



Report on the Consultations

Women of the Ferghana Valley for Peace

Foundation for Tolerance International

Kyrgyzstan - 2024

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About the Report

This report has been prepared by the Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) within the “Women of the Ferghana Valley Contribute to Conflict Resolution” Project, implemented jointly with the Association of Scientific and Technical Intellectuals (ASTI) and the non-governmental non-profit organisation Istikbolli Avlod (IA), with financial support from the Rapid Response Window of the United Nations Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund and support of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict.

The project is a partnership initiative of civil society organisations from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan aimed at enhancing women’s participation in peace processes. For this purpose, national consultations were held in each of the three countries with women living in the border communities of the Ferghana Valley, government and civil society representatives (field consultations in Tajikistan were led by ASTI, and in Uzbekistan by IA). The consultations were intended to formulate recommendations on women’s involvement, taking into account existing opportunities, gaps, and challenges.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, field consultations were conducted by the FTI team under the leadership of the analyst Ms. Asel Murzakulova. The Foundation team is grateful to Ms. Murzakulova, partners, and all field researchers for their contribution to peacebuilding.

Key Findings and Recommendations

- 1. Women in the border areas of the Ferghana Valley have accumulated a vast amount of knowledge and coping practices** over the past 30 years of dynamically changing security dynamics. While the expertise varies across generations, overall, women's acute understanding of the security situation makes an important contribution to the local conflict prevention system.
- 2. The most critical security challenges for women and the general population remain poverty and poor economic development in border areas.** The collected evidence demonstrates that supporting women's economic independence and participation can be a key tool for promoting stability and sustainability in border areas. Investing in economic inclusion and empowerment of women and girls will help create enabling conditions for economic growth, improving the quality of life and enhancing security in general.
- 3. One of the main barriers to women's involvement in addressing socially important issues is the disproportionate burden of care work.** The burden is aggravated by insufficiently developed **social infrastructure of villages**: kindergartens, leisure centres for teenagers, and training centres, as well as better financial and emotional support for those taking care of the elderly, which also often disproportionately falls on women. Investing in this infrastructure will make it possible to shift part of the childcare burden to social institutions and expand women's involvement in the public sphere. **This burden is further aggravated by men's labour migration.** When men leave in search of work, women's already disproportionate burden of household and care work increases further, as they become *de facto* heads of households.
- 4. There is existence of a generational gap in relation to the peacebuilding practice.** The majority of young women (age group 18–30) did not have personal experience of peacebuilding to share, while women 40 years old and above have had extensive practice on the issue, which they shared during the consultations.
- 5. Women's involvement was key to the success of peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery efforts in Batken after the September 2022 armed conflict on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border.** The consultations revealed that during the acute phase of the conflict, women mobilised networks of compatriots who helped internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Batken to evacuate to safe places (in Bishkek city; villages deep inside Batken Province; and settlements in Chui, Osh, and Jalal-Abad provinces). It is important to note that women leaders including local council deputies, members of local self-government bodies, and activists took responsibility for organising logistics, gathering the necessary assistance, and providing advice and information to the IDPs. Women in formal positions of authority played a particularly active role, as members of *Aiyi okmotu* (the local executive self-government body), local council deputies, directors of various institutions, etc. were all involved in the relief response and contributed to its success and sustainability.
- 6. Many women in the region have experienced trauma and therefore require long-term psychological support.** Some of the local women noted that they received psychological support, which was provided through civil society organisations, to treat their post-traumatic

stress syndrome. However, most of them noted that the support was too short-term. The consultations' participants emphasised the deep and destructive nature of received traumas, which require a longer programme of psychological support for women and men of the border areas of Batken Province.

7. **Local self-governing bodies (LSGs) have played an important role in the reconstruction in the region. However, their approach could at times be more inclusive.** The government of the Kyrgyz Republic has taken responsibility for the reconstruction of destroyed houses and social infrastructure of the affected villages in Batken Province. Along with this, the government has been paying social allowances for the residents of border villages. However, the consultations have shown that the allowance and other social benefits are not accessible to women and men living as IDPs outside of the border regions, despite their acute economic needs. It is recommended that LSGs move away from a differentiated approach to the calculation of the social allowance based on the current place of residence of the recipients. This would ensure fair treatment of all affected groups and make the government's efforts in the context of post-conflict recovery more inclusive.
8. In the majority of analysed cases, **the consultations' participants noted the positive role of local self-governance bodies in building peace and preventing conflicts.** Participants indicated that LSGs are trying to solve community problems (e.g., cases with fundraising for surgeries, assistance in opening small and medium-sized businesses for women). In this regard, it is recommended to continue enhancing LSGs and increasing the representation of different generations of women at this level of decision-making.
9. **There is limited confidence in the negotiation process among the most vulnerable groups – the displaced women of Batken – which can present a barrier to effective conflict prevention.** As noted by the consultations' participants, they continue to have mistrust because *“we are told that border issues have been resolved, but everything [the conflict] starts again and again”*. In this regard, it is important to improve public awareness and ensure involvement of all groups of the affected population in post-conflict recovery initiatives and processes.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Kyrgyz government, LSGs, and international partners and donors

1. Support and invest in women's peacebuilding efforts. This should include **facilitating dialogue and peer-to-peer exchanges between different generations of women** to support the government's efforts in building peace and development in the Ferghana Valley.
2. Amplify **investment in women's economic security, inclusion, and participation as part of peacebuilding programmes.** This can include women's entrepreneurship, financial literacy trainings, and stimulating production of local women and establishment of women-run local businesses.

3. Invest in **strengthening the social infrastructure of villages** through revitalising and creating new kindergartens, leisure centres for teenagers, and training centres for youth.
4. Provide **support to women’s participation in decision-making positions**. This can include providing trainings or networking opportunities for women who are local council deputies, members of LSGs, or women candidates in local elections. Dedicated support programmes should in particular be created for **young women to encourage different generations’ participation in self-governance**.
5. **Provide sustained access to long-term psychosocial support programmes for women and men in the border areas of Batken Province**. These support programmes should be gender-responsive, meaning that they should take into account the specific experiences and traumas of both women and men and as much as possible should be provided by both female and male psychologists.
6. **Ensure that post-conflict recovery efforts led by the LSGs are equitable and that social allowance is granted for all people affected by the conflict, both those internally displaced and those still living in the Batken area**.
7. **Implement campaigns to improve public awareness and ensure involvement of all groups of the affected population in post-conflict recovery initiatives and processes** in order to build greater trust in the negotiations process.

