



**SECURING
WOMEN'S
RESOURCE RIGHTS
THROUGH GENDER
TRANSFORMATIVE
APPROACHES**



Investing in rural people



Gender analysis to inform the development of gender transformative approaches to enhance women's land rights in **KYRGYZSTAN**



Full Research Report



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ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

SECURING WOMEN'S RESOURCE RIGHTS THROUGH GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

In 2020, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) invited a consortium of the Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) to work with selected IFAD projects to promote and strengthen women's land rights through the integration of gender transformative approaches (GTAs) in rural development interventions by improving policies, tools and practices.

<https://www.cifor-icraf.org/wlr>
https://www.ifad.org/en/gender_transformative_approaches

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ACRONYMS

AO	Aiyl Okmotu (village government)
ARIS	Community Development and Investment Agency
ATMP	Access to Markets Project
CIAT	Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical = The International Center for Tropical Agriculture
CIFOR	Center for International Forestry Research
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FAP	Feldsher-obstetric stations (in Russian abbreviation: FAP)
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
GALS	Gender Action Learning System
GTA	Gender Transformative Approach
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LRF	Land Redistribution Fund
LSG	Local self-government
Pro-WEAI	Project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index
PUU	Pasture Users Union
PUA	Pasture Users Association
VHC	Village Health Committee
WRR	Women's Resource Rights
WUA	Water User Association



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT (<https://www.bioversityinternational.org/alliance/>) is a global research-for-development organization that is part of CGIAR. The Alliance delivers research-based solutions that harness agricultural biodiversity and sustainably transform food systems to improve people's lives. Our work revolves around cross-disciplinary scientific research at the intersection of nutrition, environment, and agriculture, with a focus on sustainability, inclusiveness, and biodiversity. Gender equality is a core principle and objective of the Alliance.

One of the key projects contributing to this objective is a [Global Initiative for Gender Transformative Approaches for Securing Women's Resource Rights \(WRR\)](#) (2021-2024), led by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in collaboration with the Alliance and partners. This project focuses on gender transformative approaches to advance the recognition and protection of women's land rights. It is funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and is being implemented in six countries, including Kyrgyzstan, where the Alliance takes a leading role. In each country, the project is integrated with an ongoing IFAD project, such as the [Access to Markets Project](#) (ATMP) in Kyrgyzstan.

As part of the WRR project, **a gender analysis was conducted in each of the six countries to gather information that will shape a set of gender transformative interventions.** These interventions will be piloted in the study communities, and the gender analysis will serve as a baseline for assessing changes in gender norms resulting from the pilot initiatives.

1.2 Methodology

This report is based on qualitative research in four communities in Kyrgyzstan. The study **sought to understand context-specific obstacles that prevent women from accessing, using, and controlling land and other productive resources.** Barriers that prevent women from exercising their rights over land are complex and often include legal, social, economic, and cultural factors (Figure 1).



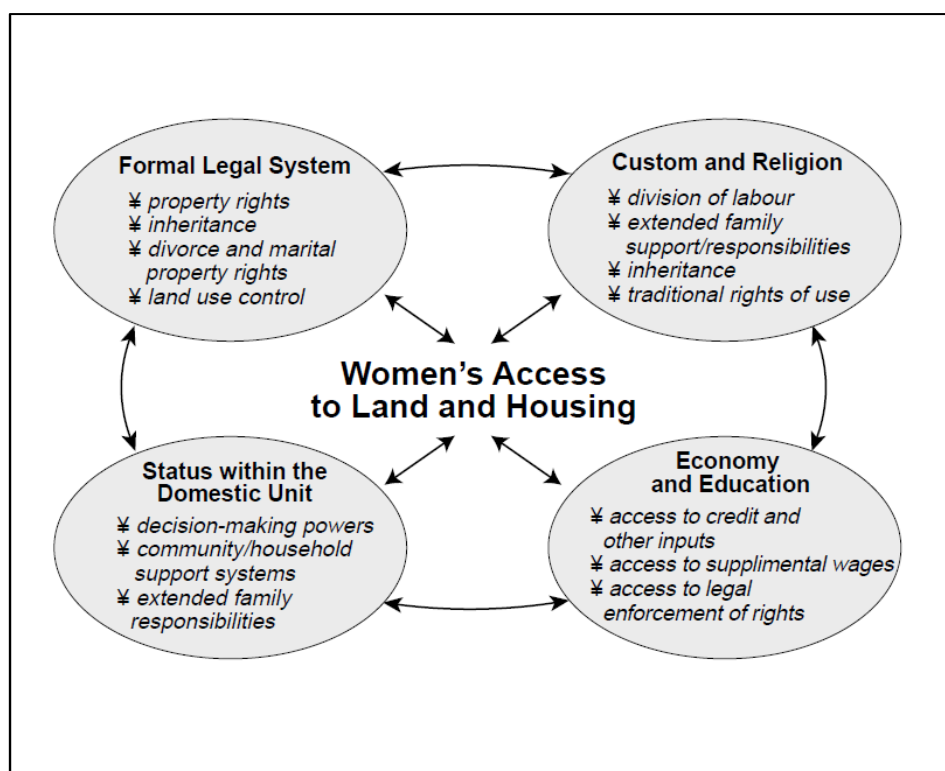


Figure 1. Institutions that Affect Women's Access to Land and Housing Rights

Source: FAO land tenure studies: Gender and access to land

<https://www.fao.org/3/y4308e/y4308e.pdf>

Two of the four study communities are located in the northern part of the country (Chon-Tash and Toguz-Bulak villages in Issyk-Kul oblast) and the other two in the southern part of the country (Kozho and Sary-Altyn villages in Batken oblast). The selection of these four communities was purposive, as they are the working districts of the IFAD ATMP project. Two villages in each oblast were selected by the ATMP team based on the following characteristics (Table 1):

- **similar** in terms of *size* (approx. population)
- **similar** in terms of *economic development* (proximity to markets, roads, or connectivity; markets for agricultural resources important for livelihoods in the village; infrastructure development, on- and off-farm employment opportunities)
- **similar** in terms of social cohesion and dynamism (good social cohesion, civic engagement, motivation to pursue new opportunities), but
- **different** in terms of gender relations: women's voice/influence in governance of resources/resource user committees (such as Pasture Users Unions); the extent to which women hold important leadership positions (civic and political) in local organizations; the number and dynamism of women's enterprises; women's freedom of physical mobility, etc.



Table 1. Population characteristics

	Total population	Men \ Women	Including			Mean population age, in years	Poverty level \ number of poor families
			Under working age	Working age	Above working age		
Toguz-Bulak*	1 946 (1346)		701	1 104	141	26.9	
Chon-Tash	2 693 (954)		1 081	1 416	196 1	25.6	
Kozho**	1027						
Sary-Altyn	971						
2022 Survey data							
Toguz-Bulak	2333 (1507)	1181 (763) \ 1152 (744)	610		280		71 households (31 households are in extreme poverty)
Chon-Tash	3215 (1418)	1627 \ 1631	976	1870	259		107 households (54 households are in extreme poverty)
Kozho	1500	780 \ 720			180		
Sary-Altyn	1630						

Source: 2009 national census data

*The census data for Issyk-Kul oblast includes not one but two villages that form one Aiyl Okmotu. The population data for a village is indicated in brackets.

**The census data for Batken oblast includes from 8 (for example, village Kozho and 7 other villages are parts of Masaliev AO) to 13 villages (for example, Sary Altyn and 12 other villages form Maidan AO).

The methodology for the gender analysis consisted of qualitative case studies developed using adapted existing comparative study protocols, including tools from [GENNOVATE](#) and the [Project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index](#) (Pro-WEAI).

Primary data gathering methods included a series Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) purposefully selected to prepare a community profile, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with community members, in-depth interviews with Pasture Users Union (PUU) chairpersons and



members, and conversational interviews with IFAD Access to Markets Project (ATMP) project country staff.

Community profiles were completed for each community. This instrument covers a broad range of topics and is aimed to provide social, economic, agricultural, and political background information about the community in terms of use, access, and control over key resources, as well as exploring community-level factors that generate or reinforce gender norms hindering the full recognition and enjoyment of resource rights.

Four FGDs were conducted in each community in Kyrgyz and/or Uzbek languages based on participants' preferences. The FGD guide consisted of questions on community context, existing rights to land and other productive resources, challenges and barriers to these rights, and potential ways to overcome them. Discussion questions were supplemented by poll questions to register individual views of participants and observe the level of variation in views among FGD participants. Responses to poll questions were examined in real-time and presented to the participants during the group interview to stimulate discussion.

FGD participants included groups of landowners and land non-owners segregated by sex, resulting in a total of 16 FGDs. Participants for the FGDs with landowners were randomly drawn from the list of inhabitants who pay land taxes. Participants for the FGDs with land non-owners were randomly drawn from the list of inhabitants who submitted a formal request to the local government authorities for a plot of land to build a house. Both lists (of landowners and non-owners) were obtained from the Aiyl Okmotu (AO), the rural government administration at the level above the village head. Overall, 111 participants took part in discussions (Table 2): 55 women and 56 men ranging in age from 19 to 68 years.

Interviews with Pasture Users Union (PUU) chairpersons and members provided insights on the work of PUAs in communities. These interviews focused on the types of problems local people may face with their pastures and how they can overcome them, how pastures are used by the different groups in the village(s), the effectiveness of villagers' participation in pasture protection and monitoring and the distribution of benefits from the PUA and who benefits the most. Overall, 19 interviews were conducted with PUA members.

Table 2. Research methods and # of informants by settlement

Oblast	Villages	FGDs		# of KIs for community profile	# Interviews with PUA member
		# of FGDs (number of participants)	# of FGDs participants		
Issyk-Kul oblast	Chon-Tash	4 FGDs 1 with women landowners (8) 1 with women non landowners (8) 1 with men landowners (8) 1 with men non landowners (6)	Women: 16 Men: 14	Women: 2 Men: 2	Women: 3 Men: 2
	Toguz-Bulak	4 FGDs	Women: 14 Men: 15	Women: 3 Men: 3	Women: 2 Men: 3



Batken oblast		1 with women landowners (8) 1 with women non landowners (6) 1 with men landowners (7) 1 with men non landowners (8)			
	Kozho	4 FGDs 1 with women landowners (8) 1 with women non landowners (8) 1 with men landowners (8) 1 with men non landowners (8)	Women: 16 Men:16	Women: 2 Men: 2	Women: 0 Men: 5
	Sary-Altyn	4 FGDs 1 with women landowners (5) 1 with women non landowners (4) 1 with men landowners (5) 1 with men non landowners (6)	Women: 9 Men: 11	Women: 2 Men: 2	Women: 1 Men: 4

A conversational interview was conducted with five IFAD Access to Markets Project (ATMP) project country staff (two women and three men) at the country level. The purpose of these interviews was to gather basic contextual information about the project and the communities where interventions were taking place. Additionally, the interviews aimed to gain insights into the factors influencing the project's impact on women's rights to resources. The respondents were also asked about their knowledge of other ongoing or past interventions that had affected women's rights to resources. Furthermore, the interviews explored current practices and approaches used in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects addressing women's rights to resources.

The field team was comprised four researchers (two men and two women) divided into two groups (Table 3). Each team consisted of one female and one male researcher. Each team was assigned the task of collecting data in two villages within the same region.



Table 3. Research team composition

Oblast	Villages	Fieldwork researchers name
Issyk-Kul oblast	Chon-Tash	Kubanychbek Tagaev
	Toguz-Bulak	Rael Osmonova
Batken oblast	Kozho	Asel Abdurahmanova
	Sary-Altyn	Mairambek Saitov

The research team was accompanied by the principal investigator, Gulnara Ibraeva, who provided guidance throughout the fieldwork process. Each team included a member from the research region, namely Asel Abdurahmanova from the Maidan AO in Batken region and Kubanychbek Tagaev from Toguz-Bulak AO in Issyk-Kul region.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited to four selected communities and may not fully represent all the obstacles that prevent women from effectively enjoying land rights throughout Kyrgyzstan. Instead, the findings are more specific to the selected study sites. One of the main barriers faced by the research team was the limited availability of statistical data about the selected villages' past. The current statistical data in the village is fragmented and contains discrepancies across different departments.



2. COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

2.1 Background

Like most villages in Kyrgyzstan, the four selected villages share common problems, such as unemployment and limited income-generating opportunities of small-scale agricultural production, a shortage of land for young families, lack of investment, knowledge, and technology for the development of modern business, inadequate socio-economic infrastructure, and mass labor out-migration among others. Additionally, all four villages have a similar number of inhabitants and are located in close proximity to raion¹ centers and cities. In recent years, the Community Development and Investment Agency (ARIS)², a public agency, implemented several infrastructure development initiatives in all villages.

At the same time, each village has its own specific characteristics influenced by factors such as their history and socio-political aspects. Another crucial factor that contributes to the uniqueness of each village is its (political) geography.

The history of Chon-Tash and Toguz-Bulak villages in Tyup raion, Issyk-Kul region, goes back more than a century. The first settlement in Chon-Tash was established by the Kalmaks³ many centuries ago⁴. In the early 20th century, Russian settlers moved to the mouth of the Tyup River, and after 1918, the territory became a permanent settlement for settled Kyrgyz people. Toguz-Bulak was founded in 1878 by settlers from the Kuban and Don Cossacks of the Russian Empire (the settlement was initially named Volkovsky settlement, later called Nikolaevka by the Cossacks). The first Kyrgyz ethnic inhabitants began to settle there around 1895, but the population was initially small. Some of the local Kyrgyz participated in the 1916 uprising (Urkun) and were forced to flee to China. They returned to their native lands after the overthrow of Russian tsarism. Russian settlers were less inclined to settle near the mountains, so the backbone of the foothill settlement of Chon Tash was and is still made up of the Kyrgyz people belonging to the Ardam tribe.

Despite being located no more than 30km apart, Toguz-Bulak is situated on a plateau and has abundant land resources and access to Lake Issyk-Kul. Therefore, until the collapse of the Soviet system, the main population consisted of descendants of Russian immigrants.

¹ Kyrgyzstan is divided into seven oblasts (provinces). The capital, Bishkek, is administratively an independent city of republican significance. Osh city also has an independent city status since 2003. Each oblast comprises a number of raions (districts), administered by government-appointed officials (akim). Rural communities (aiyl okmotu), consisting of up to twenty small settlements, have their own elected heads and councils.

² ARIS (Community Development and Investment Agency) is a non-profit organization that was established by the Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic on October 15, 2003 in order to deepen measures taken to attract investment to overcome poverty, develop and support private entrepreneurship within the framework of the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction, strengthen the activities of local authorities self-government and strengthen local communities and community organizations.

