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## "Unlocking the Potential for Sustainable Peace in the Ferghana Valley: Key Role of Women in Conflict Resolution"

Policy Brief



# “Unlocking the Potential for Sustainable Peace in the Ferghana Valley: Key Role of Women in Conflict Resolution”

## Executive Summary

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325, which created an obligation for all UN Member States to improve their support and efforts to increase the role of women in the processes of building peace and security.<sup>1</sup> Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have all expressed their commitment to this goal by developing and adopting national action plans to implement UNSCR 1325. To be effective, efforts aimed at improving women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and post-conflict recovery processes need to be context specific and based on an understanding of women’s existing contributions, as well as the barriers they face. However, in Central Asia, we haven’t found any systematic analysis of the participation of women from border communities in peace and post-conflict recovery processes.



This policy brief contributes to filling such a gap by providing concrete, evidence-based recommendations for advancing the participation of women in peace and security processes in the region. Based on data from the border areas of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan from September–December 2023, this policy brief demystifies some of the complex conflict dynamics in the region, showcasing the important roles women have played in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and reconstruction – both historically and during the most recent escalations of conflicts. The policy brief also sheds light on the generational changes in women’s activism, bringing attention to the need to invest in capacity building and awareness raising among young women, who have been less involved in activism, due to a number of barriers they face to participate in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The brief highlights cultural barriers and preconceptions as well as the lack of economic independence as critical barriers to women’s peacebuilding work.

As the security situation along the Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek borders remains complex and the return of violence possible, the brief calls on international partners and their governments to

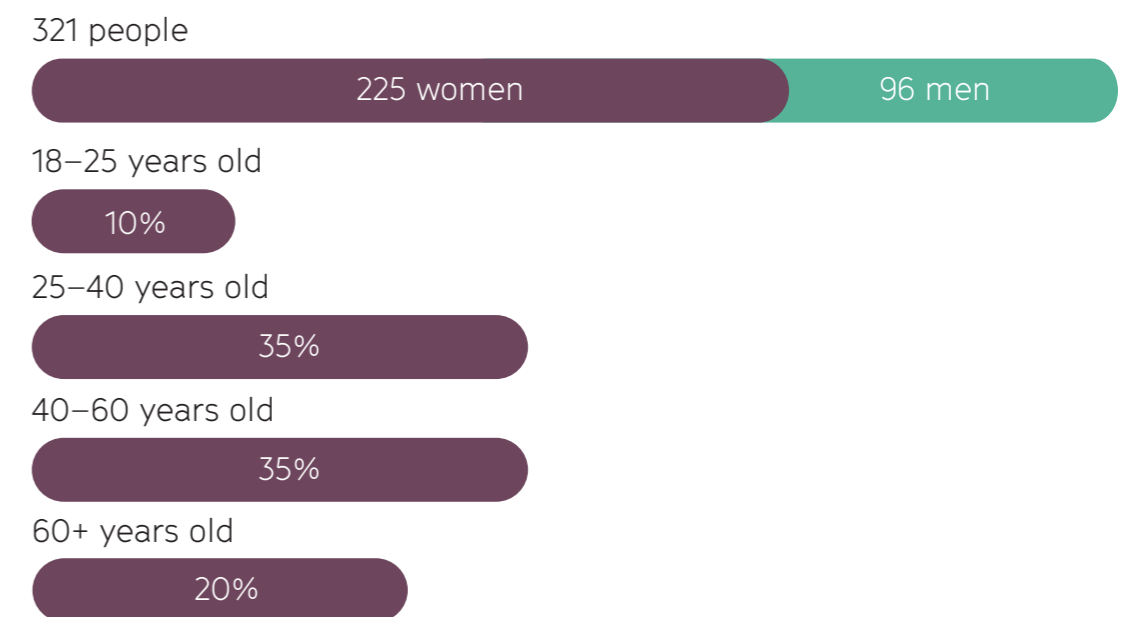
<sup>1</sup> UNSCR 1325. 31 October 2000, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/20/PDF/N0072020.pdf?OpenElement>

1. support women’s peacebuilding work, including through facilitating intergenerational dialogues and developing dedicated support programmes for young women and girls,
2. amplify investment in women’s economic security, inclusion and participation as part of peacebuilding programmes,
3. create awareness raising programmes aimed at challenging gender stereotypes within societies, including programmes aimed at women and young women to build their confidence,
4. invest in strengthening the social infrastructure of villages to provide better childcare support and enable women to participate in public life more actively,
5. provide sustained access to long-term psychosocial support programmes for women and men in the border areas,
6. continue to strengthen local government bodies and increase the representation of different generations of women at this level of decision-making.

