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United Nations Development Programme

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE:
LESSONS LEARNED IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

COUNTRY REPORT FOR KYRGYZSTAN

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AWLI	Alliance of Women's Legislative Initiatives	NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
CEC	Central Electoral Commission	NLFP	EU-UNDP New Legal Framework Project
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women	ODIHR	OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
CSO	Civil Society Organization	OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
DFID	UK Department for International Development	PEC	Precinct Election Commission
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems	PR	Proportional Representation
ILO	International Labor Organization	Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
INGO	International Nongovernmental Organization	TER	Territorial Election Commission
IRI	International Republican Institute	TRS	Two Round System
KESP	UNDP Kyrgyz Election Support Project	UN	United Nations
MP	Member of Parliament	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
NAM	Needs Assessment Mission	UNDP-GC	UNDP Country Programme Gender Coordinator
NED	National Endowment for Democracy (USA)	USAID	US Agency for International Development
NDI	National Democratic Institute		

1. INTRODUCTION

Kyrgyzstan is a land-locked Central Asian state that declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Kyrgyzstan's transition to a democratic society and system of government has been marked by remarkable successes that have been held up as exemplary in the region; at the same time, the last two decades have seen popular revolts, ethnic divisions spiking into violence, coups and frequently called elections, all accompanied by widespread poverty, persistent corruption and the lingering legacies of Soviet rule.

Political participation in Kyrgyzstan has changed dramatically in the last two decades since independence. As democratic institutions and public involvement in politics have developed, participation in elections and election-related institutions have also grown in close correlation with changes in electoral gender parity laws. Elections are guided by the constitution and by several election-related laws that have been passed. The constitution has been changed 10 times since the adoption of the first post-Soviet

constitution in 1993. Additionally, laws on elections, which were previously combined into the electoral code, were divided into separate laws in 2011: the constitutional Law on Elections of the President and Deputies of Parliament and the Law on Elections of Deputies of Local Councils. The following section outlines some of these changes within the historical and political contexts of women's political participation in Kyrgyzstan, with particular focus on the period after 2005.

This research¹ aims to identify lessons learned regarding gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment initiatives in international electoral assistance programming in Kyrgyzstan. This includes identifying the types of support provided to women voters and candidates and support to electoral management bodies (EMBs) during the electoral cycle. This report is one of five Country Reports that explore the international community's role in programming for gender equality in electoral administration and support provided to EMBs and that extract lessons on mainstreaming gender in international electoral assistance.

¹ This case study was drafted by Manuela Popovici, Medet Tiulegenov and Julie Ballington. It is based on a desk study and a mission undertaken from 12-17 December 2011. Special thanks to Nurgul Asylbekova and the UNDP Kyrgyz Electoral Support Project staff for assistance provided during the mission and in the preparation of this case study.



2. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

2.1. Background

Kyrgyzstan gained full independence on 25 December 1991, one day before the Soviet Union ceased to exist. A few months prior, Askar Akayev had been elected president of the new republic with no opposition. Kyrgyzstan is a democratic unicameral federal republic, as defined by the 1993 constitution. Since the year of its independence, Kyrgyzstan has gone through many referenda (e.g. two in 1994, one in 1996 and another in 1998), parliamentary elections (e.g., 1995, 1996, two rounds in 2000, 2005, 2007 and 2010) and local and presidential elections. In addition, in this period of transition, the constitution and the electoral laws also saw several rounds of reform, sometimes quite drastic, which contributed to a fragile sense of stability.

In 2002, the violent deaths of five protesters at the hands of police in the southern district of Aksy sparked national protests. President Akayev initiated a constitutional reform process that culminated in a referendum in February 2003 that strengthened the

position of the president while weakening the parliament and Constitutional Court. The 2003 referendum and the resulting parliamentary elections in 2005 for the new unicameral legislature were marred by allegations of corruption; the disputes among opposing parties about who could form the legitimate government contributed to public unrest. Akayev was forced to resign in 2005, following a popular uprising known as the 'Tulip Revolution' after these elections. A new government was formed by a coalition of opposition leaders, under new president Kurmanbek Bakiyev (elected in July 2005), but the general situation remained unstable and was aggravated by looting in the capital and by the murders of four members of Parliament in 2005 and 2006.

Public protests against President Bakiyev took place during 2006 and the general dissatisfaction with widespread corruption and poverty proved persistent, despite Bakiyev's re-election in 2009. In April 2010, protests turned violent and spread throughout the country and Bakiyev was

forced to resign and leave the country shortly after declaring a state of emergency. Former foreign minister and one of the opposition leaders, Roza Otunbayeva, led a transition government and was quickly confronted with another crisis when clashes between the two main ethnic groups, the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, occurred in Osh, the second largest city in the country, in June 2010. The clashes resulted in widespread violence and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people internally and across the borders. The violence calmed down in several days and, while the state of emergency and the humanitarian situation continued in the south, the transitional government proceeded with plans to hold a referendum in October 2010 to amend the constitution and pave the way for parliamentary elections. Otunbayeva did not run for office in the 2011 presidential elections.

Almazbek Atambayev from the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan was elected and has been president since December 2011.

Electoral System Reform

Kyrgyzstan had adopted the majority/winner-takes-all electoral system when the country gained independence in 1991. In 2005, the parliament shifted from a bicameral to a unicameral parliament with 120 seats. The change meant that the 2005 elections were highly competitive, as the incumbent parliamentarians contested to win seats in the new unicameral chamber. The election was held under a great administrative pressure and saw the widespread bribery of voters. This environment, together with the challenges of contesting in a majority electoral system, resulted in no women being elected in 2005.

OVERVIEW OF KYRGYZ PARLIAMENTARY ELECTORAL SYSTEMS (WEISE, 2010)

1990-1995 Unicameral parliament; Two-Round System

A unicameral parliament inherited from the Soviet Union consisting of 350 deputies. Deputies were last elected in 1990 using a Two-Round System (TRS) for 350 single-member districts. Under the TRS, if a candidate failed to win more than 50 percent of the popular vote in a given district, a run-off took place between the top two vote-earning candidates. Candidates elected to the 1990 legislature did not represent political parties, as the formation and registration of parties only began in 1991.

1995-2005 Bicameral parliament; TRS and PR

Following a 1994 referendum, the unicameral assembly was replaced by a 'mixed' system that resulted in a bicameral legislature of 105 deputies. Seventy deputies were elected to the first chamber and 35 deputies to the second chamber. In 2000, the proportion of seats in both chambers changed to 60 and 45, respectively. Two thirds of the first chamber and the entire second chamber were elected in 45 new, larger, single-member districts using the TRS. The remaining 15 members of the first chamber were elected through proportional representation (PR) using closed lists and a single national constituency. Parties had to earn a minimum of 5 percent of the total vote nationwide to be represented in the legislature. While PR offered a better chance to small parties, the few PR seats offered little hope for real representation.



2005-2007 Unicameral parliament; TRS

Through another referendum in 2003, the parliament was reduced again to 75 members in a unicameral body. Deputies were elected in single-member districts using the TRS. New controversial requirements introduced through the referendum, such as having to reside continuously in the country, disqualified several prominent candidates.

2007-2010 Unicameral parliament; PR

An October 2007 referendum again changed the system entirely and for the first time introduced quotas for gender representation, ethnic minorities and youth. The 90 deputies were elected through a closed-list PR system. Political parties had to clear a threshold of 5 percent of registered voters (i.e., based on all eligible voters as opposed to votes cast) nationwide to enter the parliament. Given the issues with voter lists in Kyrgyzstan, with many deceased and emigrated voters populating the list, and many internal migrants unable to vote due to complicated and burdensome procedures for changing registration and securing an absentee ballot, the actual threshold was in effect much higher. Parties also had to clear a second threshold of 0.5 percent of all registered voters in each of the country's seven regions, plus the cities Bishkek and Osh. By introducing the strictly PR system with two thresholds, combined with some questionable rulings on whether parties reached those thresholds, parties in opposition to the pro-presidential political forces were effectively shut out of the parliament at the last election.

2010 Parliamentary system; PR

Following the 2010 referendum, the new legislature is composed of 120 deputies based on PR. The new constitution represents a shift away from a presidential system and towards a parliamentary one. The president has weaker powers than in previous systems, though is not just a figurehead as in other parliamentary systems. Political parties need to clear a 5 percent threshold of total votes to enter the parliament. No party can gain over 65 seats regardless of its level of support, a measure aimed at avoiding concentration of power. In addition, political parties may not be founded on ethnic or religious grounds and members of the police, armed forces and judiciary cannot join parties.

Major changes to the electoral law were again introduced following the referendum of 2007, ensuring representation in parliament based on gender, ethnicity and age. The law introduced a proportional electoral system for elections to the unicameral parliament. The proportional electoral system introduced closed party lists, the 30-percent gender quota and the requirement that a minimum of 15 percent of party lists be made of people from various ethnic groups and people younger than 35.

The law that regulates presidential and parliamentary elections, entitled Election of President of Kyrgyz Republic and Members of Jogorku Kenesh [Parliament] of Kyrgyz Republic, was adopted in June 2011. In relation to gender equality, Article 3.2 states, "[C]itizens of Kyrgyz Republic have the right to elect and be elected regardless of their origin, gender, race." Reinforcing this, Article 60.3 states, "[I]n defining the list of candidates, a political party should include representation of no more than 70 percent

of people of the same gender and at the same time the difference in sequence in lists of men and women should not exceed three positions.” The part of the law stipulating procedures for electing the president does not refer to issues of gender equality or of any other social groups.

Local council elections are regulated by the Law on Elections of Deputies of Local Keneshes, which was adopted in June 2011. Since the latest revision, elections for city councils are done according to a proportional representation system and elections to the village council are done according to majoritarian system (Article 48). The following institutions require candidates to receive nominations:

- Political parties for local councils of Bishkek and Osh

- Political parties or groups of voters for city councils
- Political parties, groups of local citizens or self-nominated citizens for local councils rural districts (Article 49.2).

In the case of a recall of a candidate, the new candidate must be of the same gender as the recalled candidate (Article 54.3).

