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WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT

The Kyrgyz Republic

PHOTO: USAID

The women's political participation and leadership (WPPL) assessment in the Kyrgyz Republic (KR), one of an eight-country pilot under USAID's Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Learning, Evaluation, and Research (LER) II activity, uses the latest iteration of USAID's **WPPL Assessment Framework**. The KR WPPL assessment investigates the barriers to and opportunities for expanding women's participation and leadership in the KR along socio-cultural, institutional, and individual dimensions. There are promising WPPL indicators in the KR: men and women vote at roughly equivalent rates and there are increasing numbers of women elected officials, particularly at the local level, thanks to quotas. However, that belies a lack of political influence—polling indicates that women do not feel represented by the political system, there are few women in positions of power in the government, and political parties' women's wings lack influence. Additionally, WPPL is further threatened by closing civic space and increasing gender-based violence.

The assessment findings and recommendations are derived from a desk review of relevant literature and documents, a survey of 110 politicians, and 27 key informant interviews and ten focus group discussions with politicians, civil society, and media in Bishkek city, Saruu village in Issyk-Kul oblast, and Novopokrovka village in Chui oblast. The KR WPPL Assessment Report can be used by the relevant stakeholders to identify priority areas in which their investments in programs and initiatives to support WPPL are likely to have the greatest and most meaningful impact.

FINDINGS

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

- Although the KR has a gender quota, political parties offer little financial or other support to ensure that elected women are effective political leaders. Among the public, there is a widespread misunderstanding of the quota system; for example, that it shows an unfair preference for women who do not receive public support.
- Traditional gender roles for women as caretakers of the family and home limit women's time to pursue political careers or participate in politics. There is a perception that gender equality is a Western ideal that has no place in Kyrgyz culture.
- Cultural norms and stereotypes perpetuate the belief that women do not have the necessary skills (such as negotiation) to be effective in political office. Men are believed to make better political leaders than women.
- Violence against women in politics and public life is common and present both in person and online, preventing women from pursuing political participation or leadership despite existing legal protections.
- There is a lack of civic education for both boys and girls that could build necessary skills among girls and dispel harmful gender stereotypes, encouraging more political participation.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

- The KR updated its framework for supporting WPPL in the long-term National Gender Strategy on Achieving Gender Equality, adopted in 2022, and much of the legal structure necessary to support WPPL is in place. Although the strategy has not yet lived up to its potential, opportunities remain for the government to use this framework to strengthen and support these structures.
- Gender quotas passed in 2007 and 2019 require 30 percent of seated members of parliament to be women. There is an opportunity for donor programming to build on the election of women candidates to encourage women's political participation and expand their voices in government.
- The media is an opportunity for communicating with the public to encourage WPPL. There is little gender sensitivity in the media currently and the media often contributes to harmful gender stereotypes.

“Once in parliament, women have the same status as men deputies, but there is also little chance of getting positions in committees. As soon as we enter parliament, all men try to get into strategic committees—the committee on budget, energy, environmental management, etc. Women themselves are targeted for non-prestigious, not influential committees—health care, education... Because even among men politicians there is a belief that women should be included just for show.”

— Interview with man MP



SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

- Donors should work with civil society organizations (CSOs) to train journalists and other media professionals in gender sensitivity to change the prevailing gender norms and stereotypes that discourage WPPL.
- Donor programming should engage men gatekeepers to educate them on the pernicious effects of harmful gender stereotypes, giving them the tools to advocate for and promote women's political participation.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

- The Kyrgyz government should make the National Gender Strategy a priority and achieve the KR's gender empowerment goals.
- The KR parliament should work with CSOs to combat violence against women in politics and public life through legal and legislative change, awareness raising, and monitoring.
- Donors, along with CSOs, should undertake a communication campaign to clarify the quota system both for the public and within the political system.
- Political parties should ensure equal treatment and funding of women candidates.
- Parliament and political parties should strengthen opportunities for women politicians to network and caucus with one another.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

- Donors should work with the Ministry of Education and civil society to support civic education programs designed to improve democratic and political literacy in society in concert with other activities to increase interest in political participation among women.
- Parliament and political parties should work with CSOs to build capacity and skills among women candidates and politicians, including legal literacy and networking support.
- Donors should develop programming that trains women politicians to effectively use the media.