³ The Kalmyks are a Mongolic ethnic group living mainly in Russia, whose ancestors migrated from Dzungaria <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalmyks>

⁴ Elebaev M. 1936. The long way / М.Элебаев. Узак жол. 1936



However, in the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of the Slavic population left the village. Currently, the primary population mainly consists of families who relocated from nearby territories (primarily Tyup and Ak-Suu raions) to the areas vacated by the Russians in the early '90s. Thus, despite its long history, the community of current inhabitants of Toguz-Bulak was re-formed just three decades ago. In contrast, the population of Chon Tash village, has changed little over time, since the village is mountainous and predominantly inhabited by Kyrgyz people from the Ardam clan. The Slavic settlement preferred the plateau and the river mouth, so the mass migration of the Slavic population hardly affected the composition of the population in Chon Tash. The history of Sary-Altyn village began in 1987 when landless residents of Markaz village were allocated agricultural plots to build houses. Later, land plots were also given to residents of other nearby villages in the Kadamzhai raion and to ethnic Kyrgyz migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Although, the village is mono-ethnic, the local population is divided into “Kyrgyz”, “Uzbek” and “Tajik” groups. The last two groups consist of ethnic Kyrgyz who migrated from neighboring regions of Uzbekistan and the Zhergetal region of Tajikistan.

The settlement received the status of a village in 2006. Sary-Altyn is a border village, although it does not have an official status as such. The distance between the houses of Sary-Altyn and Gulpien village in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan is only 50–100 meters. Despite the borders being delimited in this area, there are no physical barriers like walls or fences on the border. In the recent past, during a period of strained relations with Uzbekistan, several clashes occurred between the Uzbek population, border guards, and the residents of Sary-Altyn⁵.

The daily life of Sary-Altyn residents is closely intertwined with Uzbekistan. Some inhabitants earn a living by offering private taxi services, often involved in smuggling consumer goods and products. Women from poor families in neighboring villages in the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan cross the border into Kyrgyzstan during peak agricultural seasons to work for wages, from planting and weeding to harvesting. At the exit of Sary-Altyn⁶, there is a designated place where they wait to be hired for day labor. The employers seeking field or domestic workers usually arrive in the morning. In Uzbekistan, such wage workers are referred to as *mardikor*. The hiring of women from Uzbekistan for agricultural and household work is common in all southern regions of Kyrgyzstan that border Uzbekistan. However, as noted by the residents of Sary-Altyn village, around a dozen local women also join the Uzbek *mardikors* and earn money as day laborers, although this status carries a stigma within the community. For local residents, relying on *mardikor* work signifies extreme family poverty. The Kozho tribe settled in the present-day village of Kozho in Kadamzhai raion in the 1920s, even before the establishment of Soviet power. During the Soviet period, the area transformed into a collective farm for tobacco cultivation. However, tobacco growing ceased in the late '90s, as neither the state nor the producers could organize the sales process in a way that could sustain families. According to the head of

⁵ https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_uzbekistan_border_batken_security/25027371.html

⁶ Among the respondents, this stop was called “kul bazar” several times, that is, “slave market”.



village, denationalization began in Kozho village in 1994, making it the first village in the Kyrgyz Republic to undergo this process. The Bereke farmer cooperative was established based on the Soviet collective farm and continues to operate to this day.

The proximity of Sarah-Altyn and Kozho to Uzbek villages and the settlement of Uch-Kurgan greatly influenced the way of life and employment of the population. Today, almost 100 percent of the inhabitants who used to grow tobacco have transitioned to gardening and livestock raising. Local residents have acquired gardening skills from the residents of Uch-Kurgan and have developed new niches, such as growing strawberries in addition to more traditional crops like apples, peaches, and cherries. Both sampled villages in Kadamzhai raion of Batken oblast, Kozho and Sary-Altyn, are not centrally located within the aiyl okmotu. While in Issyk-Kul oblast, each aiyl okmotu consists of only two villages, in Batken oblast, Kozho village is one of eight villages that constitute the Masaliev aiyl okmotu, and Sary Altyn is one of the 13 villages in the Maidan aiyl okmotu.

In the village of Chon-Tash, where all the inhabitants belong to one tribe, social organization, and the division of space (both physical and symbolic) are based on clans. There are five clans, which are the sons of Ardam. The members of “Enkelech” clan reside on the first street of the village, while the “Erkesary” clan predominantly lives on the second and third streets. Other residents belong to the “Baidoolot” clan, and so on. Each clan has its own authoritative representatives who handle internal clan matters and play active roles in public affairs. Ritual events, such as funerals, bring together all the villagers, but it is the responsibility of the clan representatives to organize and conduct these events. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of people practicing Islam in the village. Religious communities gather their members for various events, such as Taalim training⁷, which refers to informal religious education lessons, regardless of their clan affiliation.

The village of Kozho is nearly ethnically homogeneous, with Kyrgyz inhabitants belonging to the Kozho tribe. There is a division in the social organization of the community: the head of the local self-government (AO) has authority over community development, identification of social problems, and decisions making processes related to these issues. Tribal and religious authorities regulate daily household matters and the organization of ritual events. A similar division between “public” and “private” life is observed in the village of Sary-Altyn, where residents have minimal involvement in public discussions and decision-making processes concerning public matters.

In the village of Toguz-Bulak, social organization is based on neighborhoods. Villagers are divided into units called “*onduk*”⁸, which represent the interests of the households within

⁷ Taalim training or lesson (in Kyrgyz: Taalim sabak) means women's weekly Islamic studies as part of informal religious education in communities (since women do not go to mosques, these are home meetings). The Taalim lesson includes the reading of religious texts, such as Fadail (virtues) and Amal (priority of practice) or hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his experience.)

⁸ *Onduk* is the smallest organizational unit of the Kyrgyz (Turkic-speaking) army, the military principle of maintaining discipline, described in the epic Manas. Also *Onduk* - tithe, a religious term meaning a portion of the annual income allocated to achieve a specific goal. The Qur'an states that this tithe (that is, one tenth of the annual income) is used for spiritual purposes. In the modern practice of the village of Toguz-Bulak, *onduk* is used



them and take responsibility for their members in the public life of the village. The head of the *onduk* is responsible for raising funds for funerals, festivities, and delegating workers to *ashar*⁹ and other tasks. Members of households in an *onduk* delegate their powers to participate in decision-making on public issues to the elected head of the *onduk*. Additionally, Toguz-Bulak village has highly active *zhaamats*¹⁰, which were established more than two decades ago under the UNDP Local Self-Government project and have become a key mechanism for the social organization of the villagers. Currently, nine functioning *zhamaats* exist, each with its own specific focus on social work. All *zhamaats* have united in the Association of *Zhamaats* called “*Tamyr*”, which manages a development fund with a total capital of 1900 thousand soms¹¹. As a result, the fund has supported over 500 small community development projects, including the construction of a greenhouse and the cultivation of raspberries and currants, through interest-free loans. The village can be characterized as having a “relatively calm” adoption of Islam. Only two families are considered “strongly converted to Islam”, and the women from these families do not leave their houses and have limited interaction with male fellow villagers. However, the village displays a tolerant attitude towards proselytes, as evidenced by the presence of the leader of the Issyk-Kul unit of the Jehovah’s Witnesses sect, who actively promoted Christianity¹² a few years ago and currently resides in the village.

Each of the villages had its own specialization in agricultural production during the Soviet era, but these specializations are now only partially reproduced and not present in all villages. For instance, Chon-Tash village was the sole beekeeping collective farm in the region, Toguz-Bulak had a large dairy farm with 12’000 cows, Kozho village was known for tobacco cultivation. Presently, beekeeping is gaining popularity again in Chon-Tash, with an increasing share of honey and other bee products in production. In Toguz-Bulak, residents focus on cow breeding, and the production of milk and dairy products¹³ serves as one of their main sources of income.

as a designation of mini-communities of neighbors - 10 households each, which are united in one group with their leader.

⁹ *Ashar* is the mechanism of mutual support provided to needy members of the community in cash, in-kind, or as a labor force and is a method of collective action to solve a specific problem.

¹⁰ *Zhaamat*- from Arabic “jamaa” means society, collective, community, in modern Kyrgyz society the word has at least two meanings: 1) jamaat is understood as a community of believers who are members of the same community, grouped around one mosque for the purpose of joint study of Islam; 2) collective of neighbours or other with common interest (jamaat of teachers, who is aimed to improve the quality of education, jamaat of local dwellers who are working on ecological issues and/or to improve sanitary of population, etc.)

¹¹ When created in 2001, *zhamaats* received public funds in support of initiatives in the amount of 200,000 soms, which were used on the principle of “revolving loans”. Members of *zhamaats* could get a short-term micro loan on preferential terms, and non-members would get such loans at commercial rates. Over 20 years of activity of *zhamaats*, the fund has multiplied and reached 1900 thousand soms.

¹² According to the information provided by one of the respondents, the woman conducts propaganda in other villages. However, this seems to be not realistic. The cessation of the missionary work of the woman and her supporters was preceded by a “public warning” when fellow villagers said that they were born and would die in Islam and that other religions should not be promoted in this village.

¹³ One third of all cheese produced in Kyrgyzstan is produced in the Issyk-Kul region.

<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/648501/kyrgyz-republic-growth-potential-ru.pdf>



Despite their similarities, the sample villages differ in several aspects:

1. The historical emergence and development of each village.
2. The dominant types of employment and changes in agricultural production structure over time.
3. The degree of cultural diversity and the level of tolerance towards foreign cultural groups.
4. The mechanisms and principles of social organization and the extent of adherence to Islamic practices.

2.2 Characteristics of well-off and worse-off households in communities

Perceptions of poverty and wealth in these communities go beyond just economic factors and encompass social dimensions as well. In Sary-Altyn, male respondents in FGDs associate poverty with households lacking their own house, land resources, livestock, having small or no children, and limited education. For women in Sary-Altyn, poverty is linked more to illness (restricting one's ability to work) and social exclusion¹⁴. Some women view those who claim to be poor as seeking sympathy and being lazy (*aramza* in Kyrgyz)¹⁵. One of the women in Sary-Altyn believes that poor families lack social capital and connections, which are essential for societal recognition¹⁶.

Interestingly, during a conversation with a social worker at the raion level, the existence of “*kul bazar*” (translation from Kyrgyz: slave market), a market for day laborers was mentioned. The social worker suggested that residents of Sary-Altyn village should be well-off due to the profitability of their gardens and vegetable plots. Uzbek women, referred to as *mardakers*, come to the outskirts of the village to work, and some local women, who moved from Uzbekistan, also join them. However, the social worker expressed skepticism about the authenticity of local residents claiming poverty.

From the comments made by both residents and raion level officials, stigmatization of poverty is evident, and joining the group of Uzbek day laborers is seen as accepting that stigma. Women engaged in day labor are particularly vulnerable in the village. In the village of Kozho, women associate poverty with poor health, debt burdens, having many children, lack of education, landlessness, and perceived lack of ambition in life¹⁷.

Both women and men in FGDs conducted in the Issyk-Kul region, often cited unemployment as a primary cause of poverty. Women from Chon-Tash village perceived large families in

¹⁴ FGD with women who do not own land in Sary-Altyn: *адамдарга коп кошулбайт тойго да баралбайт (not included in groups of people, cannot go to toy)*

¹⁵ FGD with women who own land in Sary-Altyn

¹⁶ FGD with women who do not own land, Sary Altyn:: танышынын жоктугу, танышын болсо танкасын, танышын жок болсо манкасын (phraseological turn: because there is no networking; when a person has the “necessary networking”, then he is a “tank” (in the sense of strength, the ability to do everything), if there is no “necessary networking”, then a person is a “wet behind the ears” (it means one can nothing to do, is weak).

¹⁷ FGD with women who do not own land.



which only the husband earns as poor¹⁸. Men in Chon-Tash emphasized the traditional gender roles of providing food for the family for men and taking care of the household and children for women. Notably, lack of formal employment is not seen as a significant factor influencing the household well-being. In one of the FGDs conducted with women in Chon-Tash village it was noted that none of the villagers have jobs. In the southern regions, respondents also identified themselves as unemployed, even if they were engaged in handicrafts or work on a farm.

Women often do not view farming as a business but rather as a means of survival through food production. “There is no work. Now only those who work in schools, Feldsher-obstetric stations (in Russian abbreviation: FAP) and the village council are employed. The rest have no work. We only look after the land; in some sense we cultivate. We have no business. And there are no sources of income. Therefore, we try to cultivate our land, even though it is not irrigated, only rainfed. If it were watered, then at least we would have barley, so we are waiting for the rain. If the season is rainy, we will have a good harvest of barley, but in dry years we have no harvest.”¹⁹

For one of the respondents, financial literacy skills, budget planning, and the ability to save for development are seen as lacking in poor families in Chon-Tash²⁰. There are gender and territorial differences in how the respondents perceive wealthy families. The villages in the Kadamzhai raion exhibit a prevalence of conspicuous consumption. In Sary-Altyn and Kozho village, both men and women associate wealth and prosperity with the ownership and display of various possessions: land, a (“two-story”) house, an expensive car, fashionable clothes, expensive jewelry (“you can see it on toys²¹”), access to quality food at home²², and having money for all necessary expenses. For women in all four communities, good health is

¹⁸ FGD with women who own land in Chon-Tash.

¹⁹ FGD with women who own land in Toguz-Bulak.

²⁰ FGD with women who own land in Chon-Tash: *кээ бир семьялар иштеп атат, бирок ошону туура эмес пайдаланып ататта, болор болбос убактылуу нерсеге жоготуп коюшуп анан артында калбай калып ататта, ошон учун байый албайчы. Мисалы учун бир уй алса, уй сутун берип, музоолу болсо музосун сатып ийип эле, анан жалгыз уй калып калып ататта, ошону чыдабай, ошону бир экоо кылып, уланта албай атышатта, мисалы учун. Кээ бироо иштеп коп акча тапса ошону моментте эле кийип ичип салып анан артында калбайт. Ошон учун эле кичине жетпей аткан болуш керек, анан бала-чакалуларга жетпей атат болуш керек. (Some families are working, but they use money wrongly, they lose it to needless things, and then they are left behind without resources, and that's why they don't get rich. For example, if a cow is taken, it gives milk, and if the calf is sold, then the only cow is left alone. Some work and earn a lot of money, but they immediately waste it, not increasing the number of cows, for example. That's why they stay poor and do have not enough resources for families with children).*

²¹ Toy means a feast, fest, public celebration of different events - marriages, jubilee, birth of children, etc. In Kyrgyzstan toys become part of demonstrative consumption and demonstration of material success. Holding toy is accompanied by plentiful gifts for the participants of the festival and their organizers, special preparation of restaurant halls, performances by artists and singers, etc. At the same time the colossal scale of consumption associated with holding a toy against the backdrop of mass unemployment of the population allowed many citizens to find a source of income and their niche in serving toys. Therefore, very often in the research literature, the economics of Kyrgyzstan is called toy-economy.

²² The concept of good nutrition is quite subjective. Thus, in the women's FGD in Sary-Altyn village, one of the respondents joked about the other, saying that she can give the maximum number of points in assessing her food security and economic well-being, because she eats sausage.



also considered a sign of well-being. Some respondents, both women and men, believe that wealth and prosperity enable people to travel around the world and, most importantly, undertake the *hajj* or *umrah* pilgrimage. For men in the village of Chon-Tash, where religious communities (jamaats or tablighs) are particularly developed, the concept of prosperity and wealth is understood in religious terms. One man shared his perspective, saying, “If I take myself as an example, I don’t work anywhere. Thank God I have a house, my children are healthy and don’t get sick. I don’t focus on money or material things. For me, wealth is having healthy children and owning a house. My parents are alive, and my brothers and sisters are healthy. Only this is important. A million money, for instance, is a transient thing. I could grab a million too. But a million will come and go. This is my personal opinion”.

