



**UNDP-UNEP POVERTY AND  
ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVE IN KYRGYZSTAN**



**CASE-BASED ANALYSIS OF EXISTING ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL  
PRACTICES OF RURAL WOMEN IN SUUSAMYR AYIL OKMOTU, KYRGYZ  
REPUBLIC**

**Research Report**

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The study has been carried out within the Poverty-Environment Initiative (PEI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). PEI is a global UN effort that supports country-led efforts to mainstream poverty-environment linkages into national development planning. PEI provides financial and technical assistance to government partners to set up institutional and capacity- strengthening programmes and carry out activities to address the particular poverty-environment context.

Photos used in the publication are courtesy of the author.

## Glossary of terms

Aiy1 Okmotu	Village administration. Also, an administrative and territorial unit
Ala-kyiz	Traditional handmade felt carpets used to decorate and insulate yurts
Dzhailoo	Also “jailoo”, summer pasture land
Gender	A contested term which typically refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/ time-specific and changeable (UN, 2000). In this dissertation I interrogate this conventional definition
Komsomol	Youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and a political party of the Soviet Union represented in the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union
Kumis	Fermented drink made from mare's milk
Kurut	Ball-shaped dry young cheese
Practical gender needs	The needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society. They are a response to immediate and perceived necessity, identified within a specific context (Moser, 1993)
Som	The currency of the Kyrgyz Republic
Shyrdak	A traditional handmade stitched felt carpet
Strategic gender needs	The needs women identify because of their subordinate position in society. Meeting strategic needs assists women to achieve greater equality and change existing roles, thereby challenging women’s subordinate position (Moser, 1993)
Tushturduk	A wall cover traditionally handmade and hand-embroidered
Valenki	Traditional winter boots
Yurt	A dome-shaped felt tent

## List of abbreviations

CBT	Community-Based Tourism
NGO	Non-Government Organization
PEI	Poverty -Environment Initiative
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

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## **Introduction**

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan where poverty is an alarming and a growing problem majority of the population, more than 65 %, live in rural areas (World Bank Indicators, 2010). The overall poverty rate today is 40,8% whereas 9,4% of the rural population lives in extreme poverty (Rural Development Fund, 2014). Among the rural poor, women tend to be more vulnerable to poverty and deprivation<sup>5</sup>: Fifty three percent of rural households which are headed by women are classified as poor, 15% of them live in extreme poverty (Rural Poverty Portal, 2014). Rural women tend to have insufficient quality of basic service delivery and are more inclined to unemployment than men. When employed, women's labor is paid less than men. They rarely take equitable part in decision making in the public spheres. Today, rural women represent only 6% of members of pasture management committees (UNDP, 2014), 18% of Water Users Associations, 13,6% of local councils and 4,65% heads of local self-governments. At home rural women spend considerably more time on maintaining their households and childcare than men. At the same time they experience a limited access to natural and economic resources and are less likely to own land and property such as livestock and agricultural machinery<sup>4</sup>. While women constitute the majority of labour force in agriculture, their contributions to economy and household activities are largely not accounted for.

## **Goal of the study**

This study aimed at inquiring into existing women's initiatives and leadership in one of the pilot territories of the UNDP Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI), namely Suusamyр айыл окмоту. The researcher generated a qualitative analysis of women-led economic and environmental practices on the basis of primary data collected in the field in early November 2014.

## **Methodology**

Methodologically, a case study approach was chosen for an in-depth investigation of five selected sites each exemplifying local women's participation in productive activities. Data collection methods included firsthand observation and in-depth interviews. Each interview was audio-recorded with permission from every informant. The analysis of the data followed traditions accepted in qualitative research design and focused on the description of people's lived experiences, events, and situations (Denzin, 1989) with attention given to rich detail, meaningful social and historical contexts and experience as well as significance of emotional content. The goal of such analysis is to uncover emerging themes, patterns and understanding (Patton, 2002). Findings from this study demonstrate diversity of women's economic activities existing in Suusamyр айыл окмоту with specific and shared features pertaining to challenges, perspectives, successes and failures. Each case is complemented with visual illustrations and relevant quotations.

## **Locale:**

This report looks into a particular rural area in Kyrgyzstan called Suusamyр ayil okmotu in Suusamyр Valley. Geographically, the area is situated between the ridges of the Kyrgyz Ala-Too, Suusamyр-Too and Dzhumgal-Too mountains about 150 km away from the capital city Bishkek. The valley is situated at the altitude of 2000-3200 meters and has an extension about 155 km. This area is characterized by harsh climate, where temperature in the winter time descends down to – 50 degrees Celsius. In the summer the valley turns into lush meadows which have often been described as the best pasture lands in the country.

Organizationally, Suusamyр ayil okmotu belongs to Chui Administrative Region. It consists of six villages, Suusamyр, Kaisar, Tunuk, Pervoe Maya, Karakol and Kyzyl Ok. It has approximately 1300 households and total population of about 6 000 people. There are five schools, one hospital and four healthcare settings. Poverty level according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection is 18.5 % which is slightly higher than an average level of poverty in the region (16.1%).

Local residents are predominantly involved in agriculture, namely, transhumant herding. Livestock is often used as capital stock that can be turned into cash or used as direct payment. Contemporary land use may also include cultivation of potatoes and some vegetables as well as honey-production. Tourism has a great potential in the valley but is still underdeveloped. Indeed, despite its proximity to the capital city Suusamyр region still remains to be a “bleak and generally little-visited part of the country”.

According to the director of a local community radio, Suusamyр ayil okmotu is both geographically and informationally isolated. Villagers have only access to one local TV channel and only since recently, to one local community-based radio channel.