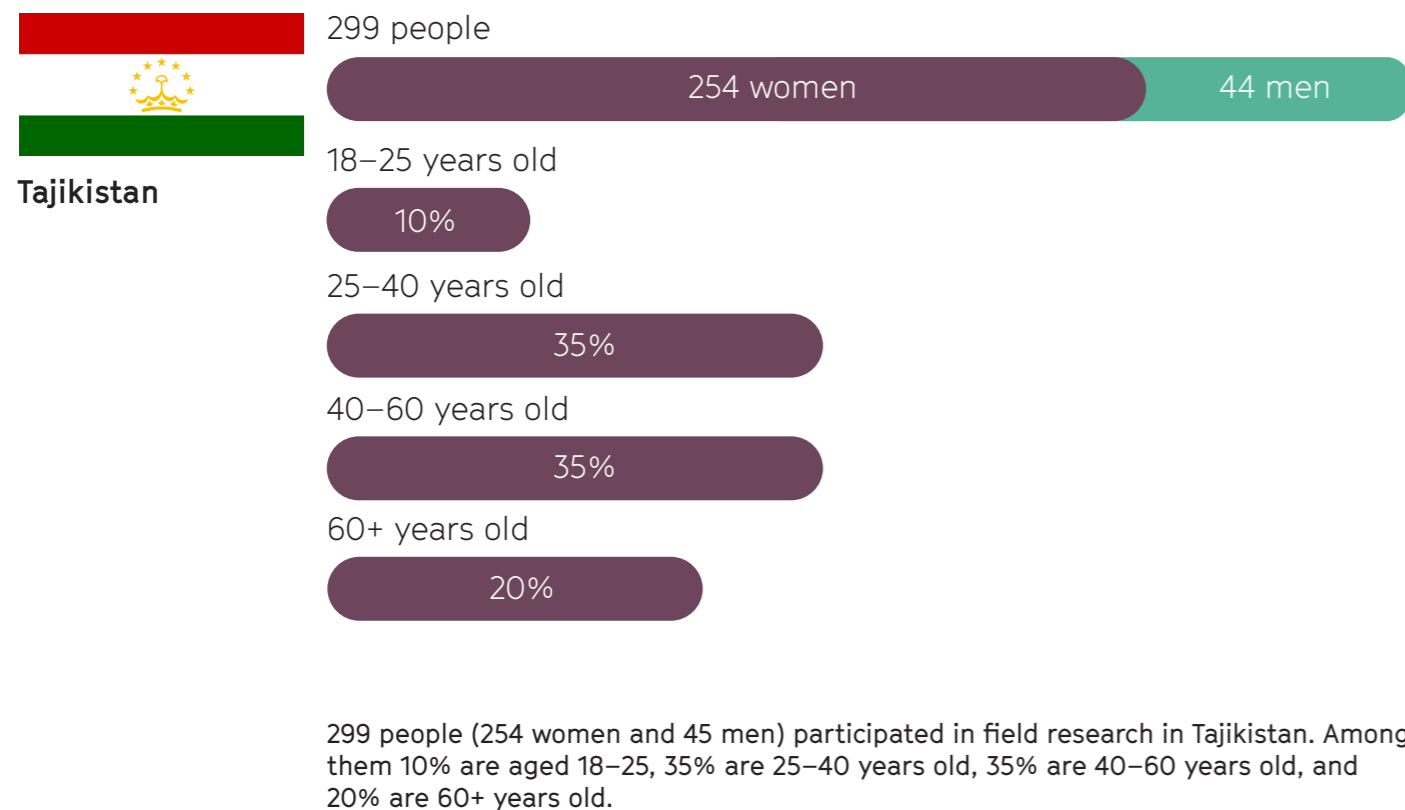
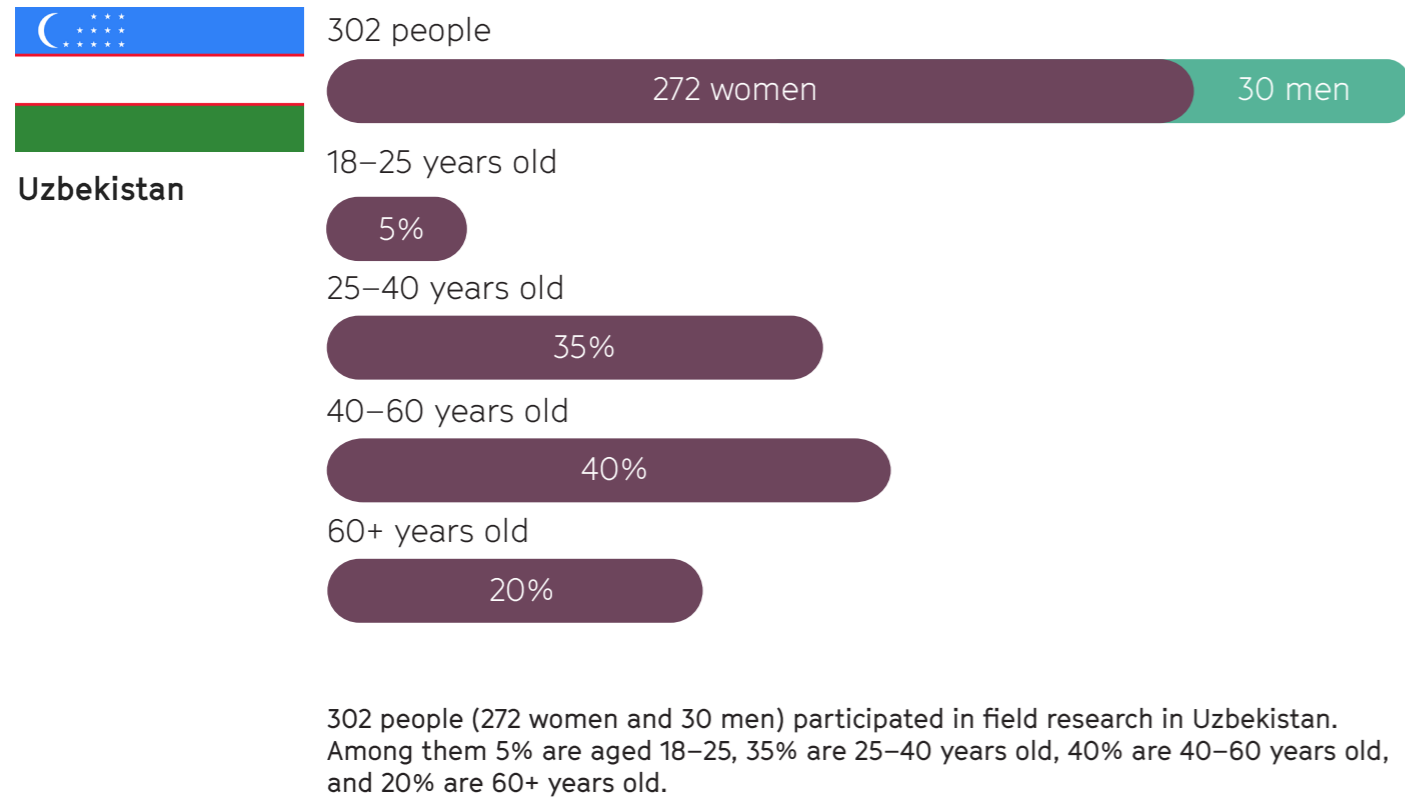
The policy brief is based on a series of consultations led by Foundation for Tolerance International in Kyrgyzstan, Istigbolli Avlod in Uzbekistan, and Association of Scientist and Technology Intelligence in Tajikistan, which brought together 922 people (321 in Kyrgyzstan, 299 in Tajikistan, and 302 in Uzbekistan). The consultations were a part of the project “Raising Women’s Voices in Peace Processes in Central Asia” implemented between July 2023 and February 2024 by the three local organisations in partnership with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and financially supported by the Rapid Response Window of the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund. Seventy percent of the consultation participants were women and 30% were men. The purpose of the consultation was to understand the entry points for building an inclusive environment for women from border communities that will help them communicate their vision of the world to the relevant stakeholders.