2.3 Social groups

The key community groups identified by respondents varied based on age and employment status. Young villagers who lack prospects of obtaining land shares either for housing or cultivating, were considered a distinct group compared to their parents’ generation, who own land. FGD participants classified farmers and artisans as unemployed, while people working in education, healthcare, social work, local governance, run a local business enterprises such as sewing shops or processing of agricultural products, and businessmen were regarded as employed.

The division between employed and non-employed individuals among local residents is quite complex. The availability of income sources and employment status are no longer directly correlated since having an official employment status does not always mean having an actual job. For example, due to the mass migration of young people, many households in the Issyk-Kul oblast consist of two generations: parents and small children left behind by migrants. The income source for these families is remittances, which are used to hire agricultural workers for field work and harvesting, among other tasks. One respondent mentioned that several young men who remained in the village formed a group of hired agricultural workers. However, this type of employment in the form of a work brigade was not considered as proper employment, and the hired workers were labelled as “unemployed”. Meanwhile, women working in informal sewing shops were seen as “working”.

Respondents also distinguished between social groups that have asymmetric power – the “haves” (*kolunda barlar* in Kyrgyz) who are in positions of power and the “ordinary people” (*karapaiym kalk*) who lack levers of influence in decision-making processes. This division was important in explaining how land and other resources were distributed in the village and the mechanism contributing to social inequality. The “haves” are able to secure the best and larger plots of land from the Land Redistribution Fund (LRF)²³ on a long-term lease. They

²³ LRF - The fund for the redistribution of agricultural land is land plots formed from agricultural land (except for pastures). They are state-owned. In accordance with the “Strategy for land use of the Agricultural Land



are also obtaining land for constructing their own houses and for their children. Moreover, they received better farms and access to more fertile pasturelands. In the Kadamzhai raion, specifically in the villages of Sary-Altyn and Kozho, respondents claimed that during the land privatization period (between 1991 and 1996), “ordinary people” were allocated land plots smaller than the officially declared norm. Instead of the designated 14 sotkas²⁴ per family member, they received 8 or 10 sotkas²⁵. A rural teacher among the respondents mentioned that initially, teachers were not even granted land shares as non-agricultural workers. Respondents asserted that those in power managed to acquire more land. In the village of Kozho, respondents also noted that one of the parliamentary deputies from the region had successfully privatized a significant portion of land from the LRF (land reserve). However, the accuracy of the information regarding the unequal distribution of land plots could not be verified during the study. Local self-government staff recalled an incident where a resident of the village of Sary-Altyn lodged a complaint with a land specialist²⁶, claiming that their land allocation (*ulush*) was smaller than what was stated in their land ownership documents. The land specialist measured the land and confirmed that, legally, the land size was the same.

It was also noted that individuals in positions of power, including a deputy, have seized land shares exceeding the norm and have taken away the most fertile areas, particularly those near water sources and irrigation networks. In the village of Toguz-Bulak, the research team discovered a new “power group” has emerged during a memorial event. It appears that the local imam holds significant respect from local authorities. The head of the ayil okmotu, a woman, relies on the imam’s authority and demonstrates loyalty and respect towards him. In subsequent FGDs, respondents mentioned that the imam received a large plot of land near the spring for a long-term lease from the LRF and started cultivating strawberries, emphasizing the high yields of strawberries and the profitability of the initiative. Meanwhile, one of the FGD participants from the same village mentioned her unsuccessful attempts over three years to obtain land for rent from local authorities.

In Sary-Altyn village, social groups are divided based on ethnicity or their place of origin. The villagers are categorized as “Uzbeks”, “Tajiks” and “Kyrgyz”. The first two groups are considered more well-off since they are perceived as being inherently hardworking and knowledgeable about gardening and vegetable growing techniques. Interestingly, all three groups comprise ethnic Kyrgyz individuals who either migrated from Uzbekistan or Tajikistan

Redistribution Fund” (2009) LRF lands are used for: 1) expansion of the territory of rural settlements in accordance with master plans for their development; 2) creation and functioning of seed-growing, breeding, experimental breeding, experimental farms and state variety testing institutions; 3) organization of special agricultural enterprises for growing crops by decision of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic; 4) leasing to rural producers; 5) provision of land plots to citizens working and living outside the given farm (including natives of the farm), who arrived for permanent residence before July 1, 1996, in the amount of the average farm land share; 6) other purposes stipulated by the decisions of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic.

<http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/4809#:~:text=D0%B9>

²⁴ 1 acre of land = 40.47 sotkas and 1 ha = 100 sotkas.

²⁵ FGD with male landowners, Sary-Altyn

²⁶ A land specialist is a municipal servant occupied in the Local self-governance body – Ayil okmoty.



or relocated from nearby Kyrgyz villages. However, male and female respondents from Sary-Altyn who immigrated from Uzbekistan in 2012 stated that they did not receive land from the state but purchased it at market value. These respondents mentioned the challenges they face, such as limited space in homes due to having multiple sons and daughters-in-law. As a result, their adult sons and their wives are forced to migrate for work in order to earn money to buy their own land and house. Unfortunately, due to the lack of land resources from the LRF in Sary-Altyn, young people have no prospects of acquiring land in the village their parents reside.²⁷ Various rumors circulate among those who moved to Sary-Altyn between 2010 and 2015, suggesting promises of land allocation from the aiyl okmotu of Maidan (according to respondents, there are about 5 hectares of fertile land) or the government promising plots to landless young citizens in the Burgondu aiyl okmotu in the Batken region or even in the Chui oblast. However, people who have applied to the local authorities receive vague responses about the possibility of obtaining land. Overall, the residents of Sary-Altyn, especially those without land plots, believe that the local self-government (LSG) neglects their needs, does not provide state support, and does not communicate information about resource allocation decisions. The recruitment process of local residents for FGDs also demonstrated that the LSG had limited knowledge about the population's movement, and communication with residents was indirect, often through local activists. Additionally, in a scheduled FGD for young women without land, only one woman out of ten invitees attended. She was in the village due to giving birth, while the rest were engaged in labor migration in Russia.

Men and women can be regarded as social groups living in different realities. The most active and "integrated" residents in the life of the village are the women of Toguz-Bulak, where there are businesswomen. Women's leadership is demonstrated by the fact that both the head of the aiyl okmotu and the chairperson of the village council are women. Women also head the majority of rural cooperatives and community-based organizations (jamaats) of the village. However, in the past few years, two families in the village have established a stricter religious gender regime, and the women from these families practically do not leave their households. It has been discovered that one of these women was previously very active in public affairs and had her own business. Presently, she does not even manage the daily income from the sale of milk obtained from milking cows.

In the village of Chon-Tash, Muslim practices are more common, and men clearly differentiate between the female space within the household and male space not limited to the house. This spatial distinction represents the "normative" model of the dominant male

²⁷ Almost every village has land available for rent for agricultural purpose, which is identified as LRF. Over the last 3 years, the government has been promising to approve the transformation of part of these LRF lands into land to share for home construction for newlyweds or other young families who don't own a home. Local dwellers hope that newlyweds can get some land piece from this LRF in accordance with the Governmental decree on change (transformation) of the land use purpose to allow young families to build a home. Sary Altyn itself was established in the LRF of Maidan Ayil okmoty, and due to the scarcity of land, the village doesn't possess any unshared LRF land, which is owned by the state, so local newlyweds have no hope of obtaining a piece of land for home construction.



breadwinner and the subordinated woman, primarily engaged in domestic reproductive labor. According to the respondents of this village, the traditional culture of the Kyrgyz does not allow a woman to head the household, except for a few cases:

1. When a woman becomes a widow at a young age and has small children, she is forced to head the household. However, according to respondents, such households constitute no more than 10% of the total number of households.
2. Women whose husbands leave for labor migration are forced to temporarily head the household, but once their husbands return, they hand over all responsibilities back to them.
3. Women head the household if the husband is an alcoholic and is unable to fulfill the role of a breadwinner.

According to information from local informants, women-led households face difficulties in hiring wage laborers for tasks like plowing, sowing, and harvesting. Male machine operators, such as tractor drivers, prioritize men's requests for services in customer queues, causing female-headed households to often experience delays in sowing or harvesting. Interestingly, the tribal groups, which hold significant influence in this village, do not regulate the principles of social justice or protect the rights of women in cases where their access to services is violated, despite regulating other daily processes and relationships within the community.²⁸

Life strategies for women in the village of Toguz-Bulak often differ from those of men. Respondents noted that girls from this village rarely stay in the village after completing their education, choosing instead to migrate to other cities in Kyrgyzstan for work or further studies. They seldom return to marry fellow villagers. In contrast, the proportion of girls who remain in the village is much higher in Chon-Tash. While an exhaustive explanatory model is lacking, it can generally be assumed that the differences in gender regimes between Chon-Tash and Toguz-Bulak are likely influenced by the level of Islamic ideology and practice integrated into the villagers' everyday lives, as well as the level of cultural and ethnic diversity.

In the village of Kozho, there is a distinction in defining youth between men and women. While men are considered young until the age of 40, women are only viewed as young until the age of 30. In the village of Sary-Altyn, a significant number of young women who are daughters-in-law are compelled to live with extended families, with no alternative other than labor migration to earn money for their own homes and purchase arable land. Conversely, if these women get divorced, many of them migrate in search of jobs, leaving their children in the care of their parents. Divorced women face stigma, and their parental families are unwilling to welcome them back after divorce. Therefore, divorced women only have opportunities to support their children and hope to earn enough to purchase their own

²⁸ The tribe is the mechanism of protection of rights of the members. In everyday life, the tribal authorities recommend to behave in certain way: for example, how many animals to slaughter for funerals, in which houses to organize memorial dinners, etc. If there is a conflict in the family, the tribal authorities (aksakals) can also act as mediators. But in the case of discrimination in obtaining agricultural services, it does not even occur to women of the tribe to ask for help to the clan authorities; and tribal authorities never raise the question of equity and justice for female or young tribe members.



home through labor migration. In three villages – Chon-Tash, Kozho and Sary-Altyn – social activities of women are not particularly encouraged. In these villages, women mainly engage in social activities through community-based non-governmental organizations such as Village Health Committees, as the concept of healthcare aligns with the normative model of the female role.

2.4 Differences in the well-being of women and men

The issue of economic accessibility is one of the most pressing concerns for land users. As stated in the FAO Gender Profile, “Land ownership is only one aspect of land rights. Formal registration confers the right to use and dispose of land, but in practice women may make use of agricultural lands that they do not own or may not use lands that they can access. According to an assessment related to food security, female-headed households are less likely to use their land for crops; only 58 percent of female-headed households cultivated their land, compared with 71 percent of male-headed households, and the average plot size was smaller for female-headed households who cultivate their land.”

The FAO report provides some explanations, stating, “These differences could be related to the fact that female-headed households are smaller on average than male-headed households, and so there may be less available labor to cultivate the land, or more restricted incomes could make it difficult for female-headed households to invest in seeds or other inputs, such as fertilizers. The study also found that female-headed households were less likely to be food insecure than male-headed households, and this finding suggests that the female-headed households have a family member working abroad (usually the husband) who sends remittances. The absence of male family members and remittance funds may mean that female-headed households choose not to cultivate their land.”²⁹

Women in the surveyed villages face challenges cultivating their land due to insufficient financial resources. Respondents from Chon-Tash highlighted the vulnerable situation of divorced and widowed women with small children in this regard³⁰. An employee of the local council in Chon-Tash mentioned the particular vulnerability of widowed women in an interview. If the ownership of the husband’s parents’ houses was not legally registered in a timely manner, widows with children depended on the willingness of the husband’s close relatives to acknowledge her rights to housing and land (*ulush*)³¹. No significant difference in

²⁹ FAO. 2016. National gender profile of agricultural and rural livelihoods - Kyrgyz Republic. Country gender assessment series. <https://www.fao.org/3/i5763e/i5763e.pdf>

³⁰ Men and women who own and do not own land.

³¹ “There are widows, whose houses are not formalized, and their land is not formalized, for example, the husband's land, mother-in-law's land. And the dead husband's siblings do not want to give it to that widow. I don't know why they don't give it. Many houses don't have registration now, and we don't digitalize the certificates of ownership. For example, in 5-6 households, their households are not formalized, because the relatives of the dead owner do not want to give it to his family, the widow. She cannot fully own it.”
(куйоолору олуп калган аялдар барда, ошол ачлдардын, кээ бир аялдардын үйу оформитетилбей турат, жери оформитетилбей турат, калган жанагы куйоосунун жери, кайненесини жери мисалы үчүн,



land shares between men and women, when land was registered under a woman's ownership, was found in any of the villages. Interestingly, in the village of Toguz-Bulak, only two local residents, one woman and one man, owned more than 100 hectares of land as a result of shares bought from other villagers during the initial years of land reform. In all four villages, residents actively access banking services, particularly microcredits. While access to microcredit was previously dominated by men, women are now the dominant group of borrowers. However, villagers perceive microcredits as a significant problem due to enslaving and irrational schemes involved, such as repayment beginning long before receiving agricultural income, high interest rates, and so on. Respondents mentioned instances where families lost both their houses and land, ultimately having to leave their homes due to their inability to repay loans. Nevertheless, almost all households in the villages have at least one loan, with some individuals taking out multiple loans from different banks and repaying them using remittances from migrant family members. During FGDs with men in Chon-Tash and Kozho, respondents noted that women, as illiterate borrowers, struggle to strategically plan and effectively invest the funds they received through credit.

The perception of migration differs between women and men in the Issyk-Kul oblast. Men tend to have a more positive attitude and see migration as a viable strategy to earn money. On the other hand, women tend to focus on the negative aspects of migration. They express concerns about the risks to life and health, the potential delay in marriage for both girls and boys who migrate, and the increased likelihood of remaining single. These concerns are not unfounded, as statistics indicate a trend of reduced marriages and increased divorces in Batken and Issyk-Kul oblasts, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Marriage and divorce rates in Batken and Issyk-Kul oblasts compared to Kyrgyz averages

	Number of marriages per 1000 people					Number of divorces per 1000 people				
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Kyrgyzstan	7.9	7.0	7.8	7.7	6.0	1.5	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.4
Batken oblast	8.8	7.5	8.5	9.2	6.3	1.1	1.2	1.4	1.5	1.2
Kadamjai raion	9.8	7.6	8.8	10.1	6.3	1.0	1.3	1.3	1.5	1.1
Issyk-Kul oblast	7.9	7.0	7.7	6.9	5.7	1.6	1.9	2.1	2.0	1.7
Tyup raion	9.4	6.7	8.6	7.7	6.5	1.1	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.4

Source: National Statistical Committee data.

олуп калганда баары, потому что ошонун бир туугандары ошол келинге бергиси келбейтта. Ушул жагынан дагы юридический керекта консультациячы, айыл элдеринечи. Кандай себеп менен беришпейт билбейм, иши кылып бергилери келбейт, коп уйлор азыр оформлениеси жок, биз санарипке уйду киргизбей турабыз. Болот ошондойлор деле. Примерно 5-6 уйбулордо , уйлору оформитетилбей, себеби ошого бергиси келбей, бербей атышатта уйлордучу, жерлер дагы бербей атышат, ошо толук кандуу ээ боло албайтат, ошондой аялдар бар, уйбулосу толук эмес аялдардан да булар)



Note: Marriage in Kyrgyzstan has been falling fast in recent years. Divorce has risen in recent years but hit a low in 2020.

