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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RAPID ASSESSMENT ON ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS FROM RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE NATIONAL STRATEGY AND NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR GENDER EQUALITY

KYRGYZ REPUBLIC
2020

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The assessment was conducted within the framework of International Alert's project "Tatyktuu Zhashoo - Living with dignity: ensuring key messages on preventing violence against women and girls reach religious communities", funded by the British Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Purpose of the study:

to review the National Strategy and NAP for Gender Equality and Post-COVID Recovery Plan of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2020-2021, identify potential gaps and opportunities, and work with both Interfaith Working Group policy makers and development partners on how to address needs of women and girls from religious communities in strategic documents.

The assessment was conducted in September 2020, and used qualitative research methods: desk research and in-depth interviews.

43 in-depth interviews:



state and local self-government bodies



religious organisations



independent experts



civil society organisations



international organisations



survivors of violence

The topic of this paper is increasingly relevant due to the surge in violence against women during the pandemic. According to the Ministry of Interior of the Kyrgyz Republic, it increased by



compared to the same period in 2019. Moreover, the main strategic documents in the area of gender equality expire in 2020 and active work on designing state policy for the next period has already started. The recommendations made in this study can be used by all stakeholders in designing measures for the new cycle.

It should be noted that very few analyses on addressing the issues of achieving gender equality and reducing violence against women in religious communities have been conducted in Kyrgyzstan. This topic needs more in-depth and extended research, and should involve scholars of religious studies, theologians, and gender experts.

Context overview

An overview of the current situation shows that, during the implementation of the National Gender Strategy for 2012-2020 and its National Action Plan for 2018-2020, a national mechanism for gender equality was established and is actively being implemented. Institutional and legal mechanisms have been established and made it possible to protect women from violence and to increase women's participation in decision making at various levels of government and in the economy.

However, there has been no significant progress. Law enforcement and implementation of laws and policies has been complicated by the following challenges to advancing gender equality:



poor gender-responsive budgeting lack of institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming in sectorial strategies, policies and programme budgets



changes in negative social norms and gender stereotypes - there is a polarisation of public opinion regarding issues of women's rights and gender equality between liberal, traditional, secular and religious parts of society



low participation in political activities and representation - there is a significant decrease in the representation of women at decision-making levels



poor definition of the gender policy concept for Kyrgyzstan

The main areas of activity of NAP for 2018-2020 were aimed at:



elimination of harmful practices (early marriage of girls)



preventing violence against women and girls



increasing the political participation of women at the local level

Rapid assessment revealed that needs and demands of women in religious communities have not been taken into account in the current gender equality policy and programming. The conclusions and recommendations below were developed by research team on addressing this issue and we frame them as suggestions which will be further discussed, developed and elaborated with various stakeholders as Interfaith Working Group, policy makers, and development partners.



General conclusions and recommendations

1

Conclusion



Recommendation

The goals defined in the NAP are not clearly formulated – there are no quantitative indicators of success in achieving set goals and objectives. There is also a weak correlation between the selected tasks and actions with the objectives of the Gender Strategy. The established mechanisms do not ensure the systematic promotion of gender equality, do not reduce the vulnerability of women; do not fully protect women from violence. The gender component is blurred in sectorial government policies; understanding the concept of gender equality is reduced to simple disaggregation of the number of men and women participating in various events. Gender mainstreaming has not been institutionalised in public administration – in government agencies it is carried out fragmentarily and depends on the availability/implementation of projects funded by international organisations.

Gender perspectives must become an integral part of all sectoral and state policies and must be considered as a cross-cutting policy. The study recommends moving away from the current planning practice and suggests that the Ministry of Labour and Social Development take a more active role in policy development on gender and becomes responsible for its implementation. There is a need to make gender policy cross-cutting and a basic framework for developing sectorial public policies and achieving gender equality. The authorised body should develop goals and target indicators for each area, and line ministries and departments should propose a package of measures on how they can achieve them.



2

Conclusion



Recommendation

The current gender equality policy is weak or does not take into account the interests of women in religious communities. Moreover, the applied policy measures are not always applicable in working with religious communities. An assessment of the impact of the National Gender Strategy and the NAP on women in religious communities suggests that these documents have not had a direct impact, which has led to their self-isolation and exclusion from socio-political development processes in the country. There is also exclusion/isolation/self-isolation among religious communities from local-development processes at the territorial and community level. Polarisation and conflict between the secular and religious parts of society are growing, and there is an increase in stigmatisation for women and influence of stereotyping on both sides.

The study recommends involving religious communities/women in projects/programmes to develop the socio-economic, political life of the community and develop a culture of political, economic and civic activity of women in religious communities through mass media. To actively promote the fight against stereotypes and stigmatisation it is imperative to hold public discussions with secular and religious women/men to identify common interests, and promote joint actions aimed at developing the NAP on gender equality. It is also recommended to conduct research on religious communities and religious women to base approaches and public policy measures on more evidence, thereby making them more accurate and more effective at reducing violence against women in religious communities.

3

Conclusion

Gender discourse is mainly promoted in urban areas and developed in English and Russian. There is an acute shortage of Kyrgyz-speaking gender experts who can convey the principles of the rule of law, and gender equality in simple, accessible language. Kyrgyz (and given the anglicisms, Russian) vocabulary does not fully reflect the meaning and fundamental values of gender policy, and sometimes the content of direct translation contradicts so-called 'traditional' values and perceptions of society and can be rejected by citizens. Sunni Islam is the the predominant religion

in the Kyrgyz Republic, and religiosity among local communities has grown significantly since independence from the Soviet Union. The language of faith for many is, therefore, Kyrgyz, i.e. understandable to local populations in rural areas. At the local level, this has led to a fusion of religious beliefs about the place and role of women with patriarchal traditions and customs, and therefore to the proliferation of locally supported ideas that contradict state policy on gender equality.