Kyrgyzstan



321 people (225 women and 96 men) participated in field research in Kyrgyzstan. Among them 10% are aged 18–25, 35% are 25–40 years old, 35% are 40–60 years old, and 20% are 60+ years old.



### Context in the Ferghana Valley – security in the border territories

Between 1991 and 2023, the border areas of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the Ferghana Valley underwent significant changes in terms of security and stability, which has had a significant impact on local communities.

A series of violent conflicts throughout the 1990s and 2000s led to the deteriorating security of communities living in border areas. In 1999, an armed extremist group launched an attack in the territory of the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, demanding the opening of a corridor to neighbouring Uzbekistan.<sup>2</sup> Following the incident, military operations in Batken continued for several years, exacerbating the militarisation of border areas in the Ferghana Valley. In 2005, there was a surge in internal violence in Andijan city in Uzbekistan. In response, Uzbekistan began to actively securitise and militarise the areas bordering with neighbouring countries. The final stage of securitisation and militarisation of borders occurred in 2010, after a violent conflict and political crisis led to interethnic conflict between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Uzbekistan unilaterally closed its border with neighbouring countries.

The situation on the Tajik–Uzbek border was also characterised by a level of volatility in the past decades. Border disputes have flared up periodically between the two countries, in particular between 2000 and 2016. Between 2000 and 2001, Uzbekistan planted land mines along the border with Tajikistan, which killed hundreds of people on both sides of the border before they were finally removed in 2020.<sup>4</sup> The relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan stabilised and began to slowly improve after 2016: the countries signed 53 bilateral documents during historic state visits in 2018 and by 2023 agreed on the delimitation and demarcation of 95% of the border.<sup>5</sup>

The normalisation of relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan since 2018 contrasts with the conflict dynamics on the Tajik–Kyrgyz border, which have intensified dramatically in recent years. Between 2021 and 2022, there was a series of violent clashes between the two countries. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan signed a ceasefire protocol on 19 September 2022.<sup>6</sup> On 2 October 2023, the parties signed Protocol 44, which was reported as a significant shift towards a political solution to the issue of borders between the states.<sup>7</sup> However, the document remains unavailable to the public; therefore, its contents are not included in this policy brief analysis.

The volatility of the security situation along the three countries’ borders has had a significant impact on the populations living in the border areas, with women bearing a disproportionate brunt of these negative effects. Women constituted the majority of

<sup>2</sup> Madeleine Reeves, (2005), “Locating Danger: Conflict and the Search for Fixity in the Ferghana Valley Borderlands,” *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 1: 67–81.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Harding, “Kyrgyzstan Erupts into Ethnic War,” *The Guardian*, 13 June 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/13/kyrgyzstan-erupts-into-ethnic-war>

<sup>4</sup> Gazeta News, “‘There Used to Be Mines on the Border with Tajikistan’ – President,” 24 September 2021, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/24/mines/>; Zarangez Navruzsho, “Mines of Not Slow Motion,” Radio Ozodi, 19 October 2015, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/more-then-80-tajiks-died-in-tajik-uzbek-border-/27314745.html>; Negmatullo Mirsaidov, “Official Sources: Uzbekistan Has Completed Demining Its Border with Tajikistan,” 4 February 2020, [https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2020/02/04/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/02/04/feature-02)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Relations of the Republic of Tajikistan with the Republic of Uzbekistan,” 6 September 2021, <https://mfa.tj/ru/main/view/145/otnosheniya-tadzhikistana-s-uzbekistanom>; Sputnik, “Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Continue Work on Border Demarcation,” 28 June 2023, <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20230628/uzbekistan-tadjikistan--demarkatsiya-granitsy-36392321.html>