In the villages of Batken oblast, migration was widely perceived as an unquestioned strategy by both men and women. In Sary-Altyn and Kozho, men and women who remained in the village had different expectations and grievances towards the state. Men were more vocal about unfair access to land resources and the lack of preferential government assistance to farmers, such as fuel, chemicals, and technological training. In contrast, women lamented the complex procedures for obtaining social benefits and the unfair distribution of financial assistance.

The perception of well-being and the assessment of the villagers' economic status varied among the communities, as shown in Table 5. In Chon-Tash, nearly half of the respondents described the economic well-being of their community as "Good". However, in Toguz-Bulak, respondents were more critical of the economic situation, with the largest share of respondents the "Poor" option compared to respondents in the other three villages. It is noteworthy that Toguz-Bulak has the most significant land resources among the four studied communities. The village residents received larger land plots, and the LRF includes a plot on the coast of Lake Issyk-Kul. The villagers also have a substantial number of livestock, including cows and birds. Moreover, according to respondents, most families try to purchase thoroughbred cattle. For instance, European dairy breeds such as August Holstein are favored. Furthermore, residents have mechanized the process of milking cows. However, two factors might have influenced the respondents' assessments. The current media discourse highlighting unscrupulous owners of dairy factories, who buy milk from the population at low prices while supermarket prices continue to rise, may have played a role. Additionally, the previous years' experience of a dry spring and summer, resulting in a lower than expected harvest of agricultural products, forced the villagers to purchase fodder at a high prices during the winter.

Table 5. Community perceptions of well-being, across communities (% of responses across all FGD groups)

		Issyk-Kul oblast		Batken oblast		Total (n=111)
		Chon-Tash n=30	Toguz-Bulak n=29	Kozho n=32	Sary-Altyn n=20	
How would you describe the economic well-being of residents in the community?	Very poor	3%		3%		2%
	Poor	3%	14%	3%		5%
	Average	50%	66%	78%	90%	69%
	Good	43%	17%	13%	10%	22%
	Very good		3%	3%		2%
Food security means having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. How would	Very poor	3%	3%	28%		10%
	Poor	7%	24%	44%	20%	24%
	Average	50%	38%	19%	45%	37%
	Good	40%	34%	9%	30%	28%



you describe the situation of food security in the community?	Very good				5%	1%
How would you describe education opportunities in the community?	Very poor	3%		6%	5%	4%
	Poor	13%	14%	13%	20%	14%
	Average	37%	62%	41%	35%	44%
	Good	47%	24%	41%	40%	38%
How would you describe the health and wellbeing of people living in your community?	Very poor		3%	3%	5%	3%
	Poor	10%	45%	25%		22%
	Average	50%	24%	50%	65%	46%
	Good	40%	21%	19%	30%	27%
	Very good		7%	3%		3%

Source: FGD data

The activists in the village primarily consist of adult women and men who grew up and started working in the Soviet period. These leaders often idealize the past system, emphasizing social justice, equal opportunities, employment for all, and solidarity among villagers³². The prevalence of such discussions may have contributed to the more critical assessments of the village's economic state and its inhabitants. Despite having relatively developed infrastructure³³, respondents from Toguz-Bulak rated access to quality education and healthcare lower compared to residents of other villages.

In the village of Chon-Tash, respondents viewed the 1990s, the beginning of the post-Soviet era and independence period, as a point for comparison when many families struggled to afford daily bread. In contrast to that period, the local population has been successful in developing the beekeeping business. Unofficial data gathered through individual interviews suggests that honey production this year exceeded one ton. The villagers aspire to create a beekeepers' association and reach the honey production levels of the Soviet era.

The number of livestock, particularly cows, is also increasing and milk delivery has become a good and stable source of income. Additionally, villagers mentioned that they not only keep their own cows but also receive payment for taking care of the livestock of their relatives and neighboring villagers from Zhyluu-Bulak, where there is a shortage of livestock breeders. This allows the residents of Chon-Tash to earn money as livestock breeders and benefit from the milk produced.

However, according to the head of the pasture committee in Chon-Tash, those who take their livestock to pastures (summer zhailoo) receive significant benefits without contributing

³² Perhaps it was the memory of the past collective farms that accounts for the establishment of successful jamaats, collectives of neighbors, colleagues, like-minded people, who together set development goals and implement projects to achieve them.

³³ Thanks to the support of Aris, as well as the initiatives of local jamaats, a pre-school education center has been built in the village, the construction of a secondary school has now begun, and there is a FAP in the village.



to pasture development. They are seen as a burden and always demand resources from the pasture committees. Respondents feel that only they receive benefits³⁴.

Interestingly, since villagers measure success primarily in monetary terms or livestock as an asset, they tend to positively evaluate even those aspects of current life that were mentioned during FGDs as causing concern. For example, despite reports of a high number of echinococcus infections and gallbladder removal surgeries among young people, the latter of which respondents attributed to poor water quality and lack of water filtration practices, residents tend to rate access to medical services higher than in Toguz-Bulak.

Similarly, access to education and healthcare services is relatively positively assessed by residents of Kozho and Sary-Altyn, although there is more criticism regarding food security and overall economic development in Kozho. In Central Asian and Muslim traditions, people are generally reluctant to speak negatively about their situation. Even in difficult circumstances, they tend to say things like “like everyone else” (*el agymynda*), “not bad” (*zhaman emes*), or “praise God” (*shugur*). Therefore, the assessment of “average” or “normal” reflects a religious and ethical expression of gratitude to God, even though the social sentiments and perceptions among the villagers may not be entirely positive.

During the FGDs, men in Sary-Altyn who do not own land openly voiced their hardships, rumors, speculations, and their willingness to protests and express discontent to local authorities. Some of these respondents advocated for a revision of land privatization. Similarly, men from Chon-Tash, particularly landowners, expressed their readiness to protest against recent unjust land regulations that they believe favor those in power.

In the village of Toguz-Bulak, the majority of respondents (both men and women landowners) also expressed dissatisfaction with government policies and practices and voiced their distrust in the authorities and local self-government.

2.5 Community governance, decision-making and leadership

The level of women’s participation in community governance varies across villages. The village of Toguz-Bulak is the most progressive in terms of women’s leadership. Key positions in the LSG, such as the head of Ayil Okmoty and head of Ayil kenesh (village council), are occupied by women. Women are active in community life, leading different initiatives and working on village development. The accountants of the water user associations (WUA) and the pasture committee are also women, and they hold influential roles in the community.

³⁴ “Among the shepherds, there are no one willing (to help the local authorities), they just talk. For example, they earn for sheep grazing services 100 soms per sheep a month, say, 600 sheep in a flock, 60,000 per month, 300,000 per 5 months. But according to the shepherds, the pasture committee should provide them with all conditions.” (Р: Малчылардан андай чыгалек негизи (окмотко жардам беруу), айтып эле коет. Мисалы койду 100 сомдом башына багып атышат, 600 кой депкой, бир айда 60 мин, 5 айда 300 мин болуп атат бы? Малчылардын ою мындайда, жайыт комитети жазаш керек деген.)



However, even in this village, there are challenges regarding women's participation in strategic decision-making meetings. According to the community profile data, only six women are heads of households, and they actively participate in community events and meetings on a regular basis. Other women either do not participate at all or participate very rarely. According to local informants, there are two households where female members never leave their houses due to religious reasons.

In the other three villages, women's roles are much more modest. In Chon-Tash, few women work in the LSG and council, although there is approximately 30 percent female representation in the council due to gender quotas. However, women generally do not take part in village meetings. At the beginning of each year, the head of the Aiyl Okmotu provides an annual report, and key issues related to the villagers' lives, such as tariffs for agricultural equipment services, a schedule for nomadism to remote pastures, and so on, are discussed. These important meetings are mostly attended by men, who raise the problems they face, while the problems faced by women often remain unvoiced due to their absence. Men primarily raise issues such as bad roads, poor veterinary care, and animal diseases. Additionally, a WhatsApp group is used to inform the population about community-related issues, but this group mainly includes men from each household. As a result, women are excluded from information sharing and decision-making processes.

Women in the village are not active in the civic space. Women in the village of Kozho are also passive in community life, with a few exceptions. Some women are involved in the activities of community organizations such as the Pasture Committee (one woman among 11 members), the local council (30 percent representation due to gender quotas), and the Village Health Committee (3-4 active elderly women). Neither men nor women could recall the last community meeting where women participated and were involved in decision-making. Men believe that women should not participate and lack the capacity to do so. Women mentioned that any attempt to be active is risky in terms of community blame and family conflict. They note that even riding a bicycle or driving a car becomes a subject of criticism and social pressure, with ridicule aimed at their spouse suggesting that he is incapable of managing his wife properly (data from community profile). Women in Sary-Altyn are even more passive and have limited involvement in community life.

Most young women are abroad for labor migration, and in most cases, their mothers take care of their children. There are few women, such as the director of the local school, a medical worker (midwife), and social workers at the LSG, who are elected as members of the local council due to gender quotas. However, they are not active outside of their professional workplace. The Village Health Committee (VHC) used to be more active a few years ago because of donor support. The committee consists of a few elderly women who are not seen as having a significant authority within the community, according to male FGD respondents. Table 6 lists other community organizations and their gender composition and characteristics.



Table 6. Community organizations

Characteristic No of HHs	Issyk-Kul oblast		Batken oblast	
	Chon-Tash	Toguz- Bulak	Kozho	Sary- Altyn
Two most important community organizations	Youth committee, Village Health Committee	Development fund and cooperative	Youth committee, Village Health Committee	Village Health Committee
Organization 1	Youth committee	“Tamyр” development fund	Youth committee	Village Health Committee
Primary purpose	Establishing justice	Support for “jamaats”	Development of the village	Improving people’s lives, health, sanitation and ecology
Gender composition	Men predominately	Women and men	Could not answer	Women only/mostly
Received support from outside the community?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Type of membership	Voluntary membership	Voluntary membership	Voluntary membership	Voluntary membership
Organization 2	VHC	Agro79 cooperative	VHC	
Primary purpose	Improving people’s lives, health, sanitation and ecology	Collective land management	Improving people’s lives, health, sanitation and ecology	
Gender composition	Only adult women	Women and men	Only adult women	
Received support from outside the community?	yes	Yes	yes	
Type of membership	Voluntary choice	Voluntary choice	Voluntary choice	

*Community Profile data

The majority of respondents and representatives of the IFAD project believe that women's leadership in the villages of Sary-Altyn, Kozho and Chon-Tash is underdeveloped. Women tend to accept a subordinate role within the family and a passive position in society. They consider their husbands (or fathers and sons) as the head of the household, even though they acknowledge that they are more economically active than other family members. Even in the case of widowed women, adult sons do not readily accept their mother’s role as the manager of the land and household. Even when the farm is registered under a woman’s name, the management is often carried out by her sons. Divorced and widowed women, according to the prevailing cultural norms, often feel shame and are not culturally accepted to speak directly to strangers.



One respondent from Kozho mentioned that in 2004-2005, local residents established Abiir Foundation (translated as “Conscience” in Kyrgyz), which provided monthly allowances³⁵ to widows with many children. This foundation reinforced the perception of widowed women as unable to feed their children or effectively lead households. Although the respondent stated that the village head and a social worker were involved in identifying families in need of such support, the local self-government staff did not mention this organization. The respondent did not disclose the sources of financial assistance but noted that it was provided within the framework of Muslim tradition.

In the FGD, some respondents disagreed with the notion of women being oppressed and passive. They argued that today's women are very active and more entrepreneurial than men. This view was supported by the chairman of the WUA from Chon-Tash, who stated that digitalization has removed old barriers for divorced and widowed women. They can now communicate by phone to seek advice, arrange agricultural services, and engage with men without fearing gossip³⁶. While male respondents acknowledged the previous model of behavior for vulnerable women, where they were hesitant to be economically active or seek assistance from men in the community, they believe that this model no longer exists. However, their assessments of women who own and manage property, earning money on an equal basis with men, often carried negative undertones and even fear. Men argued that when women have equality and the opportunity to be the breadwinner in the family, it changes the dynamic of relationships, and a woman may no longer respect a man³⁷.

It is worth noting that in almost all communities, except Toguz-Bulak, village heads and local authorities described the normative model of a woman as a housewife, husband's assistant, child educator, and caretaker of the household, based on ethnic and Muslim traditions. One of the community leaders in Chon-Tash even admitted that he and his associates hold meetings to “prevent” women's leadership,³⁸ even in the families of divorced and widowed women.

³⁵ The amount of benefits - 500 soms per month (currently equivalent to about 6 US dollars) - does not affect the financial situation of the family, but highlights the vulnerable status of women.

³⁶ “Even they (widows, divorced women) can organize work in the fields, talk to a tractor driver on the phone, hire, talk to a combine driver and organize harvesting. By calling on the phone, she will hire, and he (tractor driver, combine operator) will serve.” (Чыгып иштетет алар деле (жесир, ажырашкан аялдар), телефон менен трактор менен суйлошуп коет, айдап коет, эгин чогултканга дагы суйлошуп коюшат телефон менен эле болуп калдыгы азыр. Телефон менен звонитьтети айдап бересинби десе, айдап берет.) (

³⁷ Men with land, Sary Altyn: “A woman will rise up” in the sense of dominating if she has more resources (аял киши бой которуп калат да).

³⁸ “We now see such families, and in houses headed by women, we gradually bring religious knowledge, explain that the owner should be a man” (Азыр биз ошондойлорду коруп атабыз, анан аял башкарган уйго динден кабар берип атабыз, эркек башкарыш керек эле деп. Интервью с главой АВП Чон Таш)



3. EXISTING RIGHTS TO LAND AND RESOURCES

Land reform in the Kyrgyz Republic was implemented in stages but lacked strategic planning. The initial stage coincided with the collapse of collective farms between 1991 and 1994. Due to the absence of clearly defined rules and principles for land distribution and division of farms, the reform was carried out spontaneously and varied across different villages and raions (see also Scalise (2023) for more information on this process)³⁹. Subsequently, land legislation was developed and implemented in multiple phases. From 2004 to 2007, the Kyrgyz government took measures to address the shortcomings of the initial round of reforms, distributing over 1 million hectares of agricultural land to more than 2.5 million citizens.

However, a significant number of young villagers, particularly those born after 1996, have not received their shares of agricultural and residential land. According to FGD participants, the ownership of land is generally limited in their villages (Table 7). In Toguz-Bulak, 66 percent of respondents believe that most households have land, while another 10 percent believe that almost all households have land. In Chon-Tash village, more than half of respondents believe that most or almost all households own land. In contrast, in Kozho village, only 3 percent of respondents believe this, with 97 percent thinking that only a few households own land. In Sary-Altyn, just over a third of respondents believe that the majority of households own land, while more than half think that only some villagers have access to land. Additionally, 10 percent of respondents in Sary-Altyn believe that almost no one owns land.