Recommendation

It is necessary to approach the translation of gender terminology into Kyrgyz carefully, including linguistic, gender, and theological experts. Kyrgyz-speaking experts require training to be able to convey principles of the rule of law, secularism, and gender equality to ordinary citizens and religious communities in simple, accessible language. (The study also recommends that the National Action Plan should incorporate more measures and mechanisms for promoting gender policy at the local self-government (*ayıl ökmötü*) level with the participation of all representatives of rural *zhaamats* (community groups).

It is necessary to put forward constructs that are understandable for religious women...but the language and terminology of [gender] concepts are not clear for either secular or religious women. The main point is that they live in a secular state, in Kyrgyzstan, where the state protects them from domestic violence, and that it is necessary to follow not only Sharia, but also Kyrgyz legislation...for this we need to inform and teach them about the rule of law. Religious leaders often present archaic national traditions as Islamic canon

From interview – CSO representative

Conclusion

4 The main reasons for ineffective implementation of gender-equality policy are: insufficient human resources of state and municipal bodies; inaccurate and shallow understanding of the foundations and principles of gender policy; the prevalence of traditional, conservative thinking. This is especially acute in local government, where people without sufficient education, basic knowledge of national legislation, and principles of a secular state come to work. Therefore, the actions of Local Self-government Bodies (LSGs) in promoting gender policy are often ineffective – staff ignorance and even subversion can render measures taken under the state policy on gender ineffectual and, at worst, meaningless to local communities.



Recommendation

Increase the professionalism and qualifications required to enter public administration, as well as provide continuous improvement in terms of capacity and strengthening executive discipline for implementing policy. The activities of all state authorities in religious communities should be gender sensitive. There is an increasing need to require mandatory higher professional education for LSG bodies, organise training, testing, and develop performance indicators in the implementation of gender equality policies at the local level (this concerns the State Agency for Local-Self Government and Inter-Ethnic Relations (SALSGIR) in particular).

Conclusion



Recommendation

The current policy on religious communities is being implemented with a main focus on ensuring national security and the prevention of violent extremism, which is insufficient. Proactive policies aimed at integrating religious citizens into the socio-economic and socio-political life of the country are now required. Gender policy can become a tool for promoting the principles of secularism, democracy, non-discrimination, and diversity in religious communities.

The level of trust in government among the population, especially religious communities, is declining. In particular, high levels of corruption in politics hollows out the role of a secular, rule-of-law state in their minds; as a result, more and more people see religious values and laws as more just and worthy of respect. There is a clear correlation between the poor performance of state and local self-government bodies and an increase in the level of public confidence in religious leaders and religious values.

It is necessary to enhance the capacity of representatives of religious organisations and women, and focus on religious principles in a secular state, the role and place of religion in a secular state, knowledge of the law, development of recommendations for politicians, development of common actions to combat violence against women, joint assessment of the impact of these actions, tolerance and conflict reduction, fighting stereotypes, etc. It is necessary to develop and introduce a training module on civic education into religious and civic education with an emphasis on secularism, the place and role of religion in a secular state, and the role of women in a society together with the State Commission on Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, gender and legal experts, religious scholars, and theologians.

In religious communities, understanding of diversity is expanding and religious thought on gender relations is developing, and it makes us think about how to make religious canon more relevant to the current situation. There is an understanding in the religious community that the archaic demands of Islam require modernisation and updating. The challenge is to find mechanisms for how a secular state can effectively respond to violence against women in religious communities and the role and importance of religious leaders in advancing the resolution of these issues.

The activity of the state in relation to religious communities is reactive and it deals with consequences with limited financial resources... the activities of religious organisations, often financed from outside, are proactive, and they work with the values and beliefs of a person to which the state does not pay attention...it loses out to religious organisations.

6

Conclusion



Recommendation

Violence against women occurs at different levels: at the level of a woman's family and her inner circle, community, and society as a whole.

To develop policy measures to reduce violence against women at the family, community, and societal level, and take into account the specifics of communities. It is most important to ensure that women are protected from violence at the local level, i.e. where it is most immediate.

Existence of violence depends on:

community level

unfortunately, commitment to gender policy is not being respected by either government bodies or rural communities.

societal level

institutionalised norms for gender roles in society, legal and policy frameworks that govern societal behaviour and attitudes towards violence, and effectiveness of law-enforcement, judicial, and social-protection systems.

2nd level

violence can be reinforced by local power structures such as schools, healthcare organisations, peer groups, *zhaamats*, and local authorities

1st level

the type of family, woman's subordinate position/privileged position in the family, her level of education, access to resources and services (including healthcare and finances), living environment, and personality.

7

Conclusion



Recommendation

Women from religious communities are not a homogeneous group. There are no studies with representative samples in this area. There is a correlation between violence against a woman from a religious community and:



her level of education (secular/religious)



the branch of Islam that she and her family practises



poverty, employment and income levels in the family



access to support infrastructure at the family and community level



her leadership qualities

When working with women from religious communities, it is necessary to take into account that they have different needs and interests and require different approaches and responses. It is recommended to map religious *zhaamats*/communities in terms of school of religious thought/education (from non-radical to radical) to develop special measures to protect religious women from violence together with the State Commission on Religious Affairs, the State Committee for National Security, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, religious organisations, theologians, and secular experts.

The religious school of the *zhaamat* she attends, or of which she is a part, primarily affects her position and status in religious communities. Religious *zhaamats* adhere to the rules of different religious schools – from moderate to extremely conservative and even radical.