<sup>6</sup> Radio Ozodi, “Dushanbe and Bishkek Sign Peace Protocol, Tajikistan Releases Four Captured Kyrgyz Soldiers,” 19 September 2022, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32041590.html>; Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Signed a Peace Protocol,” 20 September 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32042109.html#comments>

<sup>7</sup> Toktosun Shambetov, “Kyrgyz-Tajik Border: Will the New Protocol Solve All Problems?” 4 October 2023, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32622194.html>

those displaced by the recent escalations of violence, notably in the Batken region on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border. Moreover, the crisis exacerbated economic precarity faced by many women – since property was destroyed and looted. As described in more detail in the country reports,<sup>8</sup> women often disproportionately bear the brunt of the economic hardships as they act as the heads of households, especially when men leave the country to seek work abroad. Furthermore, for many women living in border villages, the deterioration of relations between countries affected their ability to maintain social and family ties across the borders. Women who participated in the consultations shared that there were instances when they were forced to find ways to cross the border illegally to maintain family ties. This further added to the burden of unpaid emotional and care labour carried out disproportionately by women.

At the same time, the consultations brought to light the many ways in which women have organised and taken action to make concrete contributions to peacebuilding, despite the challenges they have faced. In all three countries, women were at the forefront of responding to the outbreaks of violence, organising self-help groups, providing shelter and food to the displaced people, and calling for peace.

While the advances in dialogue among all three countries in recent years have had a positive impact on women’s security and cross-border mobility, much remains to be done to counter the persistent instability and uncertainty within the communities.

## Key findings

### Three generations of women and peacebuilding: shifting attitudes to peacebuilding in the Ferghana Valley

The security dynamics in the border areas of the three countries have changed rapidly over the past 30 years. During this period, communities accumulated knowledge and practices that helped them cope with reduced mobility, problems with access to cross-border infrastructure, economic impacts, and physical destruction caused by the conflict. Our consultations have demonstrated that **women are the primary carriers of this knowledge and experience.**

During the consultations, we found that everyday women’s practices played a key role in maintaining social cohesion between communities on different sides of the borders. However, the consultations also found that these practices are under pressure due to the border closures, and some traditional peacebuilding practices, such as elders from different communities maintaining close relationships, are becoming a thing of the past.

Accordingly, our data clearly show different **generational patterns in approaches to peacebuilding among women.** Participants in the 60 and above age group gave specific examples from their practice related to resolving conflict situations and mediating tensions. Participants in the age group of 40–60 years have also provided examples of concrete actions; however, they have been focused more on inter-community mediation and calls for peace and humanitarian participation in post-conflict reconstruction. Finally, in the age group of 25–40 years, examples of local peacebuilding were cited by participants very rarely, with reference to examples of leaders representing the older generation, and in the age group of 18–25 years, even such examples and references to older generations were practically absent.

There could be many reasons for the different levels of engagement in peacebuilding actions by women of different ages. One possible explanation could be a **disillusionment with the possibility of a peace process** due to the resurgence of violence in the past years, difficulty in accessing funds for recovery (highlighted particularly by internally displaced people in Kyrgyzstan), and limited confidence in the state-led negotiation

<sup>8</sup> REPORT ON THE CONSULTATIONS: “WOMEN OF THE FERGHANA VALLEY FOR PEACE”, Foundation for Tolerance International, Kyrgyzstan 2024; REPORT ON THE CONSULTATIONS: “WOMEN OF THE FERGHANA VALLEY FOR PEACE”, Istikbolli Avlod & Foundation for Tolerance International, Uzbekistan 2024; REPORT ON THE CONSULTATION: “WOMEN OF THE FERGHANA VALLEY FOR PEACE”, Tajikistan 2024.

processes. Another possible reason – often highlighted by consultation participants in all three countries – could be the **pervasive poverty and poor economic development in border areas**, which affects young people – including young women – by limiting their educational and employment opportunities. Consequently, many young people (women and men) have a tendency to **migrate** in search of economic security and are therefore less interested in taking part in peacebuilding activities. Finally, the **changing cultural norms with the rise of more conservative, patriarchal attitudes** have placed additional constraints on young women’s participation; many young women have very limited decision-making power within their household; they are often expected to stay at home and take care of the children, and are criticised if they engage in public life.