Introduction

Relevance of the Consultations

A study by the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies of 182 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 has demonstrated that there is a 35% increase in the likelihood that a peace agreement will last for 15 or more years when women are involved in peace processes.¹ Other studies have also shown that women’s participation increases the likelihood both of an agreement being reached² and of it lasting longer.³ Evidence also shows that when women participate in peace processes, the resulting agreements are more likely to address issues related to gender equality, including important provisions related to economic development, education, and justice during transition.⁴ Research has also pointed to clear links between the overall state of gender equality and women’s rights in the country and the society’s resilience to conflict and violence.⁵ Thus, the security of society depends on women’s ability to take leadership roles in peacekeeping and active participation in security issues.⁶

Despite our best efforts we haven’t found any systematic analysis of the participation of women from border areas in peace and post-conflict recovery processes in Central Asia, and this report aims to fill this gap. The report is based on a series of consultations, which investigated women’s participation in three aspects of peace processes: (1) formal processes within or between countries that aim to establish peace and development in the countries of the Ferghana Valley, (2) processes or intermediary structures that link adopted agreements with local needs, and (3) all forms of social cohesion that enable communities to be resilient to different forms of tensions and potential conflicts. The purpose of the consultations was to understand the entry points for building an inclusive environment for women from border communities that will help them bring their concerns and vision for solutions to peace processes and decision-making at all levels of government.

Goal of the Consultations

The main objective of the consultations was to identify, describe, and analyse existing practices, opportunities, gaps, and challenges in women’s participation in peace processes in the Ferghana Valley.

The consultations took place from September–December 2023.

¹ Marie O’Reilly, Andrea O’Sullebhain, and Thania Paffenholz, “Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes,” *International Peace Institute*, June 2015, <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/IPI-E-pub-Reimagining-Peacemaking.pdf>

² Thania Paffenholz et al., “Making Women Count – Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women’s Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations,” UN Women, April 2016, https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/making_women_count-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5712

³ Jana Krause, Werner Krause, and Pii Bränfors, “Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace,” *International Interactions* 44, no. 6 (November 2018): 985–1016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>.

⁴ Jacqui True and Yolanda Riveros-Morales, “Towards Inclusive Peace: Analysing Gender-Sensitive Peace Agreements 2000–2016,” *International Political Science Review* 40, no. 1 (January 2019): 23–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118808608>; Jillian Abballe et al., “Gender-Sensitive Provisions in Peace Agreements and Women’s Political and Economic Inclusion Post-Conflict,” *Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and New York University Center for Global Affairs*, May 2020, <http://gnwp.org/nyu-research-2020/>

⁵ Cf. M. Caprioli, “Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2005): 161–178, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-8833.2005.00340.x>; Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, “Gender Empowerment and United Nations Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (2009): 505–523. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343309334576>

⁶ In this report, security is broadly defined as the state of being protected from impacts that could cause harm to individuals and society. This definition includes economic, social, information, environmental and physical security.

Methodology

Formal processes focused on resolving peace issues in border communities of the Ferghana Valley are inherently masculinised and elitist. They exclusively involve government representatives, and many documents regarding these processes are not publicly available. This is consistent with broader regional and global trends, where women tend to be excluded and marginalised, despite their contributions to peacebuilding within their communities.⁷ While it is critical to maintain advocacy for women's inclusion in formal negotiation spaces, it is equally important to recognise, and make visible, their contributions through informal peace processes, often at the grassroots level.⁸ In this regard, the consultations were not intended to assess any governmental efforts or to monitor the development of intergovernmental dynamics in the region. Instead, the consultations focused on local gender dynamics in the context of peacebuilding, documenting both tensions and prospects for development. For this, we used a mixed-method approach that includes a review of available publications, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. During the consultations, we adhered to the following ethical rules and do no harm principle:

- Participation in the consultations was voluntary.
- Respondents of the consultations were guaranteed anonymity.
- Data collected as a result of the consultations were encrypted and access to them was restricted.

The consultation questions were:

1. What is the current status of women's participation in building peace and stability in the border communities of the Ferghana Valley?
2. What problems and needs do women face in order to fully utilise their capacities in building peace and stability in the border communities of the Ferghana Valley?
3. What opportunities exist to support women in their pursuit of peace and development?

More than 320 residents of border communities of Batken, Osh, and Jalal-Abad provinces participated in the consultations. The participants included displaced women from Batken Province living in Bishkek after the conflict in 2022, representatives of local self-governments, community leaders, employees of public institutions, and local women entrepreneurs.

Following are breakdowns of respondents by gender (Figure 1), geographic coverage (Figure 2), and age (Figure 3).

⁷ Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, "Towards Gender-Equal Peace: From 'Counting Women' to Meaningful Participation | HD Centre," Oslo Forum, December 2021, <https://www.hdcentre.org/publications/towards-gender-equal-peace-from-counting-women-to-meaningful-participation/>

⁸ Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, "Building Trust through Care: A Feminist Take on Inclusion in Multi-Track Mediation," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2326623>

Figure 1. Breakdown of respondents by gender



Figure 2. Geographical coverage and breakdown by respondents

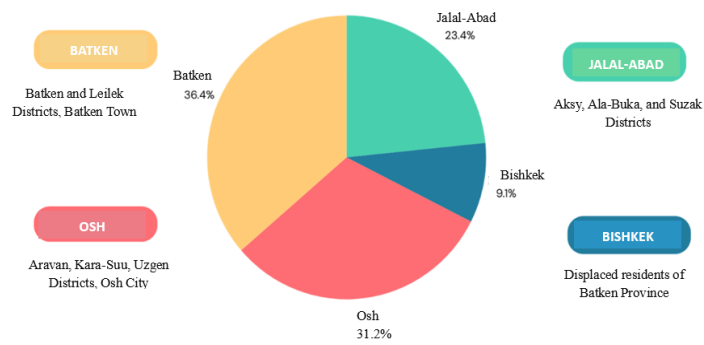
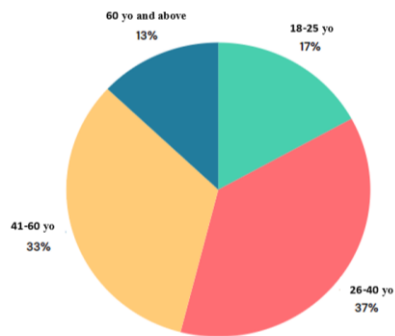


Figure 3. Breakdown by age



Context: Security Dynamics of Border Areas in the Ferghana Valley

The territory of the Ferghana Valley was transformed into Soviet territorial-national units in the course of a broad political process that has been recognised in history as the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia from 1924–1936.⁹ The principal change made under the Soviet administrative-territorial project was the division of the Ferghana Valley into national republics based on the ethnic principle – as a result, the Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek Soviet Republics were created.¹⁰ The process of national-territorial delimitation was dynamic and continued until the end of the Soviet period. It is important to note that during almost the entire Soviet period the three republics repeatedly established conciliation commissions to clarify their administrative boundaries. After the end of the Soviet era, the three republics gained independence and were transformed into independent countries: the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan in 1991. They then began the negotiation process to define their national borders. The negotiations within each country took place at different speeds.

