men should solve all economic problems and also relinquish all political rights to women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Find men and boys who promote a more equitable distribution of responsibilities within the family. For example, if a woman is active in the economic aspect, men can assist in fulfilling family duties. Men

²⁵ This should by no means entail an absolute dismissal of material aid and benefits, as certain groups will invariably rely on them for their survival.

²⁶ Husband's relatives. Exert significant influence on a woman's social status.

²⁷ What will people say?

can openly discuss this and not hesitate to share responsibilities with women, emphasizing that it is a modern norm of behavior.

SEPARATE RECOMMENDATION (MEN). Involve religious leaders in gender equality work. For instance, an imam or pastor can cite verses from the Quran or biblical principles that support women's rights. This can be particularly effective in addressing domestic violence. COMMENTARY BY THE AUTHORS: This recommendation can bring about change within religious communities but requires special efforts and careful content adaptation, as religions often place great emphasis on gender relations, although not always from an equality standpoint.

SEPARATE RECOMMENDATION (MEN). Through public campaigns, reduce the level of economic demands placed on men. If men and women are equal in their rights, then let them be equal in their responsibilities. Shift the image of the "breadwinner" towards the concept of "hunting together with a family is more beneficial", implying that any contribution to the family's development from both genders is equally important. COMMENTARY BY THE AUTHORS: In reality, women contribute to the family's development through unpaid domestic work, which is often undervalued and underappreciated. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the need to overcome stereotypes regarding economic demands on men while adequately acknowledging the value of unpaid domestic work.

Insufficient capacity and motivation of governance bodies in improving the situation regarding gender equality.

The complexity and intricacy of the situation lie in the fact that governance bodies: have a poor understanding of the necessity and value of gender equality, do not feel accountable for the issue, and often experience a high turnover of personnel. The practice in the field of gender equality is such that predominantly women participate in all events related to women's rights. However, it is necessary to organize work primarily for men.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to make NPOs key partners in the implementation of gender policies. As mechanisms, active public procurement of social services, financing of local initiatives from the local budget, participatory budgeting (budgets of participation) with a gender quota for women, and others should be utilized. However, NPOs themselves should expand their working methods, incorporating new approaches based on family values, collaborative technologies, and taking into account the psychological aspects of needs and perceptions of both women and men.

Develop new, widely applicable, and sustainable methodologies for working with communities (e.g., adapting tools such as Gender Action Learning System (GALS) and BALI, positive masculinity, design thinking, etc. for mass implementation).

Direct separate efforts towards mayors and top officials in ministries, as they currently have a significant influence on local self-governance bodies.

Conduct specific courses on inclusive development and gender equality for the leaders of LSG bodies (usually, training programs are predominantly attended by social affairs specialists, who are mostly women). Adhere to the principle of "No less than 30% representation of each gender" during all events and activities.

Outdated models of women's economic engagement

Women aspire to expand their economic rights through new forms of employment and economic activities, rightly noting that assistance in the form of sewing machines and knitting machines is not only outdated but also inherently restricts opportunities for development. There is a growing demand for the development of skills in areas such as e-commerce, IT specialties, high-tech agriculture, innovative processing, marketing, and others. Where can one acquire these knowledge and skills?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Collaboration between governing bodies, NPOs, and businesses to establish a management mechanism for disseminating this knowledge, accessible to rural women.

Creation and development of links between progressive central gender-oriented organizations that utilize non-traditional support technologies (soft skills development, psychological courses,

mentorship of "from top to bottom" associations, etc.) and local activist groups, both formal and informal.

Support for joint projects between local gender-oriented NPOs and industry-specific business associations.

