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**Displays of Patriarchy and Female Vigour. (Report prepared for the project  
'Professional and Marriage Choices of Youth in Kyrgyzstan')**

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# Professional and Marriage Choices of Youth in Kyrgyzstan

Conducted by the UN Women Country Office in the  
Kyrgyz Republic

Funded by the UN Peacebuilding Support Office  
and UN Women

2017





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# Foreword

One in three residents of the Kyrgyz Republic is a young person aged between 14 and 28 years. The emergence of a peaceful and prosperous Kyrgyzstan, providing justice for all its citizens, is predicated on engagement with and investment in today's young generation. Yet young people face many challenges. An inefficient and outdated education system significantly limits the potential for human development which is so essential for a land-locked and mountainous country that is by-passed by today's global trading routes. Misinterpretation of the cultural richness of its people, straying away from the territory's historical diversity and tolerance, and veering towards a narrative of control of some over others that includes systemic violation of the rights of adolescent girls and young women, runs counter to efforts at building an advanced and stable Kyrgyzstan where men and women can grow to deploy their comparative advantages in the global knowledge economy. Twenty-five years after independence the Kyrgyz Republic is at a crossroads.

Will those coming of age now be committed to a modern, multi-ethnic society that cherishes human rights and freedom, or will those exploiting economic difficulties and a spiritual vacuum gain the upper hand, divide the country and take it backwards? UN Women believes that moving towards more gender equality has a catalytic effect on many development issues. Without progress towards gender equality, through the tool of women's empowerment, the global development agenda is unlikely to be met in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere by 2030, when today's young generation will be in their 30s and 40s and entering key decision-making positions. Without emphasis on the empowerment of women and girls, progress on sustainable development will remain elusive.

Tools that can help include strict law enforcement to protect girls against violence, as well as gender-responsive budgeting to ensure that the country's finances serve everyone and give real opportunity to women to develop skills and talents. Temporary measures such as gender and youth quotas in local assemblies and the national parliament may also be required.

Under its Building a Constituency for Peace project, which is focused on the social and economic empowerment of youth and funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund, UN Women conducted research on key cultural, social, educational and economic factors negatively affecting the empowerment of young women aged 14 to 28 in Kyrgyzstan, and into the creation of an environment that would actively enable their empowerment.

Two research areas were prioritised for investigation, namely "professional choices" and "adolescents'/sexual and reproductive health and marriage choices", with a focus on adolescent girls and young women aged 14-28. Some 70% of respondents were female, and 30% male. Combined qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in all nine administrative regions of Kyrgyzstan. Respondents from the three largest and various smaller ethnic groups were interviewed. The intent was to build a multi-faceted picture that also identified and highlighted best practices and positive examples of girl empowerment for subsequent promotion and replication.

The research was carried out by a multi-ethnic team of young, mainly female, researchers from Kyrgyzstan. In order to ensure that all phases of the research met the highest academic standards, a comprehensive induction and

training programme was designed and delivered prior to each phase of the project by the principal researcher, herself a native of Kyrgyzstan currently completing her PhD in Germany. All phases of the research, including preparing methodology and research tools, interviewing, transcribing interviews, coding and analysis were thus carried out by this group of highly motivated and deeply committed researchers contracted by the UN Women Kyrgyzstan Republic Country Office. The final report, which was based on the various component reports prepared by the research team and the data collected by them, was then written by an international academic with extensive topical research experience in the country. This publication describes this process in more detail.

Our objective was to establish comprehensive and actionable national level data to understand the prevailing attitudes, knowledge and practices leading to structural and socially accepted discrimination against girls and young women aged 14-28. There was a lack of comprehensive, countrywide data on factors contributing to the disempowerment of girls and young women in this age range. Our research was designed to fill this gap, and to identify region-specific and age group-specific tendencies and patterns of gender inequality. The research team was keen to identify and document positive examples of empowerment of girls and young women who have successfully overcome systemic constraints. In fact, many such cases were identified, along with the specific conditions that enabled their success. This is highly valuable information for both policy-makers and development planners whose aim is to help young women attain their potential and become informed decision-makers.

As our study results have confirmed, gender role perceptions in Kyrgyzstan are still predominantly organised by sex and age, a hallmark of a patriarchal society. Among Kyrgyz youth, the socially accepted model of life is of the male as breadwinner and the female taking care of household duties and children. This notion is, however, being challenged by young women from urban areas who have marketable skills, and by those sent into migration abroad to support families back home. Girls may also escape family pressure to marry by opting for labour migration.

While they may be exposed to violence during migration, upon their return they are markedly empowered, although often stereotyped as 'easy' girls, who have been exposed to 'too much' freedom. They lack a supportive environment in which to deploy their new skills in order to make a positive contribution to society and to economic progress.

Women tend to marry earlier, at an average age of 20.6 years against 24.5 years among men. Domestic violence, bride-kidnapping and early marriage are pervasive forms of violence against girls and women that still prevail in Kyrgyzstan. Impunity and patchy law enforcement in such cases constitute both a psychological and an economic cost for society.

While many young women are on the receiving end of violence, in the event of bride-kidnapping it is often the prospective mother-in-law - in all likelihood having once been kidnapped herself - who puts her son up to kidnapping a girl. Female relatives of the groom will then force the girl into submission and she often ends up in servitude to the abducting family. Her marriage will probably involve only a religious ceremony. Avoiding civil registration makes it difficult for her to secure both her and her children's rights in case of her running away. But after being detained for just one night the girl, now deemed 'impure', cannot return to her parents for the shame it may bring upon them. This is perhaps the greatest violation of her rights. It is hoped that our research will help inform behaviour change communication strategies in order to counter such harmful practices and beliefs, and that this in turn will give impetus to the justice sector to carry out its duties under the Constitution and the Criminal Code.

The generally poor and restricted access for adolescents to sexual and reproductive health education and services leaves young women vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancies, adolescent childbearing, sexual coercion and violence. These factors when combined with limited opportunities for educational and professional self-realisation mean that many young women become victims, rather than actors and change agents for a more progressive society that cherishes and promotes women's contributions in all spheres of public life.

UN Women is dedicated to facilitating behaviour change in society so that having young women and men command the knowledge and freedom to make informed choices about their lives becomes the norm. To this end, the findings of our study provide policy-makers and development partners with reliable intelligence on how to design policy and practical interventions which will bridge the prevailing gap between socially constructed attitudes and public practices towards gender equality on the one hand, and constitutional guarantees of gender equality and human rights on the other.

It is necessary to give confidence to young women so that they can explore their professional opportunities and build a sense of self-worth before settling on marriage. It is equally necessary to involve young men in this work so that they can appreciate self-respect and a sense of purpose in young women, and commit to a partnership of equality that will be a stable basis for marriage and establishing a family.

On behalf of the UN Women Country Office, I would like to thank first and foremost the research team, under the inspiring leadership of Ms. Aikokul Maksutova, for their strong commitment, hard work and the convincing research produced. Thanks go to the principal donor, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, and the Joint Steering Committee and its Secretariat in Kyrgyzstan. UN Women appreciates the continuous support of its state partners, especially the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, and its partners in civil society, all of whom are striving with us for more gender equality and growing female empowerment. Any faults with the research, of

course, lie with the UN Women Country Office, which coordinated and closely supported this work, ensuring that it met ethical requirements and was carried out objectively.

Besides this final analytical report, a number of component reports on gender perceptions and practices across different ethnic groups and the source data collected are available to bona-fide researchers. We invite readers of the report to explore further recommendations for follow-up action. The UN Women Country Office is interested in wide dissemination of this research and welcomes discussion and use of it.

UN Women in its policy advisory function, and in its programmes and projects, will apply the knowledge gained from this research. We will also continue to focus on preparing young researchers for conducting such research and building analytical skills. The development of analytical thinking capacity is not a priority of the current education system which, as our research has shown, needs to develop more of a focus on life and livelihoods skills in order to adequately prepare young women and men for their journey to self-realisation and thus happiness, which in turn will lead to a strong and stable nation.

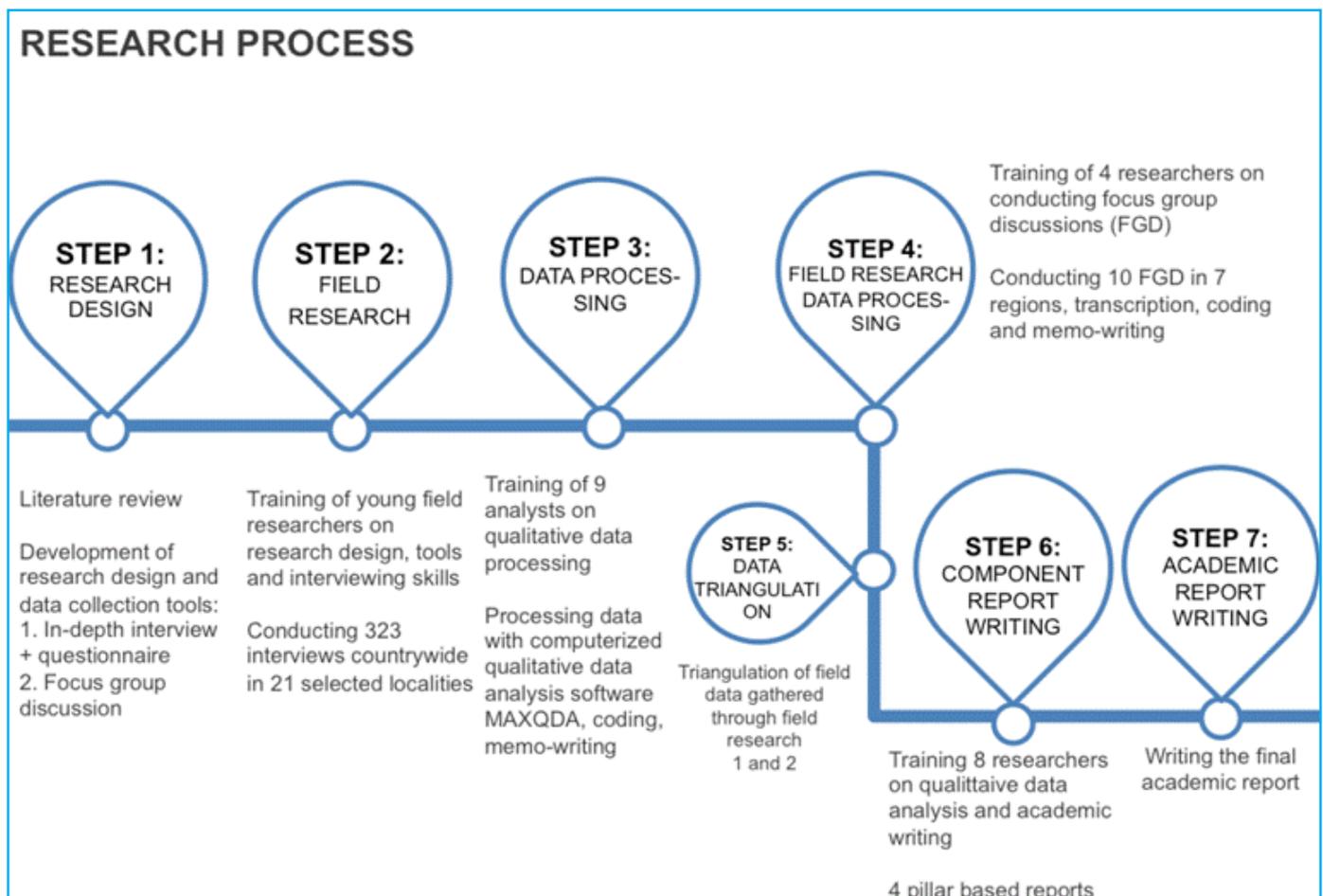
I hope that reviewing our research will inspire readers to commit to and work towards enhancing the opportunities of young women and men in Kyrgyzstan so that they may be in a position to make informed choices about their lives which will lead to more participation of young people in public life, and ultimately to prosperity and peace.

*Gerald Gunther  
Representative  
UN Women Kyrgyz Republic Country Office  
January 2017*

# How the research was conducted

The methodological design of the present study underwent several modifications throughout the research cycle, while still adhering to the original research questions and the thematic pillars deduced from the literature review. In the beginning, the study was designed as quantitative research, with integrated elements of qualitative methods. The team of researchers selected a standardized questionnaire that incorporated open-ended questions to deepen their understanding of selected research items. While discussing the applicability of the proposed design, the researchers came to the decision that, first, gender-specific, personal, and culturally

sensitive questions could not be explored in-depth via a quantitative method, and, second, they did not have sufficient time resources to conduct both a quantitative survey and qualitative research that would meet their research needs. To find an adequate compromise between research depth and coverage, the team decided to switch its design to a two-stage qualitative study with a substantive sample size. Thus a qualitative research method was adopted for primary data collection, which comprised individual problem-centred interviews (PCI) and focus group discussions (FGD). The research thus proceeded along seven consecutive steps, addressed in detail below and illustrated in the following flowchart:



## Development of the research design

As elaborated above, the research design was the product of intensive discussions among researchers and then adjustments based on research needs and project resources. One of the major factors that influenced the selection of appropriate data collection tools and instruments for data processing and analysis was the availability of researchers in Kyrgyzstan who met the minimal qualifications to carry out the research, from data collection to analysis. The human resource pool was quite limited, for several reasons. First, several qualified scholars were either already fully employed or involved in parallel research projects. Second, there are only two or three universities in Kyrgyzstan that offer sociology or anthropology degrees. Most of the graduates of these programs either move into other professions due to limited job opportunities in the domestic labour market, or leave the country. This means that for us to work with the available stock of young researchers, we had to lower the qualification standards for researchers and recruit young professionals with backgrounds in the social sciences or other relevant fields but with only limited experience with qualitative research. Therefore, the assembled team of researchers needed systematic and sequential training throughout the research process.