In the Ferghana Valley, Kyrgyzstan borders Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The border with China, which is located in the mountainous part of Osh Province, was the subject of the Shanghai Five negotiation process and is not covered in this report. Between 1991 and 2023, the border areas in the Ferghana Valley underwent significant changes from a security perspective and this has had a significant impact on local communities.¹¹

The security regime of the border communities has started to shift towards a narrowing of freedom of movement and trade in the context of a series of violent conflicts. In 1999, the territory of present-day Batken Province was attacked by armed extremist groups demanding the opening of a corridor to neighbouring Uzbekistan.¹² The military actions in Batken lasted for several years and exacerbated the process of militarisation of the borders in the Ferghana Valley by Uzbekistan.¹³ The subsequent phase led to a prolonged worsening of the security situation. In 2005, there was an upsurge in violence in Andijan (2005). Uzbekistan began to actively securitise and militarise the border area with neighbouring countries. The final stage of securitisation and militarisation of the borders happened in 2010 after a violent conflict and political crisis that led to inter-ethnic conflict in the Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces of Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan unilaterally closed its border with Kyrgyzstan amid these events.

The complex security situation in the Batken, Osh, and Jalal-Abad provinces had gendered impacts. For many women in border villages, the deterioration of relations between the countries has had a negative impact on their ability to maintain social and family ties, and there have been cases when women have been forced to find illegal ways to cross the tightened border regime. This limitation was particularly felt by women, who are traditionally often responsible for maintaining social and family ties as part of their social reproductive labour in Kyrgyz society. They are the ones primarily responsible for raising the children and taking care of the sick and elderly, and they play a meaningful

⁹ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Colonial Technologies and the Making of the Soviet Union, 1917–1939*. Princeton University, 1998.

¹⁰ Terry D. Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Cornell University Press, 2001.

¹¹ In our consultations, the term 'security' was considered in a broad sense and included both 'hard' and 'soft' aspects.

¹² Madeleine Reeves, "Locating Danger: *Konfliktologiya* and the Search for Fixity in the Ferghana Valley Borderlands," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 1 (2005): 67–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930500050057>

¹³ "Uzbekistan Has Started Demining the Kyrgyz–Uzbek Border," March 2005. <https://www.azattyk.org/a/1235556.html>

role in making funeral and other arrangements when family members die. The security situation meant that these types of expectations not only created an additional workload for women, but also could put their freedom or even lives at risk:

*“My sister-in-law, who is 27, even with a Kyrgyz passport in hand, could not cross the border to Uzbekistan [editor’s note: the respondent refers to the period between 2010 and 2015]. Her father and brother died and she did not go to their funerals. They sent a telegram to Uzbekistan, but were afraid that she might be deported upon entry back to Uzbekistan. She would then be separated from her family and children. Young women did not know about their rights, the rules of border crossing, and many were afraid. According to the rules, they had to renew the border crossing stamp every two months. Women stayed at home, they had no money, and their husbands refused to give them money. One young daughter-in-law from Kyrgyzstan was unable to return home to Uzbekistan and had a deportation stamp in her passport. She was helped to cross the border illegally, but they discovered it, found her, and put her on trial for it”. – **Woman, age group 25–40, Jalal-Abad.***

The normalisation began in 2016, after political changes in Uzbekistan. The new leadership of the country proclaimed a political course towards normalisation of relations with its neighbours and regionalisation.¹⁴ In this context, the process of negotiations on border delimitation and demarcation between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was resumed. In 2023, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed the Declaration on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and exchanged documents on ratification of the treaty on certain sections of the Uzbek–Kyrgyz state border.¹⁵ These changes had a positive impact on women’s cross-border mobility and overall security.

*“We all have relatives in Uzbekistan. It used to be difficult to go there, we had to use detours or give money to the border guards. Now, if the documents are in order, both we and they can cross the border safely”. – **Woman, age group 25–60, Osh.***

Overall, the current security dynamics between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan can be characterised as de-escalation of tensions and peacebuilding after a protracted period of confrontations. However, in recent years, the conflict dynamics have dramatically intensified on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where a series of the bloodiest military clashes took place in 2021 and 2022. The countries signed a ceasefire protocol on 19 September 2022.¹⁶ Since then, and until the time of writing this report (December 2023), intensive work has continued to define and negotiate the borderline between the two countries. On 2 October 2023, the parties signed Protocol No. 44, which was marked as a significant shift towards a political resolution of the border issue.¹⁷ It is important to note that Protocol No. 44, like previous documents signed between the countries, remains unpublished and not available to the public.

¹⁴ “Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy.” Accessed: <https://www.uzbekistan.org.ua/ru/yangiliklar/5367-vneshnyaya-politika.html>

¹⁵ Gazeta News, “Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan Signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership,” January 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/27/documents-kg/>

¹⁶ Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Sign Peace Protocol,” September 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32042109.html#comments>; Radio Ozodi, “Dushanbe and Bishkek Sign Peace Protocol, Tajikistan Releases Four Captured Kyrgyz Military Officers,” September 2022, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32041590.html>

¹⁷ Toktosun Shambetov, “Kyrgyz–Tajik Border: Will the New Protocol Solve All Problems?” Radio Ozodi, October 2023, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32622194.html>

Key Outcomes of the Consultations

Post-Conflict Recovery in Batken

On October 11, President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Zhaparov signed a decree titled “On additional measures to restore certain settlements of Batken District, Batken Province, affected by the armed conflict in Batken Province, which occurred on September 14–17, 2022”. With the decree, the government established the State Commission for the recovery and development of administrative-territorial units, affected and destroyed villages. As of December 2023, 420 houses, social infrastructure, and healthcare facilities were built.¹⁸ The state provided one-time support of 200,000 KGS (USD 2,241 at the December 2023 exchange rate) to the affected people, and made 287 loans to businesses in the conflict zone.¹⁹ Despite the support provided by the state, many affected persons indicated that they had suffered losses that were disproportionate to the compensation offered, as they had lost their economic base and livelihoods along with their destroyed houses.²⁰ During the conflict, villages were looted, and village dwellers lost their livestock, which serve as a liquid asset and a form of capital accumulation in rural areas,²¹ as well as stocks of dried apricots, the main commercial crop in the region.²² Thus, the conflict destroyed assets acquired over the years, which were been burned or looted. In this situation, it is important to realise that, along with the physical reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure, it is necessary to re-establish economic livelihoods for the affected communities, as they are a key component of human security.