Table 7. Community perceptions of own security of land/resource rights (in % of respondents across all FGDs)

		Issyk-Kul oblast		Batken oblast		Total (n=111)
		Chon-Tash (n=30)	Toguz-Bulak (n=29)	Kozho (n=32)	Sary-Altyn (n=20)	
What proportion of households in the community own land?	Almost all HH	23%	10%	3%		10%
	Most HH	37%	66%		35%	33%
	Some HHs	27%	3%	47%	30%	27%
	Only a few HHs	7%	21%	50%	25%	26%
	Almost none of the HH	7%			10%	4%
Generally speaking, who typically owns the land in landholding households?	Only Men	40%	34%	78%	50%	51%
	Only Women	3%		3%	5%	3%
	Both men and women own individually	23%		3%	25%	12%
	Both men and women share ownership	33%	66%	16%	20%	34%

*FGD data

³⁹ Scalise, E., 2023. Women's Land Rights in the Kyrgyz Republic. Securing Women's Resource Rights Through Gender Transformative Approaches. Bogor, Indonesia: Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and Nairobi: World Agroforestry (ICRAF) International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).



Half of the respondents believe that men own land, while just over a third believe that men and women jointly own land. The perception of land ownership by men and women varies among respondents from different regions. Those from Issyk-Kul are more likely to believe in joint land ownership by men and women, while in Batken, the proportion of respondents holding this opinion is twice as low. Due to variations in land resources across different oblasts, and even within them, the size of land shares can vary significantly from village to village and from raion to raion. As more than half of the country's population reside in the southern region, where the amount of arable land is half that of the northern region, the land shares received by families in the villages of Kozho (0,45 ha) and Sary-Altyn (0,25 ha) are smaller compared to those in Chon-Tash (0,46 ha) and Toguz-Bulak (6 ha). It is important to note that Toguz-Bulak and Chon-Tash are located only 30 kilometers apart from each other.

Land reform initially secured land use rights for households. However, young women who received their land plot while living with their parental household are unable to benefit from land use once they leave home. This unequal position of young women compared to young men is often attributed to cultural norms that do not view women as equal to men within the family, particularly regarding land use and claims.

This study, along with other research, has revealed that girls and young women lose the opportunity to benefit from land use once they depart from their parental family. Only in Toguz-Bulak village, respondents mentioned a few cases where the woman, together with her parental family, made a decision to give her the shares (“*ulush*”⁴⁰) of household land for her personal use. All respondents viewed these cases as fair and appropriate. However, this model did not become widespread or normalized. The study indicated that land was only given to women in families with abundant land resources. One interviewee pointed out, “If I had 100 hectares of land, why not give each daughter two hectares?”. While acknowledging the existence of a culture of male dominance, it can be suggested that the pattern where a woman and her relatives do not question her right to dispose of her land share is determined more by rational considerations than discriminatory gender attitudes. As noted by Scalise (2023), “the land owned by individual households is quite small, so partition of land among shareholders is not considered a useful outcome for anyone in the household.” A respondent from Chon-Tash village confirmed this viewpoint, stating, “I gave these 45 sotkas to my brother. I will not get rich from the sale of this land, and I will not get poorer without it. I will survive. My family does not have enough land, of course. So, should I tell my children, ‘Go to that village and get my 45 sotkas?’”⁴¹ Another woman from the same village mentioned that if she had married and lived nearby, she might have claimed

⁴⁰ Ulush means land share: a plot of land for agricultural purposes given to the citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic in the manner determined by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic – Land Code of KR, #45, 1999, ch.1.

⁴¹ “I gave up 45 sotkas of land. I'm not going to get rich and I'm not going to be poor, I have enough. It's not enough, it's not enough even for us, but for the sake of those 44 sotkas, I would have to say: Get out! Let my nephews have it.” “P 5: ал эми кенедей 45 сотый дан, берип салдым мен байып дагы кетпей кедей дагы болуп кетпейм, озумдуку жетет. Жетет эмес, жетпейтат озубузго деле, бирок ошол 44 сотый учун мен тетияка баргыла дейинби, жээндери ошякта журсунбу.”



her share of the land. However, since she lives far away, using her rights to *ulush*⁴² would be irrational.

The belief that selling one's portion of land is not profitable is supported by evidence from modern rural history. For example, in Chon-Tash village, where the number of property division disputes is increasing, FGD participants revealed that social norms no longer prevent women from suing their brothers for parental inheritance. In an interview, the chairman of the WUA recalled a recent case in which a woman successfully reclaimed land in court that her late husband had sold without her consent⁴³. An interesting interpretation of gender inequality in property division was provided by a respondent from the Issyk-Kul region, who mentioned an unspoken agreement between parents and daughters, and brothers and sisters, stating "parents can help their daughters and brothers can help their sisters to raise their livestock for free, or provide them with agricultural products such as meat, potatoes and other vegetables, berries, and fruits. The girl's dowry is also a kind of compensation for the right to use land. The entire family contributes to preparing the girl's dowry, often through remittances from the girl's father and brothers or through loans taken to purchase of dowry, which are then repaid by members of the parental family." Simultaneously, the institutional mechanism for the reproduction of patriarchy, patrilineality, which traces descent through male ancestors, plays a crucial role in understanding why, despite limited resources, land inheritance continues to favor men⁴⁴. Patriarchal social norms hinder women from registering their land rights. In most cases, it is customary to register all property and land resources of a household under the name of one family member – a man (father, son, brother, or father-in-law). Nevertheless, the data from the study cited by the researcher Namatbekova⁴⁵ indicates that almost half of the registered land shares in Issyk-Kul oblast were issued to women (Table 8):

⁴² *Ulush*= A land share is an agricultural land plot granted to a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic free of charge in the course of the land and agrarian reform, the ownership of which is certified by a certificate of private ownership.

⁴³ "One year we had someone working on leased land, and then he said that that he bought it. Then the wife of the former owner argued about what happened to the land, she became a widow. The woman came later and argued again, and she took the land back. We have seen such. She works the land herself" (KII with WUA head, Chon Tash). (Бизде бир жылы бироо жер арендага алып иштетип жургон экен, анан ал жерди сатып алганын айтты. Анан мурунку жер кожоюндун аялы жесир калды, да келим жерди талашып-тартышты. .. Аял кийинчерээк келип, кайра урушуп, жерди кайра тартып алган. Мындайды көрдүк. Ал жерди өзү иштетет.)

⁴⁴ Moreover, it is important to note that if there are several boys in the family, then the son with whom the parents remain to live inherits the land. Usually this is the youngest son (traditions of the minorate).

⁴⁵ https://landwise-production.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/03/Nametbekova-G_KyrgyzstanLand-rights-Survey_2021-1.pdf



Table 8 Land ownership in Issyk-Kul oblast

Aiyl Okmotu	Mean land size per person	Number of people who received land shares	Number of women who received land shares
Dzhety-Oguz AO, Issyk-Kul oblast	0.56 ha irrigated arable land 0.36 - dry arable land	3 823	1 910
Orgochor AO, Issyk-Kul oblast	0,48 ha irrigated arable land 0.11 - dry arable land	1005	500
Mady AO, Osh oblast	0,09 ha irrigated arable land 0.05 ha - dry arable land	11 167	5 580
Nariman AO, Osh oblast	0,08 ha irrigated arable land 0.05- dry arable land	6 500	3 250

Source : Namatbekova (2021)

The study conducted by Namatbekova (2021) (Table 8) revealed that among a sample of 57 women respondents who owned land in Issyk-Kul and Osh oblast, only 57.9 percent reported being the actual owners and users of their land shares. The remaining 42.1 percent of women indicated that, although they were the legal owners of the land, they did not receive benefits from its use. The researcher also found that only five out of the 57 women managed the land use themselves, and these were older widowed women.

During the FGDs, respondents commonly justified why women did not manage the land. The cited reasons such as the inconvenience for women to negotiate with machine operators responsible for the adjustment, repair and maintenance of agricultural machinery, agronomists, and other specialists; lack of agricultural- knowledge; reluctance to leave the house and a perceived inability to manage the land.

The respondents, both women and men, unanimously believed that men should be the ones managing land resources. However, in cases where there was no adult man in the family, women would have to take on the responsibility. The justifications for men’s advantages in land management varied. In Chon-Tash and Kozho, some were based on religious grounds, stating that Islam considers men as breadwinners and women should focus on household chores and children. In Sary-Altyn, male respondents used “pseudo-scientific” arguments, claiming that “even according to statistics women have more limited mental abilities than men”.⁴⁶ Rational arguments were also given by the same men from Sary-Altyn, such as women already having an extreme workload with household chores. In almost all male FGDs, respondents noted that women do not know how and what to grow, are not aware of

⁴⁶ эркектин статистика боюнча аялдар азыраак ойлонсо, эркектер узунураак ойлонушат.; Ойлонбой ишти кылаберет. (According to these men, statistics show that women think less, while men think longer. Women do things without thinking).



agrotechnology, because they do not attend meetings⁴⁷ and are physically incapable. Some stated that women were afraid to go out in the evening and agricultural work may require night vigils for watering or other tasks⁴⁸.

It was interesting that at the same time, the FGD respondents pointed out that a significant number of women, both young and adult, had been managing arable land for a long time because their husbands and sons had migrated. In practice, across all villages, women were the ones cultivating the land and growing crops, despite men being the legal owners.⁴⁹ According to male respondents, men have more representative functions, such as handling documentation (in case the state provides preferential loans), negotiation with specialists, and participating in local meetings on issues such as irrigation water, tariffs, and so on.⁵⁰

In Issyk-Kul oblast, most women in FGDs found these arguments to be untenable. They emphasized that in the absence of their husbands, they took on the full responsibility of working on the land and shared knowledge and advice among themselves. They considered themselves to be both agronomists and livestock farmers, handling all aspects of farming. As one respondent in Chon-Tash stated, “when our husbands leave for work (migration), only we women work. In the village we all help each other and give advice.” Another respondent noted, “since there is no other work, we have become both agronomists and livestock farmers. We all know everything. How much gasoline or fertilizer is required per hectare... My husband has been driving a KAMAZ for many years (truck driver), he only earns money. The rest is done by me with the children. I do this with the youngest son.” One of the respondents in the village of Chon-Tash expressed a similar opinion, saying that until quite recently all young men were away for migration, relying entirely on women and children for agricultural work.

In addition to land resources, the privatization and division of equipment and other property of collective farms and state farms also took place. However, reconstructing the history of this process proved challenging for residents. In some cases, the distribution of property seemed to have been influenced by those in power, leading to unequal outcomes.

⁴⁷ FGD with men in Sary Altyn who do not own land.

Аялдар бироз чогулуштарга аралашалбайт, кандай эгин-тегин сепкенин билбейт (Women don't get involved in some gatherings, they don't know what crops to sow)

⁴⁸ FGD with men in Sary Altyn who do not own land.

”ркек адам эми каалаган убакытта чыгып иш кыла берет аял киши жарыкта эле кечкисин чыгып иштей албайт. Кечинде коркушат кенент кочого чыга албайт (A man can go out and work at any time, a woman cannot go out and work in the evening. In the evening, they are afraid and cannot go out)

⁴⁹ FGD with males land non-owners in Sary Altyn

Мен азыр жер алып берем аялым менен балдарым иштетет мен только командир; аялдар ошол жерди иштеткенди билиш керек жүгору, пияз эгеби оздору билет эркектер контролдоп туруш керек.; Азыр куйоолорубуз жумушка кеткенде аялдар эле иштетип атпайбызбы, тем более айылда бири-бирине жардам берип, андай-мындай деп, бири-бирине айтып кенешип турушат. (Now I will buy land and let my wife and children work. I am only a commander; women should know how to cultivate that land, they grow onions, men should be in control. Now, when the husbands go to work, women are the only ones who do the work, especially in the village, they help each other, talk to each other and advise each other.)

⁵⁰ FGD with male landowners in Sary Altyn

Эркектин козу тирүү кезинде бар тракторист менен суйлошуп келчи дебейсин да, ошон учун эркектен зависит (It doesn't matter if a man wants to talk to a tractor driver. That's why it depends on the man)



However, during the study, no concrete evidence was found to support claims of individuals using their official position for unfair advantages. Residents were reluctant to provide information on the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities within the community.

Social injustice was frequently discussed, and one example of this is the allocation of land plots to migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in Kozho village in the early 2000s. Residents believe that these plots were soon sold, and the migrants moved to other regions of Kyrgyzstan. This situation is seen as unfair because land was given to those who did not genuinely need it, while the growing local population had no opportunity to acquire land. Some representatives of local self-government even suggested introducing restrictive measures into legislation, such as requirements for individuals to have lived in the area for at least five years to be eligible for land plots for housing construction. Although the study did not specifically focus on attitudes towards different aspects of inequality, it can be assumed that there is a general acceptance of the “right of authority” to access large resources. Dissatisfaction with injustice is typically not expressed outside of one’s own group, and any perceived injustice from members of an “outgroup” are deeply felt within the community.

It is worth noting that in only one villager provided an explanation for the “insidious behavior” of the Tajikistani migrants. According to this informant, the migrants were given land for housing construction in remote areas with lack of infrastructure, including clean water, roads, and even schools⁵¹. The informant believes that the migrants were forced to sell their plots due to these problems.

The subjective value of land resources depends on various criteria: primarily accessibility and affordability. For instance, in the village of Sary-Altyn, there is minimal interest in pasture lands, because the allocated pastures are located at a considerable distance⁵², and the transport infrastructure is poorly developed for visiting these lands. Consequently, villagers state that they are deprived of the opportunity to expand animal husbandry, and their small number of livestock graze on their own garden plots. The utilization and distribution of pastures, including the activities of the Pasture Committee, were not widely discussed among the FGD participants in the village of Sary-Altyn.

The research team was unable to clarify the issue of pastureland in Sary-Altyn village. Local authorities and Pasture Committee leaders claimed that there were sufficient pasture lands for the villagers⁵³. A member of the Pasture Committee stated that large pasture areas de jure belong (“on the map”) to the aiyl okmotu and specifically to the village of Sary-Altyn, but that this land is actually used by residents of other aiyl okmotu⁵⁴. However, ordinary villagers claim that the village had no nearby pastures and only a distant pasture in Alai district, which was difficult to access. This limited their ability to expand animal husbandry. Despite claims by the Pasture Committee that some villagers had a significant number of small ruminants, grazing them on village ravines, the issue remained unclear.

⁵¹ Interview with a pensioner in Kozho

⁵² Pastures are located in the Alai region. Coal is also mined in these territories.

⁵³ Interview with the accountant of the Pasture Committee and the head of the Sary-Altyn village

⁵⁴ Interview with the deputy of the local council, pasture committee member



Paradoxically, despite the prevalent discourse on corruption among local and national authorities, there was a lack of interest in the affairs of the Pasture Committee in Sary-Altyn village. It is known that there is a coalmine on the village's pasture lands, and the poorest families in Sary-Altyn receive free coal from the mine. However, none of the respondents, including members of the Pasture Committee, were aware of the agreement between the mining company and the local government. The role of the Pasture Committee in this process, the usage of other pastures, and how funds received from land rent were spent remained unclear. Respondents from Sary-Altyn and Kozho mentioned corruption schemes related to pasture use, including collusion between local government officials and the forestry service, receiving grants and subsidies for pasture infrastructure development, and leasing pastures to businessmen who misappropriate the funds. A respondent from Kozho village, a former member of the Pasture Committee, stated that public complaints regarding corruption are often ignored by local authorities⁵⁵. During the FGDs, men from Sary-Altyn openly expressed their hardships, rumors and willingness to protest and to express their discontent to local authorities. Some respondents⁵⁶ supported the need to review land privatization policies.