### Field research of stage 1

Before field research began, external researchers and key UN Women staff members had reviewed the research design. Based on the final approved version, interview guides for PCI in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek were developed and pre-tested. Pre-testing the research tools was essential for several reasons, including accurately planning the time that would be required for the field stay. It was determined from the beginning that the assembled team of young researchers not only should be involved in selected research tasks - for example, data collection and processing - but should also go through all the relevant research steps and gain

full-fledged research experience. Thus, the team of young researchers initially assembled enrolled in a five-day training course on research design, methodology, data collection tools, and essentials of conducting field research, documentation, and initial data processing. The latter included processing field notes, interview protocols, and transcribing interviews. Although transcription was tedious and time-consuming and could have been commissioned to a transcription company, as is usually done in large studies, we preferred to let the researchers experience as many research milestones as possible.

### Data processing of stage 1

As soon as primary field data was collected and transcribed, the next step was data processing, with a view to organizing and systematizing the qualitative data across ethnic lines, thematic pillars, categories, and codes. Decisions related to data processing and analysis, and their justifications, are provided in the project documentation. Only selected field researchers were involved in data processing. Some of the field researchers could no longer stay on the project for various private reasons; the others were evaluated according to their output quality, which was continuously assessed by quality control supervisors during the field research. As a result, eight field researchers were invited for further involvement and corresponding capacitation.

We decided to process the entire body of raw data through line-by-line coding to ensure that losing important insights while segregating certain data could be avoided, since the process of data reduction is always subjective and, to a certain degree, biased. The risk of data loss was increased in our case by the fact that the data was to be processed by young researchers with little research background. To minimize the risk, we decided to split the team of researchers into four component groups and code and categorize the correspondingly allocated data stock in an intensive in-group exchange. This meant that all the deductive and inductive codes processed were discussed within the groups, and cross-cutting issues were elaborated in general team meetings.

Another important aspect of data processing worth highlighting is that all component groups received a similar tree of codes deducted from interview guidelines, which was then revised, expanded, and adapted to component specifications. This was a necessary step to ensure that the initially defined research foci, including sub-questions under scrutiny, would be addressed to an equal degree by all components, in line with newly introduced aspects of the research. The selected researchers were correspondingly trained on how to process data using a computerized qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA. Training addressed the following issues: creation of projects; exporting documents; developing a code tree; organizing the code tree into categories, codes, and sub-codes; coding techniques; writing analytical memos to codes, documents, and codings; working with different tables; and using visual tools and variables.

## Field research and data processing of stage 2

During the data coding, as discussed above, the researchers met regularly in component or team meetings where they not only discussed process-related issues, but also identified a number of salient features of the data (codes, sub-codes, cases) that would need to be examined more deeply and carefully in certain socio-cultural contexts via the focus group discussions planned for research stage 2. Based on purely inductive initial findings of research stage 1, guidelines for contextually adapted focus group discussions were developed and reviewed within the team of researchers. As a result, several researchers were offered ad-hoc training on how to conduct focus group discussions and were then dispatched to the field. The FGD data was then processed and analyzed, according to the methodology applied during research stage 1.

## Data triangulation

In this step, the initial findings of stages 1 and 2 were reviewed as a set, and compared against and correlated with each other to give the researchers a better understanding of the research subjects under scrutiny and to increase the credibility and validity of the overall results. As this task requires higher research qualifications and more advanced analytical skills, it was conducted by the senior research advisor.

## Component report writing

To systematize the report-writing process within separate component groups and to foster intercomponent exchange and communication, a writing workshop for analysts was organised so that they could finalize draft reports through ongoing reviews and editing. Common problems discussed during feedback meetings included clustering the findings into a higher level of abstraction and synthesizing them into a narrative, reading quantitative data and integrating them into the report, and forming ideas and concepts.

## Final academic report writing

Based on the final drafts of component reports (Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek, and Other Minorities), the senior analyst wrote a final academic report, synthesizing cross-component research findings to arrive at conceptual ideas. After finishing the report, the senior analyst provided a feedback session to the involved analysts, evaluating both their individual outputs and how the research was designed and implemented, focusing on strengths and lessons learned.

The following table summarizes the qualitative and quantitative project outputs in relation to researchers' capacities:

No	Qualitative: training sessions	Quantitative: number of trained segments
1.	<p>Research design and research field preparation:            Design: development of research question(s), research pillars, (in) dependent variables, integrated deductive codes;            Methodology: general methodological approaches, data collection tools, sampling strategy, pretesting instruments;            Field research: gaining field access, recording field data, interviewing techniques, quality control, logistics;            Transcription: techniques, rules, practice;            Research ethics</p>	<p>12 field researchers            2 quality-control supervisors            1 research advisor</p>
2.	<p>Qualitative data processing on MAXQDA:            Project management: creating, deleting, merging, exporting, teamwork;            Coding: simple coding, In-Vivo, colour, emoticodes;            Memo-writing: data reduction and initial analysis, data categorization, regrouping;            Variables: document and code variables, export/import of variables, creating and managing variables, quantification of qualitative data;            Analysis: summaries, cross-tables, typology tables, segment matrix;            Visual tools: MaxMaps, Document Portrait, Code-Matrix. Browser, Codeline</p>	<p>9 analysts            1 research advisor</p>
3.	<p>Focus group discussions:            Instruments: context-bound FGD guides;            Management of group dynamics, guiding skills;            Field access, logistics and research ethics</p>	<p>4 field researchers            1 research advisor</p>
4.	<p>Qualitative data analysis:            Identifying thematic patterns, interrelationships among patterns, synthesizing them onto a conceptual level;            Triangulation: source, method and data;            Academic writing techniques: organizing a report in chapters and paragraphs, formulation of ideas, citation principles, formatting and wording.</p>	<p>8 analysts            1 research advisor</p>

Prepared by Aikokul Maksutova

# List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

A/SRH	Adolescents Sexual and Reproductive Health
FGD	Focus group discussion
GSPS	Gender in Society Perceptions Study
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ORT	Obshcherespublikanskoye testirovanie - National University Admissions Test
PBSO	United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office
PCI	Problem-centred interview
STD	Sexually transmitted diseases
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

# DISPLAYS OF PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE VIGOUR

Research Report prepared by Dr. Philipp Schröder

## Executive Summary

**I**n 2015 UN Women in partnership with other UN and Government entities conducted the Gender in Society Perception Study (GSPS). At the same time UN Women decided to also conduct research specifically on professional and marriage choices of youth in Kyrgyzstan to understand the prevailing knowledge, attitudes and practices leading to structural and socially accepted discrimination against girls and young women, aged 14-28, in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. As its primary outputs, the study shall identify opportunities and strategies for equal participation and empowerment of girls and young women in community level processes and serve as a foundation to introduce workable, gender-sensitive legal acts and policy frameworks.

### Methodology and Concept

The two major thematic pillars of this study concerned (1) 'Professional Choices of Girls and Young Women' and (2) 'Marriage and Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health (A/SRH) Choices'. In previous studies on youth in Kyrgyzstan, these topics have either remained unaddressed or did not explicitly scrutinise gender distortions.

Data gathering occurred in two phases. In the first phase, primary data was collected via 'problem-centred qualitative interviews' (PCIs) that were recorded with young Kyrgyzstani males and females. Furthermore, respondents were asked to fill in a short questionnaire on their general socio-demographic situation, on particular aspects pertaining to the two thematic research pillars, and on their levels of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STD).

In total, 350 PCIs were conducted among young males and females of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian and other ethnic belonging. During the second phase of data gathering, focus group discussions (FGD) were organised with people who can be considered 'relevant' for youth (e.g. parents, school teachers, Islamic clerics). The FGDs were set up to capture the older generation's perspective on contemporary Kyrgyzstani youth, as well as to access inter-generational viewpoints on the development of gender relations in regards to professional and A/SRH choices.

Conceptually, this report takes inspiration from an approach called 'opportunity structures' (Merton 1995) in order to better grasp and present the primary data. This allows for analysis of the dynamics of how young Kyrgyzstanis assess, relate and negotiate potential life-chances in light of their particular socio-cultural, economic, local and contemporary historical embedding. From this emerges an in-depth understanding of the complex shaping and shifting of opportunity structures, as they are informed by young respondents' belonging to collectives of (extended) family units, neighbourhood communities, ethnic and other peer groups.

## Research Outcomes and Cross-Cutting Perspectives

The main research outcomes of the Youth Research are first discussed with regard to distinct ethnic groups of young male and female respondents: Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian and smaller minority groups (Tajiks, Turks and Kurds, Dungans, Uighurs).

The section on young ethnic Kyrgyz illustrates that, for young women, the main consequence of how gender relations are perceived in their communities was that they have to continually negotiate their life trajectories. The term 'turmush' (life) is used to capture this blend of opportunities, challenges and setbacks that often meant that a woman's future positioning in education, employment and marriage is not predetermined, but subject to change by personal initiative and by male counterparts who can in principle be persuaded to distance themselves from 'traditional' role perceptions. Therefore, the *modus operandi* for the Kyrgyz group could be summarised as a 'pragmatic patriarchy'.

In comparison to their Kyrgyz peers, young Uzbek men, and especially women, could be observed to enjoy less leverage when it came to negotiating their opportunities for education and employment vis-à-vis their parents, husbands, in-laws or within the Kyrgyz state. This could be captured with the Arabic term 'sabr', which depicts Islamic virtues of 'endurance', 'patience' and 'perseverance'. 'Sabr' is important not only because young Uzbeks may be drawing more inspiration from Islam than their peers of different ethnic belonging, but also because of their disadvantaged status as 'the other' major ethnic group in southern Kyrgyzstan. Many young Uzbek women furthermore noted a mother's patient ('sabilri') approach to life as the pre-eminent qualification for their role model, which also defines a rather observant and non-confrontational stance of waiting for incremental change to happen.

The responses of Russian youth revealed that their coming of age occurs in quite different social settings compared to those of their ethnic Kyrgyz or Uzbek peers. Young Russian males and females did not mention patterns of co-habitation within extended family groups, but rather reported a focus on the core-family unit of parents and a few siblings. In the case of most young Russian families both spouses worked and decision-making was considered an equally shared responsibility. Young Russian respondents framed a personal lifestyle of equal freedoms and female societal participation as being in sync with a 'modern society' (*sovremennoye obshchestvo*), for which the Soviet era's Socialist 'achievements' in Central Asia served as the inspirational template. Beyond that, Russian youth voiced their sense of being disadvantaged within a labour market in Kyrgyzstan that respondents often believed to feature aspects of nepotism, due to their 'weaker' social networks and their general lack of Kyrgyz language skills.

The examination of smaller minority groups widened the spectrum of possible gender relations, and on the distribution of opportunities, in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. In regards to how youth's social and cultural backgrounds related to perceptions of family, education, employment and other topics, the responses from the Tajik group revealed most similarities with those of their Uzbek peers. The insights provided by members of the Turkish and Kurdish communities, in comparison to those gained from other ethnic groups, illustrated severe limitations for females to participate in collective decision-making on their

education, marriage, employment and physical mobility. Among Dungan women, again, the importance of detailed location - i.e. inhabiting a 'liberal' or 'traditional' semi-urban environment in northern Kyrgyzstan - was notable in regards to their opportunities for influencing family matters or accessing education and employment opportunities. Finally, young male and female Uighurs presented educational achievements as highly important within their everyday life, which was also reflected in the fact that, unlike their Dungan peers, they were often prohibited by their parents to work alongside their school or even university studies.

To account for the fact that young males and females in Kyrgyzstan share views, constraints and opportunities beyond their particular ethnic belonging, research outcomes are also presented from a cross-cutting perspective that aims to assess the varying degrees to which this could be observed.

Such a perspective is captured in the title chosen for the present report: 'Displays of Patriarchy and Female Vigour' is intended to express that many aspects of the everyday interactions between men and women in Kyrgyzstan tend to oscillate and are being negotiated in-between these two poles. Depending on ethnic belonging, but also on other parameters such as place of residence, a display of patriarchy may be rather rhetorical, while in fact female vigour is the actual shaping force of opportunities. Yet a display of patriarchy might equally be forceful, i.e. not only a matter of discourse, but strictly structuring the trajectories of families and female biographies. Then female vigour is still present and definitive, but may be concealed behind gendered performances of patience and perseverance (*sabr*).

The cross-cutting perspective takes up the themes of language (and ethnicisation), location, violence, the flow of information and 'being young'.

Russian respondents did not indicate that they are limited in their secondary or tertiary educational aspirations, but pointed to an ethnicised and nepotistic labour market that privileged their Kyrgyz peers. Young Uzbek males and females agreed with that observation, but also pointed to their native tongue's decreasing functionality (in the educational and professional domain), even in the country's southern areas where they enjoy a strong presence. Different geographic scales could be identified as playing

a role in shaping youth opportunities, ranging from inter- to intra-regional differences and those between urban and rural areas. Examining these patterns, the ethnic groups inhabiting southern Kyrgyzstan could be identified as reflecting stronger displays of patriarchy that constrained female social and mobilities.

The responses of young Kyrgyzstanis of all ethnic groups demonstrated a pervasive exposure to violence and abuse of different sorts, from physical and emotional violence to verbal and financial abuse or neglect. At the same time, talking about violence largely remains a taboo, and violent acts can be seen as a performance of masculinity that is culturally legitimised by different audiences.