Expansion of Women's Political Rights



ТОК-ШОУ "КЫЙЫН"

**ААЛАМДАШУУ
ДООРУНДА АТА ЭНЕ
МЕНЕН МЕКТЕПТИН ОР**

Undervaluation of women's contributions, coupled with the absence of public recognition and encouragement

The traditional gender role assigned to women in rural areas inherently restricts their participation in political and economic spheres. A substantial portion of these communities perceives women's engagement as detrimental, without recognizing the benefits. Mere declarations of equality and legislative measures fail to convince. The "newcomers" are met with distrust. There exists a dearth of appreciation and recognition for women's contributions to local development, which can manifest in the form of strengthening the economic standing of individual families (rendering women effectively "invisible") Systems and procedures designed to acknowledge and reward women's efforts are either non-existent or inadequately equitable (with the exception of recognizing the reproductive accomplishments of mothers, bestowed with the title of "mother-heroine"). Women themselves often struggle to recognize and appreciate their own merits, as well as the accomplishments of other women. For instance, modesty is widely regarded as a major virtue, leading to the censoring of any positive narrative regarding one's own achievements. Women praise their husbands, sons, and brothers, yet they seldom extend the same level of praise to their own daughters, daughters-in-law, and sisters.

CASE

"I refrain from praising my wife, as my mother and sister discourage me from doing so." "I desire to express admiration for my wife's delectable dinner, but I have been taught that it is merely her responsibility and nothing exceptional. Moreover, I fear that if I praise her, she might forget that it's her duty to take care of me. Although I am eager to articulate my sentiments, I find myself lacking the appropriate verbiage to do so".

In traditional communities, the practice of openly encouraging and praising a woman is not customary (due to various concerns, including the belief that it is immodest, the fear that she may develop arrogance, the notion that it deviates from established customs, the expectation that relatives may not comprehend, and the potential for ridicule and labeling as a "henpecked man"). Many men harbor a desire to openly express their favorable sentiments towards women. However, they frequently encounter obstacles in the form of disapproval from women themselves (including older women, mothers, or sisters) ("the daughter-in-law should know her place," "I want to praise my wife, but I don't have the words for it").

Female deputies within a particular municipality have observed that the most effective form of motivation lies in the realm of public acknowledgment and **external** recognition of their merit and achievements. As an illustrative instance, rather than receiving a mere "routine" diploma conferred by the local *aiy* *okmotu*, these women would prefer a publication in the newspaper. Such recognition would notably elevate their standing and influence within the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote and support women peacemakers, women who preserve cultural heritage, women professionals across diverse sectors, etc.²⁸ Facilitate the recognition of women's contributions as individuals, irrespective of their political activism or positions. This includes acknowledging the efforts of ordinary women who diligently work and contribute to development, even if their contributions go unnoticed.

Develop and implement specific measures of recognition and encouragement for men who, in one way or another, support or contribute to gender equality. For example, showcasing masculine figures whose masculinity remains unquestioned, to convey that performing tasks like dishwashing is not a matter of shame ("Schwarzenegger in a kitchen apron").

Conduct research and quantify the contributions of women engaged in unpaid domestic work, highlighting their impact not only on family development but also on community progress. Seek quantitative expressions of this contribution. Potentially utilize evaluation methods employed by UN Women for assessing the economics of care. Conduct an informational campaign employing qualitative and quantitative data to underscore the contributions of women to the development of families, communities, and the state, particularly in terms of financial data.

²⁸ It refers to the preservation of intangible historical heritage. It is of utmost importance to approach such events with great care, ensuring that they are centered around promoting the preservation of the most commendable traditions while actively discouraging the perpetuation of outdated and harmful practices.

Implement programs that support the public speaking engagements of women MPs and women homemakers who openly share their achievements and successes. Draw inspiration from the television show "Kyiyin."²⁹

At the local level, implement a program for women's leadership through the framework of the civil service institute.

Weak skills of women in coalition building

Even when occupying leadership positions and becoming deputies of local keneshes, women find themselves excluded from the actual decision-making process. Real politics is shaped at the level of informal interactions within microgroups, predominantly consisting of male politicians. In rural areas, there are few public spaces where women can engage in political participation through microgroups. Moreover, the culture of microgroups and coalition-building is less traditional for rural women compared to men.

Many local keneshes lack a tradition of knowledge transfer and mentorship. Experienced male deputies refuse to assist newly elected female deputies. More experienced female deputies are either absent or unwilling to support young, inexperienced female deputies (reproducing the stigma of "I suffered, so you should suffer too"; "I learned on my own, I faced discrimination, so you should learn on your own and face discrimination too.")