A representative of the village of Kozho, who is a member of the Pasture Committee, but who lacks information about its plans and activities, disagreed with the provision of remote pastures for ore development (coal mining). The villagers believed that cultivating gardens on the slopes would yield more profit for the local people without damaging nature. However, the respondent admitted that he did not raise these concerns with the village leadership, pasture committee members, or other villagers. In Chon-Tash village, pasture lands are of great importance as farming possibilities are limited by household land size and climatic conditions. Foothill pastures and forest lands also contribute to beekeeping, while hay pastures provide fodder for livestock. Leaders of local government and pasture committees expressed concerns about how the villagers in Chon-Tash use the land and pastures. They stated that villagers littered pastures and disregarded instructions of the pasture committees, grazed their cattle near the village instead of in allocated remote areas, and even illegally constructed on the pastures.⁵⁷ Representatives of the pasture committees from the village of Toguz-Bulak share similar opinions, adding that villagers often neglected their rights of their fellow villagers in pursuit of their own profit. They would descent from pastures earlier than others finished harvesting their fields, leading to

⁵⁵ Биз Масалиев айыл окмоту менен Майдан айыл окмотундо граница бар ушул жерде, бир сай бар ары жагы Майдан айыл окмоту. Биздин айыл окмотко келип малын жаят бизден суу ичет, а биздин жайыт комитети алардан акчасын алат да, чонтогуно салып алат. Мен депутаттарга айтым, жайыт комитетине айттым акча жок дейт окмотто. Айыл башчыга айттым бар деп. Масалиев айыл окмотундо бир кой, же эчки болсо 30 сом, Майдан айыл окмоту бизге 60 сом берет алар 30 сомдон берет да биздин жайытта журот, ана коррупция (We have a border between the village council of Masaliev and the village council of Maidaan - this is a ravine. People (residents of another ayil okmotu) come to our village and graze their cattle, their cattle drink water from us, and our pasture committee takes money from them and puts it in their pocket. I spoke (about this) to the deputies, I spoke to the pasture committee, they answer that the local self-government has no money. I told the village head to go (to check). The Masaliev village council receives 30 soms for one sheep or goat, the Maidaan village council provides its residents with grazing for 60 soms, but they take 30 soms from the neighbors and their livestock graze on our pasture, this is a corruption.)

⁵⁶ FGD with men, land owners, Sary-Altyn

⁵⁷ Pasture committee, local council chairman, WUA chairman in Chon-Tash and pasture committee accountant and a member in Toguz-Bulak village



potential damage to crops. These respondents, including local authorities and pasture committees, complained about the limited authority of the pasture committees and the insufficient power of local self-government to address violations and abuses in land use by the local population.

Most FGD respondents in the village of Toguz-Bulak expressed dissatisfaction with state policies and practices at the local level, highlighting a general distrust in authorities and local self-government. About one-third of interview respondents from all four communities, including local self-government specialists, pasture committee members and leaders, village activists, explained the reasons for this distrust. They believed that the land management activities planned by local authority and pasture committees were merely empty rhetoric. As noted by one of the pasture committee members from Toguz-Bulak, plans developed by local authorities and pasture committees were never achievable⁵⁸. Another respondent from Kozho, a former member of the pasture committee, stated that it was common place that tasks that had already been resolved a long time ago were presented as new plans to allow managers to report successful activities⁵⁹. An activist from Toguz-Bulak and even members of the pasture committees in Sary-Altyn and Kozho villages expressed the believe that villagers were reluctant to participate in events organized by local authorities and pasture committees because they perceived them as ineffective and pointless.

Residents and activists from Toguz-Bulak and Chon-Tash villages believed that people lacked interest in issues of effective land use due to numerous errors in land management at the local level. One activist from Toguz-Bulak suggested that lands of the LRF should be given primarily to communities (*zhaamats*). This would allow villagers to collectively produce necessary crops, and pastures could be sown with scientifically proven, perennial seeds that were more profitable in terms of cost and had higher feed efficiency and digestibility. The activist complained that he constantly voiced this idea to local authority and pasture committees but felt they "either did not understand or pretended not to understand."

Unfortunately, people generally held the same attitudes towards the most projects and programs aimed at sustainable land use development. One project employee noted that the population was poorly informed about community projects, sometimes leading to parallel projects with similar goals and approaches involving the same villagers. Moreover, the implementation of project activities often did not result in real changes in the community's life. As a result, local residents often felt disinterested and distrusted new projects, especially if their goals and approaches were developed without community involvement.

⁵⁸ Interview with a veterinarian

⁵⁹ He (head of local authority or pasture committee) reads the same things from 3-4 years ago, saying that he completes something: builds a road, a bridge, etc. That's the same as the year before, there is no such work plan.



4. ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN'S LAND AND RESOURCE RIGHTS

Men's groups in Chon-Tash village, particularly young men, displayed strong emotions when the topic of gender equality was raised. Initially, the young men became defensive and aggressive questions, such as who commissioned the study and whether the researchers were connected to Ravshan Jeenbekov or foreign agencies promoting the LGBT movement. They were determined to prevent unwanted interventions in their community.

After extensive clarifications, the men expressed their disagreement with the idea of women's leadership. One respondent stated, "They [the experts in development projects] come from the West and then they tell us that women should be like this or like that. This is wrong. They have a different mentality, for example, in Europe, but we have a different one. There is one in Arabia, another one in America, and a third in China. And then they try to impose someone else's mentality on us. But our mentality is completely different." The participant was enthusiastically supported by other respondents, shifting the conversation about women's leadership to local mentality and traditions. Furthermore, respondents felt that outsiders were trying to teach them how women should behave and what men should be like. One respondent explained, "In Europe everything is different, and the Russians also have their own traditions and rituals. They preserve their traditions, and they also want to put down their roots here as well and spread their traditions here. Since we are Kyrgyz, we are obliged to keep our traditions. Our state has its own language, anthem and flag and its own people. Correct? We must keep it. And then someone comes and teaches us: a woman should do that; a man should be like that."

Another respondent emphasized the traditional gender roles that reject the idea of female leadership, noting "As we have already said, this is how it is with us. Since we are Kyrgyz, our mothers should be tender to their children and take care of them. Our women should stay at home. Our *azhyke* (priests, religious authorities) say that a mother should take care of her children and educate them. We see what happens if a man brings up children. We also see how a mother can bring up children. If a child grows up without knowing the love of the mother, he will become a callous and soulless person. Since the father is the breadwinner and is always away from home, the mother gives advice to her children. A mother must teach her children to treat their father correctly. She must instill into their heads that the father works and feeds us. This is the right education she should give her children. And here they say, no, a woman should put on shorts, and she should go out. Who will do the household chores? You cannot do it this way. If they have enough for living, why would a woman leave the house? Why should she work if her husband provides enough? She should stay at home and only radiate motherly love."

It is worth noting that men of different ages in two FGDs practically reproduced the same narrative using almost the same words. This rhetoric that unites men from various age groups and social backgrounds in Chon-Tash village appears to be influenced by religious



sermons and discussions in the mosque.⁶⁰ The respondents even referred to the opinions of religious authorities.

Furthermore, some project staff shared similar opinions, stating that the values promoted by the project do not align with the culture of the population or the realities of the country. They believed that, unlike African and Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan did not have serious problems with gender equality. While acknowledging individual psychological issues, they considered the focus on promoting women's leadership in value chains to be unfounded, incorrect, or limited in the implementation.

The study also highlighted the functioning and normalization of dominant patriarchal femininity⁶¹ as a key component of women's oppression. The dominant femininity restricts women to reproductive labor and reinforces their role as ardent guardians of patriarchy. This dominant femininity was illustrated by one female respondent in Chon-Tash village who complained that gender norms and views of masculinity and femininity were changing in other villages and cities. To support her argument, she explained “I went to Cholpon-Ata. It turns out that the men there “look to their wives” (in the sense of being dependent on them). We listen to the man here, while in other settlements a man can ask his wife whether or not they should buy something even in front of a large number of people. If she answers that they won't buy it, then the man says to the sellers that it turned out that we won't buy it. For example, I saw on the shore of the lake that husbands want to eat corn and they ask their wives whether or not they will eat corn and what will they eat in general. If she says no, then he tells the sellers: It turns out we won't buy it. It turned out that men are now subordinate to women. I do not know, perhaps, it is only a matter in our community. Here if the husband tells us: ‘Let's eat (corn)’, we will certainly buy it, because the husband tells us. We are subordinate to our husbands. It's even disgusting to me why he listens to his wife. He is not a man at all.”

The existence of a dominant patriarchal femininity helps to explain the responses from both male and female respondents regarding rights and opportunities of women and men to use land and other valuable resources (Figure 2). While respondents generally supported the rights of unmarried (divorced or widowed) women to land and agreed that women should participate in decision-making on community land management, there were significant proportions of respondents who held discriminatory views. A considerable number believed that girls should not inherit land from their fathers (36 percent), that women should not make decisions about land (39 percent), and that women should not speak in the presence of men (31 percent) (Figure 2).

⁶⁰ In the course of a recent study, the discourse on the connection between the concept of gender equality, the struggle for the freedom of sexual minorities and the political activities of Ravshan Jeenbekov was recorded in a number of other regions of the country among different men. The mosque is the likely conduit for the spread of such rumors, since only men carry the discourse.

⁶¹ As an antipode of dominant masculinity in a binary patriarchal system. Betty Friedan, 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*. URL: https://elearning.unipd.it/spgi/pluginfile.php/99853/mod_resource/content/1/The_Feminine_Mystique.pdf



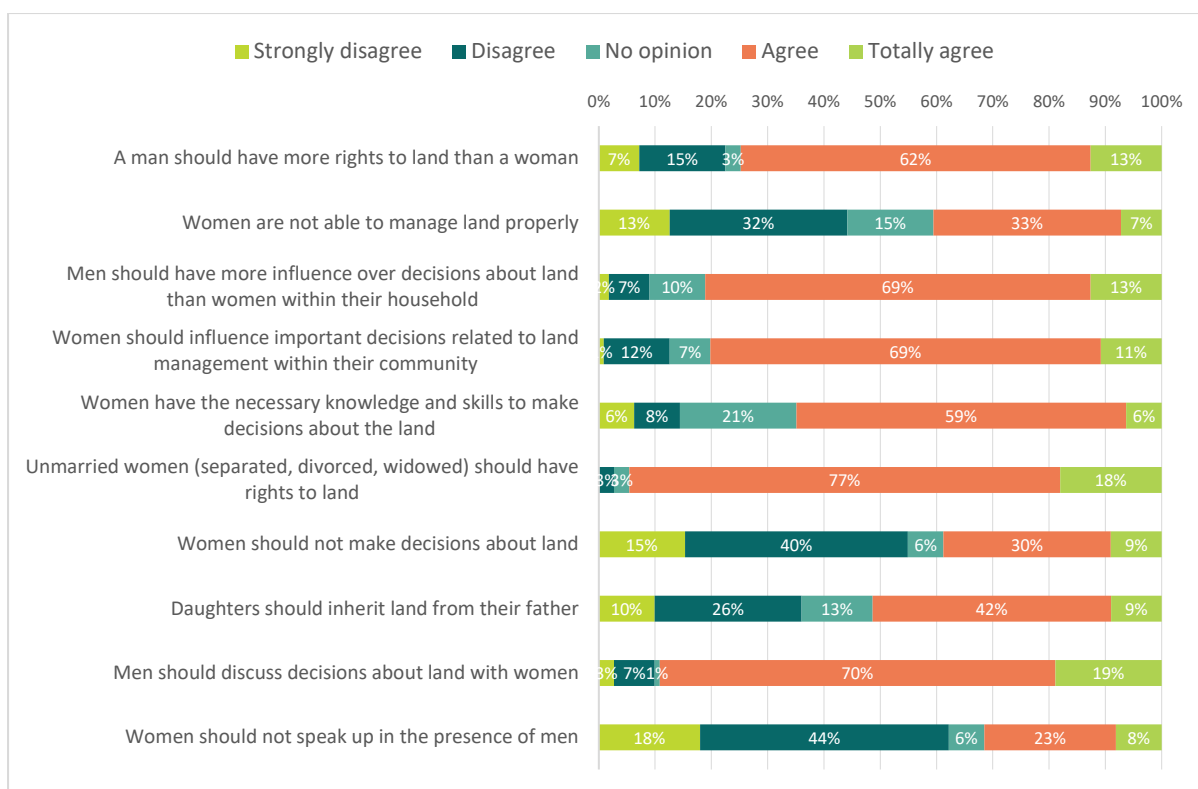


Figure 2. Overall attitudes of participants towards women's land and resource rights (% of total number of FGD respondents (all FGDs), n=111)

*FGD data

Considering women and men voted separately, women demonstrated quite conservative views (Table 9).

Table 9. Attitudes towards women's land and resource rights across villages (% of respondents who totally agree or agree with the statements)

	Issyk-Kul oblast						Batken oblast					
	Chon-Tash		Toguz-Bulak		Kozho		Sary-Altyn					
	Women (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=8)	Men (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=6)	Total (landowner: n=16, non-landowners: n=14)	Women (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=6)	Men (landowner: n=7, non-landowners: n=8)	Total (landowner: n=15, non-landowners: n=14)	Women (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=8)	Men (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=8)	Total (landowner: n=16, non-landowners: n=16)	Women (landowner: n=5, non-landowners: n=4)	Men (landowner: n=5, non-landowners: n=6)	Total (landowner: n=10, non-landowners: n=10)
Land owners												
A man should have more rights to the land than a woman	75%	100%	88%	100%	57%	80%	13%	100%	56%	100%	80%	90%
Women are not able to manage	0%	38%	19%	75%	43%	60%	13%	100%	56%	20%	20%	20%



the land properly												
Men should have more influence over decisions about the land than women within their household	88%	100%	94%	100%	86%	93%	75%	100%	88%	20%	80%	50%
Women have the necessary knowledge and skills to make decisions about the land	100%	50%	75%	100%	57%	80%	50%	38%	44%	60%	60%	60%
Unmarried women (separated, divorced, widowed) should have rights to the land	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Women should not make decisions about land	38%	25%	31%	13%	14%	13%	0%	63%	31%	60%	60%	60%
Daughters should inherit land from their father	38%	0%	19%	100%	100%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%	80%	90%
Men should discuss decisions about land with women	100%	75%	88%	100%	100%	100%	88%	75%	81%	100%	100%	100%
Women should not speak up in the presence of men	13%	0%	6%	0%	43%	20%	0%	75%	38%	20%	80%	50%
Land nonowners												
A man should have more rights to the land than a woman	88%	100%	93%	83%	75%	79%	38%	100%	69%		67%	40%
Women are not able to manage the land properly	25%	67%	43%	50%	25%	36%	50%	75%	63%		17%	10%
Men should have more influence over decisions about the land than women within their household	75%	83%	79%	83%	88%	86%	63%	50%	56%	100%	33%	60%
Women have the necessary knowledge and	75%	50%	64%	83%	50%	64%	63%	63%	63%	50%	83%	70%



skills to make decisions about the land													
Unmarried women (separated, divorced, widowed) should have rights to the land	100%	83%	93%	100%	75%	86%	100%	88%	94%	75%	83%	80%	
Women should not make decisions about land	38%	67%	50%	50%	13%	29%	63%	75%	69%	25%	33%	30%	
Daughters should inherit land from their father	63%	50%	57%	67%	88%	79%	50%	38%	44%	50%	33%	40%	
Men should discuss decisions about land with women	88%	100%	93%	100%	88%	93%	88%	63%	75%	100%	83%	90%	
Women should not speak up in the presence of men	0%	83%	36%	17%	63%	43%	13%	63%	38%	25%	33%	30%	

*FGD data

Women in the villages of Chon-Tash, Toguz-Bulak, and Sary-Altyn hold even more conservative views than men on discriminatory positions. The majority of women landowners in these villages support the idea that men should have more rights to land. Similarly, almost all women landowners in Chon-Tash, Toguz-Bulak, and Kozho believe that men should have more influence over land-related decisions within their household.