Photo 1. Suusamyр Valley. Source: Kim, 2014

## **Women’s situation in Suusamyр ayil okmotu**

Situation of women in this particular village is rarely described in available sources. A glimpse into relevant literature demonstrates that often women living in Suusamyр are subsumed under

the more general descriptions of Chui oblast. However, it seems obvious that due to the specificity of the area, more attention needs to be given to the particular situation of women living in Suusamyр айыл окмоту.

Due to the local climate and transhumant lifestyle, living conditions in Suusamyр айыл окмоту are difficult in general. However, women who are primarily responsible for maintaining their households, carrying for children and tending domestic animals experience particular challenges. Most of the domestic labor is done manually and majority of the houses lack facilities such as running water, sewerage, etc. Women typically have to fetch drinking water from outside and heat their houses with coal and wood, all of which add to their labor-intensive domestic routines. Some of the more financially advantaged households running water and electric water heaters installed in their houses, but having those is still considered to be a privilege rather than a usual situation. .

Both men and women are involved in cattle breeding, however, it is typically the men, who are considered to be the heads of their households and in charge of their farms. In terms of division of labor, women take active part in tending the cattle. In the wintertime when the livestock are in paddocks, women's responsibilities include feeding, ensuring animals' access to drinking water and salt, giving straw beddings (for the sheep), checking for illnesses and injuries, and milking the cows. In the summertime, families move together to alpine pasture lands (called "dzhailoo") and settle there until mid-Autumn. The role of women in this seasonal herding is also indispensable. When the researcher suggested a scenario in which shepherds go to meadows by themselves, one informant laughed and said "*I have never heard of any single shepherd who ever goes to dzhailoo alone. It is impossible. They just don't do it*". While in dzhailoo women provide domestic care, maintain the yurts (dome-shaped felt tents), care for domestic animals used as food sources, and also herd the animals. Additionally, women take primary responsibility for making of kumis (fermented drink made from mare's milk). It is a culturally-important dairy product that local population traditionally consumes and also a widespread source of income for the families - it is very popular among tourists.

Local government in Suusamyр айыл окмоту is comprised of eleven members. Since last year, three members are women. However, according to the director of Suusamyр community radio, the role of the latter in the local politics has so far been invisible. The same informant explains this by the traditional division of gender roles in their community that continues to gain its prominence. She beckons that

*"Women must always wear head-scarves; they should not be wearing pants. They are expected to be at home, and not leave their husbands in order to work outside. Young girls do not want to stay here, because there are no good conditions for women, there are restrictions for women. They want to go live in the city where they have more freedom"*.

An interview with a male participant supports that. When I asked him about economic contributions of the women in the village, he answered that "*women are always at home, they are all housewives. They don't work*". Indeed, many women, even those with university degrees have problems with employment in the village. They become officially unemployed and maintaining their households and children becomes their major form of employment. However, this research reveals a number of significant but less visible types of economic activities that



local women choose to do. It became apparent that women find various opportunities for generating additional income maximizing on what works well for them. In what follows is a more detailed description of five specific cases which illustrate industrious, creative and business-minded local incentives run by women living in Suusamy. These activities are diverse and range from small-scale production of traditional winter felt boots (valenki) and home-based poultry farm to an independent sewing workshop, community-based tourism and nationally recognized applied art workshop.



Photo 2. Kyzyl-Oi village. Suusamy Valley. Source: Kim , 2014

### **Case 1. Nuria<sup>1</sup>. Production of traditional winter felt boots (“valenki”)**

Nuria is a 51-year-old widow with five children. She used to work as a salesperson in Naryn where he husband also had a job. After he died she moved to live with his parents in Suusamy. She never re-married, instead, took care of her children and father-in-law until he died last year. Nuria never sought a formal job. Occasionally she made use of her handiwork to earn some additional income. Her father-in-law was a World War II veteran and supported the entire family with his relatively high pension. Since he died Nuria has become the head of her household and an only source of cash income.

Valenki (traditional winter felt boots) is the type of winter footwear that all local men and women wear in the snow (Photo 3). Small-scale production of valenki recently became a reliable source of income for Nuria’s family. Few years ago she tried to save some money and decided not to buy winter boots for her children but to make them herself. Nuria attended an older woman-villager who knew how to make them and asked to teach her. After this training Nuria

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<sup>1</sup> For ethical reasons all of the informants in this report are disguised under pseudonyms

made valenki for all of her family members every year. When other villagers saw her boots they started coming to Nuria's house and placed orders. Since then every winter she made these boots for sale.

In the course of the interview, it became apparent that Nuria's valenki are in high demand. By end of October she already had twenty new orders. She also had to decline a bigger order from a local store because she knew she would not be able to make the supply on time. *"They always ask me to give them my valenki to place on their shelves. But I don't make so many"*, she says. Evidently, the production process is not an easy one, but a rather time and labor-intensive tedious manual work. Nuria's very particular attitude towards the quality of her products adds to the labor intensity. To illustrate, Nuria in principle prepares her own felt (itself a very complex manual work) refusing to buy it from anybody else. She needs to be confident in the quality of the felt and can only trust it if she knows how it was made. She says *"I know that boots from my felt will maintain a sturdy shape for at least a few years"*.

Additionally, Nuria applies her artistic skills in the design and decoration of the boots. She created a model for women with a more fitted design, elegant and modern shape and leather ornaments with a zip in the middle for an easier slip (Photo 3). Also, Nuria offers long-term warranty service to her customers. She repairs her boots for no additional price even after they have been worn for a few years. *"They come back to me and ask me to mend a sole, or a zip or a leather ornament. I fix those and don't take money. If they wear my valenki for three years, this is very good!"*



Photo 3 . Nuria's valenki. Source: Kim, 2014

Nuria's production is characterized by high quality, individual tailor-made approach and customer-oriented service. It is also apparent that these activities also have profit-making qualities with a considerable potential. According to Nuria's calculations, the prime cost per pair including the costs of materials such as felt, leather and woolen fabric accounts to less than 500 som<sup>2</sup>. The price Nuria charges equals 1000 som per pair, i.e., a double of its prime cost. Additionally, Nuria continuously works on minimizing the costs and comes up with different ideas. For example, she does not purchase new woolen fabrics but buys old woolen coats from a

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of the data collection one som was equal to 0.017 US Dollar

flea market in a nearby town. *“One woolen coat costs about 200 som and will be enough for five pairs of valenki”*, she says. Overall, monthly profit estimates to more than ten thousand som.