While the reasons may vary, the data points to a strong **need for more intergenerational exchanges, as well as leadership development and peacebuilding programmes directed at younger women, providing them with both capacity enhancement and an opportunity to engage.**

### The role of women in post-conflict reconstruction



Our consultations emphasised that women play many **key roles in post-conflict reconstruction during the flare-ups of violence in the border region.**

During consultations in the Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Sughd (Tajikistan) regions, we found that the role of women was significant both during the period of evacuation from combat zones and in post-conflict reconstruction. Our consultations showed that women played an important role in the processes by providing humanitarian assistance; cooking food and collecting clothing for those affected by violence; preventing escalation by calling for a ceasefire and in some instances influencing the youth not to engage in the fighting; supporting the emotional well-being of children during the active phase of the conflict; providing logistical support to refugees settling in a new location; or advocating on behalf of those affected with the local government. Some of these roles – such as the emotional support to their children or preventing young people from joining in on the violence – built on women’s care responsibilities, which are strongly gendered in all research countries. Others, such as providing humanitarian assistance to the displaced, required additional mobilisation and organisation, while yet others, such as advocating with the local government for the rights of those displaced and affected by conflict, built on women’s history of advocacy and activism in the region. Many of these roles – especially those tied to social reproduction – often remain invisible when talking about women’s contribution to peace processes. However, the consultations clearly showed that they contributed not only to improving the well-being of the communities, which is an important foundation for peacebuilding, but also to increasing women’s profile and legitimacy in the region – paving the way for their future peacebuilding work and participation in potential peace and political processes. In all three countries, consultation participants noted the unique role of women within traditional cultures, underscoring, for example, the implicit role of women as mediators in conflicts. This is not to naturalise women’s peacebuilding attitudes or capabilities, but rather to emphasise how their – often overlooked – care work and capabilities can contribute to broader peacebuilding and peacemaking efforts. There is abundant research that shows that women can also take part in fuelling conflict and violence.<sup>9</sup> These roles were less evident in the consultations conducted in the Ferghana Valley – possibly due to the state-centric nature of the violence and conflict dynamics.

<sup>9</sup> Alexis Leanna Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel: Understanding Women’s*

*Participation in Armed Rebel Groups*, 2017, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1435470>; Sandra I. Cheldelin and Maneshka Eliatamby, *Women Waging War and Peace: International Perspectives of Women’s Roles in Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011).

*“Women leaders were the support of people. They distributed humanitarian aid, compiled lists of affected people, brought the needs to the right government agencies, and provided moral support. We have women as heads of border villages, deputies of local councils, community activists, teachers, they all helped as much as they could”. – Woman, internally displaced person from Batken, Kyrgyzstan, age group 40–60, Bishkek, November 2023.*

*“I witnessed women actively helping. They shared clothes, cooked food. When we collected aid for the affected families, very often it was women who were the first to respond, and because word of mouth works very well for them, after that other women joined faster than men”. – Man, age group 40–60, Sugh, Tajikistan, November 2023.*

At the same time, women from the affected regions noted the **destructive nature of the psychological trauma to which they have been exposed as a result of conflict**. As first responders, women have been particularly exposed to trauma, which requires a long-term programme of socio-psychological support and trauma relief for women in the border areas of Batken and Sughd regions. They suffered the trauma not only due to their own displacement and the suffering of their families, but also because of witnessing first-hand the trauma experienced by others – since women were often the ones working most closely with the displaced populations and children. The lack of consistent and long-term psychological support impeded women’s ability to return to normal life, including their peacebuilding activities.