On a wide range of 'delicate topics', especially sexuality, barriers for cross-gender communication were reported to exist within families as well as between young males and females. The lack of first-hand experiences of the opposite gender could be identified as furthering stereotypes and speculation, such as a male distrust towards the 'female character'. Aside from gender relations, young male and female respondents were also critical of parents and teachers who proved unmotivated or ill-informed to advise them on adequate choices for future professions (disregarding actual labour market demands and instead suggesting 'prestigious' study programmes).

A patriarchal logic as well informed the functioning of the local 'marriage market', where the demand for future husbands dictated the terms for the supply of future wives, enforcing a gendered upbringing among young women of different ethnic groups that constrained them from equal pursuit of extracurricular activities outside their family home. Related to this was the older generation's general scepticism that perceived adolescence not as an opportunity for someone to develop a responsible personality, but primarily as a period of easy descent into delinquency. Finally, displays of patriarchy concerned not only the unequal distribution of male and female responsibilities and opportunities, but also the unequal valuation of their respective contributions, regardless of whether these related to education, domestic work, child-rearing or employment.

## Recommendations

Based on these research findings, the following recommendations are made:

- ▶ It is recommended to evaluate the curriculum of so-called 'short-courses', in which young women in particular were said to gain important practical skill-sets and thus future income opportunities, and identify potentials to promote these as alternative institutions of vocational training.
- ▶ It is recommended to support the improvement of information quality and distribution, regarding educational opportunities based on actual labour market demands.
- ▶ It is recommended to support the creation of 'youth spaces', which are characterised by horizontal relations and advance a mind-set of 'trust and responsibility'; and also to ensure in particular that young rural women have access to these.
- ▶ It is recommended to promote youth programmes that take into account the distinctive needs of recently married young couples who should be mobilised to serve as a peer-group resource for sharing experiences with the younger, unmarried generation.
- ▶ It is recommended to support the promotion of 'young achievers' as alternative role models, who originate from the same local communities and whose success is based on a positive utilisation of similar opportunity structures.
- ▶ It is recommended to promote the institution of 'fatherhood' in order to ensure a more active involvement of fathers in childrearing and social upbringing.
- ▶ It is recommended to promote those religious positions, which reflect gender-awareness as an alternative moral source to denounce forms of discrimination against women and improve their opportunity structures in a culturally sensitive way.
- ▶ It is recommended to promote public debates about the physical, psychological and social repercussions of all forms of patriarchal abuse, to strengthen both collective responsibility and individual resilience to prevent these, and to enhance the readiness within communities to report and condemn acts of violent abuse.

# Research Design and Methodology

This section of the report presents the Youth Research's main research design and methodology. It introduces key underlying questions and discusses the qualitative approach that has been followed to access young Kyrgyzstani's lives and gender relations.

The Youth Research is organised around the central research question 'What key cultural, social, educational and economic factors negatively affect the empowerment of young women (aged 14 to 28) in Kyrgyzstan? What environment would be conducive to enabling their empowerment?' The overall objective of the Youth Research is to establish comprehensive national level data in order to understand the existing Knowledge, prevailing Attitudes and actual Practices that lead to such structural and socially accepted discrimination of girls and young women in Kyrgyzstan. A KAP-based survey method allows for in-depth insights into local socio-cultural and politico-economic dynamics that shape the mutual relatedness of Kyrgyzstani young women and men. The insights from this study thus aim to provide a solid foundation for introducing workable, gender-sensitive legal and policy frameworks.

The two major thematic pillars of research interest concerned (1) 'Professional Choices of Girls and Young Women' and (2) 'Marriage and Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health (A/SRH) Choices'. In previous studies on youth in Kyrgyzstan, these topics have either remained entirely unaddressed or did not explicitly scrutinise gender distortions. In regard to professional choices, the questions posed to Kyrgyzstani youth concerned their future occupational aspirations and the ways in which they imagined achieving these, the issue of economic independence for women, and patterns of male and female social mobility. In regard to A/SRH choices, topics of interest related to marriage strategies and

structures of gender in-/equality, as well as to levels of knowledge about A/SRH itself, and about different forms of violence (domestic and other).

Data gathering occurred in two phases. In the first phase, primary data were collected via 'problem-centred qualitative interviews' (PCIs) that were recorded with young Kyrgyzstani males and females. The instruments employed as part of the PCI were interview guides with a broad set of questions in order to induce a conversation, and the interviewer's notes as part of a 'field journal', reflecting their approach and experiences during and after interviews. The PCIs generated qualitative data that did not aim at representativity, but which provide in-depth illustrations of young Kyrgyzstani's knowledge, attitudes and practices in regard to gender relations.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to fill in a short questionnaire with a standardised set of questions on their general socio-demographic situation and on particular aspects pertaining to the two thematic research pillars, as well as on their levels of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STD). As part of a mixed-methods approach, such quantifiable data allowed connections to be generated within the research sample, and so facilitated a comparison of various research findings through further analysis.

Access to communities was achieved with official support, for example from local self-government units, but was also facilitated by informal 'gatekeepers' who were willing to support the Youth Research's objective. In total, 350 PCIs were conducted and respondents were identified according to purposeful random sampling. Of these respondents, 254 were young females and 96 were young males. As regards age-cohorts, 119

respondents were between ages 14-17, 118 were between ages 18-23, and 113 were between ages 24-28. In regard to ethnicity, most respondents, 159 in total, were ethnic Kyrgyz. To represent the country's two largest minorities, 67 young Uzbeks and 34 young Russians were interviewed. Finally, PCIs were also conducted with youth of smaller ethnic minority groups in Kyrgyzstan: Tajiks (29), Turks and Kurds (16), Dungans (11) and Uighurs (8).<sup>2</sup> The exact distribution of respondents within these ethnic groups is indicated at the beginning of each sub-chapter in Part 4.

During a piloting phase, interview guides and questionnaires were tested for adequacy and validity, the sampling strategy was verified, and the interviewing skills of researchers were enhanced. Additional follow-up training and workshops for local researchers and analysts were conducted before all major research steps, in order to ensure capacity building. The data from the (transcribed) PCIs was processed and coded with the help of a computer software package (MaxQDA), which facilitated the first analysis and identification of significant response patterns.

These insights initiated the second phase of data gathering. This occurred in focus group discussions (FGD) that assembled people who could be considered 'relevant' for young males and females, such as parents, school teachers, youth workers, Islamic clerics or heads of the local authorities. In total, nine FGDs were conducted, three among ethnic Kyrgyz, two each among ethnic Uzbeks and Russians, and one among ethnic Tajiks and Turks or Kurds. Each FGD evolved around a set of approximately ten questions and lasted for 60-90 minutes. Similarly to the procedure for the PCIs, after the FGDs participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire, and moderators provided reflective notes on their experiences and impressions.

The FGDs were set up to capture the older generation's perspective on contemporary Kyrgyzstani youth, as well as to access inter-generational viewpoints on the development of gender relations in regard to professional and A/SRH choices. The exact questions raised for discussion in the focus groups were based on the insights of the first phase of data gathering. In that way, particular trends that were identified from the individual responses of young males and females of different ethnic groups, or in different locations, could then be critically elaborated within the context of responses from a larger audience. The FGDs were also transcribed and data used for software-based qualitative data analysis.

The Youth Research adhered to the following ethical standards: Interviewees were informed about the aims and objectives of research and were given the opportunity to refuse to answer any specific question. Minors were interviewed only upon consent of one parent, and interviewers had been trained beforehand to pose questions in an age-appropriate manner. Interviewees could choose or switch to their preferred language during conversation (Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek). Confidentiality of interviewees was protected by a system of identification numbers, used in place names, and by publishing only composite cases (that were based on similar situations and other characteristics), rather than details of individual cases.

Eventually, from the PCIs and the FGDs two separate but interlinked sets of qualitative data emerged that could be triangulated against each other. This final report draws on all data sources mentioned so far: interview transcripts of PCIs and FGDs, code structures recorded in the qualitative data software and questionnaire data. Furthermore, local analysts compiled 'component reports' that comprehensively outlined and discussed trends in gender perceptions among young females and males of each ethnic group.

<sup>2</sup> 26 additional respondents indicated belonging to other different minority groups that will not be discussed in this report.

# Research Outcomes

This part of the report presents the main outcomes of the Youth Research. Following a brief introduction of the conceptual framework that is used to support the description and analysis of the research data, the next sections will discuss gender perceptions and relations for each of the ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian and smaller minority groups (Tajiks, Turks and Kurds, Dungans, Uighurs). Finally, a cross-cutting perspective will be developed that identifies themes of significance for Kyrgyzstani youth, such as language, violence or the flow of information, regardless of their ethnic belonging. The footnotes of this section will also provide links to recent academic literature on youth and gender in Kyrgyzstan. As scientific knowledge on these topics is still scarce, especially on youth in rural areas, the empirical data collected as part of the Youth Research is a highly welcome contribution to on-going scientific debates.

## Conceptual Framework: Opportunity Structures

In order to better grasp and present the data that has been gathered on the perceptions of gender relations in Kyrgyzstan, this report takes inspiration from the approach of 'opportunity structures'. Originally introduced by sociologist Robert Merton (1995) as part of a theory of deviance, this approach assembles various elements of thought that are suitable for the analysis of the present topic.

First, the approach aims to investigate the link between the particular positioning of an individual within a social structure and the domain of 'culture', understood as local values or norms. This is to say that the distribution of, and the access to, various opportunities in a society tends to be significantly shaped by:

- (a) social categorisations such as age, gender, class or ethnic belonging; and
- (b) what may be regarded as a culturally legitimate goal for someone to pursue.

As these configurations are commonly subject

to (societal) negotiation, tensions might become apparent between various collective conventions and expressions of individual agency. In relation to the topic of this report, some of the debates in contemporary Kyrgyzstan revolve around questions such as: 'Should a Kyrgyz girl attend university?', 'Can an Uzbek wife work after marriage?', or 'Who can be considered a good husband?'

These topics are of crucial relevance for young Kyrgyzstanis today, and their responses allow for insights on how their particular embedding in communities of different orders (family, kinship, peer groups, neighbourhood) affect the present and future of their life-trajectories. While examining, for example, whether preconceived gender roles are complied with or questioned, this reveals that a gap might exist between the objective availability of an opportunity and the perception of whether seizing such an opportunity is considered appropriate or rational. An example would be the existence of an affordable school located close to a girl's home, but where her parents are of the opinion that 'girls do not need to attend school as they will be housewives and mothers'.

Second, the 'opportunity structures' approach incorporates a notion of process, which means that one can examine the expansion or contraction of different life-chances for certain actors at various moments in time (Schröder 2010). Generally, this allows for changes in society to be tracked in relation to events of different kinds and magnitude, which in the Kyrgyzstani context might be the demise of the Soviet Union, the 2010 interethnic clashes in the country's southern part, or the regional repercussions of Russia's currently stagnant economy.

Recent trends that inform the ways in which young citizens of Kyrgyzstan perceive gender relations include: a growing significance of Islam in both the public sphere and private lives (as compared to the Soviet era); an emergence of ethnic nationalism that favours members of the country's 'titular nation' (as opposed to a civic-based nationalism); and the relevance of labour migration, especially to Russia, for securing alternative incomes

(in light of Kyrgyzstan's troubled national economy). Pressing questions arising from these developments are, for example: 'Can a Kyrgyz girl who has lived and worked in Russia still be a good marriage partner?'; 'Is it logical not to send an Uzbek boy to university, because his chances of finding an 'official job' (within the country's security forces, legislative or executive) are too slim?'; 'How are the workplace relations of young Russians affected if they are unable to communicate in the Kyrgyz language?'

On the one hand, these questions show that changes in opportunity structures are often related to re-localisations, meaning that geographic mobility (from a village to a city within Kyrgyzstan or to another country) might lead to social mobility (better education and/or income). On the other hand, the responses documented in this report illustrate that for young Kyrgyzstani women in particular the structuration of opportunities is not straightforward, and that pursuing one opportunity, such as education, might jeopardise attaining another one, such as a 'happy family life'. As will be discussed in the following pages, such situations tend to emerge from the understanding that even within a family setting the opportunity for a female member is perceived as a definite loss for the male member(s). In such a male-dominated zero-sum-perception, the economic independence of a working woman is likely to motivate her to challenge the established patriarchal order of decision-making.

Third, this report will examine all sorts of opportunities that Kyrgyzstani youth consider to be essential for their (future) lives. This means that next to the economic opportunities of generating income, there are further domains to consider, such as acquiring education or professional skills, gaining in prestige or fulfilling collective expectations, and being embedded in various social networks. This multi-dimensional perspective is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) classic idea that different 'forms of capital', ranging from the economic to the social, to the cultural and the symbolic, can be accumulated and converted by actors.

From this angle, it becomes apparent that young people's opportunities are partially 'pre-structured', depending, for example, on the educational and occupational status of their parents or on the location where they have grown up. Furthermore, seizing one and the same opportunity might be preparation for quite differently shaped futures, such as when the member of a less affluent rural household utilises her or his Russian language skills in order to become a labour migrant in Russia, while another young person might conduct his university studies in Russian in order to prepare

for a white-collar professional career in Bishkek or another Kyrgyz city. At the same time, the viewpoints assembled in this report indicate that perceptions of what in fact constitutes an opportunity or not might differ significantly. Is the access to knowledge an unequivocally desirable state, or does, for example, the free flow of information on reproductive health actually 'seduce' young people to engage in sexual practices 'too early'? In this regard, the report also reveals that the respondents' positions on whether to conceive of new developments as either empowering, or as a threat to an established order, crucially depend on their own first-hand experiences. In consequence, the conviction that a working woman might pose a threat to familial stability is more strongly pronounced among those youths whose mothers have been housewives, instead of pursuing a career outside their own home.