Receiving income from boot production is significant for the livelihood of Nuria’s family. *“When people started asking me to make felt boots for them, I thought that if I sell three pairs, I will buy one ton of coal for winter”*, she recalls. Today she earns enough money to provide her household not only with coal but flour, oil and other basic subsistence items. But today, Nuria wants to increase her income. Especially now that the family does not receive support from her father-in-law’s pension while the need for cash increased. She explains, *“the money is not enough, because the youngest child is still in high school, older son and his wife live with me and are unemployed, my daughter divorced and left her child with me”*. She wants to increase her production; however, there are serious challenges for such a development. It turns out that Nuria makes valenki at night when she has finished her daily routines and her grandchild is asleep. *“It does not matter if it is men’s work or women’s work. It does not matter. I do it all”*, she says. *“I have free time at night. I can sit down and sew. The youth give me a hand sometimes, but they are not interested in it”*. These precarious conditions in which Nuria has to carry out her productive activities interfere with a long-term sustainability of her business and tend to compromise on her health and general physical wellbeing.

Another challenge relates to lack of the primary raw material, i.e., felt. Nuria prepares the felt in the summer because the process requires water and warm temperature. Nuria’s “signature” valenki require particularly thick and sturdy qualities of her felt and she does not manage to produce sufficient amounts. The core problem here is the manual process of production (preparing the wool, washing, carding, etc.). Very shyly Nuria suggests that a wool carding machine could be a solution to this problem. Having such an equipment would enable her to produce more felt, hire additional labor, train new people and oversee their work with less involvement from her side. Nuria contemplates that having a wool carding machine would not only increase her production but diversify her sources of income. She would lend it to other villagers and charge small amounts for this service. In this way, she adds, the machine will not only serve her family but other women who are involved in similar economic activities. Moreover, the machine would be instrumental in helping Nuria implement her cherished plan of passing the handicraft skills to younger women. If she had more felt, she could *“invite young women home and teach them how to work with felt. They would help to make valenki, learn and make them for themselves”*.

However, Nuria knows that the price for a wool carding machine is significantly beyond what her family can afford. For this reason she never even tried to purchase one or inquire into the current price for such a machine. Not to say that the supply of those machines is known to be very scarce. Nobody in her community has one. She emphasizes that what she needs is a wool carding machine, not the cotton carding machine. Apparently, the latter has already been purchased within one UNDP project, but it does not suit Nuria’s work. She will also need a sewing machine suitable for working with leather. Right now, Nuria only has one regular sewing machine which she uses for all possible purposes.

Nuria’s family has livestock which can be sold to raise money for the equipment. However, using family assets for this purpose is out of the question. Customarily, cattle are not sold for cash unless there is a proper need for that, i.e., funerals, weddings, university tuition, social

gatherings, etc. Nuria, too, uses her cattle as a safeguard in important family purposes and wants to save the cattle “*in case something urgent comes up*”. It is apparent that purchasing new equipment does not qualify for the criteria of proper “good cause”. What Nuria does for income is considered to be more of a “women’s hobby” rather than a serious business with high potential worth of investments. Asking for support from the local government is not considered a realistic option. Nuria even laughed at the thought that *ayil okmotu* might be of any help to her. “*I have no hopes related to ayil okmotu. They never helped me. I don’t know if they help anybody at all*”.

## **Case 2. Anara. Felt processing and sewing workshop**

Unlike Nuria, the second interviewee, Anara, was quite successful in finding resources to purchase equipment for her business. For ten years Anara ran sewing and felt processing workshop in a small village called Kozhomkul in Suusamyr *ayil okmotu*. This 50-year-old woman was born and raised in Kozhomkul. After graduating from local school in Anara went to a university in Bishkek and received a degree in mechanical mathematics. After that she returned to the village, got married and taught mathematics and informatics for more than thirty years in the local school. After 1991 Anara started participating in international projects which were operating in the Kozhomkul at that time. As a school teacher she had a good access to information, was accustomed to working outside of home and had a better preparation for seizing the new opportunities offered by the projects’ services and resources. This is how Anara remembers the beginnings:

*“We started in 2005 when UNDP Poverty Reduction program helped to create women’s groups. I was a member of such a group and later I became its leader. I became what they called “an activist”. Then, they left and I stayed and using what they taught me opened the workshops. I founded a Public Fund “Demir”, a women’s organization. I wrote a project to the UN Volunteer Fund to renovate the old building for the workshops. This building I rented from *ayil okmotu*. After that I wrote another project proposal for funding to the UNDP Poverty Reduction Program and purchased equipment for the sewing workshop, sewing machines, and felt processing machine. So, we started. This is how I organized a women’s group”.*

It is apparent that Anara’s personal qualities have had a particular importance for her enterprise. Her activism, energy, and experience in public life played an important role in helping her start her activities:

*“During the Soviet Union I was an active member of Komsomol<sup>3</sup>, I was active in the Communist Party. Right after the Union collapsed I started working with the UNDP projects, attended seminars, conferences. At that time, there was this ideology that women need to be advanced, they need to be helped. This is how this idea came to me. I thought that I should also create a women’s group where I will work with them and help them.”*

Anara’s motivation for self-development played a significant role in the success she has achieved in running her business:

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<sup>3</sup> All-Union Leninist Communist League of Youth

*“How to run a business”, “How to keep books and finances” and so on, all this knowledge comes from the seminars and educational courses that I went to as part of [international] projects. I also took paid classes if I thought I needed them. I took classes in Marketing, Business, even Agro-business. I took courses such as “Start your own business”, “Improve your business”, “How to improve sales” ... all of them. Even now when I hear about different trainings offered, I go and participate. So, I know price-making, how to make different calculations, etc.”*

Today, Anara’s business is located in a large one-storey building consisting of two parts. One part of the building is a sewing workshop. In its large room it displays the finished products (Photo 4) and sewing machines. There is an additional room that is used for people who come from outside of the village and stay there for longer periods of time. The felt processing workshop is located in a different part of the building with a separate entrance. There are two large rooms each equipped with a felt processing machine (Photo 5 and 6).