*“So many young soldiers lost their lives. Young children, parents, family members, and wives are left inconsolable. A family tragedy, an irreparable loss. I think every resident was stressed at the time. We also could not sleep at night, and were in a constant state of anxiety. The children asked the same thing over and over again, ‘Why are we running away, why are they shooting at us?’. This conflict had a particular impact on children and women; they still need psychological support. Many have become ill”. – Woman, age group 40–60, Batken.*

It is important to note that participants have also recognised the important contributions of women employed by local governments and other government institutions. According to the participants, women’s representation in decision-making institutions has effective results both during the acute phase of the conflict and during the period of post-conflict reconstruction. While participants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan noted the government’s significant contribution to the support and development of gender equality through various programmes aimed at increasing women’s participation in the public sphere, they all agreed that more can be done to support women’s meaningful participation. The support should go beyond the establishment of quotas – for example, it should include dedicated trainings or campaigns to challenge some of the persistent gender stereotypes. Participants underscored, however, that the most urgent need is the conclusion of a peace agreement on the borders and the speedy normalisation of life in border communities.

## Barriers to women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding

Consultation participants discussed and identified three main barriers to participation of women in building peace:

1. The first concerns the existence of **patriarchal gender norms in societies**, which reinforce negative gender stereotypes. In this regard, the participants pointed

to the persistence of views that women should stay at home and not engage in public spaces. Some participants noted that **this particularly affects young women** who are traditionally perceived as not having a voice, even within their own families. Women who are newly married have no decision-making power, as all decisions are made by their husband and/or in-laws. Several interviewees emphasised that these views are often internalised, meaning that the women themselves lack confidence or do not see it as appropriate for them to participate in the public arena. As one participant described her experience:

*“As a young woman, I can say that I face a lot of stereotypes. Since I participate in many social activities, I know that there are different views and opinions about women’s activism. And I don’t like it. In Isfara, women’s activity is not very welcome, there are restrictions, and my rights are infringed, here I am dependent on unwritten laws”. – Woman, age group 18–25, Tajikistan.*

Other quotes illustrate how some of the stereotypes and harmful norms (including the notions of “good” and “bad” women or wives) may have been internalised by some women:

*“There are bad wives too, they want a divorce, they are unfaithful. Phones spoil all women, the Internet too”. – Woman, age group 40–60, Tajikistan.*

*“A woman in the family is the keeper of the hearth. The roles of a man and a woman are divided in the family. Men do hard work, women keep cosiness, help them. Women’s help is in supporting men. Women by nature are weaker than men, so the resolution of difficult issues is a man’s work. If a woman is a leader and her duties require it, then she will have to do it”. – Woman, 57 years old, Ferghana Province, Uzbekistan.*

Yet another participant, from the Ferghana valley in Uzbekistan, shared:

*“Our women have such a characteristic: they lack confidence. I have also been invited to various positions a lot, and frankly speaking, I was afraid too. First of all, uncertainty and responsibility to the family. My children were small then. I had to pay a lot of attention to their upbringing”. – Woman, 52 years old, Ferghana Province, Uzbekistan.*

Some participants linked the **patriarchal gender order with the influence of religion** in the three countries. However, some participants highlighted the duality of religion’s role in women’s participation. On the one hand, some interpretations of religious norms entrench the viewpoint that women’s activity in public spaces should be limited. On the other hand, consultation participants cited positive examples of religious women leaders helping women in the community by providing relief and a form of humanitarian support:

*“There are religious women in our village who organise taalims [Informal religious lessons for women on specific topics] and invite women residents. This is also necessary in the current situation for women, so that there is an opportunity for women to gather and listen to each other. We all have a common problem. We all understand each other. Women need such meetings too; we need support. We go out of the house into the community of women. It makes it a little easier for women, relaxes them. At home, it is hard to think and be afraid all the time”. – Displaced woman in Bishkek city, Leylek, October 2023.*