Fourth, the concept of opportunity structures is a probabilistic one and thus allows exploration of variations in degree instead of in kind. Accordingly, from one angle the present report will be able to investigate differences within the ethnic groups that are represented here, for example between those Kyrgyz males and females who reside in a certain region of the country, or in a village as opposed to an urban setting. From another angle, the report will examine variations across ethnic groups, such as the ways in which young females' biographies and life-choices are shaped by patriarchal practices and various forms of violence. When considering pathways into matrimony, for example, there are noticeable trends that: (1) within the Uzbek ethnic group marriages are arranged by parents, and the ability of future brides to impact on this decision-making is low; (2) for the Russian respondents, by contrast, it seems that the choice of a future partner is taken individually by the young woman herself; (3) among the ethnic Kyrgyz again, there are cases in-between these extreme poles, where the phenomenon of bride-kidnapping (ala kachuu) might either lead to involuntary marriage for young women, or be a welcome means (an 'instrumentalised tradition') to enforce a love-marriage that is opposed by the parents.

In summary, this report intends to utilise the concept of opportunity structures in order to analyse the dynamics of how young Kyrgyzstanis assess, relate and negotiate potential life-chances in light of their particular socio-cultural, economic, local and contemporary historical embedding. From this should emerge an understanding of the complex shaping and shifting of opportunity structures as they are informed by the respondents' belonging to collectives of (extended) family units, neighbourhood communities, ethnic and other peer groups.

# Displays of Patriarchy and Female Vigour:

## Observations on Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian and other Youth in Kyrgyzstan

### Turmush: How Young Kyrgyz Negotiate Life

This section investigates the opportunity structures and perception of gender relations among young female and male respondents of the ethnic Kyrgyz group (who currently represent 73% of the country's population).<sup>3</sup> The term 'turmush' (life) features in the headline, because it helps to illustrate key aspects of the perception that life may be full of challenges and setbacks, but that eventually it remains contingent and thus subject to change by personal initiative and negotiation, forging what could be called a 'pragmatic patriarchy'.

Following a brief account of the data source for this section of the report, the themes that will be explored among young Kyrgyz are 'Family Backgrounds', 'Professional Choices' and 'Marriage and A/SRH Health Choices'.

### Data Source

Data for this section were gathered in all administrative regions (oblasts) of Kyrgyzstan, plus the major cities of Osh and Bishkek. In total, 159 interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted. Among the respondents were 119 young females and 40 young males. Of the respondents, 104 were unmarried, 45 were married and nine were divorced. (One respondent provided no answer.)

The focus group discussions took place in At-Bashy village (Naryn oblast), Uchkorgon village (Batken oblast) and the city of Jalalabad (Jalalabad). Participants in these discussions were

local community members who play a role in young people's social upbringing and development, such as teachers, social workers, local government and law-enforcement officials or doctors.

### Family Backgrounds

Social upbringing among the Kyrgyz is strongly gendered. For most young women this means that already from an early age they feel the need to negotiate with their parents what it means to be a 'good daughter'. While defining this, the parents' expectations that their daughters should primarily fulfil household chores are usually opposed to the girls' aspirations to engage in extracurricular development or leisure activities. 'Unlike most of their male counterparts, it was in particular unmarried Kyrgyz young women from the rural and southern regions of the country, who stated to have only limited opportunities to spend time outside their family home so to avoid the social stigmatization of being considered 'street girls'. Among parents there is a widespread anxiety that such a negative reputation later on could reduce their daughter's 'value' in the marriage market later on, and thus the ability to secure an adequate husband. This situation was reported to be markedly different for youth in urban settings, where more attractive extracurricular opportunities are offered, where family budgets are bigger, and where there is less social control that would equally subordinate female mobility to a family's reputation. Respondents accordingly remarked that in cities both genders are encouraged by their families to attend preparatory courses for university enrolment, music schools or sports clubs, and also that they may go out to discos or private parties.

<sup>3</sup> See National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2016a).

The role models that Kyrgyz respondents commonly identified also follow a predominantly gendered perception of family and communal relations. Young women, for example, stated to admire how 'patient and enduring' (sabyrduu) or 'hardworking' their mothers were. Young men, by contrast, revered their fathers for 'masculine' traits, such as 'assertiveness', 'dominance' or 'family leadership'.

The picture of unequivocally gendered hierarchies became more complex once the respondents reflected on the actual processes of decision-making in their families. Although most Kyrgyz youth did not question that the final decision would rest with the eldest male, many also remarked that matters of particular significance would first be discussed in a family council. This informal institution often includes both parents and other older family members who would share their opinions on an equal basis. When it came to particular family expenses, women were said to more often decide in domains of health care, children's education and other small everyday matters, whereas decisions about larger investments, such as a car, an apartment or a washing machine, were attributed to men. In the few cases where mothers were identified as the main family decision-makers, this was related to their proportionally large financial contributions to the family budget due to their status as working women.

Respondents from the southern oblasts of Batken, Osh and Jalalabad tended to name fathers, brothers or other male family members as the family's main breadwinner, regardless of their actual income status. In line with this regional pattern, even working wives from the south of the country tended to undervalue their own financial contributions to the family budget, referring to the inferiority of 'grace and bliss' bestowed on female earnings. Rather, it was regarded as a matter of 'honour', but not necessarily of fact, to nominate males as both the head of the family and the main breadwinner.

In marked contrast to this, a focus group discussion in the northern oblast of Naryn presented rather favourable views on 'housemen', which has been a recent development, owing largely to the structural economic decline in this remote area. With shrinking employment opportunities in the industrial sector and commercial agriculture, fathers were reported to be taking over more household chores, such as preparing daily meals or caring for children.

Wives, on the other hand, are encouraged by their husbands and in-laws to generate income, because what scarce employment opportunities there are in Naryn can usually be found in female-dominated places of employment such as schools, hospitals or the local self-government bodies.

## Professional Choices: Education and Occupation

Most Kyrgyz respondents reflected a positive attitude towards their school, which they described as their 'second home'. Especially appreciated was the school 'community' of directors, teachers and classmates and often also the school facilities, ranging from the sports hall to musical instruments. Generally, students expressed satisfaction with the education they had received. However, it was remarked that there was a lack of specialist knowledge and that the 'psychological preparation' of young people was insufficient in order for them to be able to make an informed choice about their future professions.

A majority of Kyrgyz respondents of both genders, from both rural and urban areas, declared that they had been employed during their school years. Some began working from 5th grade onwards, i.e. 11-12 years of age, mostly during weekends or vacations. Some indicated the necessity to earn money in order to supplement their family's budget, for example to buy school uniforms or supplies. Others expressed a wish to earn extra money for their personal needs and to gain work experience. Rural male respondents reported that they organised themselves into groups and sought employment as day-labourers in the agricultural sector or on construction sites. Female respondents from rural areas commonly assisted with their family's business or farm, whereas their urban peers mostly worked as waiters, dishwashers or receptionists. Urban male respondents also found employment in the service sector as waiters, in car washes or as bazaar-sellers.

Student respondents revealed serious frustrations with the post-secondary education system, which were caused primarily by pervasive corruption, low quality of teaching, and poor facilities and equipment at local universities. In fact, quite a lot of Kyrgyz youth questioned the legitimacy of tuition fees in light of the fact that

they were also forced to pay multiple bribes each semester for what is essentially unsatisfactory teaching. This situation notwithstanding, post-secondary education is understood by the prevailing majority of young Kyrgyz as the most promising way to secure a decent livelihood. Regardless of gender, the respondents showed an awareness of the necessity to obtain further professional qualifications, either in vocational schools or at universities.

Despite this encompassing notion of continuing education, the research data showed that young females face a wide range of barriers or threats to pursuing their academic aspirations. Among these are: entry into marriage, domestic responsibilities of young married women and absence of support from parents and spouses. Furthermore, in cases of financial hardship families tend to prefer to invest scarce resources in the education of male siblings. As the following quote from a young female illustrates, women might then decide to subordinate their individual ambitions in order to avoid becoming a burden to their birth family:

*'I was actually planning to study. By that time, both my sister and brother were at university. We had only my mother and I did not want to cause her into more hardship. Both of my siblings had to pay tuition fees, and imagine that if I went to university it would have been a disaster. So I decided to get married.'*

As regards enrolment into a particular university and the ability to select their faculty, in Kyrgyzstan much depends on a pupil's performance scores in the annual 'All-Republican Testing' (ORT) or National University Admissions Test. In comparison to their urban peers, prospective students from rural areas of the country often face structural disadvantages. Without similar financial means, parental support and free time to attend the respective preparatory courses, or participate in other skill-building activities, their actual educational choices often do not relate to the future profession they had envisioned. For young Kyrgyz women, this matter is further complicated by the question of what can be considered an acceptable female occupation. Parents often recommend that their daughters become teachers, medical professionals, hairdressers or tailors, because these professions would be in permanent demand in both urban and rural areas, and are also flexible in regard to managing workloads and hours. These professions are thus regarded as 'proper for girls', mainly due to the fact that they do least to interfere with duties of child-rearing, household chores or the

professional orientation and place of employment of a future husband. Accordingly, running a private business was found by many to be inappropriate for women, as it might be too time-intensive. Such subordination of female careers is also evidenced by the fact that alternative trajectories are often strongly discouraged by parents, who argue that these could threaten future family life. One female respondent, for example, who wanted to become a singer, reported that her parents and other relatives continuously challenged her dream, arguing that 'singers are unhappy in family' or 'singing is not decent for a girl'.

The perception of 'working women' was found to differ significantly between the southern and northern parts of Kyrgyzstan. A vast majority in the southern oblasts were opposed to female employment, arguing that 'a woman's place is in the home', 'a woman's duty is to rear children', or 'it is the man who should go out and make money, not the woman'. In contrast, most of those male respondents in the northern oblasts of Naryn, Issyk-Kul, and partially in Talas, whose own mothers had higher education and were working, claimed to support their wives' and daughters' decisions to do so as well. This perspective is reflected in the following quote of a young 17-year-old man from Naryn:

*'Women should work. You need to feed the children. If you [a woman] do not work, from where should you take food? For example, if you just stay at home and do the household chores, there is no money coming out of it...By working they should feed the children.'*

Yet, employed women who contribute to the family budget were also commonly expected to keep up with their regular household duties. When such balancing efforts proved difficult, for example due to a lack of spousal or other family members' support, women often felt pressured to prioritise domestic life over their careers, in order to avoid family tensions and blame. Some women also found themselves feeling guilty for not being able to cope with such a double burden:

*'This is one of the complicated situations, when it is difficult to make a decision...Maybe if the matter came to this, she might be guilty herself, too, because she could not manage her time well. But on the other hand women are not some kind of engine, which will always work like a robot. She gets tired "morally"...There is a need to find a compromise, that is for sure.'*

Only in exceptional cases is the income of married women not reported to and controlled by their husbands or in-laws (often the mother-in law)

if they live in the same household. What females earn was usually spent on the family's everyday needs such as food, clothes, and toys for children or school supplies. Such practices were justified as 'being respectful' towards husbands or in-laws, and there was also the view that a female's income is less 'blessed' than that of a male.

In addition, many Kyrgyz respondents shared the belief that, following her economic independence, a woman might seek stronger participation in decision-making and thus challenge the established patriarchal family constellations. Male respondents emphasised that such a development could increase the risk of divorce. The following quote gives a female Kyrgyz respondent's reflection on how a man's peer group might perceive a working wife as undermining his masculinity:

*'For example, my husband's friends may say: "What's wrong with your wife? Can you not manage her since she earns? Did she become so strong?" Such situations can occur.'*

Following female perceptions of their professional opportunities over time revealed that even in the northern regions of Kyrgyzstan, which are considered less 'traditional', there are few women who had not been forced to significantly downgrade their earlier ambitions. While adolescent girls still imagined becoming highly qualified experts, who will work in management positions and sponsor charity projects on the side, among the next generation of married mothers most hoped to return to previous employment, and admitted that they would not reach what they had envisioned for their professional future by their 30s. In contrast, marriage could not be observed to mark a similarly (negative) turning point for the social mobility patterns of young men.

In light of Kyrgyzstan's weak national economy, labour migration to Russia has become an attractive opportunity for many to improve their livelihoods. In regard to gender perceptions, the issue of women migrating and living abroad for a prolonged time has remained a controversial one. Whereas for young men, leaving home to find employment elsewhere was generally considered a legitimate opportunity, female geographic mobility, especially of unmarried young women, was primarily perceived as a threat to their physical safety, moral integrity and personal health, and thus to their future potential for being regarded as a good wife. Especially in cases, however, when the earning potential for Kyrgyz

women from migration exceeds that of their male counterparts, such an opportunity is difficult to ignore for families caught in precarious situations, while at the same time it challenges 'traditional' delineations between breadwinning outside the home and the domestic sphere.