Photo 4. Piles of mattresses produced at Anara’s workshops. Source: Kim, 2014



Photo 5. Wool carding machine in Anara's workshop. Source: Kim, 2014



Photo 6. Piles of unprocessed wool in Anara's felt processing workshop. Source: Kim, 2014

The number of Anara's employees varies from five to fifteen people. These are typically women between thirty and sixty years of age. Currently, there are only twelve employees, five of which have worked with Anara since the very beginning. She calls them "*my women*". The employees produce felt for yurts, shyrdaks, ala-kyizes<sup>4</sup>, dowry packages, mattresses, blankets, etc. Their clients are mostly local farmers and Anara actively works on extending her market. Anara is very proud of the accomplishments her group has made over time.

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<sup>4</sup> Shyrdak and ala-kyiz are Kyrgyz traditional felt carpets included in the list of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

*“We have many successes. We started as only five women, we did everything manually. After we bought the equipment it immediately became easier to make felt”.*

Besides organizational achievements, Anara points out personal successes. She admits that her life has had significant financial improvements since she started her business. *“It has been five years since I retired and do not work in the school anymore. I would rather be fully involved in this* (and she pointed at the pile of the ready mattresses in the middle of the room depicted in the photo 4). Indeed, profitability of Anara’s enterprise is impressive:

*“In the school I only could earn maximum of five thousand som per month. Here, my income is about fifty to sixty thousand som in one month. In six months I make about three hundred thousand som. It is a lot more than what I would earn in the school”.*

Improvements in financial standing pertain to all of the other women working in the workshops. Anara explains:

*“They [women who work here] earn money, I earn money. It is slow, but we earn money. My women are also pensioners or housewives... they receive income too. It is good for these women because they can earn money and attend gatherings, because, you know, in the village life is like that. One has to attend gatherings”.*

Positive changes in these women’s life situations go beyond financial improvements. There are apparent social and emotional benefits that these women have gained. Below is what Anara has observed in relation to her employees:

*“My women have become close friends. They play the “black cash pool”<sup>5</sup>. They often thank me for their friendship. It is important because in such a small village there are only few sources of entertainment. There is no cinema or anything. Friendship brings pleasure. These women go visit each other, have tea parties, etc”.*

Anara is very proud about how “her” women adapted their lifestyles to the working schedules in the workshops:

*“My women are so glad! They say they prefer coming here instead of being at home. It is better to work here than not. In such way they can do even more. They wake up at 6 am, milk cows and do everything before 9 am so that they can be at work at 9 am. So, they manage to do everything in a much less time. So, they are very happy, and they manage to do everything.”*

At the same time, Anara remembers that when she started the workshops her group met some level of resistance and misunderstanding from the villagers. Many people did not understand what these women were doing, why they became part of the women’s group. Their husbands would follow them and force them to go home or check up on them. Only later, when the women started bringing money home the situation changed. Today, some men even insist that their wives go to Anara’s workshop. They call Anara a “business lady” (said in English) and even ask for her consultation about their own business ideas and projects.

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<sup>5</sup> An informal rotating savings association based on trust

Currently, Anara's group faces a different set of challenges. As indicated above, her products require an extended market and she continuously works to improve it. She has inquired into various possibilities including having regular retail outlet site in large bazaars in Bishkek. Anara has also attempted to negotiate agreements with local hospitals and military units for mattresses supply. High competition in Bishkek or corrupted systems of administration in the local institutions predicated success of these negotiations but that did not discourage Anara. *"Our sales are slow and it irritates me and I will work out how to improve it"*, she says. Marketing of felt is less problematic for Anara. It is an easier process because *"farmers always need felt for yurts and floor carpets"*. One small difficulty with the sales of felt is that it has seasonal features.

*"When farmers begin preparations for dzhailoo, they call me asking if I have felt because they will soon go. If I call them earlier they say they don't need it but in March and April they want it (laughing). This (she pointed to rolls of felt in the corner of the room. (Photo 7.) I can only sell in the spring, not earlier"*.



Photo 7. Rolls of raw felt produced in Anara's workshop

Like Nuria, Anara, too, encounters problems with the quality of the raw materials for her goods. The group purchases wool from the local farmers but the quality of it remains quite unsatisfactory (Photo 8.). *"We buy one ton of the wool and only two or three hundred kg will be used. The rest we throw away or burn"*, she complains.





Photo 8. Raw wool drying in the backyard of Anara's workshops

There is also a more serious challenge that Anara still has to overcome. The workshops only operate six months per year from April to September. In the wintertime they lock the workshops and wait for the spring. This happens because the building does not have an in-built heating system. Electric radiators would be a solution in warmer parts of the country, but in Suusamyр Valley where winters are extremely cold, the buildings require serious heating. At the moment the premises do not provide for a furnace or boiler neither does it have hot water piles and a chimney. Anara's responses make it clear that this situation is devastating for her. Winter is a good time for sewing because families return from high mountains meadows and women can spare more time for working in the workshops. In the summertime, in contrast, women's time is often limited because they must travel to pasture lands together with their husbands. *"If we had heating, we would work all year round"*, says Anara. The problem with heating also contributes to a higher staff turnover. Anara has to regularly post job announcements to ensure that she has employees.