Surprisingly, respondents from Chon-Tash even supported the notion that women should not talk in the presence of men, despite the men from the same village not supporting such a statement at all. Regarding the rights of daughters to inherit land from their fathers, women in Sary-Altyn and Toguz-Bulak unanimously agreed, while over half of respondents, both men and women, in Kozho and Chon-Tash did not support this statement.

In all villages, a large majority of respondents who do not own land also favored giving men preemptive rights to land and greater involvement in land related matters. However, to a lesser extent these respondents supported the idea that women should not speak in the presence of men. Most respondents in Chon-Tash and Kozho supported the rights of daughters to inherit land from their father. In Toguz-Bulak and Sary-Altyn respondents who do not own land were less supportive of this idea compared to their fellow villagers who own land.

The most remarkable results were observed in Toguz-Bulak, where women are represented in local government, business (including agriculture), and the management of public organizations. Despite their involvement, the majority of women landowners hold very conservative views, prioritizing men's rights and denying recognition of women's abilities and rights. In contrast, male respondents in Toguz-Bulak were more inclined to advocate for



equal rights for women, at least in their rhetoric. Notably, in recent years, there have been cases in this village where fathers initiated land allocations for their married daughters⁶².

This difference in gender “dispositions” may initially appear paradoxical. Under the patriarchal gender regime, women are responsible for adhering to social norms, risking stigmatization and discrimination if they violate “normative” behavior patterns. Despite women’s involvement in non-traditional activities such as business, state, and public administration, the expectation remains for them to support the normalized concept of femininity, embodying the image of a caring mother immersed in reproduction. Even women in leadership positions face the risk of stigmatization and discrimination if they deviate from these norms. Such attitudes among women have been increasing, especially in recent decades⁶³.

Conflicting data were collected from respondents regarding current gender relations. Both men and women acknowledged that times have changed significantly, with women now being very active in the family and society, even exerting control in the family. When some male respondents mentioned that women should be silent in the presence of men, they referred to it as an ideal from the distant past (the times of the *Basmachestvo*⁶⁴), aligned with religious and ethnic norms⁶⁵. Female respondents partially recognized that woman can and should be equal to men, should not blindly follow their husband’s instructions, but they also partially supported the ideal of passivity and subordination of women, prioritizing men in the family and society. Some men even made jokes about women practicing domestic violence against men, while emphasizing the important of women behaving properly in public.

In the discussions, women often attempted to highlight the boundaries of the norm, by stating “in our village everything is normal and correct, we obey our husbands and serve them, but in another village or raion everything is different.” This contradiction between

⁶² It is important to note that this occurred in families that owned large plots of land. For example, in one family, during the period of land privatization, the father bought their *ulush* from fellow villagers. In total, the household owned about 100 hectares of land. He gave 2 hectares of land to each of his three daughters. Another case of allocation of shares to daughters occurred also in a family with significant land resources. As men in other communities noted, if there was enough land, it would be necessary to provide daughters with the opportunity to earn money from the land. However, since boys inherit disproportionately large allotments of land, it can be concluded that the social hierarchies and priority of boys do not change in these families.

⁶³ According to the 2019 World Values Survey, the cultural orientation of the Kyrgyz society is becoming more traditional, which is based on the importance and significance of the values of the family, religion, social conformity, the adoption of strong power and the importance of the collective interests <https://sociology.mephi.ru/docs/polit/html/ingl.htm>

⁶⁴ The term “Basmachi” is of Uzbek origin and means “bandit” or “robber”. The Basmachi movement was an uprising against Russian Imperial and Soviet rule by the Muslim peoples of Central Asia in 1920s.

⁶⁵ P2: бул нерсу туура нерсе энди биринчиден уй-булосун сыйлаган, эрин сыйлаган президент катары аял киши болсо, уруксат алып суйлош керек болбосо анын акысы жок. P3: биз да ушундай шариат боюнча, динде корсотулгон жол менен (сары алтын, владельцы земли) P4: аялдар ошол жерди иштеткенди билиш керек жугору, пияз эгеби оздору билет эркектер контролдоп туруш керек. P 1: аялдар бизден да (P2Well, life is like that. They say, that if the wife is good, then the husband is good. Women must be respected. A woman should not argue with her husband. First of all, this would mean that she respects the family, and, secondly, that she accepts her husband as president. And if she follows this, then she can decide everything herself. P3: We follow Sharia, the way the religion shows (Sary-Altyn, land owners). P 1: Women are better than us)



rhetoric and actual practice, the desire to maintain the image of compliance with the norms of femininity, can be explained by the concept of "gender display" introduced by researcher Erving Goffman. According to this concept, in social interactions, men and women perform behaviors that align with societal expectations, individuals aim to be perceived as socially competent, trustworthy, and fitting into the accepted communicative practices of their culture" ⁶⁶.

For example, it is considered normal in these communities that women, especially those from vulnerable groups such as divorced, widowed, or single women, should not publicly advocate for their rights to land. Instead, they are expected to give up these rights in favor of male family members such as brothers or fathers. The fact that women adhere to this norm is explained by the villagers as a sense of shame and sensitivity to cultural norms. Respondents across FGDs and interviews spoke a lot about the tradition in which "women are "embarrassed" to apply to authorities or to the courts, that it is indecent for women to demand their land share". However, data from lawsuits and litigations, as well as information provided by the respondents themselves, indicate that women often turn to courts to assert their property rights, including cases involving the division of parental property⁶⁷. In recent years, with the digitalization of documentation (in the last 3-5 years)⁶⁸, it has become apparent that many houses in Chon-Tash were not re-registered after the death of parents. To formalize the right to land, consent from all the children is required, leading to more frequent conflicts related to the division of parental property. In such conflicts, daughters participate on an equal footing with brothers, despite the traditional expectation that the youngest son inherits the property. Nevertheless, in rhetoric, both women and men in all villages affirm adherence to tradition and the importance of preserving the "female role." During a FGD in Sary-Altyn, men expressed the view that for a harmonious and non-conflict life, it is important to communicate in a normative way in the public spaces. They emphasized that a woman should not openly oppose a man, but instead, simply acknowledge his viewpoint by saying, "You are right."⁶⁹ A respondent further elaborated, "Well, life is like that. They say that if the wife is good, then the husband is good. Women must be respected. A woman should not argue with her husband. First of all, this would mean that she respects the family, and, secondly, that she accepts her husband as president. And if she follows this, then she can decide everything herself."⁷⁰ Men in all communities mentioned that women have become more assertive and argumentative in the past ten years, attributing this change to migration of both women and men. They stated that now all women are seen as "successful and superior to men" (*kyiyn, erkekten otot*).

⁶⁶ https://st.rosalux.de/fileadmin/ls_sanh/pdf/2021/Ufa_2019.pdf

⁶⁷ According to the data compiled by the Judicial Department, in the courts of first instance, family disputes account for 35% of all completed cases, of which housing disputes account for 7-8% in 2019-2021.

<http://admin-sot.sot.kg/public/sites/4/2021/12/Byulleten-2021-veb.pdf>

⁶⁸ The digitalization process of all documentation was carried out in the framework of the national policy: CONCEPT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION "DIGITAL KYRGYZSTAN" - 2019-2023. One of the indicators of this policy was the share of digitized government documents.

⁶⁹ FGDs with male landowners in Sary-Altyn.

⁷⁰ FGDs with male landowners in Sary-Altyn.



According to the opinions of the IFAD project staff, promoting women's leadership in land management is challenging due to the dominance of gender stereotypes and the difficulty of changing the prevailing "mentality". Some project staff see the potential for transforming patriarchal gender relations by changing ideas about the normative gender division of labor.⁷¹ Others suggest the need to create separate projects that focus on "women's components of development" without pushing women and men into competition, allowing women to advance in traditional "women's" spheres of labor and business⁷². There is one particular interview that stands out among all the interviews conducted with specialists in local self-government and members of the pasture committees. This interview is with the head of the PUA in the Issyk-Kul oblast, a woman who dedicated her life to conservation and development of pastures. Her perspective and assessments differ from the dominant opinions expressed by both the villagers (men and women) and representatives of local authorities and administration.

Firstly, this respondent is the only one who views the participation of women in pasture management as active and effective. She believes that providing women with the right information and understanding of their life practices is the key condition for their meaningful involvement⁷³.

⁷¹ Нужно показывать как женский труд, так и мужской труд. Их просто нужно показывать и говорить: ребята, и она, и он они делают равную работу. Вот этот скажем посыл мы хотим показать в рамках нашего проекта, что есть вот такие моменты. Вот я для себя это чётко увидел, понимаю и я сейчас хочу его в рамках проекта донести до людей и сломать вот этот стереотип который у них сложился, что откормом может заниматься муж, этого нету, на местах на самом деле совсем по другому. И все хозяйство как я уже отметил 70% дохода семья достигает совместным трудом, где то муж поливает землю, его видно полях, за трактором он ходит, но дома ему жена готовит еду, стирает и т.д. это же тоже косвенный процесс, почему мы эти вещи не выпячиваем. Интервью с мужчиной, сотрудником проекта (It is necessary to show both female labor and male labor. They just need to be shown and say: the guys, and she, and he, they do equal work. Let's say this is the message we want to show within the framework of our project that there are such moments. So I saw this clearly for myself, I understand, and now I want to convey it to people within the framework of the project and break this stereotype that they have developed that a husband can be engaged in fattening, this is not there, in fact, it's completely different in the field. And the whole economy, as I have already noted, 70% of the family's income is achieved by joint work, where the husband waters the land, he can be seen in the fields, he goes behind the tractor, but at home his wife cooks food, does laundry, etc. This is also an indirect process, why we do not stick out these things. Interview with a male project employee)

⁷² чтобы не было для галочки в разработке дизайна мы должны финансировать определённые направления, женские направления. Если войлочные, варенья да или производство сухофруктов это же для женщины более интересно или производство каких то молочных продуктов. Также, например у нас пишется общее, хорошо было бы для женщин сделать отдельный компонент в проекте и для этого компонента для женщин отдельное финансирование. Конкретно надо разделять, потому что у нас менталитет другой. (So that there is not just a checkmark in the development of project design, we must finance certain areas, women's areas. If felt, jams, yes, or the production of dried fruits, it is more interesting for a woman or the production of some kind of dairy products. Also, for example, we write in the project in general for everyone, but it would be good for women to make a separate component in the project and for this component for women separate funding, then women would be more interested. It is necessary to divide because we have another mentality. Interview with female staff member)

⁷³ Ну как мен аял катары, жайыт жонундо болгондо меники жалан аялдар келет. Себеби деген, аялдар источник бул. мен аялдарды ушинтип кызыктырып алдымда озумочу, бизден зависитетет могул жайыт, бас келгиле дегенде аялдар шыдырап жыйналып келишет. Ошондо 20% эле эркек болуп атат, мисалы учун 20 аял келсе, 2 эле эркек келет. (Since I am a woman, women even come to me on pastures issues. Until I come to the pasture committee I was never interested in this. it seemed to me that pastures are when a man



Secondly, the respondent provided several examples where women demonstrated a better understanding of pasture-related issues, set appropriate goals for the pasture committees, and actively participated in problem-solving. For example, women from livestock-breeding families located in the Balbai-Ata gorge, initiated the repair of a bridge across the river and parts of the road damaged by mudflows. They contacted the respondent, chairperson of the association of regional pasture committees, and offered their help in repairing the bridge and road. The women suggested that the respondent formally apply with a letter to the leadership of the dairy company, requesting concrete rings for the bridge while they would take care of purchasing cement and carrying out the repair work. This collaborative effort resulted in a successful resolution: the dairy company gained access to a larger supply of fat and fresh milk from the pastures, and the cattle breeders had the opportunity to earn money while benefiting from a repaired road. The respondent views this experience as empowering for herself and other women.

Thirdly, unlike other members of the pasture committees, this respondent did not solely focus on the lack of authority to apply sanctions to violators or blame the population and the lack of financial resources. Instead, she recognized the full range of challenges and strategies for transitioning to sustainable pasture use. She plans measures to preserve the environment and takes action to combat pasture degradation. Her work is centered around caring for people: she initiated a series of lectures at the school for high school students and their parents on prevention, detection, and early diagnosis of diseases when the incidences of echinococcus began to rise. Furthermore, when 30 pastoral families from the gorge approached her regarding the lack of drinking water, she organized women into an initiative group, developed the Watering Hole project, received support from ARIS and the local administration, and ensured that families had access to water. Now, in this small remote village, every household has not only clean water but also an automatic washing machine.

Finally, this respondent and her team plan and develop eco-friendly income-generating projects for the local population. For example, they focus on mass planting endemic shrubs such as wild rose, barberry, and sea buckthorn in ravines and estuaries on pastures. The berries from these shrubs will serve as a source of income and consumption products for livestock breeders' families. Additionally, they are working on developing a recreational and skiing area in the gorge using artificial snow.

It is important to note that the research team only learned about this inspiring experience of a woman leader in promoting sustainable pasture use through targeted interviews with the project staff. None of the residents in the villages of Tyup raion or representatives of local authorities and pasture committees mentioned such a role model. The successful case of interaction with livestock breeders and addressing strategic gender needs have not been documented and widely shared.

mounts a horse and rides to the mountains, and steppes. And then I realized that my family grazes cattle on a pasture, and this pasture feeds us. If a cow today gives 5 liters, and tomorrow on good pasture grasses it will give 7 liters. That's how I first got the women interested, saying that pastures depend on us and we depend on pastures. Now women go to me, only 20% of men).





5. CHANGES IN LAND AND RESOURCE RIGHTS OVER TIME

The perception of land rights insecurity exhibits a clear gender specificity and is influenced by the actual ownership of land resources (Table 10). Women who fall into the category of landowners across all villages tend to be more optimistic about the security of their land rights. They believe that having documented rights offers protection against all risks. Among male landowners, on the other hand, respondents from the villages of Sary-Altyn and Chon-Tash expressed a particularly strong sense of insecurity regarding their land rights. However, the reasons for this concern varied between the two villages.