CASE

Female deputies in one of the municipalities have confessed that they lack work experience and knowledge of laws pertaining to local self-government (LSG), so they are unable to implement their initiatives and address crucial community issues during kenesh sessions. Frequently, female deputies, lacking knowledge of the laws, vote in favor of decisions "as everyone else does," while male counterparts assume the role of initiators for all decisions. Such behavior elicits condescending attitudes and mockery from male deputies. In the same municipality, men have remarked that female deputies are passive and useless, as they do not raise any issues and do not engage with the population. This is because the husbands of these female deputies are against them meeting with the community, stating, "Husbands dislike it when their wives walk the streets and meet with residents."

In another municipality, it was noted that all the initiatives put forward by female deputies are later implemented by those same women, while male deputies don't get involved. In the kenesh, issues are informally divided into "male" and "female" categories.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop and implement projects aimed at building horizontal networks through which women can provide mutual support to each other.

Conduct an analysis to identify ayil keneshes where the participation of female deputies is least pronounced. Investigate the reasons behind this and provide targeted support to these female deputies.

Continue to shape a positive and successful image of female deputies in the local kenesh through showcasing real success cases from different regions of the country.

Implement mentorship initiatives where more experienced deputies of both genders mentor less experienced female deputies.

Conduct training programs for female deputies on establishing partnerships with male colleagues and vice versa.

Implement support projects for legislative initiatives put forward and carried out by mixed groups of deputies.

Fear and a sense of injustice in men

Men, both formal and informal local leaders, perceive a threat in the expansion of women's rights (among them, undoubtedly, there exist numerous myths and prejudices). Men perceive gender quotas in local kenesh elections, which create preferences for women, as unfair. However, the fairness of these quotas extends beyond the current

²⁹ This campaign is carried out by the multimedia information agency "Govori.TV."

moment and should manifest itself when, as a result of positive changes regarding gender stereotypes in rural communities, women are proportionally represented in local governing bodies irrespective of quotas. Until that point, the quota is necessary to safeguard the fair principle of equal representation of genders. However, men's opinions tend to focus on the current moment, which may appear unfair to specific male or female deputies.

SEPARATE OPINION (MEN). The quota is unfair. We are willing to accept the quota if new female deputies receive support and have the necessary knowledge. If a female deputy enters the kenesh with just 100 votes and lacks the skills and knowledge to work effectively, while an experienced male deputy who received 2,000 votes does not get elected, it can be seen as not only gender discrimination but also harmful to the community. The quota should be maintained, but there should be a special condition that a woman must get at least 5% of the total number of voters.

COMMENTARY BY THE AUTHORS: This opinion represents a understandable reaction from some unsuccessful candidates for deputies, but it would be incorrect to simply ignore it. Efforts should be made to assist women who have received a small number of votes in learning to collaborate with male activists, including their competitors. In a broader context, the implementation of a quota system necessitates political safeguarding, as it would typically demand multiple electoral cycles for women to accrue sufficient votes without the assistance of a quota.

CASE

Many focus group participants highlighted the importance for women aspiring to run for a local kenesh to engage in proactive preparation. This involves studying legislation and the operational procedures of LSG bodies, establishing supportive networks, and devising and executing projects. By undertaking these measures, "women can avoid being subjected to ridicule and becoming mere puppets in the hands of the predominant male majority within the kenesh".

In one of the keneshes, prior to the implementation of a quota system, there were frequent conflicts among deputies, including physical abuse. However, following the inclusion of female deputies in the kenesh, a noticeable shift in behavior among male counterparts ensued, characterized by a greater sense of composure and politeness in their interactions with one another. Women here actively participated in all the standing committees, and better organized the kenesh's work. They put forth numerous effective proposals for addressing social issues and facilitated the exchange of experiences with a municipality in the different region of the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Collect, summarize, and disseminate instances that showcase the positive impact of female deputies on the political culture and effectiveness of the local kenesh.

Produce and circulate compelling economic indicators and instances that substantiate the fact that the expansion of women's political rights and their heightened involvement in local keneshes contribute to the attainment of social justice and the establishment of a more transparent resource allocation framework.

Establish an effective knowledge management system for deputies that is accessible to both men and women (courses, mentorship programs, best practices, sample solutions, NLAs, etc.).

