

UNIFEM Community art project

‘CEDAW in Kyrgyzstan: movement towards justice’

The community art project, which UNIFEM implemented as a part of the thirtieth anniversary of CEDAW, represents a unique opportunity to increase the visibility of communities and groups of vulnerable women of Kyrgyzstan, whose rights are violated and the whose voices are not heard.

Today in Kyrgyzstan there are several factors which explain women’s vulnerabilities. Women are subject to multiple types of violence, including bride kidnapping, polygamy, early marriages and domestic violence. They are concentrated in informal sectors of the economy, earning low salaries and have no social security. In addition, they suffer from many health-related problems. For example, the maternal mortality rate is the highest in the Commonwealth of Independent States, there are unresolved problems with women’s lower pensions, unemployment.

Women belonging to the most excluded and vulnerable groups are prone to a higher risk of discrimination and violation of rights. Each of these groups has additional risk factors – physical abilities, age, poverty, sexual orientation or ethnicity. Thus, the project was focused on excluded groups of women.

More than 200 marginalized women – including labour migrants, victims of bride kidnapping, Afghan refugees, disabled, poor rural women, sexual minorities, young girls and many others – took part in creation of the large-scale quilt ‘CEDAW in Kyrgyzstan: movement towards *justice*’.

Disabled women

Experience multiple forms of discrimination due to the limited social contacts, lack of equal access to medical services, education, professional training and employment.

Female refugees

A lack of documentation prohibits stateless women from enjoying their property rights, freedom of movement and access to social welfare, medical services, employment and civil registration.

Lesbians, transgender and bi-sexuals

Poor social awareness and widespread discriminative stereotypes about persons with alternative sexual orientation lead to their harassment at workplaces and education institutions, and violence.

Why CEDAW was put in the center the community art project?

- CEDAW is the only international agreement that focuses on the rights of women in all areas of life and addresses the particular types of discrimination they face.
- CEDAW makes no distinction between the private and the public spheres, by recognizing acts of discrimination against women in the home, the family etc.
- Sometimes the enactment of laws and policies are not enough to end discrimination against women. For this reason, CEDAW recognizes both de jure discrimination (as a matter of law) and de facto (as a matter of fact, i.e. in reality) and obliges states to ensure the practical realization of rights.
- CEDAW requires countries to take measures to eliminate traditional and stereotyped ideas based on the idea of “the inferiority or the superiority” of either sex.

In Kyrgyzstan, advocacy for observation and protection of women’s rights relies on research papers, statistics, government and civil society group reports, which express the experiences of marginalized groups. The process of community art complemented this work by creating a platform for women to directly shape what they want to say about their own experiences.

Women migrants

Poor women migrants, living in the suburbs around Bishkek city, suffer disproportionate discrimination and human rights violations through the migration process. They do not have equal access to medical services, education, social security, decent housing and, because of this situation, cannot practice proper hygiene.

Stitching, embroidering, felting and using fabric are often considered the work of women and as such it was an ideal format to explore, challenge and gain visibility around issues and experiences of women's discrimination.

One of the project's aims was to increase awareness among women about their rights. Women gathered into groups to learn from the gender experts about the articles of the Convention and the Optional Protocol, and successes and problems with its implementation in Kyrgyzstan.

Next, they examined their rights in their particular community, social, age or ethnic group. Based on the identified problems they worked on the design of the quilt panel, to visualize their experiences and transmit their messages to a wider audience. The process of making a community artwork took place through group discussions and decision-making, and was facilitated by community artists from *Active Art*. Working in this way provided both a creative method to think about experiences of discrimination and inequality, and an innovative communication tool between women who are separated by geography or social structures. It, thus, gave these groups of women a forum to make their challenges visible, which will be transmitted, with UNIFEM's and women advocates' support, to the political and institutional structures, from which they are often excluded

A special feature of the project was to build on strong partnerships with the civil society organizations (CSOs). The project encouraged joint work between the CSOs and excluded groups of women and individuals. The CSOs actively supported the project idea, by bringing together their beneficiaries and community members.

UNIFEM is proud of this cooperation and expresses appreciation for the commitment and creativity and of the organizations and individuals who made this project happen:

1. ***DIA*** (Osh city, Osh province)
2. ***Umai Ene*** (Kemin, Chui province)
3. ***Association of Disabled Women*** (Bishkek)
4. ***Dusti*** (Bishkek)
5. ***Leilek-Daanyshmany*** (Isfana town, Batken province)
6. ***Alliance of Women's Legislative Initiatives*** (Bishkek)
7. ***Alga*** (Rot Front village, Chui province)
8. ***Atbasy Women's Center*** (village At-Bashy, Naryn Province)
9. ***Zakyn-Atbashi*** (village At-Bashy, Naryn Province)
10. ***Eldarhankut*** (village At-Bashy, Naryn Province)
11. ***Youth Initiative Group*** (Krasnaya Rechka village, Chui province)
12. ***"Ishenim" Self-help group*** (Ak-Ordo village, Chui province)
13. ***Social Technologies Agency*** (Bishkek)
14. ***Development and Cooperation in Central Asia*** (Bishkek)
15. ***Youth Program UNV/UNDP*** (Bishkek)
16. ***Association of Crisis Centers*** (Bishkek)
17. ***Women's Support Center*** (Bishkek)
18. ***Labrys*** (Bishkek)
19. ***Botogoz Bagyshbaeva***, Y-Peer Youth Network (Bishkek)

Young girls

They are often considered by the males in their families and communities as a free labour force and objects of sexual harassment. Young girls are often the objects of bride kidnapping, forced or arranged marriages.

Rural women

Rural women's rights to land are often restricted by the traditional law (*adat*), as well as by the widely spread gender stereotypes about the women's role in the society. For example, women's limited access to agricultural equipment, seeds, fertilizers and transport mean that they cannot make a profit from their agricultural activities. Women's labor often remains manual, unproductive and unmechanized.

20. *Anara Moldosheva*, gender expert.

The quilt consists of seventeen panels and decorative elements; each created by a specific group of women, telling about their own stories of discrimination and violations of their rights. It has a strong advocacy role in requesting policy and legislative changes to improve the lives of the vulnerable women and to enforce their rights.

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