As will be shown below, the participation of women as candidates varies across types of elections – presidential, parliamentary, and local – but overall presidential and local elections have not had a substantial presence of female candidates and winners. In 2012, the first city council elections were held with gender quotas, with the requirement that every third candidate should be of the other gender (Art, 49, Law on Elections of Deputies of Local Keneshes). Parliamentary elections

BASIS FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF TEMPORARY SPECIAL MEASURE (NAZARKULOVA & AKMATOVA, 2008)

The 2003 law on the Foundations of the State for Guaranteeing Gender Equality incorporated concrete mechanisms for the promotion of gender equality. Article 9 of the law requires that the state provide “equal representation for people of a different sex in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the government through legal, organizational and other mechanisms” and allow for the adoption “of temporary special measures aimed at achieving real equality in gender relations” (Item 6).

- This is also in line with the international commitments made by Kyrgyzstan, e.g., CEDAW, which in item 4/1 says, “The adoption by participant states of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating the establishment of actual equality between men and women is not acknowledged, as it is considered by the present Convention to be discriminatory; [...] these measures should be abolished, when the goals of equal opportunities and equal rights have been achieved.”
- The Recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women following Kyrgyzstan’s report on their implementation of CEDAW (in 1999 and in 2002; item 37) states, “The Committee recommends that the Government of Kyrgyzstan consider the opportunity of adopting a wide set of measures, including quotas, to increase women’s representation in politics and other unconventional areas.”

have seen an increase in women's candidacies and election after the introduction of gender quotas into the electoral laws.

Constitutional Reform

The 2010 constitution was drafted by the Constitutional Assembly, which the transitional government that came to power after the 2010 popular revolt convened in 2010. The Constitutional Assembly consisted of 75 people, of whom 17 (22.7 percent) were women. Public consultations about the changes to the constitution were limited, as the government was under pressure to draft the constitution and put it to referendum in order to end the interim government period.

The constitution, adopted through referendum in June 2010,² addresses universal representation in the preamble, declaring that the "state creates conditions for representation of various social groups defined by the law in state agencies and local self-governments, including at the level of decision-making" (Article 2, Clause 5). It also includes an extensive section entitled 'Rights and Freedoms of a Person and Citizen'. It states:

All people are equal in the Kyrgyz Republic before the law and court. Nobody can be exposed to any discrimination, infringement of freedom and rights on the grounds of origin, sex, race, nationality, language, denomination, political

*or religious beliefs or any other circumstances of a personal or public nature.*³

This article also states that "special measures established by the law and aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for various social groups in accordance with international commitments are not discriminatory", thus providing a legal framework for gender quotas, as will be discussed later. This degree of gender equality and equality for other social groups was a relative novelty compared to previous versions of the constitution, in part a reflection of positive, top-down legal measures taken by Kyrgyzstan in recent years.

The Central Electoral Commission

The Law on Electoral Commissions on Conducting Elections and Referenda of Kyrgyz Republic, adopted in June 2011, regulates the activities of the electoral management body. The system of electoral committees consists of the Central Election Commission (CEC),⁴ territorial (rayon and city) commissions and precinct commissions. The CEC is composed of 12 people and is formed for a period of five years. One third of the CEC is nominated by the president, one third by the parliamentary majority party/coalition and one third by parliamentary minority party/coalition. There can be no more than 70 percent of CEC members of the same gender (Article 5.2). The CEC has vast powers to form and approve territorial commissions; organize

² Weise, G. (2010). *Understanding the Proposed Kyrgyz Parliament*. An IFES Briefing Paper. Available at http://www.ifes.org/~media/Files/Publications/Papers/2010/Understanding_the_Proposed_Kyrgyz_Parliament.pdf, accessed December 2012.

³ Nazarkulova, E., & Akmatova, C. (2008). *Gender Analysis of Political Parties of the Kyrgyz Republic*. Supported by Administration of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Office of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, UNDP "Democratic Governance" Programme under the Project Promotion of Women to Civil Service and Politics, with funding from the Swedish Agency for International Development (Sida).

⁴ Website of the Central Election Committee: <http://www.shailoo.gov.kg>

the system of voter registration accounting for voters; and engage other state agencies in the process of organizing elections (Article 7). Territorial and precinct commissions are formed for a period of two years; half of their members are representatives of political parties and half are representatives of local governments (Article 19).

Historically, the composition of CEC has varied in its representation of women. The current composition (in 2011) complies with the 30-percent quota mandated by law, with four women out of 12 members. Prior to the introduction of the quota in 2011, representation of women in the CEC was lower, with three women out of 13 and only one woman among the nine chairs of territorial commissions. However, women have been overrepresented as members of local commissions. Gender-disaggregated data for the precinct electoral commissions (PECs) in the presidential elections show 48,137 members, 25,772 (53.5 percent) of whom were women. Women were overrepresented in lower-level (precinct) commissions and there was balanced representation on territorial- and central-level commissions.

National and international actors often note the fact that women are “well represented” in PECs as evidence of gender equality, which reflects a simplistic understanding of gender equality as equal representation and which obscures the fact that work on local-level commissions is time-consuming and underpaid or not paid at all.

2.2. Women’s Political Participation

Kyrgyzstan signed the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and, in 1997, it ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), declaring its commitment to promoting gender equality at all levels. This public commitment was followed by various campaigns, programmes and projects aiming to promote women’s rights in general and women’s political participation in particular. Laws and normative acts were changed to reflect Kyrgyzstan’s commitment to gender equality and a national action plan was drafted. Despite all this, women’s representation declined steadily from 1991, culminating in an all-male parliament in 2005. Changes to the Election Code introducing gender quotas in party lists for parliamentary elections resulted in a dramatic shift for women’s representation in the 2007 parliamentary elections, with 26 percent of those elected being women.⁵

Civil Society

Though women’s organizations had been growing and mobilizing for a decade (some with initial international assistance, as will be discussed later), the years following the 2005 elections were important for women’s activism in Kyrgyzstan. The parliamentary elections held in February 2005 resulted in zero representation for women and were generally criticized as not being credible.⁶

⁵ Bagdasarova, N., Gorborkova, G., & Moldosheva, A. (2008). *Kyrgyz Republic: Country Gender Assessment in the Sphere of Politics 2008*. Supported by President’s Administration of the Kyrgyz Republic, Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, UN Gender Theme Group & United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

⁶ Moldosheva, A. (2008a). Lessons of Women’s Activism in Kyrgyzstan (2005-2008). For AWID Forum ‘Power Of Movements’ 14-17 November 2008.

Other issues directly threatening women's rights paralleled the all-male parliament:

- Parliament discussed proposals to legalize polygamy and reduce abortion rights (both defeated)
- The new draft constitution did not define the state as secular in character (this definition was later reinstated after pressure from civil society, mostly women's NGOs)
- Religious and traditional groups organized a campaign was organized around "traditional family values"

Women were very active in the wave of protests that began to spread across the country in 2005 and that eventually lead to the Tulip Revolution. One month after the revolution, a first national women's forum was held and the participating activists and women's organizations adopted a unified platform of action. One of the most important demands in the platform was for the acting president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, to agree on special measures to improve women's representation in government. Under pressure from an increasingly vocal women's lobby, the acting president appointed a Special Representative of the President in Parliament on Gender Issues to compensate for the all-male composition of the legislature. Women's organizations used various other ways to deal with the multi-faceted challenges to women's rights, such as alliances with youth and human rights groups and highly visible public campaigns against the legalization of polygamy, for

the right to abortion, for a secular state and for inclusion of special measures (quotas) in the Election Code.

Political Parties

Research done in 2007-2008⁷ found that most party representatives could not provide information about how their parties had developed and some knew neither the membership levels nor the proportion of women and men in the general structure of the party or in its governing structures. The same research found glaring imbalances in gender representation in the political parties, particularly at leadership levels, and a systemic lack of gender approaches and policy in party documents, statutes, programmes, charters and platforms. "Almost all the heads and representatives of the parties, be it a man or a woman, explained the absence of a gender policy and a gender section in their party programme by the fact that they "do not have a gender problem in their party".⁸ Gender issues were seen as non-existent, irrelevant or misleading and, consequently, no plans were made for the inclusion of gender issues in party statutes or for the creation of women's wings in the parties.

A total of 104 parties were registered in December 2007, three of which were headed by women. However, of these three, only one, the Democratic Party for the Women and Youth of Kyrgyzstan, participated in elections, yet it was not among the 11 parties

⁷ Nazarkulova & Akmatova, 2008.

⁸ Nazarkulova & Akmatova, 2008.

with elected members.⁹ The high number of parties registered in a short time period reflected the rapidly changing transition times: the high number was not necessarily matched by adequate structures, statutes and organizations.

Given the new quota law, the parties were nevertheless faced with the need to include women (30 percent), youth (15 percent) and members from various ethnic groups (15 percent) on their lists and to do so very quickly following the 2005 dissolution of the parliament. Many parties therefore looked for persons who filled more than one quota, e.g., young women or youth from particular ethnic groups, thus 'freeing' spaces on the lists for men party members. Party leaders complained about the lack of 'trained and active' women to fill the 30-percent gender quota and about the way the quota violated the principle of 'free and fair competition' of democratic elections.¹⁰ Later studies analysing the elections found some commonalities in the criteria that political parties used to select women candidates to meet the quota requirements (in descending order, from most important):¹¹

1. Professionalism and experience of government administrative work, which also meant that the candidate had social and political capital
2. Party experience and work done for the party, particularly for the older parties with existing national structures

3. Famous personalities and popularity in a certain region, which reflected the personality-based nature of Kyrgyz politics
4. Ability to mobilize people and collect the greatest number of votes from the regions or from large organizations where they had worked
5. Representatives of national minorities, who could also be women or youth, thus filling more than one quota
6. Availability of financial resources, which could also determine the placement on the party list. Most parties required financial contributions on par with those from men only from the women candidates placed towards the top of the list, as otherwise they could not have filled the quota, since women did not have as many financial resources as men.

Barriers to Women's Participation

Various barriers prevent the effective participation of women in elections and political office. Cultural perceptions about the role of women in society and politics are based on traditional gender roles that see the woman as nurturing and responsible for care-giving and the family and as less capable than men in exercising authority and having experience in the public sphere.¹² Stereotypes are displayed in and perpetuated by the media and sometimes by projects; for example,

⁹ Nazarkulova & Akmatova, 2008.