Socio-economic Characteristics of the Border Provinces of Kyrgyzstan in the Ferghana Valley

As the data of the National Statistics Committee show, poverty is still widespread in the border areas, in particular the Batken Province and Jalal-Abad Province, where the poverty rates have consistently been significantly higher than the national average over the past years (see Table 1).

The data also demonstrate the impact of labour migration on the material well-being of the population. Comparison of Tables 1 and 2 shows that if the income of labour migrants is excluded from the cost of consumption, the poverty rate increases from 33.2% to 43.3% on average in the Republic. At the same time, poverty in Batken Province increases from 48.5% to 68.5%; in Osh Province, from 19.9% to 41.1%; and in Jalal-Abad Province, from 47.1% to 57.5%. This is particularly significant given that in the other regions the levels of poverty do not change as significantly when the income from labour migration is excluded.

¹⁸ Cabinet of the Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Information on the Work on Recovery and Assistance to Batken Province in Connection with the Events of September 14–17,” September 2022, <https://www.gov.kg/ru/post/s/21944-14-17-sentyabrdagy-okuyalarga-baylanyshtuu-batken-oblusun-kalybyna-keltir-ishteri-zhana-zhardam-krst-boyuncha-maalymat>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Zhenish Aidarov and Kubanychbek Zholdoshev, “Consequences of the Conflict on the Border: Is It Realistic to Quickly Restore What Has Been Destroyed and What Are the Security Safeguards?,” Radio Azattyk, September 2022, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32044161.html>

²¹ Nadia Schoch, Bernd Steimann, and Susan Thieme, “Migration and Animal Husbandry: Competing or Complementary Livelihood Strategies. Evidence from Kyrgyzstan,” *Natural Resources Forum* 34, no. 3 (2010): 211–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-947.2010.01306.x>

²² Asel Murzakulova, “The Power of Apricot: Border Disputes, Land Scarcity and Mobility in the Isfara River Basin” In *Environmental Humanities in Central Asia*, edited by Jeanne Féaux de la Croix and Beatrice Penati. Taylor & Francis, 2023, chapter 11.

Table 1. Poverty rate by territory (as a percentage of population)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Kyrgyz Republic (national average)	22.4	20.1	25.3	33.3	33.2
Batken Province	33.8	32.6	34.7	40.7	48.5
Jalal-Abad Province	32.2	26.9	37.2	43.2	47.1
Osh Province	14.8	14.0	18.8	23.8	19.9

Source: <https://stat.gov.kg/media/publicationarchive/2a652573-efb0-4424-8e4c-534401ff6ff9.pdf>

Table 2: Poverty rate excluding income from labour activity outside the Kyrgyz Republic (as a percentage of the population)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Kyrgyz Republic (national average)	32.2	31.2	34.6	42.8	43.3
Batken Province	54.6	53.7	53.6	60.9	68.5
Jalal-Abad Province	44.9	42.4	50.2	56.0	57.5
Osh Province	36.1	37.7	37.6	40.5	41.1

Source: <https://stat.gov.kg/media/publicationarchive/2a652573-efb0-4424-8e4c-534401ff6ff9.pdf>

These findings are consistent with the data from the consultations. Participants noted that the **most pressing security challenges for women and the general population remain poverty and poor**

economic development in border areas. The ranking of economic security concerns was different only in Batken. **For Batken communities, the first problem was the fear of a new escalation of military conflict on the border.** Economic vulnerability of the population was identified as the next priority.

The economic development of border areas was largely hampered by the interruption (and periods of blockage) of overland transit of vehicles between the countries bordering the Ferghana Valley, as well as by the reduction in human mobility that has developed in the region as a result of the process of securitisation and militarisation of the borders, as described in the previous section.²³ This has had a negative impact on the traditional economic ties of border communities and undermined their sources of income from trade and agriculture.²⁴ In addition to these problems, the consequences of land and water reform, which has led to fragmented land use and degradation of natural resources, undermine the sources of income in the traditional agrarian sector.²⁵ This has contributed to an increase in labour migration among the populations in the border region.

Labour Migration: The Dilemma between Economic and Social Security for Women in Border Communities

In Kyrgyzstan, labour migration in the early 2000s was predominantly male, but after the 2010s, a trend towards female labour migration began to emerge. Unfortunately, current data on the gender and age structure of migrants has not been published; the latest open data is dated 2016 and indicates that the proportion of women in labour migration from Kyrgyzstan was 40%.²⁶

The structural conditions for female labour migration from Kyrgyzstan have been shaped by the gender norms in the region's traditional patriarchal societies. Kikuta's (2016) study of female migration in Central Asia shows how male labour migration compounded these gender norms, also shaping the trends in female labour migration.²⁷

During the consultations, almost all the participants agreed that their communities can be characterised as villages with an active outflow of predominantly men into labour migration to Russia (in several communities a tendency towards female migration was noted). Labour migration was discussed by respondents of in-depth interviews in the context of the dilemma between economic and social security of border communities, and women in particular. Respondents pointed out that **male labour migration has a negative impact on the remaining women (wives, mothers, daughters of male migrants):** their workload increases, their mobility decreases, and stress in relationships increases.

²³ Roman Mogilevskii and Kamiljon Akramov. (2014). "Trade in Agricultural and Food Products in Central Asia. University of Central Asia–Institute of Public Policy and Administration Working Paper no. 27.