*"I invite people from outside, from Naryn, Osh, etc. Both women and men come, work and live here. They want to stay longer time, but they cannot stay in this building because it is too cold to work and to live. So, they go away and each year I have to look for new people. Every summer I need to hire additional workforce because local women go to dzhailoo with their husbands."*

Despite all of these difficulties, Anara's attitude is very positive. *"We only work six month a year, but we always have an income, we always earn money"*, she says. In the future she wants to involve more youth in her workshops. Her plans is to

*"have many trainees, many young people. We need to solve the problem of heating and water, of market our goods, and make more money for a higher turnover. I would invite even more women for a different kind of work, i.e., making of "beautiful things", more refined handicrafts, folk souvenirs, embroidery, etc. This is important to save and pass old Kyrgyz traditions."*

Anara has already started working in this direction and organized a handiwork workshop for schoolchildren in the school. She teaches twenty five young girls the skills of “manual piala” (a special art of making woolen yarn). They needle or crochet clothes, hats, socks, scarves, etc. while Anara helps them to find a market.

Anara conveys confidence that she will manage to achieve her goals. This strong woman knows how and where to raise funds for her workshops. She is aware of what works and what does not. She knows, for example, that the local government will not be helpful. *“They [ayil okmotu] gave us the building and we don’t pay rent for it. This is already a big help. They can’t give more, they themselves are financially dependent upon subsidies”*. However, she is on the lookout for a possibility to apply for grant. For this she says they *“cooperate with many organizations including UNDP, with the Forum of Women’s NGOs and others”*.

### **Case 3. Shair. Ornamental and Applied Arts**

Shair is a well-known needlewoman who has been recognized for her talents well beyond her village. Since she was 35 years old she has been a widow raising four children. With a high school certificate for her formal education, Shair received an important informal training in sewing, embroidery and ornamental design from her mother and an uncle. As a result, from a very young age she was recognized for her astonishing skills in handicraft production and tailoring. This was fundamental not only for her development as a gifted artist but also for securing employment. For ten years she worked as a seamstress in Dom Byta (House of Repairs) and later became a teacher of arts and domestic skills for girls in the local school where she worked for twenty years. Today she is a seventy four year old, retired and enjoys her status and community respect. *“People used to respect me for my talents and they keep respecting me too”*, she said.

Fifteen years ago one international organization initiated mobilization of local applied art groups and invited Shair to join it. She and her daughter-in-law agreed. This was where they learned how to make profit from their skills including calculating direct production costs. Shair’s daughter-in-law used to keep books and carefully register numbers to make sure they know what income they had. Since then Shair made shyrdaks and ala-kyizes for sale (Photo 9, 10, 11). The production of the carpets was very successful. The family never experienced shortages in demand.

*“Every year tourists come to purchase Shair’s made shyrdaks. We sell our shyrdaks abroad, we sell them to tourists. There is woman from Austria, she comes here every year and buys all the shyrdaks we have. In 2004 she bought one shyrdak and after five years she came back to buy more. If we had more, she would buy them all. But we don’t produce wholesale “*

Successful production and associated income had an immediate positive impact on the wellbeing of the entire family.

*“Since we started earning more, it is so good. We support our three children who study in the universities in the city, we constructed a house. We were invited to participate in exhibitions, both in Suusamy and in the city. Life changed for the better, of course.”*