¹⁰ Nazarkulova & Akmatova, 2008.

¹¹ Nazarkulova & Akmatova, 2008.

¹² Bick, M. (2010). *Final Report: The European Union's EIDHR Programme for Central Asia*. Prepared for EU – Central Asia Civil Society Seminar on Women's Rights, Brussels, 21-24 June 2010. Available at http://Eeas.Europa.Eu/Human_Rights/Dialogues/Civil_Society/Docs/2010_Ca_Final_Report_En.Pdf, accessed December 2012.

a project in Kyrgyzstan trying to mobilize rural young people taught embroidery to girls and media computer skills to boys.¹³ Campaign materials produced during parliamentary elections placed more emphasis on men and often portrayed women in traditional gender roles. In 2010, campaign posters depicting men were used four times more often than posters depicting women. In the same election, women received less than 5 percent coverage of all paid political advertisements. Because of cultural bias, women in parliament are judged by a different standard for their performance as politicians. Gender quotas have enabled the election of a number of women to parliament; however, scrutiny of those women is frequently strongly negatively prejudiced and the quota system as a whole is criticized for helping to elect incompetent women.

Political parties are yet to create greater and more meaningful opportunities for women's participation within their structures. Currently, women and men must be alternated every third position only on the lists registered with the CEC, not on the final lists from which elected candidates are drawn. In addition, a candidate who resigns his or her seat need to be replaced by a candidate of the same gender, a procedural loophole that has led to a gradual decrease in the percentage of women vis-à-vis the percentage of women initially elected. Moreover, women living with disabilities and their needs and rights remain invisible in political discourses and institutions, despite the most

recent change to the electoral laws in 2011 that extended the quota system beyond gender, ethnicity and age to include people with disabilities.

Elections

Since 1990, there have been six presidential and six parliamentary elections as well as number of elections of local councils and heads of local governments.

Parliamentary Elections

While women have participated as candidates in all parliamentary elections, women's rates of election participation has generally remained low because of various factors (see above) and, after the introduction of a quota in 2007, because of high rates of attrition and loopholes in the quota law.

In the last Soviet parliament elected in early 1990, women only constituted slightly more than 7 percent of all deputies.¹⁴ Women's participation declined after the introduction of multi-party democracy, hovering around 5 percent, with 4.5 percent in 1995 (of 105 seats) and 2.2 percent in 2000 (1 of 45 seats in the lower chamber)¹⁵ at the start of their terms. However, the most notable case of gender disparity was the parliament elected in 2005, which did not have any women. This is in part explained by the shift from the bicameral to unicameral parliament and by the majority electoral system.

¹³ Bick, 2010.

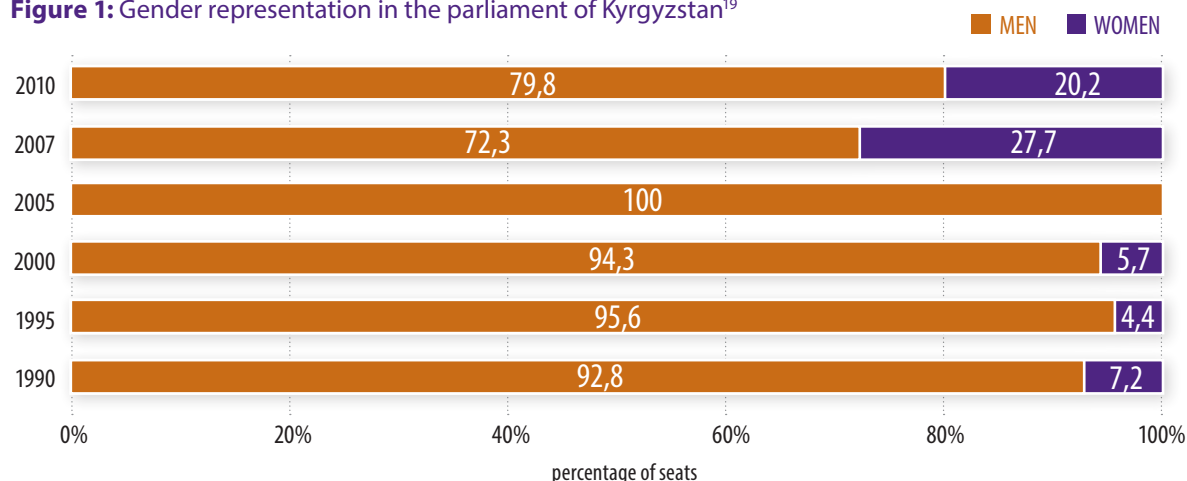
¹⁴ Compiled by the Department of International and Comparative Politics at the American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2010.

¹⁵ Kyrgyzstan Parliamentary Chamber: El Okuldor Palatasy. (2000). Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) PARLINE. Available at http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2174_00.htm, accessed January 2013.

The electoral system was revised in 2007 to a PR system including a quota provision for closed lists. This increased the proportion of women significantly. In the last two parliaments, women initially held 25.6 percent (23 of 90 seats in 2007)¹⁶ and 23.3 percent (28 of 120 seats in 2010)¹⁷ of seats, respectively. However, these numbers have decreased since, as we have already noted, the law does not stipulate for replacement of a seat with a candidate of the same gender and men usually assumed the seats held by women when women vacated those seats. Figure 1 below shows the same trend, although it includes not only elected members of the parliament at the beginning of the term, but also some replacement in the course of the term.¹⁸

The quota provision has met with other challenges as well and failed to meet the legal minimums in the last election. Figure 1 demonstrates that, while the last two parliamentary elections were held using the same PR system and 30-percent gender quota in the electoral code, the proportion of women in the 2010 elections was much lower than in the 2007 elections. In fact, the 2010 proportion did not meet the legal requirement that one gender not constitute more than 70 percent of all members. One of the explanations is that replacements occurred after some MPs moved governmental positions and vacated their seats. In addition, the majority of female candidates withdrew after the registration of party lists with the CEC, as the provision for alternation of candidates only applies at the registration stage.

Figure 1: Gender representation in the parliament of Kyrgyzstan¹⁹



Note: The data include replacement MPs over the course of the term and information about both chambers for 1995 and 2000.

¹⁶ Kyrgyzstan Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Council). (2007). Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) PARLINE. Available at http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2174_07.htm, accessed January 2013.

¹⁷ Kyrgyzstan Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Council). (2010). Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) PARLINE. Available at http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2174_E.htm, accessed January 2013.

¹⁸ The data comes from the Department of International and Comparative Politics of the American University of Central Asia.

¹⁹ Idem.

The rate of attrition of women MPs testifies to the challenges that they face in parliament. While some women seek re-election to a second term, no Kyrgyz woman has ever served more than two terms. A slight improvement has been seen in recent elections, as nine women have been re-elected in the 2007 and 2010 elections, compared to only two women re-elected in 1995, 2000 and 2005.

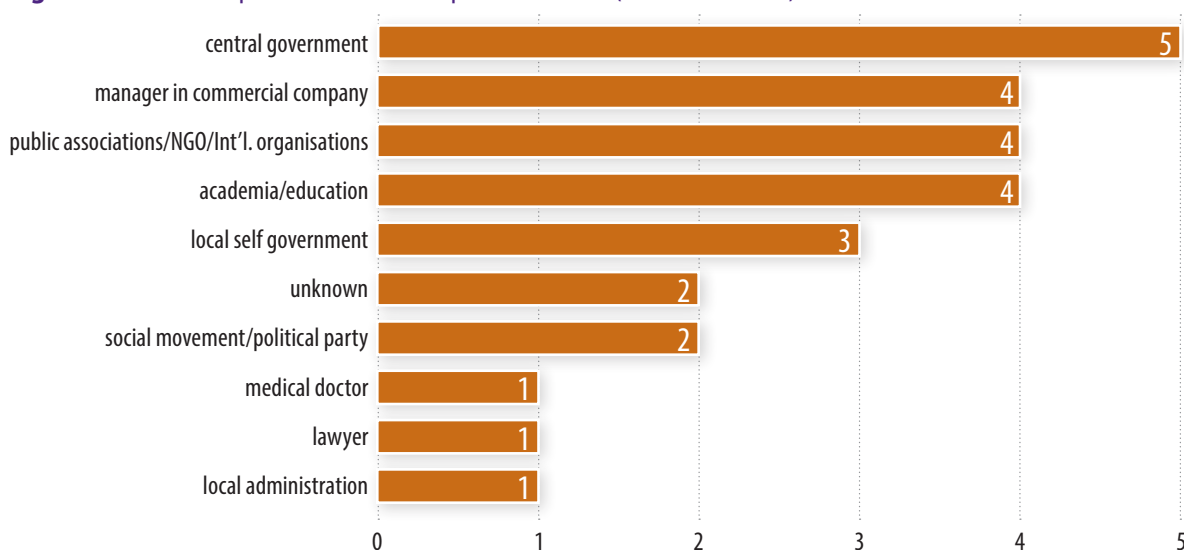
An important area to consider is where women are recruited from to run for office. Figures 2 and 3 show the occupations of women deputies before they became MPs. Patterns of recruitment start to emerge in 2007 and certain differences are already visible between the 2007 and 2010 elections. First, in previous parliaments, there were no women working in NGOs who then became MPs; this trend starts only in 2007 and continues into 2010. Women in financially lucrative positions such as

managers of private or state-owned enterprises became relatively more frequent in the 2010 elections compared to 2007, which can be explained by more competition and the need for party financing. Some women came to parliament from positions with NGOs or from professions such as medicine, law or academe. Political parties frequently leveraged the prestige and social status of candidates to ensure votes. The presence of women in parliamentary elections from local government offices (as well as from NGOs) may reflect the pragmatic desire of political parties for women with mobilization capacities in certain communities during the electoral campaigns.