The status of a daughter-in-law as a factor that limits political rights

Relationships with the husband's relatives (kaiyn-jurt) are of critical importance. In their presence, both young and older women tend to remain silent and avoid engaging in activism.

CASE

Women often face challenges in politics because each woman in our villages is considered someone's kelinka (daughter-in-law), and when there are relatives of the husband around, women feel constrained and limited in their actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop and execute projects that foster collaboration and collective efforts between older and younger generations of women. Such initiatives aim to bring about advancements for both generations and the family as a whole (in the extended concept of family).

Necessary Transformations Within "Agents of Change" (NPOs)



Throughout the research process, special emphasis was placed on male personnel working within NPOs and development projects, specifically those engaged in activities related to rural communities. During the formation of groups, it was once again evident that women predominantly occupy positions within NPOs. While among the project staff, no male professionals specializing in gender equality issues were found. Many men acknowledged that they consciously refrain from engaging in such activities, as they do not fully align with the declared principles of gender equality, despite publicly expressing agreement with them. This section is primarily aimed at representatives of NPOs and development projects, urging them to delve deeper into the situation within the "agents of change" themselves.

Partial formal agreement with universal values and gender equality

PROBLEM. Many representatives of NPOs (both men and women) admit that in their personal lives, they do not fully adhere to the values and norms they promote within their professional activities. When stepping outside the professional sphere, they enter the ethno-gender context and begin to act under the influence of other factors: adhering to family hierarchies, customs, using appropriate language, and so on.

CASE

Even within the organizations and development projects themselves, gender issues are exclusively handled by women: "gender is considered women's work." Many of us, over the years of work, either haven't been invited or have actively avoided events on this topic" (opinion of men).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue studying the factors of the ethno-gender context for transforming the work of NPOs and development projects.

Conduct in-depth research on the attitudes towards gender equality among male employees of NPOs and development projects to understand the reasons why male professionals in the development field do not share the values of gender equality and to what extent the situation can be subject to change.

Weak skills in working with certain types of communities

PROBLEM. Many NPOs struggle to work with "closed" religious and some monoethnic communities where there is a significant need for education and the development of "soft" skills. Existing methods and approaches used by NPOs often fail to be effective in such contexts. NPOs often simply avoid working with "challenging communities" and exclude them from their region of influence. It is possible that such an approach may be justified, but it can lead to the emergence of conflict points, increased misunderstanding, and the spread of negative attitudes towards equality and rights within the communities that remain untouched.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Study, summarize, and expand the experience of progressive women's Islamic groups that focus on legal education for women within the framework of Islam and secular legislation. Enhance the capacity of NPO staff in working with religious women.

Expand the pool of trainers and consultants by involving more influential men, religious individuals, and entrepreneurs.

Develop a specific set of activities for men, taking into account their needs and values structure. Find arguments for changing stereotypes. It is crucial that the specialists conducting these activities have a good understanding of the context: faith, stereotypes, values structure, local cultural nuances, and language.

Identify personnel and methods for working with communities that are reluctant to discuss gender equality issues. One approach is to involve mediators, such as religious leaders, in creating platforms for dialogue where parties can share their opinions and demonstrate that religious norms are compatible with constitutional norms. Draw on success stories of devout women: politicians, businesswomen, managers, and representatives of the creative professions (to prove that a devout woman can be successful in a secular sense and that faith does not hinder self-realization). This work is particularly important in border areas with Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, as well as in the Issyk-Kul and Naryn regions.

Gender imbalance in NPOs

PROBLEM. There is a lack of personnel for working with men and young men. The existing personnel composition of civil organizations shows that the majority of leaders and staff members are women. However, an increasing number of rural local communities are not willing to listen to women, especially those who come from outside their community.