Photo 9. Shyrdaks made by Shair. Source: Kim, 2014

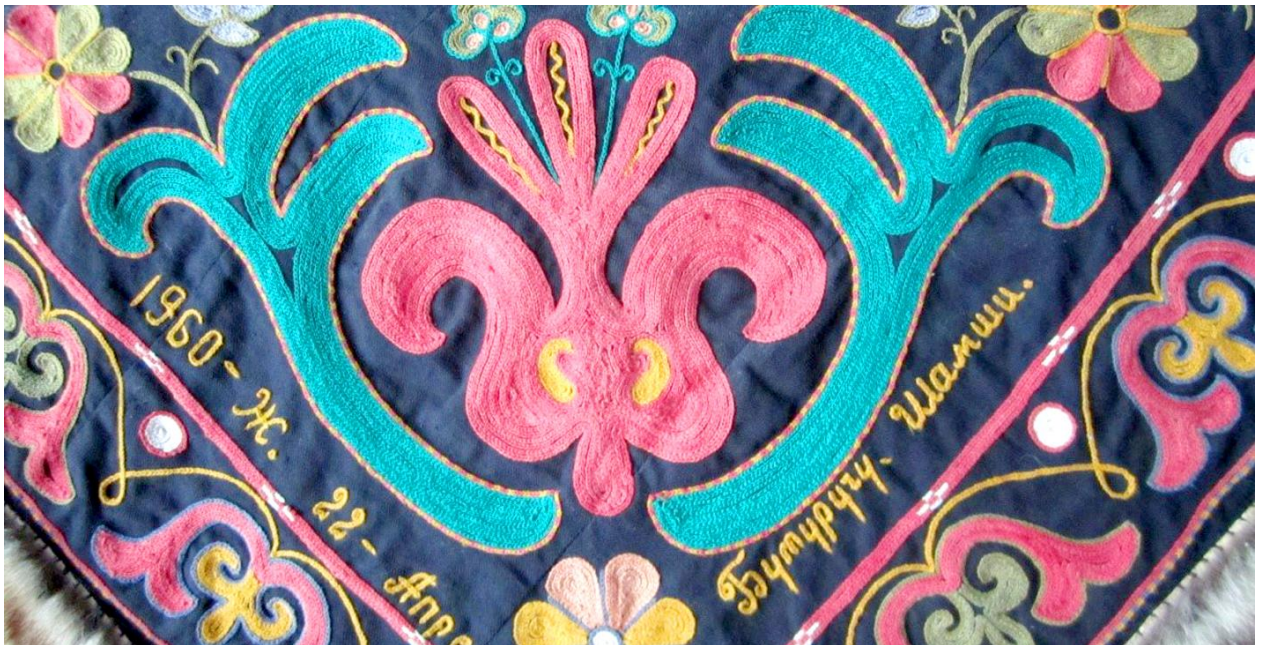


Photo 10. Tushturduk made by Shair. Source: Kim, 2014

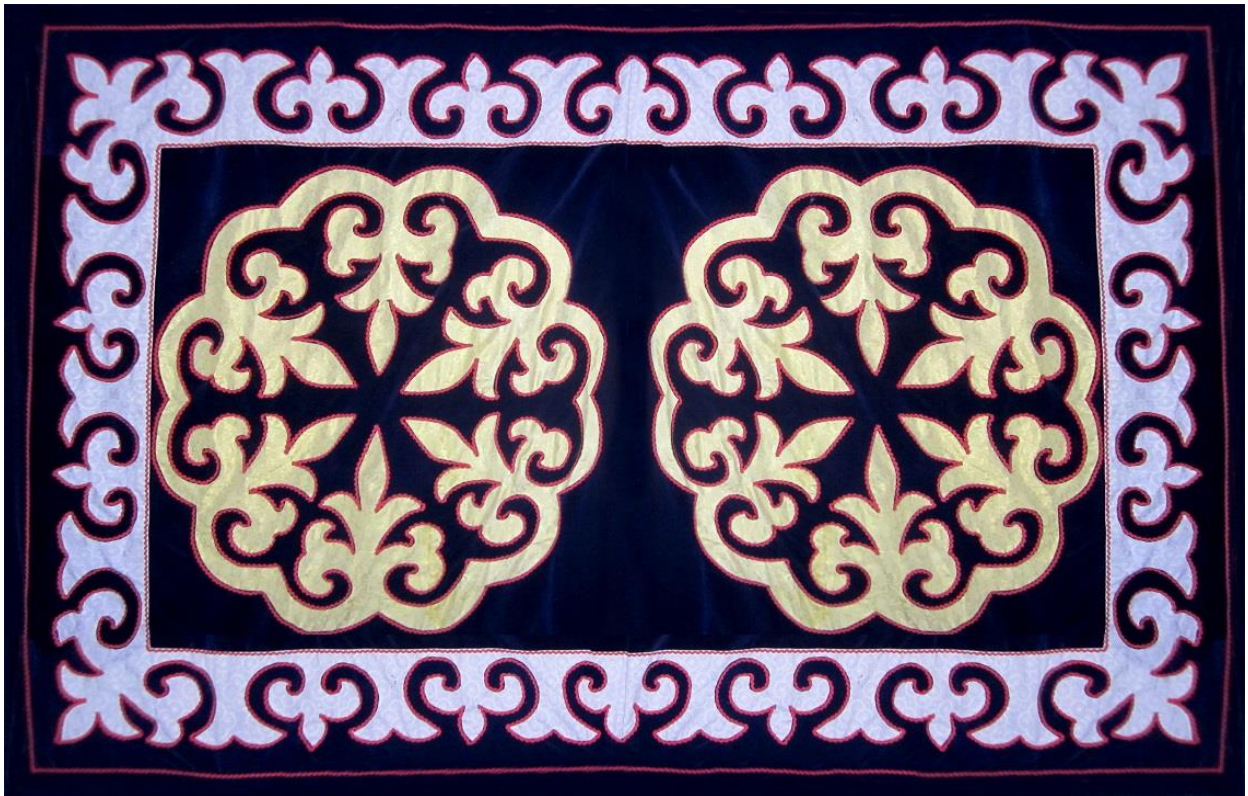


Photo 11. Ala-kyiz with ornamental arts by Shair. Source: Kim, 2014

However, it seems highly likely that Shair's production will gradually discontinue existing. In the last two years, the level of production decreased significantly. *"Nobody now even keeps books and records the numbers to calculate incomes and cost prices"*, says Shair. The decrease in production is attributed to her gradual withdrawal from the group activities. Due to her health conditions Shair cannot maintain the same level of productivity and must spend much more time in Bishkek, i.e., away from the production site.

Additionally, as Shair beckons, there is a lacking interest in national applied arts among the youth. *"There are so many unemployed women and it is possible to train them and they would continue this tradition. Unfortunately, nobody is doing this anymore. It is a pity"*. Younger women are discouraged from doing applied art because of the inherent necessity to process felt. Women seem to be especially reluctant to the idea of its manual production. They prefer a more technologically advanced process with the use of the machines and apprentices. In fact, lack of felt processing machinery partially caused disintegration of the local applied art group which Shair used to lead. When Shair was its leader the group used felt that her family members produced manually. *"If only I were fifty years old now, I could work so much. Only now my health does not allow me to work more"*, she said.

Shair's productive activities, as well as those of Nuria and Anara seem to share one interesting feature, i.e., they evolved around one extraordinary person who can hardly be replaced. While the mere presence of local women-led activism and economic leadership is important by itself, in such a context longer-term sustainability of their projects remains at risk.

An important note to Shair's case: financial standing of the family despite the decrease in the production did not suffer. The family became involved in community-based tourism where

Shair's contribution was essential but required less work. In fact, community-based tourism took precedence over applied art workshop because of its apparent privileges - it is a significantly less labor intensive and much more cost-efficient work. Shair plays an important but secondary role in this activity. Her daughter –in-law is in charge of this enterprise. A more detailed description is what follows.