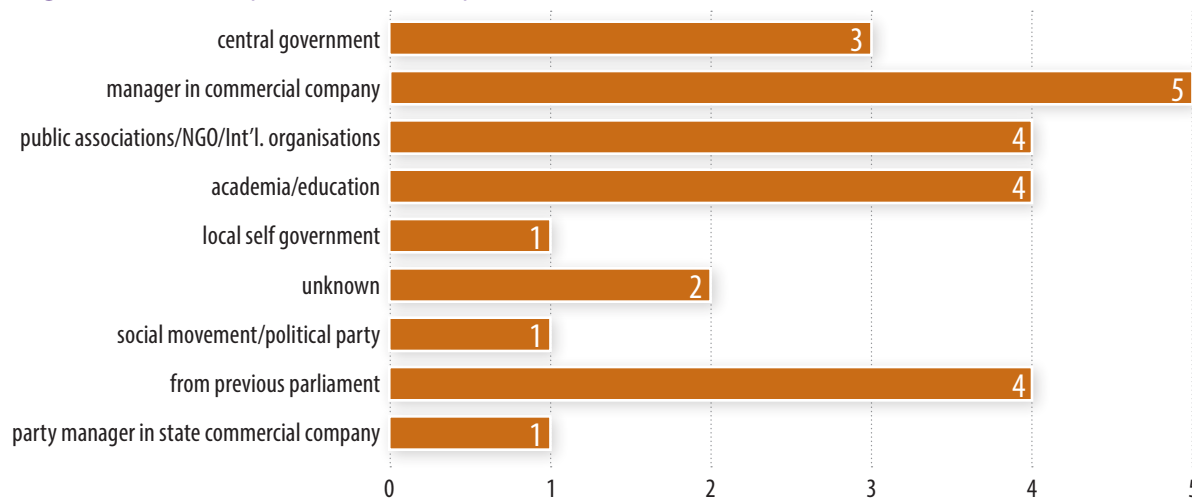
Local Elections

There is no systematic data available on past trends in regard to women's participation in local elections. In 2011, women comprised 16 percent of 8,147 local councils deputies,

Figure 2: Prior work place of women deputies in 2007 (number of MPs)



Note: The data include replacements MPs over the course of the term.

Figure 3: Prior work place of women deputies in 2010 (number of MPs)

Note: The data include MPs including some replacements over the course of the term.

and only 3 percent of 459 heads of local governments. This trend occurs despite the introduction of gender quotas (the gender of every third candidate being different than that of the previous two candidates) into city council elections in 2012. Since councils elect heads of local governments, the underrepresentation of women becomes exacerbated in hierarchical progression, as the male-dominated councils tend to elect males as heads of local governments. There is some specific gender-disaggregated information on electoral patterns from 2004 to 2010 for mayors who were also elected by local councils. For 25 cities for this period, there were 73 different mayors, yet only three of them were women.

As seen from the elections at the local level, the proportion of women is quite low among candidates and is correspondingly low among election winners. Nevertheless,

it seems that, once women emerge as candidates, there is a good chance for them to become elected. The biggest problem appears to be the low number of women presented as candidates, either on party lists or in nominated positions.

Presidential Elections

The 2005 elections were the first ever in which a woman took part in Kyrgyz presidential elections. In 2005, there were 22 initial candidates, two of whom were women. In 2010, a woman was elected as interim president. During the referendum on the new constitution, Roza Otunbaeva was uncontested and elected as president. In 2011, there were several women nominated as candidates, but none of them reached the point of final candidate registration by the CEC.

The Executive

Women have been underrepresented as ministers throughout the post-Soviet history of Kyrgyzstan. Of the 101 people who have held ministerial positions since the 1990s, only seven were women (8 percent). These seven women held the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs (1), Minister of Social Welfare (1), Minister of justice (3), Minister of Finance (1) and Minister of Education (2). Only two of these seven were ministers more than once. More recently, in November 2011, there was only one woman minister, the Minister of Social Protection, and there were no women among vice prime ministers. After a new coalition formed in January 2012, the situation did not improve significantly.²⁰ There is only one woman among the ministers, the Minister of Health, and there is now one woman among three vice-prime-ministers.

Of the 20 prime ministers during the last 20 years, only one was a woman. This was attributable to exceptional circumstances during the period, when Roza Otunbaeva was Chair of the Interim Government in 2010. Otunbaeva came to be Chair due to her appointment as leader of opposition in the March 2010 opposition rally, a month before Bakiyev's government collapsed during the popular revolt.

Gender quotas have had an impact beyond electing more women to parliament. Historically, women have not held key parliamentary positions such as those of speaker of parliament or vice speaker and only a few women have chaired committees. Since the adoption of law on gender quotas, there have been eight women chairs of the committees, six of whom won their seats in parliament after the introduction of gender quotas.

²⁰ Government of Kyrgyzstan website, available at <http://www.gov.kg>, accessed December 2012.



3. INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

International and regional support for women's political empowerment has focused primarily on two areas: building the capacity of civil society actors and building the institutional capacities of EMBs, political parties and parliament. This work is part of a broader constellation of electoral assistance by UNDP and other international organizations supporting the democratic process, including IFES, NDI, IRI and the OSCE.

The UNDP Kyrgyz Election Support Project (KESP) has supported the electoral process in close cooperation with key stakeholders such as electoral commissions, parliament, national courts, law enforcement bodies, NGOs and voters. From 2010 to 2012 KESP assisted electoral legislation reform; the development of a technical base for the newly introduced voter registration system; the creation of a voter list accessible on-line; the establishment of a high-technology media centre for CEC; raising the capacity of members of electoral commissions and employees of the CEC Secretariat, judges,

law enforcement officials, journalists and political parties with respect to the new electoral legislation and procedures; the establishment of nine regional electoral resource centres; and equipping the central and regional elections commissions with necessary technology.

The promotion of women and youth participation in electoral processes was one of the key directions of KESP; hence, the project supported different voter education campaigns by, inter alia, producing and broadcasting bilingual (Kyrgyz and Russian)

PSAs and radio reels in all regions and by organizing roundtables and discussions. In 2012, as gender quotas were introduced for the first time for local elections in cities and towns, KESP supported women's participation by organizing a round of workshops with potential women candidates in the Naryn, Talas, Jalal Abad and Batken regions and by publishing posters to promote women's participation in local elections.

UNDP also helped the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to consolidate good governance and democratic practices. UNDP provided effective strategic and other support to the 2004-2005 election processes; the purpose of this was to promote sustainable and effective institutional capacity in order to achieve regular credible elections. In response to a request from President Askar Akayev to the UN Secretary-General for support for the Central Electoral Commission, a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) was dispatched to Bishkek. The KESP project document was formulated following the NAM's recommendations. The project was based on an electoral cycle approach and did not focus on the elections scheduled for 2004-2005 as isolated events, but considered them as an integral part of a holistic process of democratic transition and governance. Thus, for Kyrgyzstan, which had some experience of managing elections, the project's emphasis was on linking process-orientated electoral support (such as technical support, capacity development and wider popular participation) to broader and longer-term good governance programmes. Support for well-managed, transparent, democratic elections, whose results would be widely accepted, was central to achieving this objective.

NDI has worked in Kyrgyzstan since 1996 and supported political parties, civil society and election monitoring organizations. NDI maintains a network of Information Centres in all seven provinces to inform citizens in remote areas about how their government functions, to provide voter education, to facilitate community discussions and to offer training to encourage citizens' engagement in solving local problems. NDI has also supported the regular broadcast of political debate programmes on several Kyrgyz television stations since 1999, promoting public awareness of various issues, including women's rights. NDI has focused on empowering women's political participation, including by offering two month-long courses in Bishkek for 25 women candidates and party campaign workers from 10 parties in preparation for local elections in 2012 as well as multi-party training for 288 potential women candidates throughout the country.

IRI has worked in the Kyrgyz Republic since 2004 and has played a major role in providing reliable polling in the country since 2005. It supported constitutional reform efforts in 2005 and 2010 by educating key stakeholders. IRI also supports government-citizen dialogue as part of its democratic governance work and capacity training for political parties and youth and women civil society advocates. In 2011-2012, IRI supported regional legislative exchanges and executive consultations as well as voter education and political party observers.

In 2012, IFES, together with UNDP KESP, worked with the CEC to support the revision of the electoral legal framework. IFES supported the updating of all materials (posters, manuals) as they related

to conducting elections by the PECs for local elections.

In 2012, the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, together with UNDP KESP, provided capacity training to technical staff of the CEC and supported domestic observation in Osh, Tokmok and Karakol. It helped the CEC establish a unified state population register to simplify procedures for residency. It also gave material support to the printing of informational material and organized multiple events, including roundtables, press conferences and telephone snap polls.

These activities were undertaken jointly with KESP. With funding from multiple donors including the EU, DFID, Japan, Germany, Austria, UNDP, USAID and the OSCE, the OSCE, IFES and UNDP's KESP jointly supported the CEC in the voter registration process in 2012, including through door-to-door verification of the lists. IFES and KESP trained CEC members, including through trainings for Territorial Election Commissions (TECs) and PECs for the 2012 local council elections. These activities comprise the framework of electoral assistance in Kyrgyzstan. Within this context, support for women's participation has focused on building the capacity of civil society actors and building the institutional capacities of EMBs, political parties and parliament. The rest of the section explores these in more detail.

3.1. Electoral Assistance

The international community has been directly or indirectly supporting elections

in Kyrgyzstan since soon after the country gained independence in 1991. Electoral assistance by the UN started in 1995. Under the UNDP project since 2005, the main areas of focus have been democratic governance and women's political participation, regional and local development, poverty reduction, gender expertise of legislation and strengthening the capacity of women's movement.

UNDP provided effective strategic and other support for 30 months during the 2004-2005 election processes in order to promote sustainable and effective institutional capacity for the consolidation of good governance and democratic practices in the Kyrgyz Republic. From the beginning of the previous project, the Kyrgyz Republic experienced two political crises: the first in March 2005 and the second in April 2010.²¹

The intervention strategy of the current UNDP electoral support project is part of the framework of UNDP's global objective to support inclusive participative democratic governance through consolidation of peace by the establishment of democratically elected institutions. Specifically, it helps Kyrgyz citizens, notably women, youth and those affected by poverty, to exercise their rights and fulfil their civic duties in choosing their representatives for national elected offices. The project also aims to develop an institutional memory that will permit improvement, through local capacity-building and provision of appropriate tools, of current and future electoral processes in the Kyrgyz Republic.