CASE

"Men are reluctant to engage in public work as they see themselves primarily as providers for their families. They believe that engaging in public work does not yield significant financial benefits, which is why men are less inclined to work in NPOs. The traditional image of a man as an entrepreneur or a government official is predominant. And who is a "NPO activist"? For men, it is still important to hold political positions because they are interested not only in the economic aspect but also in power, the opportunity to participate in decision-making and exert real influence on the situation. Men and young men don't join NPOs because they don't feel the importance of NPO work. Men also believe that they already fulfill a significant amount of responsibilities, such as paying utility bills, educating and clothing their children, and providing for the family's sustenance, among other things. Whereas public work is seen as a hobby that women can engage in" (opinion of male participants in the focus group).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local NPOs should identify potential projects of interest to men and involve local male leaders in their development and implementation, including through religious leaders.

NPOs should intensify their work with young men and boys, providing them with opportunities to showcase their abilities, become self-fulfilled, and gain respect from peers and family members through participation in socially beneficial activities. A nationwide movement or organization could be created to engage boys and girls in community development from an early age³⁰.

It is important to describe the contribution of NPOs to development, showcasing their diversity and significance, in order to attract more men to see opportunities for themselves in the non-profit sector.

The "fight" and the language as a factor of tension

PROBLEM. The tactics of fighting for rights and combating discrimination may no longer be effective. Rural communities come together and reject any interventions that they believe threaten their important values. Language plays a destructive role, as terms like "gender," "NPO activist", and "human rights" have already acquired negative perceptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NPOs should abandon the tactic of opposition when working with local communities and instead foster relationships based on partnership, seeking and forming mutual and tangible benefits. Partnership approaches should be applied at all levels of engagement, starting with language. For instance, it is not effective to "fight against stereotypes." Instead, it is important to understand the fears that give rise to these stereotypes and attempt to reduce the level of anxiety by working from within the stereotype. Additionally, creating new values can also contribute to addressing and challenging stereotypes.

Distrust of traditional "ambassadors" of women's empowerment

PROBLEM. Distrust of official slogans and declarations requires a transformation toward a peer-to-peer approach. The success of a super-popular personality has become too detached from the reality of the vast majority of rural populations and no longer garners the same level of trust as it did 10 years ago. For an increasing number of religious women and men, secular "stars" such as extravagant showbiz representatives or individualistic-oriented bloggers are not seen as authorities. There is also a lack of diverse role models promoting principles of equality. The most

³⁰ Such practices are prevalent in many countries. Examples include the Peace Corps and the Boy Scouts movement in the United States, the Salvation Army in European countries, the Komsomol and Pioneer organizations in the Soviet Union, all of which equally involve and educate both boys and girls, instilling in them a habit of engaging in public work. These organizations have successfully supplied individuals of both genders to the non-profit sector.

prevalent are two extremes: patriarchal norms (where women are expected to bear children and stay at home) or highly publicized fame (entertainment industry).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Transform the composition of gender equality and human rights advocates towards localization. Simply put, ambassadors and influencers should be relatable, tangible, and familiar figures who can be interacted with, someone "known personally" or known by the neighbor. For individual communities, the ambassador must be credible from a religious perspective, which is why it is necessary to look for ways to work with religious leaders.

Work through local male politicians and influential men who serve as informal leaders within communities, including religious leaders. Provide them with specific arguments that demonstrate the overall benefits for the community, including the potential economic and political empowerment of women.

Expand the range of role models to promote gender equality. For example, showcase a man who proudly identifies himself as a "happy husband under the thumb," who considers a happy wife and a happy family to be his main achievement.

Introduce heroes from various spheres of influence beyond sports, religion, or politics. It is important to present new heroes who, for example, successfully advocate for the protection of girls, develop political communities, promote women's entrepreneurship, and more.

The imbalance and division of attention to the expansion of political rights and economic opportunities