²⁴ Aseil Murzakulova and Irene Mestre, "Natural Resource Management Dynamics in Border Communities of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan." MSRI Research Report. 2016

²⁵ Roman Mogilevskii et al., (2017). "The Outcomes of 25 Years of Agricultural Reforms in Kyrgyzstan," Research report; Kathleen Collins, "The Limits of Cooperation: Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the New Silk Road," Asia Policy no. 17 (2014): 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0012>

²⁶ FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), "Kyrgyzstan Women and Children from Kyrgyzstan Affected by Migration: An Exacerbated Vulnerability," no. 675a, September 2016, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/269066?download=true>

²⁷ Haruka Kikuta, "Remittances, Rituals and Reconsidering Women's Norms in Mahallas: Emigrant Labour and Its Social Effects in Ferghana Valley," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 1 (2016): 91–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2015.1088229>

*“Household chores are entirely on women, there is no time for rest. We do gardening, cleaning, field work on the days out of work. Women have to do all the work. When my eldest daughter was born, my husband was in migration. When he returned, she asked: ‘Mommy, is this man my daddy?’ In the upbringing of boys, fathers play a special role, to bring them up strong, strong-willed”. – **Woman, mixed group, Batken.***

When men migrate, women are left to perform not only duties that have traditionally belonged to them, but also those traditionally performed by men (e.g., organising irrigation, managing house construction, representing the family interests). Respondents noted that in cases where there is support from the extended family, some of the responsibilities will be shared among relatives and the burden on women will not be excessive. But, in cases where there are weak ties between extended family members, women have to perform multiple tasks. It is important to note that this burden can act as an important structural constraint for women and can lead to a decrease in their activity in public and community spaces. Young and middle-aged women with many children are the most vulnerable. **From the data collected, we can see that the male labour migration has multifaceted effects: on the one hand, migration helps to improve the financial well-being of families, but on the other hand, it can reduce women’s public activity and their interest in solving community problems due to the double burden of running a household and the strain that migration puts on relationships with the extended family.**

An important concern that emerged from our consultations is the issue of migration sentiments among young people. The data show that although adult and elderly migrants are returning to their villages, young migrants see their future in urban rather than rural settings.²⁸ The lack of employment opportunities in the rural labour market means that young people are usually employed in low-paid seasonal agricultural jobs, and they are generally not motivated to link their lives to agriculture and aspire to become part of the urban middle class.²⁹

In their study of the rural labour market, Tilekeev et al. (2019) note that the youth remaining in villages usually have only two choices: low-paid work in agriculture or labour migration.³⁰ Earlier studies have shown that migration of adult family members increases the burden on adolescents and has a more negative impact on female youth.³¹ Our findings show that during the conflict period of September 2022, women whose husbands were in migration, as well as children whose parents had both left for work, were particularly vulnerable groups:

“There is no doubt that the conflict has had a negative impact; especially the elderly, schoolchildren, and young children have been badly affected. Some of them have a father and some have both father and mother in labour migration. It is heartbreaking to see them. During the days of the conflict, only

²⁸ Susan Thieme, “Coming Home? Patterns and Characteristics of Return Migration in Kyrgyzstan,” *International Migration* 52, no. 5 (2012): 127–143. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2011.00724.x>

²⁹ Ken Roberts, “Post-Communist Youth: Is There a Central Asian Pattern?” *Central Asian Survey* 29, no. 4 (2010): 537–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2010.535315>

³⁰ Kanat Tilekeyev et al. (2019), “Analysis of Youth Labor Market Trends in Kyrgyzstan,” Institute of Public Policy and Administration Working Paper no.52. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3807729>

³¹ Jorge Dávalos et al., “Remittances and Labour Supply of the Left-Behind Youth: Evidence from Kyrgyzstan,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 26, no. 3 (2017): 352–380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0117196817729190>

law enforcement and men remained in the villages, 95% of the residents left their homes. The impact of the conflict is still felt today. The children of our relatives were killed and injured. Young daughters-in-law also had a hard time. They fled with their children, their husbands are in migration. I hope that these terrible events will not affect the future of our children". – Woman, age group 40–60, Kok-Tash, Batken, II.

The data collected in Batken show that labour migration has a negative impact on the security of women, children, and the elderly during periods of violence escalation. As a result, it also has a negative effect on women's ability to participate in public roles and in peacebuilding. It should also be noted that male migrants from border communities have been under the double burden of conflict. On the one hand, there is military conflict in their home villages and the threat to their families, which puts psychological strain on them. On the other hand, the risks of being involved in the current military conflict in Ukraine (through recruitment into the Russian army), or loss of employment due to Western economic sanctions against Russia have become more pressing for many Kyrgyzstani migrants in Russia.³² All this indicates that labour migration to Russia is becoming a less and less safe strategy, and its social cost has increased significantly.

Our data for Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces indicate a different dynamic. In communities with a high outflow of men into labour migration, women have a window of opportunity to realise their leadership potential and express a more active role in discussing and solving problems at the community level. At the same time, these opportunities are not the same for all women. Women's social status, state of family relations, support of relatives, and equal opportunity policies at the level of local authorities (such as establishment of gender quotas in LSGs) are all important structural and institutional factors that shape women's involvement in public affairs.

Across all areas, respondents noted a difficulty in mobilising people for the benefit of solving community problems (e.g., joint cleaning of irrigation canals through *ashar*³³). As respondents noted, it has become difficult to mobilise people without material incentives. This may signal the broader effects that labour migration has on local communities, eroding the social fabric and a community spirit that has historically characterised rural communities in the region.

Peacebuilding Experience in the Ferghana Valley

As illustrated in the first part of this report, the dynamics of border security have been actively changing over the past 30 years. Over this period, the communities have accumulated knowledge and practices that have helped them cope with the changing security regime on the borders of the Ferghana Valley.

During the consultations, we discovered that everyday practices that played a role in maintaining

³² For a baseline report and research on labor migrants returning to Kyrgyzstan, please see International Organization for Migration, "Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey," December 2023, https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/KG_Baseline%20and%20Returning%20Migrant%20Worker%20Survey%20Round%201%20RUS.pdf

³³ Ashar is a joint effort to solve a common problem or challenge.

social cohesion between communities on different sides of the borders are under pressure, and some forms of these, such as elders maintaining close relationships, are being lost. The generational dimension of peacebuilding practices is clearly evident in our data. Respondents in the 60 and above age group provided specific and diversified examples from their practice related to conflict resolution and addressing tensions. In the 41–60 age group, mostly homogeneous examples were recorded, such as appeals for peace and humanitarian involvement in post-conflict recovery (for Batken). In the 26–40 age group, examples of peacebuilding were given by respondents very rarely, mostly as reference to actions of leaders representing the older generation, and in the 18–25 age group such examples were practically absent.