The case study of Ainura, a 24-year-old Kyrgyz woman from the city of Jalalabad, serves well to illustrate potential causes and also consequences of migration when examined through the prism of gender relations:

*When she was a 4<sup>th</sup> year university student Ainura started to work in a local bank in order to contribute to her tuition fees. Following the death of her father some years previously, the family became burdened by financial problems, and the money that Ainura earned in the bank was not enough anymore to contribute to her family's expenses. So Ainura decided on labour migration to Russia, from where she then sent home money and even managed to finish her studies (as an external student of a Kyrgyz university). Still, Ainura remarked that she used to be confronted with typical stereotypes, even from among her own relatives, about how her time abroad might have left a negative imprint: 'What I do not like is, if you went to Russia, everyone thinks you are a bad girl. So I do not like those who think like that...As I was saying, some people think: "You have been to Russia, probably you smoke or do other things?" They have bad thoughts.'*

At the time of the interview Ainura was still unmarried.

However, she did not elaborate on whether this was because she would fall into the category of 'a girl who has seen Russia', which tends to raise doubts among future in-laws as to whether a female migrant might not be too independent and too strong-willed for a marriage to succeed.

Such a view is exemplified in the following quote by another respondent:

*'Now, for example, as far as I know, after a trip to Russia, it is pretty hard to marry for girls... Because there are rumours that she married in Russia, or she met someone there. We have not seen this, but there are rumours which spread in the village...and then for example, after becoming daughter-in-law of someone, if someone finds any improper behaviour or hears a bad word from her, then immediately they say: "this is the girl who visited Russia"... Maybe she has behaved well there in Russia, but people will still say she has seen other places, other people, etc. Therefore, for young women it is difficult, it would be better if they did not go.'*

The voices of Kyrgyz parents during focus group discussions revealed serious contemplations about the futures of their daughters. Aside from early 'unprepared' marriages and migration to Russia, parents revealed that they seek alternatives, which would keep daughters local, but also enhance their future income opportunities. In line with this, as early as during their secondary school years, Kyrgyz girls in the Batken or Jalalabad areas are reportedly sent on courses that improve practical skill-sets such as cooking or sewing. During marriage, being able to sew clothes for children or bake homemade pastries could mean making actual contributions to the family budget. These skills are understood to be in demand within the tertiary economic sector, enabling young women to draw additional income from selling such homemade goods.

Furthermore, according to focus group respondents, more and more families in Kyrgyzstan's southern and rural areas see a necessity to equip their daughters with higher education at local university branches before they enter marriage. Enrolling through the ORT system into institutes close-by, such as in the towns of Kizilkiya or Batken, has come to be perceived as an opportunity for young women of low- or medium-income families to access free undergraduate programmes. The rationale behind such investments into daughters' skill-sets is not only that they will be less dependent on their husbands' or in-laws' benevolence, but also that they will be better able to cope in case of divorce, which is seen as a realistic possibility. As one mother put it:

*'We don't know how her [the daughter's] life will look like after she gets married. Hopefully, she will have a caring husband and children. But who knows, maybe she gets divorced one day and will be left alone with her children. Then she will be forced to go working in order to provide for her family. Without education she will be easily lost.'*

However, in cases, where men accept that current conditions favour income opportunities for women over them, especially in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, then a pragmatic approach to sharing household chores may ensure family well-being. Such a trend of 'housemen' or 'husbands at the stove' was discussed during a focus group in Naryn. The words of Aisalkyn, a 38-year old working mother of five children, give insight into how her unemployed husband overcame constraining notions of patriarchal pride:

*'A woman with children, who works at school all day long, comes home in the evening and takes no rest, because of remaining household chores. It is extremely tiring! My husband does not work. He stays at home, but helps me a lot. By now he seems to understand me better, I guess. Sometimes I even ask him to fry potatoes for dinner or something easier...In fact, he does not feel ashamed of doing housework. In the beginning, he used to feel uncomfortable because my mother-in-law kept telling him that he was obeying me and doing a woman's work. Now he seems to have changed his mind. He does not mind doing the housework for me. We are both very much content about this.'*

At the same time, Aisalkyn's further remarks indicated that this was still a delicate balance that needed empathy and careful attention. To gloss over her husband's feelings of economic inferiority, Aisalkyn tended to exaggerate the impact of his modest earnings:

*'Sometimes I really have to tell a lie to him. I tell him: "Look how much I could buy from your 3000 soms [\$44]. A man's earnings are indeed blessed and bountiful (berekeluu)!'"*

## Marriage and A/SRH Health Choices

Many of the Kyrgyz respondents indicated that 25 years is the age by which a woman should get married. Women beyond that threshold were said to face social stigmatisation and were perceived to lose value within the 'marriage market'. For men, the latest age to marry was often considered to be 30 years, although some female respondents expressed the view that a man does not actually have an age-limit for marriage.

For a young Kyrgyz woman, marriage entails leaving her birth family and joining her husband's household, which in most cases results in sharing the living space, for some time at least, with his parents, siblings or other relatives. The position of a 'daughter-in-law' (kelin) in the husband's family was generally experienced as one of vulnerability, which was burdened with the need to prove one's versatility as a 'good wife'. For many young Kyrgyz men, this means their wife fulfilling various household chores and being obedient, caring and submissive. Female Kyrgyz respondents revealed that they were aware, or had already experienced themselves, that various forms of violence are likely to be a part of such

married life. Expectations for a partner were thus mainly framed in the absence of negative traits, and many considered that a decent husband is someone who 'does not drink', 'does not smoke' and 'does not beat'.

The following case study illustrates the violent predicaments that young Kyrgyz women may have to face, in particular if a forced marriage by bride-kidnapping is followed by continuous experience of domestic violence:

*Jyldyz (24) is divorced and has two daughters from her earlier marriage. At the age of 17 she was kidnapped while she was still studying in the 11th grade. Since then she has not pursued further education. She left her husband, who is troubled with an excessive alcohol problem, three times after repeatedly having suffered from severe physical and psychological abuse. She reported that the abuse also took place when she was pregnant with her children. This time she left the house early in the morning after not sleeping the whole night. Jyldyz thought that she would not survive the night before. Her husband threatened to kill her by putting a knife to her neck, beat her with his bare hands, threw kitchen appliances at her and verbally abused her.*

*The first time Jyldyz returned to her mother's house, her mother believed her story only after having seen the bruises that Jyldyz had sustained from the domestic violence. After some time, Jyldyz's husband begged her to return and promised he would not beat her again. Jyldyz did not believe him but still returned after hearing what her mother told her: 'Go back [to the husband] and live with him. This is life [turmush]. Your father also used to beat me. We have been living like this for many years'. Upon Jyldyz's return, her husband continued drinking and violently retaliated against her for putting him into a degrading position in front of her mother.*

*As she did not receive support from her mother, this time Jyldyz came to live with her brother, who showed understanding and support. The brother registered Jyldyz's children in a kindergarten and she is currently looking for a job.*

Beyond the actual experience of physical violence, this case allows the identification of further aspects that are essential for understanding how Jyldyz or other young Kyrgyz women might end up in a situation where opportunities are extremely limited. This begins with the cultural legitimisation of bride-kidnapping as a 'Kyrgyz tradition'. A high number of respondents from the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan reported being aware of relatives or friends who either had participated in a kidnapping, or had been kidnapped themselves. Bride-kidnapping also appeared to be among the

prime causes of early marriage, and some girls had reportedly already been kidnapped at 16 years of age. While the general perception of bride-kidnapping among respondents was negative, many still did not perceive of it as a criminal act (amounting to deprivation of liberty).

In the case of a kidnapping, parents often felt obliged to subordinate their daughter's individual objection to such a marriage to the collective power of gossip and the threat this might pose for a family's reputation, especially within smaller village communities ('elder emne deit?' - 'what will people say?'). As the case above vividly shows, the social anxiety associated with 'having to take a daughter back' may be strong enough to lead to the rejection of desperate requests for help, regardless even of a mother's own history of suffering from violence (as in the case of Jyldyz's mother).<sup>4</sup>

Such a situation is further exacerbated by the fact that some of the female respondents expressed support for violent means of disciplining, for example when a wife 'talks too much' or does not 'care for the children properly'. Without in any way justifying the violence exerted by male perpetrators, this shows that the perpetuation of (violent) patriarchal practices relies also on the complicity of women, be these mothers who force their daughters to remain in an abusive marriage, or mothers-in-law who protect their violent sons. Young Kyrgyz women frequently identified their mothers-in-law as a general source of tension in their everyday lives, which went beyond them being criticised for a lack of household skills or efforts in childrearing.

In summary, Kyrgyz women who seek an exit from an abusive or otherwise unhappy marriage face multiple cultural and social barriers. Pointing to the 'shame' that a divorce would bring to their birth families, and also concluding that one should endure domestic violence as part of life (turmush), has established a strong social taboo that silences women. In consequence, women who choose to resist tend to receive little support from their own parents, other family members or the law-enforcement agencies (who are not considered as trustworthy sources willing to protect them). Women who have been bride-kidnapped could be said to suffer most from this situation, because they are often regarded as only '2nd class wives', and thus are more prone to being physically and psychologically abused and neglected.

<sup>4</sup>Certainly, in cases of precarious livelihoods the 'cultural argument' might only serve as a front, while in fact parents might be motivated to oppose their daughter's return because their family budget would hardly allow them to feed any additional members.

As regards puberty and sexual reproductive health, respondents indicated using different sources of knowledge. For example, a majority of female respondents from Osh and Jalalabad, and some from Talas and Naryn, reported that they had attended meetings organised by the local women's councils at their schools. Young participants remarked, however, that these gatherings would focus less on providing actual information about A/SRH Health Choices, but rather pressured girls to abstain from pre-marital sexual intercourse, referring to the moral discourse on the supreme value of female virginity:

*'The women's council tells stories about one girl from this class who got married to this boy. They scold us like: "Are you cattle to lay down?! You also want to sleep on the white sheet, marry with a white dress [indicating virginity]."'*

In fact, this quote reflects a more general pattern that predominantly assigned the responsibility for reproductive and sexual choices to women. When discussing pregnancies out of wedlock, which respondents identified as a widespread phenomenon, it was almost exclusively women who were blamed for not thinking to 'save' their virginity for their future husbands. Accordingly, unmarried pregnant women were often left alone to face the consequences, which may be a forced marriage, single parenthood, clandestine abortion, or relocation to another village/city where the child will be born in secret and then left with grandparents.

Those female respondents who would openly discuss puberty and sexuality with their mothers originated from the urban areas of Bishkek and Osh. Young women from rural areas expressed a preference for talking about such topics with other female members of their extended family, such as aunts, sisters and sisters-in-law. Male respondents, by contrast, claimed that they would not talk about puberty and sexuality with their fathers or other male relatives, but rather mentioned the Internet, friends or older boys in their neighbourhood as sources of information on these matters.

The opportunity to educate youth on A/SRH Health Choices at school was a controversial topic. Although a majority of respondents were in favour of spreading information on the consequences of unprotected sex and similar topics, there were also members of local communities, mostly men and those with a religious background, who were anxious that this might provoke promiscuous behaviour among youth (which furthermore was seen as a negative influence emanating from

'Western' societies). The following is a voice from a focus group discussion held in the Talasoblast:

*'I think it is better if such classes do not take place. For example, when a teacher explains it, it may push young people to do it. A person may not follow all desires, but this desire may not be temporarily left alone. Therefore, after hearing everything in class, a girl and a boy want to do it and they may get engaged in a sexual relationship. This is why I think it is not appropriate to give classes about the relationships between girls and boys and sexual contact. Better live peacefully [sic].'*

## Discussion

The insights presented in the preceding paragraphs on gender perceptions and opportunity structures of young male and female Kyrgyz established a baseline and a range of themes, which from here on will also be discussed and expanded in reference to the ethnic minority groups of Kyrgyzstan. The following paragraph will highlight some of the most salient trends and aspects.

While growing up, most of the young Kyrgyz female respondents were exposed to a gendered upbringing that juxtaposes a domestic-female with an outside-male domain. In line with that, unmarried Kyrgyz women were subject to parental control, whereby parents, acting out of fear for the family's reputation, tended to constrain their daughters' participation in extracurricular academic or leisure activities outside of her own home. However, for Kyrgyz girls there appeared to exist the opportunity to actively negotiate this private-public balance within their families, i.e. the boundaries of what it meant to be 'a good daughter'. This opportunity could be understood to exist (1) more for Kyrgyz girls in the northern parts of the country than in the south; and (2) for Kyrgyz girls rather than, for example, their Uzbek, Tajik or Kurdish peers.

The primary orientation for these negotiations remained a young women's value in the 'marriage market'. In practice, the idealised requirements of future in-laws demanded from daughters-in-law that they walk a thin line between being educated, but not too old; and between being employable, but ready to prioritise husband and children. On the one hand, this equipped quite a lot of young Kyrgyz women with the prospect of becoming relevant decision-makers

and active participants in societal life. Aside from higher education, a recent trend in this regard was notable in southern Kyrgyzstan, where parents sent their daughters on so-called 'short courses' in order for them to develop skills such as cooking or sewing, which they could capitalise on in the future (as wives or single parents).

On the other hand, multiple patriarchal barriers could be detected that young women were facing. Within the marriage market, female expectations for a male spouse were set significantly lower than vice versa, and it was common for someone to be perceived as a decent husband simply if he 'does not drink', 'does not smoke' and 'does not beat'. As regards education and employment, the lack of spousal support, or the previous preferential treatment of male siblings by parents, forced many young Kyrgyz women to diverge from their original career aspirations (turning towards more 'female' jobs or becoming housewives). Many Kyrgyz male respondents revealed that they do not trust the 'female character', which, it was believed, could lead working women in particular to demand more participation in decision-making and thus challenge patriarchal family constellations. Within all-male peer-groups such scepticism appeared to be reinforced, which advances an understanding of gender relations not as potential accumulative advantage, but as a zero-sum game viz. 'what the woman will win, the man will lose'.