#### **Case 4. Nurzhamal. Community-based tourism**

Nurzhamal is Shaiyr's youngest daughter-in-law. She is in charge of hosting tourists in their house as part of a Community-Based Tourism (CBT) program that operates in the village (Photo 12). Every year from May to October Nurzhamal's house welcomes its clients. They stay in a large one-story building where rooms are beautifully ornamented with photos, handicrafts, shirdaks and ala-kyizes which Shaiyr has made. In the off-season time, Nurzhamal's family uses this house for family celebrations, visitors and other social gatherings. In the backyard the family sets up a large yurt where the clients dine and rest. The family itself lives in a smaller house located on the other side of the yard.



Photo 12. Office of Community-Based Organization in the village. Source: Kim, 2014

Organizationally, Nurzhamal's guesthouse is bound to the village's CBT office. The latter attracts tourists and allocates them among local families who must sign up and queue to receive clients. Nurzhamal's turn comes once or twice a week. Because tourists tend to come in groups, she typically hosts up to one hundred clients each season. For additional price Nurzhamal and her family also offer their guest a variety of entertaining services such as felt-making workshops, cooking master-classes, kumis-making demonstrations and various performances.

*"They [the tourists] often ask for "folk shows" [said in English]. We do it together with the children. We dress up in Kyrgyz national costumes, sing and dance folk dances and play komuz. We also lend national costumes to our guests and sing and dance together with them".*

With all the fun activities that Nurzhamal's guesthouse offers to its clients, she emphasizes her professional position toward this work. In order to increase the appeal of her house, she made considerable improvements in the building:

*"We treat this very seriously. This is our job during the summer. I even installed shower and toilet inside the house, also running water, both hot and cold. I did it for my clients. When you have these conditions, tourists come to your house."*

Hosting tourists brings financial outcomes that make Nurzhamal very satisfied:

*"Life has become much easier. We have telephone, washing machine, ovens and devices for baking bread, vacuum cleaners, refrigerator. We are becoming lazy (laughing). Lives of women are becoming much easier"*

Besides, there is a non-material component that makes her happy. Having never travelled abroad Nurzhamal has an exposure to international culture through communicating with her foreign guests:

*"It is very good for us to have tourists in our house. On the one hand, it is additional money, on the other hand, it is so interesting, we speak to them, they bring us gifts. We even learnt some English and French. Our children also learnt how to make simple conversations in English. The other villagers like to practice saying "hello" in English. There used to be no such things as tourism in our village, there were no tourists here. Now we are used to them already and treat them well"*

Advantages of her business significantly outweigh any challenges or additional workload for Nurzhamal. To my question about possible difficulties that her work involves she responded in the following way:

*"I cook them breakfast, dinner and host them for the night. This is easy. We also have fun, sing, dance, kindle bonfires at night. Honestly, [she whispered] I would rather host thirty tourists than fifteen Kyrgyz people because it is much easier"*

It is apparent that the CBT-related work neither interferes nor burdens Nurzhamal. Only after the researcher's second prompting she pointed to a lack of locally-grown vegetables which not only increases the prime costs of her business but also creates additional workload of ensuring pre-orders and timely delivery of vegetables from outside the village:

*"We don't grow and don't grow enough. If anything grows here, it only ripens in the fall and not in the summer. Often when we need vegetables, local stores would not have them"*

Nurzhamal wants to promote her business and work directly with her clients without the intermediary services of the CBT office.

*"We would like to host 15 people each day, we have the capacity and motivation for that. But CBT does not give us so many, only once or twice a week during the season. The season begins in May and finishes in October; some people also come in November but not to us"*

She understands that this would require independent marketing and advertising work: “*We need our own pamphlet and distribute it in tourist agencies*”, she said. But this work is, apparently, a challenge that this family has not sought a solution too.

In a more long-term perspective, Nurzhamal has an idea to construct a new cottage house near the river for her guesthouse. Apparently, such a location is more strategic because it reflects preferences of the clients.

*“Many tourists do not like to stay at our house, they prefer those houses which are closer to the river. It is more beautiful there, they like walking along the river, do fishing there, etc. This is my dream, I don’t know how to actually do this. We can’t do it with our own financial means. If we had some external help for that, it would make it more realistic”.*

With the researcher’s prompt Nurzhamal admitted that she would even consider taking a loan from the bank. No other sources appeared to her as realistic. For example, Nurzhamal immediately disqualified local government as a feasible option:

*“God forbid if we ever have to depend upon their [ayil okmotu] help. We’d better develop by ourselves”.*

#### **Case 5. Nargiza. Home-based poultry and dairy farming<sup>6</sup>.**

Nargiza is a 29-year-old woman living in small village in Suusamyр ayil okmotu. She is a shy and reticent collocator who gives short precise answers without much elaboration. Nargiza lives in a small house with her husband, four children (the youngest child is two years old and the oldest child is fourteen years old), and an elderly mother-in-law. Her husband is a full-time employee in a local school. At home taking care of children and attending to the elderly mother-in-law is entirely Nargiza’s job. Nargiza has never been officially employed. Shortly after she had finished high school she fell victim of bride abduction practice and was forced to marry the abductor. In the new family she was expected to help her mother-in-law who used to sell products from their domestic farm including milk, eggs, kurut (ball-shaped dry young cheese), yogurt, ghee, etc. This woman taught Nargiza how to trade, calculate prices and seek clients. Gradually, Nargiza assumed full responsibility for this work. Today she runs a small home-based poultry and dairy farm. When this study was conducted she had five cows, few dozen hens and a few turkeys under her care.