²¹ From UNDP Kyrgyzstan 2010 project document.

THE 2010-2012 UNDP KYRGYZ REPUBLIC ELECTION SUPPORT PROJECT WAS BUILT AROUND THREE OUTPUTS:

1. National Electoral Institutions and processes strengthened in accordance with international standards

- Institutional and operational support to the CEC
- Electoral material and logistics
- Capacity development in the short and long terms
- Post-electoral operations and electoral consolidation

2. Increased and inclusive participation in the electoral process

- Institutional communication, electoral information and education
- Support to civil society and political parties on electoral observation
- Gender and youth
 - Training and sensitization of civil society on gender issues with a view to reducing polarization among organizations
 - Training potential candidates on 'Gender and Leadership for Change'
 - Assisting the CEC to ensure gender equity throughout the electoral process
 - Assisting in the dialogue between the youth and political parties throughout the country

3. Enabling a peaceful and secure environment for elections

- Security for the electoral process
- Management of electoral disputes

The Project Strategy is based on strengthening the capacities of the CEC and providing technical expertise through mobilization and management of resources from donor partners by establishing a 'basket fund' and on coordinating all such resources and technical assistance to the electoral process in Kyrgyzstan.

Even though developed separately, the components of this programme are planned to act as an ensemble leading to the achievement of the results mentioned above. The

common theme of all components is the strengthening of national capacity and all international experts working in support of national and institutional actors should train and transfer their knowledge and skills to national partners. This approach views electoral assistance as a constant or cyclical activity, rather than as a single event taking place at a particular time, in line with UNDP's global focus on the electoral cycle in assistance provision. This long-term perspective aims to support the establishment of an institutional memory and the

processes for electoral governance; in this, the active participation of the UNDP Country Office is essential.

Other international partners have also been involved. While a comprehensive review is not possible, ODIHR/OSCE, NDI, Sida and IFES have been among the main partners. Civil society organizations (CSOs), government representatives and international organizations have praised the quick reaction by international donors to the needs of electoral processes and the provision of alternative solutions to problems.

Supporting the CEC

Much of the assistance for the CEC and other electoral institutions consisted of provision

of electoral expertise in order to improve electoral processes, not specific gender-related processes. It could be argued that this type of assistance has led directly to more free and fair elections and inadvertently to greater gender parity in political representation and that it has thus indirectly supported efforts to mainstream gender. Only in 2010 did all of these interventions bring results in the form of women's inclusion in decision-making.

UNDP's electoral assistance under the current project has broadly focused on technical and operational assistance to central- and regional-level election commissions, electoral legislation reform, voter registration, media support, CSO support, institutional support and civic/voter education.²²

EXCERPTS FROM THE UNDP PROJECT DOCUMENT OUTLINING THE CURRENT WORK DONE AROUND SUPPORTING THE CEC²³

- Based on a request from the provisional government for electoral assistance, deploy up to six **international elections experts** to serve as members of the CEC with advisory vote to provide immediate advice on any key issues on electoral preparation and management that may arise and add to the quality and transparency of the CEC's work by participating in CEC discussions and decision-making (not voting). They thus help to increase the trust of the stakeholders in the electoral process.
- Support the CEC to elaborate a **strategic, multi-year plan** that can serve as an integrated framework for identification of its missions, guiding principles, strategic objectives, goals and strategies for implementation of the goals and objectives. The goal of this component is to furnish the CEC with a management tool that can sustain its efforts to realize lasting, professional and credible elections.
- Also **support the operations** of the CEC through provision of office supplies for the district and local electoral committees and other necessary materials, as well as transportation and warehousing needs of the election commissions. UNDP will procure the necessary goods and services for the smooth running of elections, based on activity plans, descriptions of needs and material specifications established by the CEC.

²² From Kyrgyzstan UNDP Country Office survey on gender mainstreaming in electoral assistance programming, 2009-2012.

²³ From UNDP Kyrgyzstan 2010 project document.

Capacity Development

Technical assistance provided under the capacity-building component of the UNDP project has aimed to optimize the professional competencies and global performance of the election commissions.²⁴ The electoral administration of Kyrgyzstan consists of the following:

- Central Election Commission (CEC)
- 56 Territorial Election Commissions (TECs) at the city and rayon levels
- Approximately 2,300 Precinct Election Commissions (PECs)

The CEC is a permanently working body elected for five years and TECs and PECs are recruited for two years, but, in fact, start to work just before the elections. This means that there are approximately 24,000 election commission members at all levels during elections, most of whom are engaged in the process right before the elections. Therefore, rapid, focused and comprehensive training of all commission members is essential for the success of the elections.

The UNDP project foresees the development of a programme of complete apprenticeships aimed at improving the competence, confidence and the professional and technical network of electoral actors at all levels, with specific attention to personnel at the level of regional and local election commissions. The main goal of this component of the project is to assist the CEC to implement capacity development initiatives to improve the professional competence of its personnel. Besides UNDP, over the past

five years, IFES has been conducting trainings at all levels of election commissions and has developed a methodology for such large-scale exercises. The UNDP project has cooperated closely with IFES and OSCE in conducting trainings and used their experience and lessons learned.

Voter Outreach

Various other types of gender-related assistance and outreach have included summer and youth camps supported by IFES and the Soros Foundation to build political efficacy (further described below). Other organizations, such as IRI, have worked to build a congress of political parties. The provision of experts to the government, parliament and civil society on gender, electoral and legal issues accompanied these capacity-building efforts. Quite often, direct advocacy by international organizations supported these activities, as in 2005-2007, when the parliament was 100 percent male.

All of these international assistance efforts developed an environment conducive to women's political participation. These efforts facilitated the emergence of new women leaders within civil society; many of the women currently active in politics were connected in the past with many projects of international organizations. The concerted assistance helped to strengthen civil society, which was instrumental not only in bringing forward women as political leaders, but also in promoting institutional changes that enabled women's political participation. Support to civil society was also important because it kept gender-related issues on

²⁴ Idem.

the agenda, whether it was an issue of criminalization of abortion or decriminalization of polygamy.

Electoral Violence

The project From Peaceful Elections 2010 to Development of Kyrgyzstan has been implemented in all seven provinces of Kyrgyzstan through the network of women organizations, the Alliance of Women Legal Initiatives. In this electoral violence prevention project, women's NGOs collaborated closely with local authorities and law enforcement agencies to respond proactively to emerging conflicts through seven hotlines in all seven provinces of Kyrgyzstan, seven press conferences, seven regional Civic Control Headquarters and a series of roundtables and working meetings in the areas recognized as 'hot spots' (a total of 688 people attended those meetings in all seven provinces).

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other international organizations also played an active role in combating violence against women in Kyrgyzstan. In addition to advocacy in civil society, UNFPA targeted local religious leaders to help mitigate violence against women in the context of religious teachings.

Women as Voters

The turnout for the 2011 elections was 61.3 percent. Women voters by and large reportedly did not experience significant logistical problems during voting. There were, however, some notes of caution.

- In more traditional regions of the country, newly married women were not able to vote, as many were not properly registered locally and did not have adequate documentation. Recent changes in the electoral laws have removed some of the more stringent documentation requirements for voting registration.
- Family voting also restricted some women in exercising their right to vote. In such cases, family member votes were delegated to the seniors, who often were men.
- There were some access issues to voting by Uzbek women, some of whom could not understand Kyrgyz or Russian (the languages in which election-related documents are issued). This issue was not limited to women.
- Political party programmes and outreach to voters tended to be gender-biased, stressing the importance of families and the traditional (i.e., reproductive) role of women in sustaining and developing families and society in general.
- In terms of electoral administration, there was an underrepresentation of women as members and/or chairs at the higher levels of the electoral commissions (central and territorial). In 2010, there was slight improvement, but underrepresentation persisted: CEC had four women and nine men, 36 percent of territorial commissions members were women and, among nine chairs, only two were women.

Building Internal Capacity on Gender Mainstreaming

Often, gender mainstreaming was misunderstood as meaning only equal representation or numbers. Gender mainstreaming was described as having equal numbers of men and women participating in electoral structures or in projects implemented by international organizations. This simplistic understanding of gender mainstreaming was reflected at all levels, from national organizations to international agencies. For example, the high percentage of women represented in local electoral commissions was often quoted as evidence of gender equality, when, in fact, women were overrepresented because they were mobilized from public institutions, mostly from schools, where 80 percent of teachers were women; the workload was heavy and the pay low. As for international organizations, their decreasing interest in gender issues after the adoption of the quota signified a similar approach whereby guaranteed percentages would be considered equivalent to achieving gender equality.

In some cases, international organizations required project proposals to contain gender components or to highlight how gender concerns would be addressed. While this effort is commendable and generally signals a growing understanding of the importance of the issue, it still remains affected by particularities of thematic areas and the ability of proposal writers to understand how to interpret the importance of gender aspects in their projects. International organizations have various formal arrangements for dealing with gender mainstreaming that depend on the size of organizations and

other factors. Many organizations rely on specialized consultants who often are in the country only for short visits and have fewer opportunities to build strong relations with CSOs and with the government. This distance and outsourcing have had some negative effect on the programming and effective support of women's organizations.

Some organizations have designated gender focal points (UNDP, OSCE, USAID) that operate as liaisons to local women's groups. Organizational policies on gender mainstreaming appear to be getting stronger (at least at UNDP, which also has an organizational policy on this, OSCE and USAID), but do not always translate into actual gender mainstreaming. Instead, successful applications of such policies depend very much on the individual interests, skills and commitment of the person in that position. While this can – and did – generate great results when the person is dedicated and knowledgeable, it can also do the opposite if the person changes. In other words, at the moment, the quality of the work depends almost entirely on individual characteristics.

Successful gender focal points often promote gender mainstreaming within their own organizations by organizing trainings for project staff or by reviewing projects. Effective gender awareness trainings appeared to be very important in terms of long-term impact and there were examples where successful breakthroughs occurred after such trainings. International organization representatives often credited their organization's internal gender awareness training for substantive changes in their thinking and ability to mainstream gender in their work.