Kyrgyz women continued to suffer from violence against them, be that forced marriage through bride-kidnapping, or domestic violence and other abuses during marriage. In regard to bride-kidnapping, it is interesting to note that although a daughter's divorce was understood to bring 'shame' (uyat) upon the family as well, for many parents this negative prospect wasn't sufficient to prevent an involuntary early marriage of their daughter in the first place, or to respond to her call for protection. The complicity of older women, such as mothers who forced their daughters to stay in an abusive marriage, or mothers-in-law who protected their violent sons, could be identified as contributing significantly to the perpetuation of patriarchal practices and the silencing of women. Furthermore, and aside from the elder generation's general suspicion that information on the topic of reproductive and sexual choices would instigate youth's promiscuity, the responsibility to prevent and handle matters such as non-marital pregnancies was predominantly assigned to women.

The previous paragraphs have illustrated that for young women in Kyrgyzstan the main consequence from how gender relations are perceived in their communities was to continue negotiating their life trajectories. The term 'turmush' (life) captures this blending of opportunities, challenges and setbacks that often seemed to render a woman's future positioning in education, employment and marriage as not predestined but as subject to change by personal initiative and male counterparts who can, in principle, be persuaded to reassess traditional norms. Essentially, the *modus operandi* for the Kyrgyz group could be summarised as a 'pragmatic patriarchy'. It was best exemplified by the 'housemen' of Naryn, who proved flexible enough to distance themselves from their traditionally assigned roles as family patriarchs, in the light of inescapable material circumstances which favoured female employment opportunities, and in the interests of the well-being of their families.

## Sabr: The Relevance of Endurance among Uzbek Youth

The following section will examine the opportunity structures and understanding of gender relations among young female and male respondents of the ethnic Uzbek group. Nationwide, the Uzbeks represent 14.6% of Kyrgyzstan's population.<sup>5</sup> More relevant, however, is their strong presence in the country's southern regions (Batken oblast, Jalalabad oblast, Osh oblast and city) where the Uzbek population is 26.6%.<sup>6</sup> The Arabic term 'sabr', which encapsulates the Islamic virtues of 'endurance', 'patience' and 'perseverance', was chosen as the headline for this section, because it successfully captures the essential aspects of how everyday life is perceived and imagined among the largest ethnic minority of Kyrgyzstan.

Following a brief comment on the data source for this section of the report, the themes that will be explored among young Uzbeks are 'Family Backgrounds', 'Professional Choices' and 'Marriage and A/SRH Health Choices'.

<sup>5</sup> See National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2016a).

<sup>6</sup> See National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2016b).

## Data Source

Data for this section were gathered almost exclusively in Kyrgyzstan's southern regions of Osh, Jalalabad and Batken. In total, 67 interviews were conducted, among them 45 with young females and 22 with young males. 42 of the respondents were unmarried, 20 were married and four were divorced. (One respondent provided no answer.)

Two focus group discussions took place in the city of Osh. Participants in these discussions were members of local communities, including local (Islamic) clerics and women of neighbourhood communities ('mahalla').

## Family Backgrounds

During the interviews for this report, many of the young Uzbek respondents were hesitant to discuss what they considered 'private' matters regarding their family backgrounds or 'delicate' topics, such as ethnic discrimination. This state of suspicion and anxious vulnerability dates back to the 2010 interethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan, when a majority of casualties, but later also of defendants and victims of detention or ill-treatment, were ethnic Uzbeks.

The basic patterns of gendered socialisation and patriarchal family hierarchies that young Uzbeks reported having experienced were comparable to those just depicted for the ethnic Kyrgyz of the southern region. From here on, the task of this section will be to examine the different degrees of manifestation, and the particular consequences these entailed, for male and female Uzbek respondents.

Among Uzbek females of all age groups, mothers served as the primary role model. Respondents spoke with deep appreciation about how their mothers as guides helped them to reach their maximum potential for housekeeping, childrearing, overcoming difficulties in life and displaying proper behaviour within the local community. The following quote exemplifies this:

*'My mother is a very patient [sabrlı] woman. She has faced many difficulties, but despite these she has always been patient. Many people who face difficulties become nervous and aggressive towards other people, but my mother, unlike these kinds of people, is patient, friendly and forgiving. Thus, I try to imitate her and my ideal is my mother.'*

Furthermore, quite in contrast to the other ethnic groups discussed in this report, those Uzbek respondents who identified themselves as being religious believers noted that their ethical and moral values, including the question of how to be 'an ideal woman', were inspired by the life of the 'Holy Prophet' Muhammad:

*'As we are from a religious family and wear the hijab, we try to be like the Prophet's wives. We want to be as cultured and educated as they were. They once distinguished themselves as ideal women and were very educated. That is why I admire them and try to be like them.'*

## Professional Choices: Education and Occupation

Uzbek respondents generally drew a favourable picture of schooling, in part because secondary education is offered in their mother tongue. On the other hand, graduates of such Uzbek-language schools later on may face limited opportunities in regard to their continuing education, especially as, since 2013, the nationwide university entry exam (ORT) can be taken only in the country's 'state language' (Kyrgyz) or the 'official language' (Russian). Therefore, if a young Uzbek is not proficient enough in one of these additional languages, access to universities and further professional opportunities, such as employment in the public sector, are significantly limited.

Young Uzbek men, similarly to their Kyrgyz peers, aimed to work during their school vacations, earning money from construction work, washing cars, helping out in the fields, or from selling fruits and home-made drinks. Female Uzbek respondents indicated contributing to the family budget by working in local bazaars, tutoring children, babysitting, or preparing baked goods to be sold.

Some female Uzbek respondents indicated tensions at school because of their preference to wear the 'hijab' (Islamic headscarf). As the following quote from a 15-year-old female resident of Osh illustrates, confrontations emerged when the school personnel questioned a pupil's ability to progress academically on grounds of her religious appearance:

*'There are a lot of girls at school who wear the hijab. In fact, the director has no right to prohibit wearing the hijab, as the president*

*[of Kyrgyzstan] permits it. But she does not like it. Every time when she demands that I take my hijab off, I say to her that the president has permitted it. She behaves towards covered girls as if they are backwards. She does not want to hear my opinion. The hijab is just the hijab. I am keen on learning secular sciences such as physics, chemistry and biology. I told her: "I will surpass your uncovered students and enter the most prestigious university."*

Although Uzbek respondents considered higher education to be relevant for their professional futures, in comparison to the Kyrgyz group only a few of them (especially among the young women) had enrolled in universities. For young female Uzbeks, the stated lack of readiness of their parents to 'invest' in their daughters' continuing education, or parents fears for their daughters' safety and well-being once they left home to study in a city accounted for this. Some Uzbek male respondents were critical of the declining quality of instruction at local universities, and in case of limited financial means, also pointed out the necessity to work rather than study.

In relation to this, male respondents mentioned 'short-term courses' at private language institutes as an attractive alternative to university. Improving Russian or other language skills (e.g. Korean) was seen as an opportunity to prepare for labour migration to places such as Russia or South Korea. As has already been mentioned for the ethnic Kyrgyz, within the Uzbek group young people of both genders who reside in an urban setting also reported enjoying privileged access to extra-curricular opportunities in the domains of personal development or leisure activities.

'Short-term courses', lasting from six months to two years, and aimed at improving knowledge of topics such as culinary skills, medicine or (fashion) design, have become popular with young women. Uzbek respondents, especially in rural areas, remarked that such courses could be very convenient, because they enabled women to fulfil household chores and study at the same time; because they would be affordable also to less affluent families; and because parents could maintain control of their daughter's reputation by not having to send her to a university in the city (for a prolonged period). Similarly to their Kyrgyz counterparts, an additional rationale for Uzbek parents behind investing in the continuing education and future professional opportunities of their daughters pertained to the heightened number of divorced young couples.

The focus group discussions with Islamic clerics and elderly women of local neighbourhood communities addressed both the potentials and constraints for young Uzbek women in regard to studying and working. Although one cleric clearly remarked that, from a religious standpoint, there should be no limit to the professional achievements of a woman, '...she can even become a president...', the conditions that need to be met in order for such goals to be realised are significant. Many of these draw on the perception of gender relations within a family, where, as outlined by the same cleric, 'at home' the woman should be 'modest' and 'respectful' towards her husband; where, especially in case of insufficient resources, male education is to be prioritised in order for them to fulfil their duties as breadwinners, 'teachers' and 'guides' for their women through life; and, finally, where female education shall be utilised less for income purposes than for childrearing. Further conditions should ideally apply to the potential working environment of a woman: contact with males outside their own kinship group (mahram) should be minimised, and during business-trips lasting longer than three days, women should be accompanied by one of their mahram males. In Kyrgyzstan's rather secularised working realities, such principles, even if not fully enforced, severely limit the actual career opportunities of Uzbek women, to, in best-case scenarios, the fields of medicine or teaching.

But even those young Uzbek women for whom their families have opened the way towards higher education may face the possibility of never graduating, should they marry at the 'usual age' of 21 or 22 and the new in-laws prohibit their further studies. The following story of an Uzbek mother in her 50s vividly illustrates the multiple social pressures from within and outside her own family which she had to fight against in order for her daughter not to be 'married off early', but to receive further education, both at university and in the aforementioned household-related short courses:

*'I firmly stood up for it, I was just fighting for it! My daughter and I won the fight!...They said, "What is the need for a girl to study? We will marry her off!" At that time, many families were marrying off their daughters one by one. I said: "No way. She is too young! She is not ready yet!" We were already receiving matchmakers. But you should know when your child is ready for marriage and when not, shouldn't you? Why should I make her suffer?...*

*In our mahalla [neighbourhood] only my daughter received a university education. Other girls finished school after 9th grade and attended informal household-related courses. My daughter argued with her friends: "Are these courses enough for you? Why don't you fight for your rights?" She also wanted to attend the same courses as her friends. I said: "You can attend informal courses during vacations, if you are interested". The first year she attended baking courses, the next knitting courses, and the last, courses of how to sew curtains because she was interested in it. She earned quite enough money sewing curtains. Now her in-laws are very happy with her, as she has higher education and can sew. Nowadays, mothers-in-law pay attention to these kind of skills.'*

At the other end of the spectrum, many families, in particular those without educated or working female members, apparently submit to the social trends within tightly knit and traditional local units such as a neighbourhood communities (mahallas). For young Uzbek women whose futures become exclusively constructed through the prism of marriage and domestic life, this can even initiate doubts about the usefulness of secondary education:

*'In our days men prohibit their wives from going out of the home, force them to wear a headscarf and do not allow them to work. That is why girls do not aspire to get higher education and prefer attending informal courses. They think: "My husband will not allow me to work. It is difficult to find a job for men, so for me there is no job. Why should I waste my time for university?" It is rare when a man allows his wife to work. Moreover, they force girls to drop out of university after marriage, or plan to marry uneducated girls.'*

In line with the patriarchal understanding that 'for a woman family has priority over a career', most married Uzbek women reported that they quit their jobs or began working part-time in order to readjust the balance between professional and domestic life and resolve family tensions.

The majority of young Uzbek respondents imagined their future careers in self-employment and the private sector. It was mentioned that quite a lot of young Uzbeks entered into apprenticeship-agreements with a 'master' while they were still at secondary school - for example hairdressing or crafts for boys, mostly sewing for girls - which upon school graduation they would pursue as their full-time occupation. Further plans mentioned were to open their own business or expand on (parents') existent ones, such as pharmacies, beauty parlours or grocery stores. Some respondents mentioned the idea of exporting agricultural goods or

establishing trade representations of international companies in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the city of Osh. Young Uzbek males stated that the major reason for their strong preference for the private sector was the conviction that they could not advance their careers in Kyrgyzstan's government institutions due to their disadvantage of belonging to an ethnic minority. This is slightly different for Uzbek women, some of whom still work in the public sector, mostly as teachers or accountants, and reported being satisfied with their opportunities to develop these career paths.

A few Uzbek respondents remarked that they feel discriminated against in the workplace, at school or at university, based on their ethnicity or religious convictions. Some university students, for example, claimed that instructors would give ethnic Uzbeks lower scores, and that they had even been verbally abused by university staff. The following quote illustrates workplace tensions at a school because of an Uzbek employee wearing a hijab:

*'I wear a hijab. When I came to the school where I used to work, they demanded I take off my hijab, or tie the headscarf from behind my head. When I said that I could not do this because there were men around, the director demanded a letter of resignation from me and to quit.'*

Most Uzbek respondents reflected that women are not encouraged to seek employment outside the home. The reasons given are similar to those that could also be heard among parts of the Kyrgyz group, namely that women might become targets for sexual harassment and their earnings would not be equally 'blessed' as those of men, while economic independence will encourage disobedience and challenge the patriarchal family order. However, some respondents stated that, if a man's earnings are insufficient, income generated from female home-based work would be acceptable, for example from sewing or baked goods.

On the other hand, males with higher education in particular, and those with first-hand experience of working mothers or sisters, expressed supportive views, such as that a woman who manages both work and domestic spheres enjoys respect in society. While those men in favour of working women predominantly point out the material benefits that this would bring to the family budget, working female Uzbek respondents emphasised the social and psychological benefits, such as: 'self-confidence because of the ability to earn for themselves and the children', a 'sense

of achievement to be a benefit to society', being 'an inspiration for children and for those women who cannot work because of society's constraints', 'expanding their social network', and the motivation to 'take care of their appearance'. Anxieties about male inadequacies stand in opposition to such experiences of female empowerment and are reflected, as previously noted, in a strict zero-sum-perception of gender relations. Such is especially evident among those Uzbek men who initially depict working women as more educated, assertive and reliable, and then argue strongly against their own wives or daughters taking up employment for those exact same reasons.