- The second barrier identified by consultation participants was **economic dependence and the lack of financial literacy**. Consultation participants noted that many women in the border areas are financially dependent on their husbands or families, which further restricts their ability to act independently. Even when women manage to leave their home, mobilise, and organise some initiatives, they often lack the resources to finance these and have limited financial literacy, which both restrict their ability to become more economically independent. As highlighted by a participant:

*“Since many women stay at home, [they] are dependent on their husbands or other family members, there are economic constraints. If they start planning some initiatives, they are unable to implement them due to financial constraints. They have low levels of financial literacy or capacity to work, limited resources to improve their capabilities”. – Woman, age group 25–40, Ak-Sai Province.*

**Economic and labour migration**, which is common among border communities in all three countries, has a dual effect on women’s economic situation. In all three countries, most of the labour migrants are men, although more women and families have migrated in recent years. While having a husband in labour migration might have positive economic impacts for a woman by increasing the family income, it also increases her day-to-day burden to sustain the family. Some participants noted that the labour migration might have positive impacts in terms of women’s economic independence, since they become the primary decision-makers on economic matters within the household.

- Finally, the third factor highlighted by all participants was the **disproportionate burden of domestic and care work**, connected to the lack of sufficient care infrastructures within the border regions. Patriarchal gender norms and men’s labour migration both contribute to an extremely high burden of domestic work being carried by women in all three countries. Women are expected to perform most of the household duties and take care of the children. When their husbands leave in search of work, women often face additional responsibilities and burdens. Consultation participants underscored that the **lack of appropriate infrastructure – such as kindergartens, youth clubs, or other spaces where children could spend time – aggravates the problem by increasing the burden of care work on women.**

These constraints might be **more acutely felt by young women – especially if they marry early**. Early marriage still persists in some of the communities. According to Girls Not Brides data, 13% of girls marry before the age of 18 – with the rate for Batken, Osh, and Jalal-Abad being slightly higher, around 15%.<sup>10</sup> Early marriage **significantly reduces girls’ and young women’s access to education**, further limiting the prospect of economic independence and autonomous decision-making power, and resulting in their taking on a disproportionate share of domestic and care labour at home.

<sup>10</sup> Girls Not Brides, Kyrgyzstan country page, available at <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/kyrgyzstan/>, accessed 28 May 2024.



## Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, international partners, and donors, as well as civil society organisations:

- Facilitate dialogue on issues of peacebuilding between different generations of women.** Initiatives in this direction can become an important contribution to the system of conflict prevention at the local level. This should be complemented by **developing dedicated programmes for girls and adolescents** aimed at supporting their access to education and employment opportunities.
- Amplify investment in women’s economic security, inclusion, and participation as part of peacebuilding and development programmes.** This can include support of women’s entrepreneurship and financial literacy trainings, and should include dedicated support for young women, displaced women, and women who are heads of households. Taking such measures will help create conducive conditions for economic growth, improving the quality of life and strengthening security in general.
- Create or invest in awareness programmes aimed at challenging gender norms and stereotypes within societies, including programmes targeted at women of all ages, particularly young women, to build their confidence.** This can include, for example, highlighting positive examples of women’s contributions to peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and of profiles of women leaders, including in public roles.
- Invest in **strengthening the social infrastructure in border villages** through revitalising and building new kindergartens, leisure centres for teenagers, and training centres for youth.
- Provide sustained access to long-term psycho-social support programmes for women and men in the border areas.** These support programmes should be gender-responsive, meaning that they should take into account the specific experiences and traumas of women and men, girls and boys, and should as much as possible be provided by both women and men psychologists.
- Continue to strengthen local government bodies and increase the representation of different generations of women in this level of decision-making.** This can include providing trainings or networking opportunities to women who are local council deputies, members of local self-governing bodies, or candidates in local elections. Dedicated support programmes should in particular be created for young women to encourage different generations’ participation in governance.

*The project “Women of the Ferghana Valley for Peace” was implemented by a consortium of civil society organisations: the Foundation for International Tolerance (Kyrgyzstan), the Association of Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia (Tajikistan), and Istiqbolli Avlod (Uzbekistan) in partnership with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and with the financial support of the Rapid Response Window of the United Nation’s Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund.*



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