The most successful cases of mainstreaming happened as a result of collaboration between direct electoral support projects (or support to elected political institutions) and gender focal points within international organizations. Notable examples of these are the collaboration among UNDP's Gender Team and the UNDP Electoral Assistance Project (KESP) and New Legal Framework Project (NLFP). The collaboration between the UNDP Gender Coordinator and KESP is a good example of how specific gender expertise can complement general expertise on electoral reforms.

Quite often, the process of electoral reform in Kyrgyzstan – and the involvement of the international assistance providers in that process – would begin with a government request that usually did not include gender in its priorities. In one case, 14 experts were involved in the reform process and, when questions were asked as to why there was a need for additional gender experts, the UNDP Gender Coordinator was able to explain the need to have gender expertise for all draft laws as stipulated by the Law on Normative and Legal Acts. Thus, it was important to have an in-house expert who not only promoted the idea of gender mainstreaming, but also offered solutions for how to engage effectively with local partners.

In another case, the collaboration between the NLFP (which was mostly working to enhance the capacity of the parliament) and UNDP Gender Coordinator is a good example of gender mainstreaming in parliament. Their partnership worked to

overcome the traditional misunderstandings accompanying UN gender mainstreaming projects through close interaction and making gender mainstreaming complementary to the work already done by the NLFP. Seminars on gender, such as those for the KESP project staff, were helpful in shaping understanding of how to approach the issue and embed it into the parliament's basic functions. A methodology was subsequently produced and adopted, which institutionalized these procedures, the acquisition of such expertise and the training of people in gender mainstreaming.

3.2. Supporting the Women's Movement

Many accounts²⁵ of the work of, and support provided by, international and regional organizations show that the most important areas of support for Kyrgyz women's political participation were the long-term capacity-building support for the emerging women's movement and the gender-sensitive electoral support. Successes were reported as a result of the active work of in-house gender experts (e.g., of UNDP or EU) and the direct partnerships of international organizations with Kyrgyz civil society groups. Early engagement supporting women's NGOs at the beginning of the 1990s was essential to the establishment of the women's movement, and having networks and resources ready for eventual collaboration with the parliament to promote gender parity legislation for Kyrgyzstan was essential to progress.

²⁵ From interviews with women's NGO representatives, December 2011.

Investing in Civil Society and Contributing to the Development of a Women's Movement

While civil society's proactive engagement was largely key to positive changes in women's political participation, donors, including UN agencies, often played a crucial supportive role. The engagement of international organizations was pivotal in the emergence of CSOs and many projects supported the emergence of the first generation of women leaders. Throughout the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, emerging women's NGOs formed a movement of their own, focusing on issues of domestic violence, human trafficking and women's political participation.

External assistance supported women's political leadership, primarily through educational programmes on women and politics, youth and politics, and decentralization. The earliest efforts²⁶ included the work done by assistance providers such as the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and USAID, which were developing women's political leadership as early as 1997, mostly through educational programmes. Between 1996 and 1997, a USAID-funded organization, the Counterpart Consortium International (CCI), started to organize trainings for activists on how to establish NGOs and offered grants for new NGOs. Programmes and trainings in fund-raising and strategic planning supported the establishment of CSOs and, indeed, quite a few of them were established around that time. Initially, this work did not have a particular focus on women.

The Gender in Development Bureau, an organization that started in 1995 under a UNDP-funded project, was the first organization to support the rights of women in 1998, initially with programming focused on poverty and rural areas. The long-term objectives of the Bureau were to support the establishment of a national policy and programme on the status of women and to support pilot programmes of Kyrgyz NGOs focused on rural women and sustainable income projects.²⁷ The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung opened new programmes in 1997, focused on women and politics, youth and politics, and decentralization, and implemented them across the regions. This work not only produced women who were trained in how to participate in civil society and politics, but also generated local experts who later formed their own NGOs, such as the Agency for Social Technologies, one of the leading think tanks on gender issues in the country.

Through vigorous work with the women's movement to change legislation, women began emerging from within the civil society to become politicians. The sweeping victories for Kyrgyz women in politics in 2005-2006 were possible only because of the foundations built by the Kyrgyz women's movement. By the mid-2000s, however, donor attention turned elsewhere in the region and Sida, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and others began to phase out their gender-focused or gender-related activities with civil society. International assistance has shifted and institutional support is no

²⁶ From interviews with women's NGO representatives, December 2011.

²⁷ Ostendorf, J. (1998). *Women cope with transition in Kyrgyzstan*. UNV News June 1998, available at <http://www.unv.org/en/news-resources/archive/unv-news/unv-news-june-1998/doc/women-cope-with-transition.html> accessed December 2012.

longer provided to NGOs. Often, donors take for granted the existence of CSOs, while some of the organizations depend on external assistance and have to run projects from their own homes, lacking sufficient funds to rent offices.

There is also a generational experience gap within the leadership of the current women's movement and those who started organizations in late 1990s. While the move of experienced women from civil society into politics is a welcomed (and relatively small) trend, it tends to leave NGOs with fewer active and experienced leaders. On the flip side, for women who would like to move into politics from civil society, it is difficult to leave their organizations due to the lack of sufficient and experienced successors. There is also a growing concern among women's movement leaders that the younger generation of women does not receive the same kind of support for capacity-building as they did. Since the NGOs themselves do not have sufficient resources and the experienced women cannot afford the time to mentor the younger women, the concern remains that the new generation of women leaders is not actually developing.

Furthermore, many active women leaders in civil society are afraid to get into politics because they do not want to appear to be partisan. There are enough capable women in civil society, but not all of them wish to be candidates or participate directly in politics. Presently, the women's movement appears to have lost its focus and momentum. The fight to legislate quotas at the local level

could potentially serve as a future mobilizing point for women's NGOs to come together once again.

Legal Framework Interventions and the Gender Quota

The 2005 election was a turning point and the resulting all-male parliament a rallying cry for the women's movement in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz women NGOs convened in a national forum and, among other issues, agreed to collectively lobby for special provisions to be introduced into national laws. In a coordinated fashion, women NGOs were able to arrange a meeting with Acting President Bakiyev to persuade him to appoint a special representative on gender issues to the male-only parliament.²⁸ This coincided with the process of changing electoral laws that was being undertaken by the government at that time. It is also likely that, as the president was trying to consolidate his powers at that time by rearranging various institutions, he sought some support from civil society and was open to concessions or negotiations that were not perceived as too political, i.e., women's issues. In March 2006, President Bakiyev signed a decree that required 30-percent female representation in the government at the national and local levels.

With the election of the all-male parliament in 2005, international support returned and partnered with civil society groups so that the women's movement rapidly regained momentum and unprecedented focus. The Kyrgyz women's movement was able to

²⁸ Asylbekova, N. (2009). *Kyrgyzstan Fight for Gender Quota Pays Off*. Gender Links: Gender & Media Diversity Journal. Available at, <http://www.genderlinks.org.za/article/kyrgyzstan-fight-for-gender-quotas-pays-off-2009-01-01>, accessed December 2012.

introduce standards of gender expertise into the parliament's legislative activities as well as a new version of the law on gender equality. In the introduction of gender expertise, the UNDP's New Legal Framework Project (NLFP) was quite pivotal by enabling parliament to establish standards and procedures that enhanced gender parity in future legislation.

NLFP, co-funded by the European Commission and UNDP for 2005-2010, worked for more than six years with the Kyrgyz parliament. In efforts to strengthen the Kyrgyz legal framework in five key areas, including gender issues, NLFP developed a handbook on how to propose, draft and analyse laws from a gender perspective. The handbook was so successful that parliament asked NLFP to develop guidance (standards) for gender in legislation. These standards were piloted on 48 draft laws and visibly raised their quality. Due to that fact, the parliament applied the standards at the national level and received the status of the law in 2008. As national standards, they became mandatory assessment tools for drafting any piece of legislation in Kyrgyzstan. This was the first time in the history of the Kyrgyz Parliament, in existence since 1995, that gender expertise was accorded such high importance.

Along with other advocates, NLFP suggested a gender quota for the electoral code in 2007, which was initially met with resistance. In order to defend the quota measure, NLFP unified its legal experts' voices with those of women's NGOs, gender experts and civil society groups to amplify support for the quota through the media. NLFP brought an international legal expert, who

put all groundwork done by gender NGOs into legal style and language, making the message heard by the government and CEC and providing all these actors with a tool for moving forward. All high-profile opportunities were used to draw the attention of the parliament, president, and the CEC to the issue of women in politics. This collective effort was an enormous success and led to the passage of the legislation mandating the 30-percent gender quota for the 2007 election. By December 2007, gender parity at the national level of governance changed dramatically; Kyrgyzstan transitioned from zero women in parliament to the highest proportional presence of women since Soviet times, with 28 women elected into the parliament. This achievement manifests itself in adopted legal provisions, but it is also a testament to how successful collaboration between civil society and international



organizations led up to the adoption of these changes. Although initial proposals that the gender of every third candidate on party lists be different than that of the other two did not pass, the compromise that the gender of every fourth candidate must be different than that of the other three was a big achievement. These successes for gender parity are evident not only when compared to the previous all-male parliament, but also in the fact that both recent Kyrgyz parliaments have had participation from women above the world average of 19.8 percent.²⁹

Unfortunately, since the adoption of the gender quotas, interest from international organizations in the issue of women's political participation has dropped significantly. Some international and local organizations mention that they work mostly on purely legal issues when it comes to elections and do not have direct relation to gender as such. Currently, UNDP and other international actors, including IFES and NDI, are conducting gender analyses of all legislative and analytical documents and compiling gender-disaggregated data.

3.3. Support for Women Candidates

Following the reforms of 2010, a certain shift happened in politics, from people and personalities to political ideas and platforms, and this has meant also different demands placed on candidates. Candidates had more pressure to prove their worth as candidates in the political process, not, as before, as public personalities with

established followings. This also meant that higher demands were placed on women candidates, particularly given the quota requirement. Historically, the biggest obstacles for women's political participation, where participation is understood comprehensively as voters, members of electoral commissions and candidates, relate to their capacity as candidates. There is still a lack of proper institutional arrangements to support women's political participation, especially at the local level, which is exacerbated by a predominant cultural bias that prevents more women from running and being elected as politicians.