*“I look for a replacement for myself among young people, but no one agrees to work. I was offered to become a deputy, but neither I nor my husband agreed, because I’m not the right age. We need to give way to the young”. – **Woman, age group 60 and above, Jalal-Abad.***

The analysed data indicate the need to facilitate intergenerational dialogue to support the government’s efforts to build peace and development in the Ferghana Valley. Initiatives in this direction can become an important contribution to the system of conflict prevention at the local level.

*“The participation of the majority of women, especially young women, in public life is low. We can even say that there is no such participation at all. If their mothers-in-law or husbands allow it, they will participate. They are busy with household chores, they have no choice. They get married early and stay at home. We need to work with the parents”. – **Woman, age group 40–60, Osh (Amir Timur).***

Batken: Women and Post-Conflict Recovery

During the September 2022 military conflict on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border in Batken Province, according to the authorities, more than 130,000 residents fled their villages affected by the military clashes. The majority of this outflow were women, children, and the elderly. Within the framework of support for displaced persons across Batken Province, the government opened 45 temporary accommodation centres. Assistance was provided to relocate displaced persons to safe places. However, due to the large scale and unprecedented outflow, the state’s capacity was not sufficient to provide temporary housing for all affected people, so most of the displaced people were received by private individuals: relatives and civil assistance networks.

Given that some Batken women have not returned to their villages for fear of a new escalation of the conflict,³⁴ we conducted the consultations in Bishkek with a group of women (displaced to Bishkek and Chui Province), along with the consultations in the border villages of Batken. Thus, we balanced our consultations with different groups of women and believe that our data is sufficiently representative to represent the diversity of voices of women in Batken. Through our consultations, we found that the role of women was significant both during the evacuation period from the war zones

³⁴ See Munduzbek Kalykov, “3,942 Batken Residents Have Not Returned to Their Homes Yet. Zhaparov Announced Reprimands to Members of the State Commission for Batken’s Recovery,” Kloop, December 2022, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/12/09/v-svoi-doma-eshhe-ne-vernulis-3-942-batkentsa-zhaparov-obyavil-vygovory-chlenam-goskomissii-po-vosstanovleniyu-batkena/>

and in post-conflict recovery. Our consultations revealed that women have played an important role in humanitarian assistance, providing food, preventing escalation by calling for ceasefires, supporting the emotional well-being of children during the active phase of the conflict, providing food for both refugees and the military, and doing outreach work, among others.

“There are cases when women created self-help groups and prepared food for soldiers. The event called ‘Mother’s Bread’ is still conducted”. – Woman, age group 25–40, Batken.

We found that during the period of the outflow of people fleeing the conflict of September 2022, women’s networks of compatriots were mobilised to help refugees settle in safe places (Bishkek city; villages deep within Batken Province; and settlements in Chui, Osh, and Jalal-Abad provinces). It is important to note that women leaders took responsibility for organising logistics, collecting necessary assistance, and providing consultation and information.

“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, [and] teachers; they all helped as much as they could”. – Woman IDP from Batken, age group 40–60, Bishkek.

During the consultations, the participants confirmed that communication was made through messaging and voice communication in WhatsApp groups, which were moderated by women leaders.

“There are women leaders in our village. They shared information and initiatives through WhatsApp groups, and invited women to participate if assistance was provided or needed. I myself took the initiative to cook food for the defenders of our Motherland”. – Woman, age group 25–40, Batken.

It is important to note that the definition of women leaders in our data included women with formal status (deputies, employees of LSG structures, *Aiyl bashchy*,³⁵ civil society activists).

Our analysis shows that many of the women leaders involved in the recovery efforts held official roles in local self-governance structures. This highlights that women’s representation in decision-making institutions has a positive impact both during the acute phase of the conflict and in the period of post-conflict recovery. At the same time, it should be noted that in interviews with male respondents or in mixed groups, such examples were mentioned less frequently, while male respondents almost did not mention them at all. We explain this by the existing gender hierarchy, in which women’s contributions are considered as secondary to those of men, and therefore often remain unrecognised or are made invisible.³⁶ At the same time, the post-conflict recovery process was often understood by respondents (regardless of gender) as the physical process of reconstruction of destroyed houses and construction of new infrastructure, where male labour is predominantly involved. In such cases, respondents did not recognise the role of women in post-conflict recovery. Thus, women’s agency in

³⁵ *Aiyl bashchy* is the village head, a position in the Local Self-Governance bodies (LSGs).

³⁶ For more details on gender subordination in rural communities in Kyrgyzstan, see Aksana Ismailbekova, “Migration and Patrilineal Descent: The Role of Women in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 33, no. 3 (2014): 375–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2014.961305>

post-conflict recovery processes was assessed ambivalently, based on the gender of respondents, as well as respondents' personal interpretation of the post-conflict recovery process.

Respondents also highlighted the psychological needs of both women and men during the post-conflict period. It is important to note that some of the interviewed women confirmed that they had received psychological support for recovery from post-traumatic stress syndrome, which was provided through civil organisations. They also pointed out the deep and destructive nature of the received psychological traumas, which require a longer programme of psychological assistance and support for women and men of the border areas of Batken Province.

“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.**

“Many children have started stuttering. After the conflict, there were many psychologists who were helping. But it was temporary. We have no experience in providing permanent assistance. The men saw corpses, burned houses, and there are some among them who still haven't recovered. For our women, we need medical and psychological support on an ongoing basis”. – **Woman, age group 25–40, Ak-Sai.**

“When the second wave of the conflict started, we fled as a family, with our children and grandchildren. During our travels, my two-month-old grandson died. Although we tried to take care of him, I took care of him as best I could, but he caught a cold. There was no one to help him in the first days, then we were in the hospital with him. But he died. When counting the deaths caused by the conflict, no one took such cases into account, although many people died the next day after the shelling or after they moved to Bishkek and Osh. People got sick and died from stress, and no one adds them to the list. They say 36 people died during the recent violence, but in fact many [more] died”. – **Displaced woman in Bishkek, age group 26–40, Zhashtyk, Leilek.**

In several consultations, women noted that a lesson learned after the conflict was the necessity of learning new skills. For example, women indicated that driving was an important skill, as many women were dependent on men during the evacuation period and this made their mobility difficult. Female interviewees in Kara-Bak and Batken indicated that women in their communities had started learning to drive en masse. Middle-aged women (41–60 years) were more active in this group.