The handling of income generated by working women reveals different aspects of (traditionally) patriarchal gender relations and basic Islamic principles. Most Uzbek respondents stated that money would be managed jointly within the family, which in practice means for women that their earnings are either fully controlled by their husband or his parents, or that they are supposed to use them on everyday expenses, such as those related to childrearing. During the focus group discussion, a local cleric remarked that, in fact, such merging of a woman's budget with that of a family violates Sharia law:

*'I will tell you a law in Islam. The husband's income is common and the wife's one is her own...The husband cannot spend his wife's money, but the wife can spend her husband's money, because his money is common for the whole family. A woman's income is her own only.'*

In comparison to the Kyrgyz group, only a few Uzbek women seem to have their own experiences of labour migration. Female migrants were either part of (extended) family groups that relocated to Russia, where they would still be responsible for exclusively domestic work; or they migrated with the intention to earn their own income, because the absence of a male breadwinner forced them to do so.

## Marriage and (A)SRH Health Choices

Among most Uzbek respondents, 20-22 was considered the ideal age for women to marry, while for young men this was set at 24-26 years. Those female respondents who were married at an early age indicated that they had been quite unaware of the meaning and responsibilities associated with marriage and that they were told by their parents to take this step, rather than having been involved in the decision themselves. Often this was combined with the fact that marriage among Uzbek youth is usually planned within a short period of time, and thus the young couple have few opportunities to get to know and evaluate each other beforehand.

Different social dynamics could be identified as leading towards early marriage. Among them was that older daughters experienced pressure to marry earlier than they would have wished, in order to clear the way for their younger siblings, as is exemplified in this quote:

*'I have a younger sister. She has grown up faster than me, so matchmakers started to come to her to ask for marriage, instead of to me. That is why I had to marry early.'*

Outside their own family, the collective expectations of friends, neighbours or other peer groups stigmatised those women who, due to their on-going studies or employment, aimed to delay their marriage. This can be illustrated with the following quote from a young Uzbek woman:

*'All of my friends had already got married, even those who were younger than me had children. I got married when I was 24. Neighbours and relatives perceived me as if I had some defect. I attended university, which my married friends and relatives did not. They had married right after finishing school. But people did not want to understand it...Perhaps I decided to marry because I was bothered by stigmas. When I saw my friends with their children, it seemed as if I am going to stay without children. By the time I graduated, my peers already had three or four children. The neighbours spread rumours that my parents were not behaving properly, so no one wanted to marry me, and that we were too poor to afford the wedding expenses and so on. Maybe I got married to eliminate these kind of rumours.'*

While discussing cases of early marriage, for example that of a 16-year-old girl who had to get married before the deaths of her grandparents, an Islamic cleric voiced the following opinion, juxtaposing physical and mental preparedness for entering wedlock:

*'I do not encourage [parents] to marry off girls even at 18 or 19 years of age. Why? Physical readiness does not always ensure the ability to deal with married life. There is "bitterness" and "sweetness" in family life. They should be ready to deal sensibly with sweetness, and to stand and be patient when they face bitterness. They should rationally recognise these kinds of things. So, let us say 23 is the ideal age for marriage. After 23 there is a stigma of "old maid" in our society. As for boys, the earliest age is 21, and no limit for late marriage.'*

At the same time, neither this cleric nor any other reported a case where they actively opposed underage marriage, and, for example, refused to perform the Islamic marriage ceremony (nikah). In this regard, secular reasons for early marriage, including the perception of a girl as an economic burden for her birth family, seemed to predominate even over such religious opinions.

Within the Uzbek community of Osh (city and oblast), the 2010 violent interethnic conflict apparently aggravated concerns about unmarried women's physical safety and sexual integrity, which led to situations in which Uzbek girls were reportedly 'married off' as early as 16 years of age. Often, such young brides also suffered from psychological violence or early divorce and were stigmatised by husbands and in-laws as 'humanitarian aid daughters-in-law' (gumpomoshchkelins) or 'daughters-in-law for free' (bekerkelins). The fact that it was predominantly Uzbek families who turned to such practices of early marriage at this time, rather than Kyrgyz families who inhabited the same conflict area, could be taken to indicate the low levels of trust in the local law enforcement and justice system among the Uzbek ethnic minority (but also among other minority groups, such as the Tajiks, Turks and Kurds; see below).

Although Uzbek respondents of both sexes indicated that their parents would serve as important roles models for their own married life, young men and women differed in regards to the sources from which they received actual information on the topic of sexuality and puberty. While females of all age-groups, educational and regional backgrounds named their mothers or elder sisters as essential interlocutors, their male counterparts seemed to avoid raising this

topic within their families, and instead claimed that older peers (friends) or religious sources (books, imams, Friday sermons) were influential for them. For young men, religious explanations were considered trustworthy for delicate topics such as puberty and sexuality, alongside sources such as anatomy lessons in school, the internet or TV. Furthermore, when it came to reflecting preferences and expectations for married life, it was noticeable that young women with higher education showed themselves to be less reserved in addressing these topics.

In comparison to the Kyrgyz group, divorce seems to be more stigmatised among the Uzbek respondents. However, the main reasons for divorce are similar: early marriage, continuous domestic violence and family tensions, in particular with the wife's mother-in-law. In regards to the treatment of a new daughter-in-law (kelin), the voice of an Islamic cleric during a focus group discussion again revealed a discrepancy between the actual experiences of young Uzbek wives and the ways outlined in Islam. The cleric stated that in cases of 'disobedience, disloyalty or ill conduct', a husband's options for discipline should never include physical violence. (First, he could verbally reprimand his wife, then separate his bed from hers, and only then either give her a non-violent blow with a teeth-cleaning twig, or 'push her in such a way that she falls onto a soft place'.) Furthermore, he clarified that daughters-in-law do not have an obligation 'to serve' in their new families, but that their contribution to household chores should be considered as a voluntary and charitable act.

Other manifestations of A/SRH Health Choices, such as non-marital pregnancy following labour migration to Russia, can be detected among Uzbek youth as well. However, in comparison to the reflections of Kyrgyz respondents, such phenomena seemed to either occur less frequently within Uzbek families, or be subject to a stronger taboo of speaking about them (to strangers).

## Discussion

In comparison to their Kyrgyz peers, young Uzbek women could be observed to enjoy less leverage when it came to negotiating their opportunities for education and employment with their parents, husbands or in-laws. Co-habitation within the extended family seemed to be a factor that 'traditionalised' gender perceptions, because

expectations of 'right conduct' become articulated and monitored by parents, or maybe grandparents, on a daily basis. Even a progressive husband would be likely to feel the need to at least partially comply with these.

Beyond the family, the mahalla neighbourhood communities in which most Uzbek families are embedded did not only provide them with essential networks of mutual support, but also were the prime unit where a family's reputation was decided. Often the mahalla can be understood as a localised social environment where the collective force of a homogenising patriarchal opinion complicates any attempts to pursue alternative life-trajectories. From the voices of Uzbek female respondents, it could be observed that from this setting emerge sequences of conditional decisions observing a hierarchy of wife-husband-family-mahalla. In that hierarchy, young Uzbek women often perceived themselves to have few chances to participate, as is captured in the two following quotes:

*'If I will not marry, I will focus on my career. If I will marry, and my husband will allow me to work and will support me, I will balance between work and family. ...I do not know what kind of person I will marry. So, my career depends on my marriage.'*

*'To be honest, I'm not planning to work after graduating from university. Family is foremost for me. If my future husband allows me to work, I will; otherwise I will stay at home and devote myself to childrearing.'*

As has been noted before, such a scenario should be understood to differ in degree and probability from others, and not be seen as one that would be exclusively Uzbek. Similarly, 'traditional' family situations were also depicted by ethnic Kyrgyz women, especially those residing in rural and southern areas of the country. Furthermore, previous paragraphs have mentioned Uzbek voices that advocated for young women's expansion of skill-sets (via short-courses) and continued education, which would allow them to gain more independence from their husbands or in-laws. It was noticed that male support for such development ranked highest among those who themselves had a higher education, and those with first-hand experiences of working mothers or sisters. But whereas male respondents pointed out the material benefits of women's employment, female respondents by contrast highlighted the social and psychological benefits, such as improved self-confidence.

The perception of the ideal age for young Uzbek women to marry being 20-22 years, according to most respondents, and the strong stigmatisation of 'old brides' within the marriage market, could be considered as additional factors influencing choices around continuing female education. If the transition from the birth family to that of the husband can be expected to occur while a young Uzbek woman is still studying, and if experience suggests that the new in-laws' continued support for her education is doubtful, then her parents might consider it most 'rational' not to motivate their daughter to pursue higher education. In the aftermath of the 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, the phenomenon of 'marrying off' underage girls in order to protect them from possible sexual harassment or rape, which would make their future marriage practically impossible, caused some members of Uzbek communities to doubt even the 'usefulness' of secondary education.

The statements of Uzbek Islamic clerics revealed that religious tenets would in fact oppose some of the constraining 'traditionalisms', such as under-age marriage or the rejection of working women.

However, it could not be observed that from the spiritual domain there arose a significant impact towards taming existent patriarchal anxieties about educated and self-confident women (which before has been discussed as a zero-sum-perspective on gender-relations). In practice, everyday male interpretations of Islam and traditions tended to establish preconditions for Uzbek female employment, which often meant that these women have only a hypothetical chance to participate in Kyrgyzstan's largely secularised working environment. Actual participation was often unrealistic, as it could not meet these preconditions.

Male and female Uzbek respondents, although hesitantly, indicated other developments that pointed to a shrinking opportunity structure and a continuous narrowing of their niches within Kyrgyzstan's education and economic sectors. Young Uzbeks reported that, following their secondary education, for which they could still attend institutionalised Uzbek-language schools, they do not have equal chances of success in the countrywide university admissions test (ORT), because as of 2013 this can only be taken in either the 'state language' of Kyrgyz or the 'official language' of Russian. Uzbek women of different

ages shared instances when they felt they had experienced religious discrimination, as, for example, when a female teacher was threatened with dismissal because of wearing a 'hijab' at school. A majority of young Uzbek respondents envisioned their professional futures in self-employment, which was framed as a necessary adjustment in response to the preferential treatment given to ethnic Kyrgyz in the job market since 2010, which has further decreased Uzbeks' opportunities to enter the public sector.

Later paragraphs illustrated the way in which 'sabr', the Arabic term depicting Islamic virtues of 'endurance', 'patience' and 'perseverance', encapsulates a key *modus operandi* for young Uzbeks in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. 'Sabr' is essential not only because Uzbeks may be drawing more inspiration from Islam than their peers of different ethnic belonging, such as when young Uzbek men significantly sought for knowledge on puberty, sexuality and marriage from religious sources. 'Sabr' is also understood to be necessary due to the Uzbeks' disadvantaged status as 'the other' major ethnic group in southern Kyrgyzstan, especially after the events of 2010. And finally, many young Uzbek women noted a mother's 'patient' (*sabirli*) approach to life as the superior qualification for their role model, which reflects a rather observant and non-confrontational stance of waiting for incremental change to happen.

## Russian Youth and a (Soviet-inspired) Modern Society in Central Asia

The focus of this section will be on the opportunity structures and perception of gender relations among young female and male respondents of the ethnic Russian group. Nationwide, the Russians represent 6% of Kyrgyzstan's population.<sup>7</sup> Regionally, their representation is stronger in the northern areas of the country, especially in Chuy and Issyk-Kul oblasts, and in the capital Bishkek, where they amount to 14.8%.<sup>8</sup> The headline's reference to a Soviet-inspired 'modern society' (*sovremennoye obshchestvo*) in Central Asia aims to capture the comparative significance of smaller family units, equal decision-making and female societal participation among Kyrgyzstan's second largest ethnic (but non-indigenous) minority.

Following a brief comment on the data source for this section of the report, the themes that will be explored among young Russians are 'Family Backgrounds', 'Professional Choices' and 'Marriage and A/SRH Health Choices'.

### Data Source

Data for this section were gathered in Chuy and Issyk-Kul oblasts, as well as in the capital Bishkek. In total, 34 interviews were conducted, among them 23 with young females and 11 with young males. Of the respondents, 28 were unmarried, five were married and one was divorced.

Two focus group discussions took place in Bishkek and the city of Karakol (Issyk-Kul oblast). Participants in these discussions were Russian youth and parents.

### Family Backgrounds

Young Russian respondents were outspoken about both permanent and periodic tensions in their family lives. Among the major triggers for conflict, respondents mentioned precarious financial situations, unemployment of both or one parent (often fathers), domestic violence and alcohol abuse (predominantly by males but also by females).

One noticeable feature, especially in comparison to the other ethnic groups discussed here, was a high rate of divorce and single parenthood. In consequence, some young Russian males and females remarked that, due to their parents' divorce, they had been raised by only their mothers or their grandparents. In a few cases in Chuy oblast, respondents reported that they were sent to orphanages after their parents had failed to fulfil or had abused their parental rights.

In relation to this, Russian respondents assessed the family dynamics of other ethnic groups favourably, contrasting, for example, the close ties among Kyrgyz relatives with the prevailing 'ignorance' within Russian families in regard to divorce or the neglect of children or grandparents. This was also reflected in the fact that young Russian respondents rarely indicated their parents or other family members as role models with whom they associate positive qualities such as a strong personality or being able to cope with difficulties.

<sup>7</sup> See National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2016a).

<sup>8</sup> See National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2016b).