International Assistance

In 1999, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, ODIHR/OSCE and UNDP entered into a partnership to promote the political participation of women in Kyrgyzstan. They started to organize workshops for women in the country's regions on issues of political participation and, in 2000, a national forum brought together 45 women, the most active participants of these workshops. ODIHR/OSCE brought in several experts from the Baltics who shared their experience with organizing women's movements. The participants decided to organize a network called 'Women can do it' (which is still operating) and together wrote the aims and procedures of this network. The network has been ensuring interregional as well as national coordination of women NGOs' activities. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung supported the network until 2003, when it began to phase out its activities

²⁹ As of November 2011, according to Inter-Parliamentary Union. Available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>, accessed December 2012.

and UNDP and ODIHR/OSCE took over the support. In 2003, UNDP and ODIHR/OSCE supported women's NGOs participation in a Central Asian regional conference 'Promotion of Women in Politics', from which women returned to Kyrgyzstan with a good understanding of the importance of special measures to change women's representation and with a determination and strategy to lobby for electoral gender quotas.

However, despite concerted activities, the political response was not positive and the 2005 parliamentary elections, based on a majority system, resulted in a parliament with no women at all. The absence of women in the parliament and the need for them to re-enter into the political processes also prompted other, different kinds of support from international organizations. In 2006, for instance, NDI supported the creation of a Women's Discussion Club that brought together women from various political parties to discuss political issues.³⁰ This was a time when the government was more repressive and it was easier for international organizations to have projects focusing on women in order to avoid being accused of interference in local politics. This also reflects the low perception of women's potential role in and contribution to society and politics. As mentioned before, President Bakiyev was able to promote measures supporting women's participation because this was not perceived as an important, politically charged issue (at least not initially).

Conceptions and misconceptions about the traditional role of women and their role in politics have been and remain a major impediment to women's political participation. Tackling these traditional concepts about women and their roles is difficult and has not been directly addressed in the work of many international organizations. Nevertheless, some donors have conducted projects aiming to sensitize the public about the role of women in politics. Often, they target the youth as the most accepting audience, such as through summer camps run by IFES and the Soros Foundation. In these mixed camps, boys and girls have to organize and elect representatives from among those who choose to organize and run campaigns. Girls were found to be very active and successful in the mock elections in camps and many peers supported them. The support that youth received from their peers seemed to be linked more to campaign performances and less to gender, reflecting the importance of working with youth when combating gender stereotypes and entrenched cultural norms.³¹ Many of the female alumni of these camps reportedly became successful in civil society while studying in universities and after graduation.

Assistance Coordination

UNDP has been an active member of the UN Gender Thematic Group (UNGTG), chaired by UNIFEM (now UN Women), and adopted a position of open collaboration with other agencies on gender equality issues. Since

³⁰ In 2012, NDI's Women's Discussion Club project was awarded NDI's Madeleine Albright Grant, given once a year to applicants seeking to promote women's participation in civic or political life. Available at <http://www.ndi.org/node/18533>, accessed December 2012.

³¹ From interviews with international organization representatives, December 2011.

its establishment by UNIFEM in 2004, the UNGTG has been a major mechanism for donor coordination to promote gender equality and combat violence against women in Kyrgyzstan. The UNGTG advocates for gender mainstreaming in the UN System and encourages UN integration of the gender dimension in different areas of work. Members of the UNGTG coordinate with each other and also organize regular consultations with representatives of relevant sectors to promote awareness and coordination among all stakeholders. Indeed, the well-developed internal coordination among international assistance providers in Kyrgyzstan, and their external coordination with relevant actors (government, civil society, etc.), emerged as a recognized strength and civil society and government representatives saw them as a valuable asset.³²

UN agencies at the country level had Gender Focal Points (GFP), who were members of the UNGTG. They assisted in the implementation of the UNGTG Work Plan in general and were also responsible for the implementation of specific gender-related activities and projects of their respective agencies. The work of the Gender Focal Points, however, was often added on top of regular duties in other areas and could be disconnected from wider initiatives. In 2007, the UNGTG attempted to consolidate gender mainstreaming by increasing the number of staff members responsible for the coordination

and implementation of gender-specific programmes in UN agencies. However, many member agencies of the UNGTG were short-staffed and therefore unable to participate fully in the gender mainstreaming attempt.³³

UNDP had expertise in many UNGTG priority areas, such as democratic governance and women's political participation, regional and local development, poverty reduction, gender expertise of legislation, strengthening the capacity of women's NGOs, peace-building and environment sustainability. In 2007, UNGTG initiated the Country Gender Assessment (CGA), which covered four areas: governance, economic development, gender-based violence and public health. In view of results, it was decided to conduct comprehensive CGAs every two years, together with an annual thematic assessment coordinated by one of the participating UN agencies. In 2008-2009, UNDP took the lead in preparing the thematic CGA in politics.³⁴ This assessment was devoted to women's political participation and was based on results of UNDP projects for the promotion of women at decision-making levels (2007-2008). The assessment analysed women's participation in local elections in 2008 and the gender dimension of activities of National Parliament, which was elected in 2007 by 100-percent proportional system and included the gender quota for the first time. The assessment provided analytical and statistical evidence of the decrease in women's participation in local elections

³² Moldosheva, A. (2008b). *Violence against Women in Kyrgyzstan: Baseline Assessment*. Available at <http://Kyrgyzstan.Unfpa.Org/?Reports=189>, accessed December 2012.

³³ Moldosheva, 2008b.

³⁴ Bagdasarova, Gorborkova & Moldosheva, 2008.

and demonstrated the systemic and structural nature of the barriers limiting women's participation in politics.

Regularly assessing achievements in gender policy in Kyrgyzstan is necessary in order to track positive changes, assess progress and refine strategies in the process of promoting gender equality. There have been significant gaps in the information available, generally related to the lack of a systematic approach in the collection and analysis of data. Thus, the CGA reports and the thematic assessments, both useful mechanisms to expand the qualitative analytical base on issues of gender development in Kyrgyzstan, helped to fill existing knowledge gaps. And as the knowledge has become available, gender experts and women's activists lobbying for the introduction of a 30-percent gender quota in local elections have used the results of CGA as an advocacy tool.

Supporting Political Parties and Capacity-Building

Political parties have become increasingly important to gender equity since the introduction of a proportional representation system in 2007. While some international organizations such as IRI work on increasing the general capacity of political parties, others, including NDI, work specifically on training women in political parties. Attempts to work with and develop women's wings of political parties were aimed not only at enhancing the capacities of women to be effective political players, but also at bringing together groups of women from various political parties to form a common gender-related agenda. In 2011, NDI worked with eight political parties, mostly offering

trainings on how women can work with the media and increase leadership skills.

The hope is that, as political parties become institutionalized, they will also become more interested in recruiting women for pragmatic reasons. Some signs of this were apparent in previous electoral campaigns. If women had a greater presence in local elections, the breakthrough in women's participation in elections at the national level would follow. Women often head local branches of political parties, so they may be more robustly engaged in campaigning for others than for themselves. There is also a need to engage in helping parties to reform themselves internally, because many of them were initially equipped with tools poorly suited to producing wins in the current institutional environment. Some of them, now in power, experience internal management problems and international organizations working with them express the feeling that gender issues per se are not a priority for the party leadership.

Groups such as the Soros Foundation have provided unique assistance to female candidates by supporting one of the platforms from which to promote the gender quota. The Soros Foundation hosted meetings to develop joint action plans among gender specialists, civil society groups and women candidates. The group divided into working groups, distributing the political candidates among them, in order to discuss short-term and long-term responses to electoral challenges and steps to take in a national forum. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation was instrumental in supporting this collaborative process by financing travel expenses for many women from different provinces.

For the 2004 local elections and 2005 national elections, UNDP and Sida encouraged women to participate as candidates, building their capacity by offering leadership training and networking.

Public service advertisements have been used as another way to heighten awareness during elections and, in some instances, international organizations have supported them. However, they rarely address the role of women in politics or counter cultural perceptions about women and more could be done to ensure the presence of a gender perspective in advertisements.

Support for Women Post-Election

By 2000, UNDP expanded its focus from civil society, capacity-building and poverty reduction to parliamentary development, incorporating gender issues. After three years with relatively little success, they began a second project involving women and men in a comprehensive approach to promote better understanding of gender inequalities at different levels in politics. These efforts sparked debate in 2004-2005 because some members of the women's movement wanted an exclusive focus on women's issues in parliament. UNDP became increasingly involved in gender training for the parliament, helping to organize a gender group of seven parliamentarians. The UNDP/Sida project Promotion of Women in Civil Service and Politics helped to build women's capacity in parliament and organize public discussion about gender-related issues, including health, marriage and education,

with the participation of MPs. While the programme strives for gender parity and male MPs are invited, most participants are women. UNDP works primarily at the national level to build the capacity of parliamentarians and to promote gender-sensitive legislation. UNDP has also organized special trainings for women candidates in local governments about gender-related issues; however, this local level effort has not been systemic and has lacked a focused, strategic agenda.³⁵

After the 2007 parliamentary elections, the Alliance of Women's Legislative Initiatives (AWLI) was established to facilitate engagement on gender-related legislation. The Alliance has among its members more than 70 NGOs throughout the country and more than 70 persons, including more than 20 former and current women members of parliament. Such commitment from domestic and international partners highlights a more sustainable women's movement for gender equality through political means in Kyrgyzstan. Many international efforts have supported women already within the parliament and have trained new candidates. Besides the broad women's legislative coalition AWLI set up in 2008, some international organizations have attempted to create a women's caucus in the current parliament. This has not met with much success because women deputies tend to side with their party leaders.

In 2009, UNDP in collaboration with International Labor Organization (ILO) carried out a comprehensive gender audit of the

³⁵ From interviews with women's NGOs representatives, December 2011.

national parliament apparatus.³⁶ UNDP contracted a group of facilitators for the gender audit and supported all educational and communicative activities. ILO provided an internationally certified methodology for the gender audit and expert support to the group of facilitators. Further institutionalization of the gender expertise of parliament bills and awareness-raising sessions about gender for parliamentary staff considerably promoted the gender equity agenda while the gender audit was conducted. Thanks to the audit, the deputies and staff could assess the level of gender sensitivity of the parliament's human resources policy and the parliament received high recommendations for promoting gender issues in legislation and strengthening gender equality in the workplace. There were trainings in improvement of gender sensitivity as part of the overall capacity-building exercise.