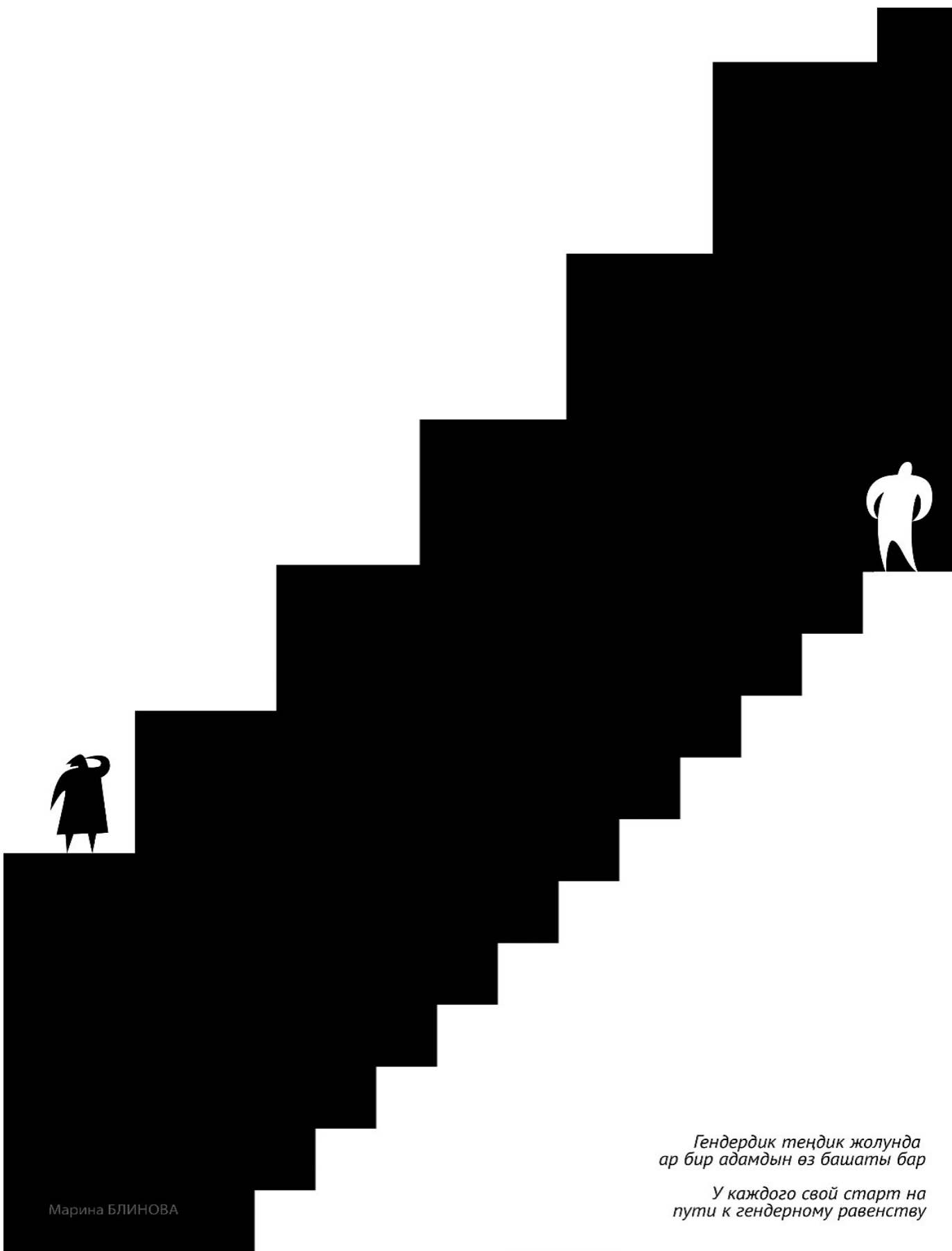
PROBLEM. The economic vulnerability and political passivity of women are closely linked. Many women lack the skills and training for self-fulfillment and face restrictions in accessing technology, knowledge, and development opportunities, which impacts their political engagement. Often, these limitations reside within the women themselves, rooted in their fears, insecurities, and imposed stereotypes. Furthermore, a significant number of women exhibit reduced motivation for change, displaying resignation and acceptance of their vulnerable and disadvantaged positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Integrate the economic and political contexts in all support initiatives. Engage business associations in efforts to enhance the potential of women deputies.

Propose fast, cost-effective, efficient, scalable, and diversified development programs for different gender and age groups, focusing on the development of "soft" skills. (There is a particular need for digital, legal, and financial literacy, but attention should also be given to other personal skills such as dialogue facilitation, advocacy, information seeking, and engaging in dialogues at various levels.) Specific areas of focus should include the development of critical thinking and emotional intelligence.