“People have started buying cars, those who did not have cars started buying cars. Because last year's events had an impact [on the mobility of those who had cars]. Women started learning to drive.” – **mixed group, age group 41–60, Batken.**

In our data there are directly opposite assessments of the role of LSGs in post-conflict Batken. Data

from consultations with women displaced during the 2022 conflict indicate tensions between displaced village residents and LSG structures on three issues. The first one relates to the pension supplement for residents of border villages. The consultations' participants noted that they cannot receive these pension supplements because the LSG heads remove them from the list of recipients due to the fact that they actually reside outside the place of their residence registration:

“The country’s leadership would at least support us in this. Our local authorities should stand up for us, but they tell us what they are told by the authorities from above. We have lived there all our lives, now we don’t live there for one year, and are we really punished for that? If the border issues are resolved, we will go back home”. – **Displaced woman, age group 60 and above, Bishkek.**

“They’re kind of asking. They are distributing humanitarian aid. But nobody wants to listen to and solve the most urgent problems that we are talking about. Our village has been given a special status of the border area, and pensioners receive 2,000 KGS of compensation to their pensions as residents of border areas. But now we are refugees [IDPs], we cannot return to our village. We have not sold our houses, we have not checked out of the register, we are here because we are in a desperate situation. We live in Bishkek in an apartment, we pay a lot of money for the apartment. I live with my son and grandchildren. You think we are here for a good life. And now the state is taking away our compensation of 2,000 KGS as residents of border areas. I spoke to the Ayl okmotu, but he said that unless you return to the village, you are not entitled to this compensation”. – **Displaced woman, age group 60 and above, Bishkek.**

“They tell us as soon as you come back, we’ll start paying you compensation again. It’s a shame. We have to live here. We are sick, we need medicine, I am sick, but I can’t go to the hospital. We need money. We are offended by the leadership of the country”. – **Displaced woman, age group 60 and above, Bishkek.**

“It’s the same with the allowance for children. My husband went to Leylek to Social Security to get the allowance. He showed all our documents. They asked him where his wife and children were. He said they were in Bishkek. They said that they would provide it when he brings his family to Leylek. My husband was resentful about how the family would live: our house was burned down, a new one has been built, but it is empty. We need to have conditions in it to bring the family. The husband started arguing with them, he said that it is up to the family to decide where their children should be”. – **Displaced woman, age group 41–60, Bishkek.**

The second issue noted by the respondents was a shrinking space to voice their concerns publicly. They attribute this to the fragile security situation, which has made any attempts to voice problems unsafe for those who raise sensitive issues.

“Now they write in social networks that life in Batken has improved. But we don’t believe it. They say that agreements have been signed, but how many times has it happened. We live on the border. We know that they have tanks on alert on the border. We have no nerves left”. – **Displaced woman, age group 40-60, Bishkek.**

In the group of women displaced during the conflict, there is a layer of ethnic Kyrgyz who fled from border villages in Tajikistan during the military clashes of 2022. They voiced pressing problems related to difficulties in accessing Tajikistan's state structures, which currently cannot be resolved on a personal level, without mediation from the Kyrgyz authorities:

“Now I have a problem with my pension. The Tajiks have not paid us the Kyrgyz for two years. And here they say that they cannot pay my pension. There is no help. We have applied to different authorities, in Batken – to the administration of the authorised representative of the president. There is no result”. – **Displaced woman, age group 60 and above, Bishkek.**

“I have a problem with my pension. Now we live in Bishkek in an apartment. We did not receive our pension in Tajikistan, and they do not give it in Kyrgyzstan. They say we have to de-register in Tajikistan. I have written three times to Tajikistan authorities. There is no answer. I can't go there”. – **Displaced woman, age group 60 and above, Bishkek.**

In general, the consultations with displaced women revealed feelings of grievance and injustice that need to be openly discussed and addressed.

“They said that those whose houses were looted, cars burned down, stores looted and burned would receive compensation. It has been a year now, and no one has paid anything. We can't go back, but no one asks us how we live here in Bishkek. We live on our own as we can”. – **Displaced woman, age group 60 and above, Bishkek.**

“Akylbek Zhaparov [the prime minister] came. He looked at the houses. They brought everything to these houses, and put carpets everywhere. They collected money from all the village residents and put furniture in this house. Instead of telling Zhaparov about their problems the people themselves hid the real situation. Aiy! okmotu does not allow us to speak. Our voices do not reach the right people. And the question is whether they want to listen to us”. – **Displaced woman, age group 40–60, Bishkek.**

During the consultations, women also expressed frustration and concerns about the pressure on the affected people. There were several examples of pressure on residents of affected villages who tried to publicly voice the shortcomings of the post-conflict recovery process in Batken.

At the time of preparing this report, the situation with the political vector of resolving the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict was showing progress. Our respondents also noted that the most urgent need is to conclude a peace agreement on the borders and to normalise life in the border communities of Batken as soon as possible. We hope that the emerging tendency of de-escalation will continue, and believe that some of the data received from the consultations with communities living on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan may be useful for a broader discussion on peacebuilding in the Ferghana Valley. In particular, communities whose interests were at stake by the negotiations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan noted the importance of informing the local population about the progress of the negotiations. The absence of conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives at this level risk

misinformation in communities affected by the negotiations.

*“We need to do outreach work. We need to convey the right information to everyone. For example, the news that AiyI aimaks³⁷ should be merged caused disputes among people [here is the context of a local response to the negotiations between the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on borders]. Why should Ak-Korgon be merged with Uzbek villages?”. – **Woman, age group 25–40, Ala-Buka District.***

As seen in this example, speculation and lack of official information can create panic and tension in communities. It is also important for Batken to restore trust between the affected people and the authorities, as the series of military clashes in recent years have undermined the confidence in the negotiation process by the most vulnerable groups – the displaced women of Batken. As participants in the consultations noted, distrust persists because “we are told that border issues have been resolved, but it starts all over again”.