The gender equality agenda was significantly strengthened within the framework of the constitutional reform and legislation review in 2010. For the first time, the constitution underwent a gender review; the norms of women representation in the public administration and local self-governance were improved; and gender experts were involved in the activity of the legal working group. This instrumental support from UNDP contributed to gender sensitization of the legislation.

Within the 2010 Civil Society Project of UNDP, the national conference 'Women's Political Participation in Constitutional Reform and Parliamentary Election' was held. This conference produced recommendations on increasing the meaningful representation of women in government and on political parties' lists.

³⁶ From Kyrgyzstan UNDP Country Office survey on gender mainstreaming in electoral assistance programming, 2009-2012.



4. LESSONS LEARNED

4.1. Good Practices

Building and Supporting the Women's Movement

- It was not so much the direct electoral assistance by international organizations that was pivotal in promoting women's political participation, but rather the early, sustained and continuous support for women leaders and women's CSOs that furthered the connectedness to and between local women's NGOs, enabling effective lobbying and programmes for women's political participation.
- Regularly assessing achievements in gender policy in Kyrgyzstan has been useful in order to track positive changes, assess progress and refine strategies in the process of promoting gender equality. The CGA reports and the thematic assessments were useful mechanisms to expand the qualitative analytical base on issues of gender development in Kyrgyzstan and became important advocacy tools.

Building and Supporting Women's Capacity

- Major obstacles to women's participation include a lack of finances and cultural norms that prevent women from participating in politics. While international organizations struggle to deal with the former, cultural stereotypes and biases can be tackled most effectively, and likely with the longest impact, in projects and programmes targeting youth.
- Knowledge-sharing initiatives where local activists, candidates or leaders can meet counterparts from other countries have proven to have a strong impact, e.g., issues discussed during the women MPs' visit to Finland (supported by NDI) and Sweden (supported by UNDP/Sida) were later reflected in parliamentary procedures.
- Women's participation in elections as candidates is vitally important and can be viewed as training because it offers the benefits of experience even if the woman candidate does not win a particular time.

Work at the Local Level

- There is a need to work with civil society and with projects outside of the capital and big cities, especially if international organizations and CSOs intend to focus on ensuring political participation in local elections.
- There is a need to work with political both at the local and at national levels. This is emerging as a new priority in efforts to increase and improve women's political participation, particularly as candidates. This work can come from strengthening the parties, establishing formal internal statutes and structures, including women's wings, strengthening local party women activists, facilitating women's networking, etc.
- In order to ensure a steady inclusion of experienced women politicians at the national level, there is a need to ensure that they can be elected and gain experience in local elections.³⁷ For example, after the 2012 local council elections held under the quota system, the Osh city council had eight women deputies after many years of having had only one woman. Based on this experience, there is a need to work with women politicians and with parties on better inclusion of women into local politics.

Work within Existing Government Structures

- Women politicians are scrutinized much more closely than men and any mistakes are often attributed to their gender and used to justify the charge of 'women's

incompetence' in politics. This is not the case with male politicians. Therefore, women candidates, party members and elected officials need to be more competent than men just to be credible. As a consequence, they require more support to develop that capacity, which can be done at different stages and must start much earlier than the actual candidature.

- Elected women and civil servants are not necessarily gender-aware merely because they are women. Expecting them to be gender-aware is another stereotype that, in effect, relieves men of the responsibility of developing their own awareness of gender. If elected women and civil servants themselves are to be gender advocates, they need their own trainings/education in gender awareness. The work with elected women on gender awareness, though difficult in current circumstances, needs to be continued.
- While they continue to struggle with negative cultural stereotypes, women politicians are nevertheless believed to be less corrupt than men politicians. This could be an additional argument for sustaining gender mainstreaming and ensuring that quotas remain at least at their present level.

Work within International Organizations

- Having in-house gender experts seems crucial for gender mainstreaming. This has worked most effectively when expertise was combined with supportive

³⁷ The experience of Nepal was brought up in an interview as a successful example.

organizational leadership. This is not only important for mainstreaming within international organizations' programming, but also for signalling the importance of gender issues to national partners, especially the government.

- The institutional feature of having thematic groups within the UN enabled better coordination among various UN projects as well as with other international organizations. Thematic groups on elections (KESP/UNDP, OSCE, IFES, EU) often facilitated coordination and allowed for quick decision-making. This was especially true in 2011, when the government and CEC made a lot of changes to the legislation while also preparing for presidential elections in the fall of that same year.
- Overall coordination among international organizations was very good, and this was important at times, especially in 2011, when quick decisions were made to effectively provide electoral assistance. The same was true during the time of promoting gender quotas, when efficient coordination with and among international organizations complemented coordinated work among CSOs. This ensured effective and efficient use of otherwise scarce resources.

4.2. Further Opportunities

Electoral Assistance

- While UNDP has had a highly knowledgeable and effective Gender Coordinator who promoted gender mainstreaming through many aspects of UNDP's electoral work, UNDP's electoral support has not had an explicit gender focus, nor has

gender been completely mainstreamed in the overall project. This is also the case with most other international organizations, as gender work and gender mainstreaming remain relatively siloed and too dependent on the expertise of dedicated individuals. This tendency will only exacerbate the diminishing focus on gender in the work of international organizations.

- Public service advertisements have been used to heighten awareness during elections and, in some instances, international organizations have supported them. However, public adverts rarely counter stereotypes about the role of women in politics in their messaging.

Work within Existing Government Structures

- In general, the government has not prioritized gender issues on its agenda, as exemplified by the gender coordinating mechanism, which was left to the whims of the political situation. Its highest status was as a special council with a secretariat in the president's office, but it was recently transferred to the function of the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Migration (which, at the time of writing, is about to be closed due to the government restructuring that the new parliamentary coalition agreed upon).
- Institutionalizing gender mainstreaming is neither a smooth nor a flawless process. It needs constant vigilance and adjustments, as was the case with the zebra quota that compromised initial legislative intent by allowing the loophole of gender quotas only for initial party lists.

Quotas

- In order to ensure that the gender quota system is maintained, constant advocacy remains necessary.
- Institutionalizing gender quotas in local elections will increase gender parity at that level and could create a pool of experienced female candidates for national elections.
- Quota laws must provide for women to replace women in parliament and party lists. Experience has shown that, without this provision, the number of women in parliament keeps decreasing after elections. At the moment, the replacement is simply the next person on the list, who is usually a man.
- The quota requirement should apply to the final party list and parties should replace any withdrawing candidate with another candidate of the same gender. Registration reversals or withdrawals should not affect women's places in party lists.

Political Parties

- Political parties need to be supported in finding diverse and creative ways to engage women voters. Often, the political programmes of parties stress the importance of families and the traditional (i.e., reproductive) role of women in sustaining and developing families and society in general.
- Parties are encouraged to create greater opportunities for women's participation within their structures.

Civil Society

- Special efforts can be made to attract active women leaders from the NGO sector into political processes. These efforts need to take into account and address the reasons that women leaders are reluctant to engage in politics. Such reasons include the lack of support for the younger generation of women that would ensure that current movement leaders can find suitable successors and the lack of institutional support for women's NGOs, which makes the NGOs highly dependent on the work of dedicated individuals.
- There is a need for creative approaches to public education to overcome cultural misconceptions about women in politics. Venues such as soap operas, community theatres and advertisements could be used to portray a new norm of women's political participation as voters, commission members and elected representatives.
- Help is needed to connect women in parliament with civil society and with women at the grassroots level. This connection can be made through previously established mechanisms such as the AWLI or women's discussion clubs or through other ways.
- In addition, women's political participation at the local level leaves room for improvement. Women's representation in councils is low and is even lower amongst elected heads of local governments. Local government female representation should become an issue for civil society, yet the issue has not attracted much attention mostly

because local governments have little power. This discrepancy in power is under revision, as new electoral laws are changing how local elections are run and the government plans to devolve more decision-making and taxation powers to local governments.

International Organizations

- International organizations may also reconsider their own programmes to support women's political participation, and the trend of scaling back, as this may possibly threaten the sustainability and the effectiveness of the gender norms adopted in 2007.
- Designating gender focal points in international organizations has no meaningful impact unless the leadership of international organizations is genuinely willing to back them internally and externally in working on gender issues. International organizations should put less effort on making guidelines

on mainstreaming and more effort on selecting as gender focal points dedicated people who have solid expertise; a given organization's leadership should then provide those focal points with an enabling environment.

Work with Marginalized Groups

- The particular needs of marginalized groups such as Uzbek women or women living with disabilities tend to remain invisible when the overall struggle to increase women's participation faces so many cultural, economic and political challenges. This could be a point of reflection as the women's movement matures and as international organizations develop their own awareness and mainstreaming mechanisms (e.g., Kyrgyzstan signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2011, although, as of this writing, had not yet ratified it).



In its search for stability and democracy, Kyrgyzstan has seen many legislative and institutional changes in the last two decades. As is the case with any political, economic or social change, women have been disproportionately impacted during the transition.

At the same time, women have taken advantage of new opportunities for participation and been vigorously engaged in these processes. When the elections of 2005 resulted in an all-male parliament, for example, an unprecedented level of mobilization of and advocacy from women's rights organizations reflected the progress made in establishing a credible and reliable women's movement. Long-term institutional support to civil society from international assistance providers was crucial in this process and needs to continue in order to prevent rollbacks.

Cultural, economic and political barriers to women's participation remain entrenched and international assistance needs to

maintain a structural, cross-sectoral and long-term approach in order to keep momentum. The importance of dedicated and experienced gender focal points in international organizations, of gender mainstreaming and trainings in all projects and structures, and of explicit executive support of these processes cannot be overstated. As the capacity of local and international actors to promote gender mainstreaming develops, more attention can also be paid to the particular needs of marginalized groups that so far have been less visible: women living with disabilities, women from minority ethnic groups, young women and women living in poverty and in remote areas.



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