It is clear that Nargiza’s activities are utterly essential for her family’s wellbeing. She remembers a period of time two years ago when she did not have any poultry:

*“This was a difficult time. We did not even have eggs to feed the children. We could not afford to buy them. It was so difficult...”*

Since then Nargiza makes sure that her small business is continuous and well-maintained. Today, her farm brings a considerable contribution to her family budget. To illustrate, each week she receives two thousands som for dairy products, two thousand some for selling whole

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<sup>6</sup> Due to apparent embarrassment of this respondent the researcher did not take photos of her house and farm.

turkeys and about five hundred som for selling eggs. This accounts to more than ten thousand som per month which is twice as much as her husband's monthly salary.

Nargiza is markedly committed to her poultry project. It is evident that financial benefit is complemented with an increased feeling of self-worth. She seems to have used her economic activities as a compensation for her unrealized dreams and plans:

*“I was an excellent student in high school. My parents and I were preparing for me to go to a university in Bishkek. After I got married they made my husband promise that he would allow me to study in the university. He told me to wait for one year. One year passed and I already had a baby and my parents-in-law started feeling sickly and I had to take care of them”.*

Ultimately, Nargiza never went to the university. Today she finds opportunities for self-development and draws confidence from her independent economic activities.

*“Now at least I am doing this work, making my own money. If I could go to the university now, I would go. But my husband does not support me. He says that education is no use to me. He says that even a teacher like him does not earn as much money as I already do without education”.*

Adding to her developing sense of empowerment is her being in charge of making decisions about how to spend the earnings. Of course, most of the cash money she spends on her four children and household expenditures. But sometimes she also barter her products for the goods that she personally needs.

It is no surprise that Nargiza wants to scale up her homestead farming. Especially now, that she observes a higher demand for her products:

*“Neighbors always ask for more eggs, I never have enough. Turkeys, too, will be gone by the New Year. Our people like turkey, especially in the winter. They will be asking for more, but I don't have enough”.*

Nargiza has a special interest in increasing production of turkeys because of their better sustainability to cold temperature. She wants to learn about effective technologies in turkey management in order to turn her micro-farm into a more “serious” production enterprise:

*“Right now I have only six turkeys. I will sell them all way before the New Year. Next spring I will have to buy few little ones and they will grow until the next New Year. If I have two turkeys, they bring twenty younglings in a year. If I had forty I could sell 38 of them and leave two for the next year”.*

However, Nargiza has little money for purchasing more poults. Indeed, her earnings are enough for immediate household expenditure but not for any larger investments. Additionally, the family has been constructing a new house which demands considerable expenses.

Also, an extended poultry farm would require her to hire at least one helper and she is not sure if she could afford it. Nargiza has been doing all the farm-related work by herself because her older children are at school while the younger ones are too little. Her husband treats her farm as a



“*women’s work*” and neither interferes nor helps her. In these conditions, Nargiza is left with an only option to keep her farming afloat and develop it at the rate and the speed that she can afford.

### **Analysis and conclusions**

Five individual experiences reviewed here demonstrate diversity of processes whereby local rural women secure income through their own efforts. There are shared features that all the studied cases explicate and illuminate. Analysis of interviews shows that women continually seek to improve their livelihoods by engaging in different productive activities which are available and appropriate in their existing situations. These women play a crucial role in supplementing family income. However, women’s income-generating activities often add increased workloads to women’s already busy schedules and risk to compromise on women’s health and wellbeing.

The study shows that women-operated economic projects tend to be small-scale agriculture, manufacture, service and trade. It is evident that women possess adequate levels of knowledge and skills that determine success of their small enterprises. They obtain these skills and knowledge in different ways ranging from family upbringing and a “trial and error” approach to more systematic trainings provided by international organizations.

It is believed that living standard of the rural poor can only be uplifted when they receive income from the economic activities (Ahmed et al., 2007). Empirical evidence from this study supports this statement. Women report that their increased income improved at least four aspects of their livelihoods, i.e., food availability, freedom in cash expenditure, housing conditions and participation in social activities. No data were obtained on sanitation and health situation.

Women gain both positive economic and social benefits from their work. All of the interviews implicate a certain degree of empowerment obtained in the process of their economic participation. Four of the five women explicitly indicate that the overall quality of their lives has risen significantly. All of the respondents have developed an improved sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. Women’s productive activities are important for their personal self-realization. Increased social recognition and respect have been mentioned among other non-monetary benefits.

While economic initiatives empower women, the conditions in which they find themselves are often not optimal for success in terms of a more sustainable economic growth and independence. The interviewed women face a variety of multi-dimensional difficulties and constraints that affect their capacity to maintain and expand their productive activities. Common challenges for these women’s economic activities include lack of capital, insufficient infrastructural facilities, lack of improved technologies, poor marketing channel and, in one instance, relatively low skillfulness. There are also traditional socio-cultural constraints which limit women’s participation in larger-scale economic activities. In a situation where coordinating agencies that could support less visible economic activities are lacking, women who have a limited freedom of movement like Nargiza are barred from a better access to resources for improving their production.

Interviewees for the study were quite diverse but sufficient to express different aspects on their development with regard to their resource generation. Interestingly, none of the women has used financing options such as bank loans and micro-credits to start or maintain their activities. It has

been mentioned once at a researcher's prompt and only as a distantly possible solution. This, of course, rids them of the additional pressures related to outstanding credits and repayment schedules. However, some interviewees successfully used grant support offered by international organizations.

Indeed, the role of international organizations has been quite prominent in three of the reviewed women's economic projects. These women indicate that they have received support in the way of trainings, funds, or services. Also, the earnings of these women appear to be higher than those who have not had access to international resources. Such difference might be attributed to the fact that the former received various additional skill development training on running small business, marketing, etc.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that rural women's economic activities in Suusamyir empower them without largely disturbing the existing gender order. Nevertheless, this report would be incomplete without a note that local women manage to address not only their "practical gender needs" but also begin to tackle their "strategic gender needs" (Moser, 1993). Advancing themselves in the economic sphere they gradually come forward to confidently participate in public spaces. They do so in their own, often implicit, but locally appropriate ways.

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