Landscape of Opportunities: Women and Peacebuilding in the Ferghana Valley

In all three regions, the consultation participants noted the unique role of women within the existing cultural system of norms and customs. Women, according to respondents, have an inherent role as mediators in conflicts. This role, as illustrated in the following interview extracts, comes from the intra-family ethic of intergenerational communication within the family. While the respondents often expressed this view in naturalising or generalising language (using phrases such as “women are more peaceful”), their testimonies demonstrate how the social structure of Kyrgyz families and communities has placed women in a unique position to understand and mediate conflicts not only in their family but also in their community:

*“Due to our mentality, if children approach their fathers about any issues, they will answer ‘go to your mom’. Since childhood, we first go to our mother, then the mother tells the father about the problem”. – **Man, age group 25–40, Batken.***

*“Women by nature are far from conflict, they say, you can’t argue. If children quarrel, they stop them”. – **Woman, age group 25–40, Batken, II.***

*“It is not for nothing that they say that women rock the cradle with one hand and the universe with the other [Kyrgyz proverb]. I believe that where there is a woman there is purity, justice, mercy. We evaluate things by analysing them. Women can stop escalation”. – **Woman, age group 40–60, Batken, II.***

*“We can have different conflicts. In the summer there are conflicts over irrigation water, but they are fewer. Because we agree with our neighbours on taking turns for irrigation. Women try to understand the situation”. – **Woman, age group 25–40, Osh.***

³⁷ Local self-governance body

“Women usually raise social issues and look for solutions. Peace is justice for all, equal opportunities, openness, and responsibility”. – Woman, age group 60 and above, Batken.

These narratives demonstrate a strong foundation for women’s leadership in peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan. As noted previously, women have already been at the forefront of responding to the violence and crises in the Batken region, by providing humanitarian aid and supporting recovery efforts – including through holding local governance positions.

Increasing women’s participation, especially within LSGs, is of critical importance, since many of the consultation participants viewed the role of the local authorities as mediators that link nationally adopted decisions to local needs were predominantly positive in the communities living on the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border. Respondents indicated that LSGs try to solve community problems. For example, there were cases with allowances, fundraising for surgeries, and assistance in opening small and medium-sized businesses for women. In Jalal-Abad and Osh provinces, the interviewed women had experience in participating in meetings of LSGs, openly voicing their problems, hearing reports of *Aiyl bashchy*, mobilising to solve problems with access to drinking water, etc. There were only two cases in which the participants of the consultations negatively assessed the work of LSGs, while referring to the role of women deputies in solving pressing problems of communities. In addition, there were cases when the activity of LSGs was mentioned only in connection with the period of political elections (materials on Ala-Buka, Jalal-Abad) and was assessed as having weak potential in representing the interests of communities. In most of the analysed cases, the participants of the consultations noted the effective role of local self-governance in building peace and preventing conflicts.

“If, for example, there are problems of interethnic relations, the Aiyl okmotu will immediately call leaders and activists and instruct them to conduct outreach work with the population, to provide full information”. – Woman, age group 41–60, Osh.

At the same time, there still exist serious barriers to women’s full and meaningful participation in peacebuilding in the Batken region, which we discuss in the following section.

Narrowing the Space for Women’s Social Activism

In our data, the respondents discussed and identified **three main factors** that can lead to a decrease in women’s social activism. The **first** factor relates to **cultural norms and gender hierarchy** in society as a whole:

“In many cases, rural men openly say that women should know their place. Therefore, women are shy and do not speak their minds openly”. – Man, age group 40–60, Leylek, II.

The **second** factor was discussed in the youth group and with middle-aged respondents, in which opinions were voiced that **religious norms** can act as a constraint to women’s activism in public spaces:

*“Because of the wide spread of Islam in the society, there are many who say that women should stay at home and not speak in front of men”. – **Woman, mixed group age group 18–35, Batken.***

At the same time, respondents pointed to the important role that religious leaders could play in addressing women’s issues:

*“It would be good if imams would talk about women’s issues during Friday prayers”. – **Woman, age group 60 and above, Batken.***

Consultations’ participants also mentioned positive examples when female faith leaders helped village residents to overcome post-traumatic stress in post-conflict Batken:

*“There are religious women in our village who organise taalims [religious lessons held at home] 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, age group , Bishkek city, Leylek.***

Third, economic dependence and lack of financial literacy were also identified as negative factors that narrow the space for women’s activism in public and social spheres:

*“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.***

Still, our consultations have also indicated some hopeful ways forward to overcome these barriers. Our data signal that gender quotas have played an important role in the activation of women with leadership potential. In all participating communities there were women leaders: representatives of LSGs (deputies of local council, employees of Aiyl okmotu), employees of public organisations. But, as the participants agreed, gender quotas alone do not solve the problem of women’s participation in decision-making, since opportunities for women’s leadership are derived from women’s marital status, their level of support from close relatives, and their level of education.

Conclusion

As the consultations have revealed, the current status of women's participation in the nexus of peace processes, conflicts, and tensions in the border communities of the Ferghana Valley has two dynamics: de-escalation of tensions and conflict resolution on the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border, and post-conflict recovery in the communities after the large military conflict on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border. The interviewed women and men in Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces noted that their sense of security has improved significantly after the normalisation of political dialogue between the countries. They positively assessed the governments' efforts to establish and facilitate mobility of people, trade, and all forms of interaction across borders.

We discovered that women living in border communities have similar problems related to economic security in their communities. Labour migration as a strategy to address this issue has profound and multi-faceted effects, with predominantly negative social impact on women, children, and the elderly. At the same time, labour migration helps to address pressing problems at the family level by increasing income and moving out of poverty. Thus, women have to balance risks, opportunities, and limits in the context of the labour migration process. Our data from some communities also signal that women's migration is gradually becoming a customary strategy, the same as men's migration. In this context, the need for financial literacy, support for women's entrepreneurship, and building networks of mutual support is evident.

It is important to note that women displaced because of the conflict, as well as those who have returned to the post-conflict zone, experience deep and devastating consequences of the conflict and need a long-term programme of psychological and social support. Women IDPs also need better access to financial support to restore their livelihoods.

The participants of the consultations noted the important role of LSGs in communicating and addressing the problems of cross-border communities at both local and regional levels. The interviewed respondents actively referred to and provided examples in which women deputies, employees of Aiyi okmotu, and respected informal women leaders helped and solved specific problems of the community and acted as an authority on which vulnerable women could rely. However, the consultations also made clear that these roles are usually held by older women, highlighting the need for more intergenerational exchanges and opportunities – including educational, training, and economic opportunities – for younger women.

In our perspective, an important message from the consultations is the urgent appeal to promote intergenerational dialogues among women for the sake of development and peacebuilding. Initiatives in this direction will be an important element in a conflict prevention strategy at the local level. People in the Ferghana Valley have extensive experience of peacebuilding and it is important to integrate this into local and national development strategies.