Table 10. Community perceptions of own security of land/resource rights (% of FGD respondents)

	Issyk-Kul oblast						Batken oblast					
	Chon-Tash			Toguz-Bulak			Kojo			Sary-Altyn		
	Women (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=8)	Men (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=6)	Total (landowner: n=16, non-landowners: n=14)	Women (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=6)	Men (landowner: n=7, non-landowners: n=8)	Total (landowner: n=15, non-landowners: n=14)	Women (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=8)	Men (landowner: n=8, non-landowners: n=8)	Total (landowner: n=16, non-landowners: n=16)	Women (landowner: n=5, non-landowners: n=4)	Men (landowner: n=5, non-landowners: n=6)	Total (landowner: n=10, non-landowners: n=10)
Land owners												
Very insecure		25%	13%				13%		6%		20%	10%
Insecure		75%	38%		57%	27%		25%	13%		20%	10%
Average					43%	20%	13%	13%	13%	80%	20%	50%
Secure	100%		50%	100%		53%	63%	50%	56%		20%	10%
Very secure							13%	13%	13%	20%	20%	20%
Land non-owners												
Very insecure					13%	7%	38%		19%	25%		10%
Insecure	13%		7%	33%		14%	13%		6%			
Average		17%	7%		13%	7%	50%	13%	31%		67%	40%
Secure	88%	83%	86%	67%	75%	71%		63%	31%	50%	33%	40%
Very secure								25%	13%	25%		10%

*FGD data

The men in Sary-Altyn expressed their concern and uncertainty regarding the preservation of their land rights due to the village's proximity to the border. Previous armed clashes between local residents and Uzbek border guards in 2011 in the neighboring village of Bakyt added to their worries. The respondents mentioned that the border had been gradually encroaching on their village over the past decade, reducing the amount of land available to them: "P1: when we moved (from Uzbekistan) the whole field was completely Kyrgyz. But every year, the border deepens in our direction by 1-2 meters."



Furthermore, these men argued that Google Maps inaccurately represented a portion of their village as belonging to Uzbekistan. “R2: The land where I live is marked on the maps of Uzbekistan as their land. R4: The media wrote that on the Google map our land is marked as belonging to Uzbekistan. My house and yours, and also Bahadir’s, are located on the border with Uzbekistan.” Male residents of the village felt that the government did not acknowledge their village as a border zone and did nothing to address the border issue. The residents had very little trust in the authorities and believed that the government could potentially relinquish border territories under pressure from Uzbekistan. They explained: “We turned to the raion administration but did not receive the status of a border zone. Land specialists came and demanded to move the grid. The people were forced to do it. Our authorities are not working in our interests”. In Sary-Altyn village, a border town, it is possible that the respondents' mood was influenced by the media. The dominant discourses at the time of the interviews revolved around completing the border delimitation with Uzbekistan, transferring water resources in Kempir-Abad⁷⁴ to Uzbekistan, and the armed conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the border areas (territories of Batken region) in the spring of 2022. Many respondents approached field researchers for help, suggesting that this could be a more effective channel for informing the government about the aspirations and concerns of the local population than local governments.

The concerns of male respondents from the village of Chon-Tash were related to other political and economic events, such as the adoption of various legal acts, including the Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic “on measures to develop the agro-industrial complex of the Kyrgyz Republic” in February 2022, and the Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic. On approval of the Regulations on the procedure for conducting a land amnesty" dated May 31, 2022, No. 291. Local citizens perceived risks in terms of potential revisions to existing land ownership rights or the right to lease land. Of particular concern was the proximity of the village to the town of Karakol, where a private meat industry enterprise owned by the current Minister of Agriculture was rumored to be expanding and monopolizing the market. Male respondents in Chon-Tash view this as a threat from officials who may have personal interests in pastures and other land resources. The villagers believe that those in power can manipulate laws to annul their land ownership documents⁷⁵. The

⁷⁴ A preliminary agreement was reached already on the arrival of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Kyrgyz Republic in September 2022

⁷⁵ P2: Не дегенде чондор алып коюп атпайбы мисал учун. Мисал учун айыл чарба министри азыр мындай эле мисал айтып коеюнчу. Айыл чарба министри мисал учун могу биздин ФПСтеги жерлердин баарын немеге алып койдум, айыл чарба департаментине алып койду. Алар эмне кылат мисал учун? Тияктан келип иштетпейтта, озунун мояктагы ...бар кооперативи. Мисал учун ошолор келип иштетебиз деп атат, аларга келсе билбейм мен эле эмес айылдын кобу эле жаштары чыгып айтат болуш керек, карашылык корсотупчу. Эми озубуздун жерибизди багатта ал озубуз иштете албайт. Анан аяктан келип ал иштетиш ал болбойтта. P2: Ишенбейбизда ага деле. Андайлар деле болуп атпайбы, корруп жатабызда. Кызыл китеби барлар деле алгызып ийип атпайбы жерин. Алгызып ийип атат, мына момундай буйрук чыккан деп эле печатты корсотуп коет окмоттун кагазы менен, болду да анан эмне кыла аласын? Эчтеке кыла албайсын. (P2: Anyway, those in power take away it. For example, the Minister of Agriculture is such an example. For example, the Minister of Agriculture took away all of our LRF lands in favor of a department of the Ministry of Agriculture. What will they do with our land? He will not be able to work (on our land) from there, he has his own cooperative there. If, as they say, they come and work on our land, I don't know, not only me, but many young people in the village must come out with a protest. It is just as



livestock (meat) value chains outlined in the project, which are focused on interaction with a private enterprise affiliated with the Minister of Agriculture, further contribute to their apprehension. The villagers' assessments of insecurity are likely influenced by the recent efforts to streamline the documentation for housing and land resources. As reported by the villagers, many families have not adequately documented their dwellings and land shares over generations, which became apparent during the process of digitizing documentation. This has led to conflicts and litigation within the village, as the registration of parental property requires the consent of all children, regardless of gender or place of residence. Litigation has arisen between relatives who previously sold their land plots but later claimed rights to the sold property after the older generation passed away, exploiting the inadequate registration of sales contracts. Furthermore, there have been numerous lawsuits and conflicts among siblings over the division of parents' property. Traditionally, it was customary for children to leave the parent's property indivisible in favor of the youngest son, who would take care of elderly parents. However, recent history has shown that siblings no longer hesitate to dispute the division of parental property, even if it goes against tradition. It is important to note that women landowners in all villages, to a greater extent than their male counterparts, tend to perceive their land rights as protected and secure. In Toguz-Bulak and Chon-Tash, 100 percent of women consider their rights secure, while a significant number of men in these villages expressed concern about the insecurity of their land rights. Similarly, among the women in Sary-Altin and Kozho, the safety ratings are higher compared to their male counterparts. However, women who do not own land resources in Kozho and Sary-Altyn are more likely than men to perceive their land rights as unsafe.

It could be hypothesized that women landowners, who generally do not participate in public discussions, may be less informed about ongoing political and regulatory changes, as well as the risks and threats to their land rights. Men, on the other hand, have more opportunities for joint discussions and tend to be more interested in political changes.

The head of the Tyup raion PUA expressed the importance of information dissemination channels in shaping the perception of problems among different population groups. The use of WhatsApp groups for community discussions and informational meetings excluded most women due to the traditional practice of including only one contact from the household, typically men. Limited communication within families prevented women from being informed about problems and having a say in potential solutions.

However, women without access to land resources in their households followed public discourse more closely, anticipating their future acquisitions of land, and were more likely to follow information from local authorities.

wrong that we cannot cultivate our own land. It won't work that he will come from there and feed on our land.

P2: We don't believe in it (the security of the right to one's own land). We see such examples. Even those who have a red book (certificate of land ownership) lose their right. It's just that powerful people come, they say that such a decree has been issued, they show a seal with government paper, and what can the owner of the land do? He can't do anything; he loses the land."



6. OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE INTERVENTIONS

The perceptions of the population, representatives of LSGs and project staff regarding transformative interventions differ significantly. In most cases, both LSGs and the population find themselves trapped in a cycle of problems and struggle to see real opportunities for improving the community's life. Only a few individuals envision possibilities for change. One such individual with a strategic vision is Turganbaev, a civil activist from Toguz-Bulak village. His position is based on the following key premises:

- Donor projects and government programs that aim to organize farmers into large enterprises primarily serve the interests of these enterprises, not the farmers themselves⁷⁶.
- The solution for farmers lies in cooperation and the transitioning from supplying raw materials to producing processed products. Women, in this regard, have certain advantages as they are more adaptive, proactive, and cooperative. Therefore, it is important to focus more on working with women and developing their leadership.
- Legislation and land management practices should undergo radical changes, empowering each farmer with real land ownership rights and scientific expertise and conducting selection work in agriculture, enabling farmers to work on a scientific basis.

According to the opinion of the IFAD project staff, understanding the possibilities of transformative initiatives requires adjusting the approach. It is crucial to work with the family as the foundation further cooperative activities among farmers. Recognizing and embracing gender dynamics is essential, as gender relations can only shift towards equality and partnership through mutual understanding and effective communication among family members. The GALS methodology, coupled with specialized training for employees and consultants, can serve as a mechanism for facilitating such transformation.

The head of the raion PUA holds a gender-sensitive perspective and advocates for a participatory and inclusive approach that addresses the needs of different population groups. This includes creating platforms for discussion and learning, with a particular focus on gender-related issues.

⁷⁶ Доить коров, сдавать молоко и получать за это деньги — значит быть сырьевым придатком. Пока не доведешь продукты до готовности, не разбогатеешь. А мы делаем грязную работу. Мы доим и отдаем молоко Умуту. Журат, Карита — миллионеры за счет нашего молока, а мы — поставщики сырья. Они должны нам 10 миллионов, а у Журата дома 800 миллионов, когда его арестовали. Так живут люди. (Milking cows, donating milk and getting paid for it means being a raw material appendage. Until you bring the products to readiness, you will not be rich. And we do the dirty work. We milk and give milk to Umut. Zhurat, Karita are millionaires due of our milk, and we are suppliers of raw materials. They debt to us 10 million, and at his house Zhurat has 800 million, when he was arrested. This is how people live.)



7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Key research findings

1. The promotion of sustainable and efficient land use faces key challenges within communities, including the lack of effective and inclusive communication spaces, unequal distribution of information among different population groups, and a lack of accountability from local governments regarding land use issues. These barriers to information lead to mutual misunderstanding, mistrust, and lack of interest in cooperation.
 - Assessments of the local authorities' activities in land management reveal a lack of trust, suspicions of corruption, inadequate professionalism, and irrational management of land resources and allocated finances for infrastructure and land quality improvements.
 - Conversely, local governments and pasture committee leaders accuse the local population of various claims, ranging from residents' disinterest in participating in management and community decision-making to violating the law (e.g. unauthorized cattle grazing, improper waste disposal, illegal construction on pasture areas or farmland, concealing livestock numbers, and unauthorized commercial livestock grazing by residents from other territories).
 - Additionally, conflicts often arise between local authorities, pasture committees, forestry services, and other land use entities. These government agencies struggle to approach situations from perspectives and interests outside of their own.
 - Development agency projects and donor organizations also suffer from information gaps, lack of transparency, and incomprehensibility to the population and local government, leading to distrust and an unwillingness to cooperate.
2. This study predominantly assessed women's participation in land management as weak, with two possible explanations emerging: traditional patriarchal norms and alternative, gender-sensitive perspectives.
 - Most community members perceive women's involvement in land and pasture management as minimal. Respondents provided various explanations including reproductive workload at home, perceived biological limitations in engaging in animal husbandry or agriculture, and societal constraints that discourage women from being active land users due to regulatory models (ethnic mentality, religious gender norms, etc.).
 - An alternative viewpoint on women's limited participation in pasture use was presented by a single respondent, a woman heading the raion PUA. She believes that women are highly interested in such issues and actively participate in improving pastures. She highlights successful examples of addressing strategic gender needs in pastures and effective environmental initiatives to prevent degradation. According to this perspective, the non-participation of women is attributed to structural barriers, such as lack of support systems within family roles, pressure from patriarchal values, and difficulties in approaching aiyl okmotus and pasture



committees where their questions and initiatives are not understood and or accepted. Local authorities show limited interest in their participation.

3. Patriarchal attitudes favoring male dominance in the family and society, including land use matters, are supported by dominant patriarchal femininity, which upholds and perpetuates patriarchal values. Failure to conform to this type of femininity can lead to stigmatization and social exclusion. Even women leaders are compelled to adopt a special gender interaction strategy described as "gender display." This strategy involves engaging in contradictory communication practices to be perceived as socially competent individuals who fit into acceptable communicative practices within the culture.
4. Communities exert significant pressure on women and men to uphold normative patriarchal culture. However, they struggle to organize and exert social pressure on violators of laws regarding ethnic land use.
5. The empowerment of women in pasture management remains invisible suppressed, reinforcing the prevailing discourse that suggests women lack interest and capability in participating in decision-making in this domain.
6. Different stakeholders formulate diverse perspectives on transformative opportunities, drawing upon practices from other communities, countries, and personal transformative experiences.

7.2 Recommendations

1. It is crucial to implement transformative interventions in communities through a participatory research-in-action approach.
2. It is essential to identify the range of gender needs among different groups of women and men and determine culturally acceptable strategies for meeting those needs or strategies to bring about cultural norm changes.
3. Providing well-documented case studies of successful land use initiatives where women actively participated in various communities is important for promoting sustainable land use practices.
4. Each community should identify multiple "entry points" based on the needs and values of different social groups within the population. For example, addressing men's health and grooming or promoting positive parenting practices could be entry points where women can contribute meaningfully without facing community resistance, while men can perceive themselves as beneficiaries.
5. Targeting existing women leaders is crucial to help them recognize the opportunities and benefits of challenging prevailing patriarchal norms and femineity, unlocking their potential and fostering deeper gender transformation.
6. Embracing the principle of dialectic femininity and masculinity is vital, planning interventions that foster cooperation rather than conflict between men and women to achieve gender equality and empower women.



7. Conducting a preliminary impact analysis and identifying the key factors influencing the use of the GALS (Gender Action Learning System) methodology in communities is advisable. Disseminating best practices based on these findings can further enhance the effectiveness of interventions.

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INITIATIVE CONSORTIUM



The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and World Agroforestry (ICRAF) envision a more equitable world where trees in all landscapes, from drylands to the humid tropics, enhance the environment and well-being for all. CIFOR and ICRAF are CGIAR Research Centers.



Climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and malnutrition. These four interconnected global crises have put at stake the wellbeing of our planet for years. Fueled by COVID-19, their impact on agriculture, landscapes, biodiversity, and humans is now stronger than ever. Reversing this negative trend is a challenge, but also an opportunity for bold choices and integrated solutions. Established in 2019, the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) was created to address these four crises, maximizing impact for change at key points in the food system.



The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) provides research-based policy solutions to sustainably reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition in developing countries. Established in 1975, IFPRI currently has more than 600 employees working in over 50 countries. It is a research center of CGIAR, a worldwide partnership engaged in agricultural research for development.

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