Short-Term Action Plan in Support of the 30% Gender Quota



Марина БЛИНОВА

*Гендердик теңдик жолунда
ар бир адамдын өз башаты бар*

*У каждого свой старт на
пути к гендерному равенству*

In 2021, during the information campaign to support women candidates for local kenesh deputies, the Development Policy Institute interacted with approximately 1000 women who participated in elections or expressed their intentions to do so. Overall, the campaign was successful for women, thanks to the introduced 30% quota by lawmakers and their own activism. In absolute numbers, over 3300 women became deputies of local keneshes, with over 2000 of them being elected for the first time. However, even during the formation of the new kenesh compositions, it became clear that "winning elections does not guarantee equal and successful participation for women in the work of the local kenesh. To assert and uphold their position, women will require more than just perseverance and determination. They will also need a comprehensive understanding of the foundational principles and practices of local self-government, as well as a profound comprehension of the intricacies involved in the operations of the local kenesh. Furthermore, acquiring specific knowledge will empower women to effectively showcase their abilities as deputies. Additionally, personal skills such as time management, communication and public speaking skills, partnership-building skills, and conflict resolution abilities also play an important role in the development and advancement of women deputies. Typically, it takes more than a year of work for a newly elected deputy to acquire all of this knowledge and skills, but newly elected women deputies are immediately faced with the task of proving to their colleagues that they rightfully hold their mandates."³¹

The past two years have confirmed the validity of this assumption, as supported by empirical observations and the results of conducted focus groups. Many women deputies continue to experience multifaceted limitations that hinder their ability to effectively and successfully fulfill their role as public representatives.

These limitations are observed against the backdrop of growing dissatisfaction and a sense of injustice from male deputies, who, justifiably or unjustifiably, increasingly assert the following:

- the quota is unfair towards men, violating their rights and discriminating against them in the electoral process.
- women who became deputies through the quota system have not lived up to expectations, as they inadequately fulfill their role due to a lack of sufficient knowledge and skills required for the responsibilities of a deputy.

As aforementioned, the equity of the quota system extends beyond the present moment and should come into play even when, as a result of favorable transformations in gender stereotypes within rural communities, women achieve proportional representation in local governance independent of the quota. Consequently, the rationale supporting the quota must furnish evidence demonstrating that its implementation has effectively expanded women's political rights, thereby yielding a comprehensive beneficial influence on women's political empowerment and the overall progress of the country.

Proposed plan of short-term measures to support the quota:

- Under the guidance of the Central Commission for Elections and Referendums of the Kyrgyz Republic, establish a working group to support the 30% gender quota.
- conduct an analysis of the number of votes in favor of candidates disaggregated by gender to identify aiyl aimaks where the electoral success of women candidates may potentially lead to dissatisfaction among men. Compare this list with the geographic coverage of existing projects and initiatives to identify municipalities where such support is either not provided or not fully provided.
- conduct a sample survey of the identified municipalities where support for women deputies is not provided or not fully provided, describing accompanying factors (such as remoteness, isolation, level of development, etc.). Based on the survey results, develop a plan of support measures for 2023-2024.
- collaborate with NPOs and development projects to organize campaigns supporting women deputies in municipalities where support for them is lacking or insufficient. Pay special attention to mentorship programs where male deputies act as mentors.
- conduct a comparative analysis of the impact of the quota on the socioeconomic development of aiyl aimaks, including changes in the quality and structure of local budgets. In particular, find answers to the following questions:
 - Has the conflict potential within the local kenesh decreased compared to the previous convocation of local kenesh deputies? If so, what factors influenced it?
 - Has the quality of the budgetary process regarding the local budget changed compared to previous years (or year) in terms of: a) the level of citizen engagement in the draft budget discussions? b) thematic areas, quantity and quality of gender-oriented objectives and goals of local budgets?

³¹ DPI Report

- collect case studies and success stories of women deputies, and assess their contributions to local development, including a financial evaluation.
- based on study findings, conduct an information campaign highlighting the successes and contributions of women deputies (particularly in addressing issues related to youth, children, women, vulnerable groups, and housewives, as well as attracting projects, donors, investors, etc.)
- incorporate elements of public awareness about the role of local keneshes in general into this information campaign.

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