## Professional Choices: Education and Occupation

Russian respondents from Issyk-Kul oblast had mostly had nine years of secondary school education, after which they continued in vocational schools in the city of Karakol (Issyk-Kul oblast), or, rarely, in Bishkek. Respondents in both rural and urban settings reported that they were generally satisfied with their school facilities and also with those 'older teachers' who had been trained during the Soviet era. They mentioned racketeering and other forms of violence as the main challenges and tensions of their school lives, which among Russian students in Chuy oblast and Bishkek city were associated with their lack of Kyrgyz language skills (unlike in Issyk-Kul oblast where respondents communicate in Kyrgyz). Furthermore, young Russian respondents criticised a learning environment that did not 'inspire to discover' and which constrained the expression of alternative opinions. This is captured in the following quote:

*'I wished to study a lot, but when the teacher does not know more [than the students], and even the whole school system does not teach anything interesting, all is supposed to be done according to older standards. And you cannot say any criticism or disagree with teachers...I was disappointed.'*

Both male and female Russian respondents highlighted the relevance of post-secondary education for future professional success. However, when examining actual income opportunities, this picture became more complex. Among Russian respondents, those with a vocational school degree were employed and reported to have a permanent income, whereas those with higher education often had to re-orientate towards the service or freelance sectors, where their diplomas or professional knowledge would not be required. This also reflected the perception that, the actual impact of post-secondary education on social mobility notwithstanding, obtaining a diploma continues to serve as a significant marker for the establishment of personal self-esteem and for the social recognition of belonging to the higher social strata of 'educated' people. Pursuit of higher education could be observed in particular among those Russian respondents who had seen that their parents' limited secondary education had not translated into a decent livelihood. At the same time, it was also this group, which appeared the least likely to expect financial and emotional support or guidance from within their family to pursue these aspirations.

In regard to accessing secondary and post-secondary education, young Russian males and females could be said to enjoy equal opportunities. Differences were noticeable not with regard to gender and education, but rather in the ways in which residents of various regional backgrounds made their study choices. In this respect, youth in Issyk-Kul oblast seemed to have developed a rather pragmatic approach that allowed them to remain flexible in light of changes in the local labour market. Enrolment in local higher educational institutions, such as Karakol State University, rather than aiming towards options in Bishkek, was accompanied by readiness to switch to other specialisations that were in more demand, even if that entailed a transfer from university to vocational school (or the other way round).

For Bishkek families, by contrast, the priority was not the actual labour market situation but rather to send their sons and daughters to prestigious universities in the capital, such as the American University of Central Asia (AUCA). Sometimes this resulted in an education that individual students later found difficult to capitalise on. One such case was that of Alexandra, who was encouraged by her parents to undertake 'American Studies' at AUCA, despite her own interest in the tourism sector. Upon graduation from AUCA, she realised that her diploma only qualified her to work in libraries or museums. She then decided to study law at the Kyrgyz-Russian-Slavic University in Bishkek, where however she was much disappointed in the quality of teaching. She remarked that both of her higher education diplomas are now 'lying around without much use':

*'I finished secondary school close to Bishkek Humanities University, where I became interested in the faculty of tourism. But my parents did not like it and forbade me to apply for it. They said no! My mum wanted me to try to become a lawyer, and they both insisted on it...Now both diplomas are just lying around. The knowledge level is, roughly speaking, zero. I have not worked in any of the specialisations I pursued!'*

Such a discrepancy between original career aspirations and later income opportunities was a common trend that could be observed among Russian youth (and all ethnic groups more generally). Cases of both male and female respondents showed that a relatively high number of those who studied to become lawyers, teachers, accountants or tourism professionals, for example, later on did not work in their field of education or

were unemployed. Among the reasons given for this situation were high unemployment rates in rural areas, low salaries in the teaching or tourism sector (in the Issyk-Kul area), and weak social networks that did not facilitate finding employment. Furthermore, some Russian respondents remarked that after graduation the ability to speak Kyrgyz became a significant factor when entering the job market. In this regard, Russian youth from Bishkek or Chuy oblast seemed to be less prepared than those originating from the Issyk-Kul area, because the latter, having grown up in this predominantly rural and Kyrgyz-speaking environment, understood from early on the necessity to develop this language skill for their local integration. This is also captured in the following quote:

*'I know how it is usually done in this country. You have to have networks, good social networks [to find a job]. I know a girl who is working in a bank. She graduated with me, but found a job easily because she knew someone from that bank. She is Kyrgyz, but I could not easily find a job. You know, you also have to speak Kyrgyz while providing services to clients.'*

Consequently, the alternative for many Russian youth with higher education was employment in the service sector, such as a vendor in a shop, waiter, taxi driver or free-lance tourist guide, which does not require their original professional qualification. At the same time, male respondents from Issyk-Kul oblast expressed satisfaction with their vocational school education and the income opportunities it opened up to them, which was substantiated by the fact that most of them were able to secure employment shortly after graduation.

During the focus group discussions, Russian respondents pointed out the ethnic aspects of employment structures in Kyrgyzstan, remarking that Russians could become established within the technical and service sectors, but were under-represented in state structures (similarly to the ethnic Uzbek group). According to this view, employers prefer Russian-speaking personnel of 'Slavic appearance' for administrative and front-service positions, considering them to be 'more qualified, reliable, honest and clean'. (The phenotypical preference is at times even indicated in the advertisement of the position.) For similar reasons, ethnic Russian medical doctors, technicians and engineers, drivers and teachers often enjoy a better reputation than those of Kyrgyz or other ethnic belonging. This favourable

perspective on Russian professionalism and reliability is no less widespread among the non-Russian ethnic groups themselves, which may be interpreted as a continuation of the previously shared Soviet experience where 'development' (and atheistic modernity) was said to have been exported from European-Russia to Central Asia.

With regard to internal migration, amongst the most prevailing reasons why young Russians relocated from villages to cities in the Issyk-Kul area, or to Bishkek, are education, employment (including seasonal labour), marriage and divorce. Interestingly, quite a number of respondents reported returning to their home regions of Chuy or Issyk-Kul after graduation, due to marriage and local income opportunities, or as a result of urban unemployment and higher living expenses in Bishkek.

Mobility beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders is almost exclusively directed towards Russia and Kazakhstan. All young Russian respondents knew female Russian migrants personally from among their family members or friends who had spent time in Russia. Around one third of respondents had experienced international migration themselves, mostly staying in Russian cities where relatives or acquaintances were permanent residents. The readiness to migrate abroad appeared to correlate with the degree of local integration. Accordingly, respondents from Issyk-Kul oblast, who expressed a strong sense of belonging to their local communities, and also had better Kyrgyz language skills than their Bishkek co-ethnics, were rather hesitant to leave for Russia, arguing that they would already be 'too Asian' or 'too Kyrgyz' to be fully accepted there. By contrast, Russian respondents from Bishkek or Chuy oblast noted a stronger readiness to emigrate to Russia permanently.<sup>9</sup>

Female Russian respondents generally held favourable views about migrant women, who they perceive as seeking better study and employment opportunities. By contrast, male respondents supported educational migration, but were opposed to the idea of women working abroad. Within the local context of Kyrgyzstan, however, it was noticeable that male Russian respondents tended to be supportive of women as co-breadwinners. Accordingly, in married families, it is predominantly the case that both spouses were employed, which was presented as an inevitable phenomenon of a 'modern' society. Female Russian

<sup>9</sup> In-between 1989 and 2016, the number of ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan fell from 916,500 to 360,600 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic 2016a).

respondents readily listed multiple advantages of working women, such as economic independence from a spouse or elevated self-confidence. At the same time, however, respondents reflected that a woman should not flaunt her independence, but rather present her professional ambitions as a 'back-up' to those of her male partner.

A few cases were reported where married women left their jobs due to feelings of jealousy from their husbands, or for fear of possible sexual harassment at work and on the way there. This is reflected in the following quote:

*'I am unemployed now, but I worked and I liked it. For example, I was a waitress, but my husband forced me to stop, because customers could show their interest and accost me. And work finished late in the evenings, it was also dangerous to get home at nights...'*

## Marriage and (A)SRH Health Choices

Decision-making among Russian married couples was perceived to be an equally shared responsibility. In regard to labour division, a gendered perspective was recognisable, although it was not as clearly observed as in the Uzbek ethnic group, for example. The following quote from a young woman exemplifies the fact that the assignment of responsibility for household chores to females (or for balancing these with a woman's professional life) is not an exclusively male perspective:

*'All in all, a woman should deal with her own duties. A man should not stand in the kitchen, a man should provide for the family, take responsibility for the financial plans of the family, of course, if he has these possibilities... For myself I have decided, even though it was a hard decision, that the kitchen is the place for a woman...'*

By contrast, several male respondents stated that domestic tasks should be shared between spouses, especially if a wife is already busy with her outside employment:

*'She can work, and I should work. It is ok, if both wife and husband work. However, domestic duties should be divided equally. If she works hard and is not able to come home earlier, I can support her, I can cook.'*

Unlike all other ethnic groups discussed here, co-habitation prior to marriage was widely practised among young Russian males and females. Sharing a household before conducting a religious marriage ceremony and official registration was considered to be a good way of getting to know a future spouse.

As far as interethnic marriages are concerned, in urban contexts these do take place and seemed to be acceptable, whereas in rural areas 'cultural differences' were understood to be a factor complicating such marriages. This was also the case among those Russian respondents of the Issyk-Kul area, who otherwise stated that they were well integrated into local communities. The viewpoint that 'different ethnic backgrounds' or 'different religious affiliations' might trigger conflicts in families is well illustrated in the first of the following quotes. The second quote is the story of a young Russian woman who had married a Kyrgyz man at the age of 18, but was now divorced:

*'I had this idea [to marry someone of another ethnic group], but then I imagined that it will be difficult for me in another family. I will not be accepted there, because I am different, I have different moral norms and traditions. I myself could not be there.'*

*We had very different worldviews. Of course, I knew it before getting married to a Kyrgyz guy, but I did not think that it could be that decisive. Relations with his mother were horrible. She was always dissatisfied with me and with what I was doing...'*

Cultural differences aside, divorced women indicated pervasive domestic violence (physical, verbal and psychological abuse) as the predominant cause for their separation. Young Russian respondents did not reflect on divorce as a tragic event. Rather, divorce was considered as an inevitable step in cases where a family encountered a deep crisis, such as the alcohol addiction of a spouse. Divorced Russian women seem not to be similarly stigmatised as those from other ethnic groups, and re-marrying was described as a feasible future scenario. Following divorce, young mothers often did not receive financial support from their former husbands, either for themselves or for their biological children. Notably, none of the female respondents affected attempted to legally enforce such entitlements, and the fact that divorced fathers had an obligation to care for their children was not discussed.

Many young Russian respondents reported having experienced various forms of violence during childhood and within a relationship or marriage. Paradoxically, while male respondents claimed that the physical punishment of their wives was unacceptable and below their dignity, many female respondents found it acceptable that women should be punished when they 'misbehave', 'cannot control their tongue' or 'cheat on' their partners. The combination of such female 'bad behaviour' with male alcohol abuse was identified as a primary cause of violence in families (This did not entail reactive violence on behalf of the women, as this was perceived to be socially unacceptable.)

Young male and female Russian respondents indicated the internet as their major source of information for questions on puberty and A/SRH Health Choices. The preference of the internet over alternative sources (parents, friends, school) occurred regardless of the respondents' rural or urban background, and was apparently made based on the easy availability of a wide range of sources and because it did not demand personal interaction. While young Russians mentioned that parents would provide them with books and other reading material about issues of sexuality, female respondents in particular mentioned that although a mother could be considered a personal source of information, a child would need to proactively approach her.

Some respondents within the Russian group explicitly remarked that, leading up to marriage, virginity would not matter as much to them as to other ethnic groups. It was more important that first sexual intercourse, which might happen as early as 14 years of age for males and 17 for females, was based on mutual consent. In the focus group discussion, the idea that adolescent Russian girls and young women could be perceived by members of other ethnic groups as 'debauched', 'sexually mature' or 'accessible' was raised. It was felt that this made them easier targets for sexual harassment. The following quote hints at this:

*'Sometimes I have to walk home late in the evening after long working hours. I cannot even say how many times I have been offered a lift home! I was not even in a short skirt, but with a backpack on my back or with a bag... And this is just because we are Russians. I do not know a girl of any other ethnicity who was offered a lift.'*

A final difference between the young Russian respondents and their contemporaries of other ethnic belonging was the perception of who would be to blame for non-marital pregnancy. Some Russian females, especially from rural areas, tended towards a rather patriarchal view that assigns the need to be responsible and knowledgeable exclusively to women. Rather than the 'shame' which this could bring upon a family, respondents pointed out that women should be 'rational' enough to understand that they could face single parenthood without any support from the child's biological father. On the other hand, a majority of young Russian males and females foregrounded the shared responsibility of both partners for effective contraception and, in case of unplanned pregnancy, to deal with the consequences.

## Discussion

The responses of Russian youth revealed that their coming of age occurs in quite different social settings from those experienced by their ethnic Kyrgyz or Uzbek peers. Young Russian males and females did not mention patterns of living as a couple within an extended family group, but rather reported a focus on the core-family unit of parents and a few siblings. At the same time, Russian respondents were not hesitant to speak about family tensions and only a few nominated family members as their role models. Furthermore, there were self-critical remarks about the social 'ignorance' within many Russian families, which - in contrast to Kyrgyz configurations, for example - was considered responsible for the higher rates of divorce and neglect of children and grandparents.

Young Russian females mainly reported enjoying equal opportunities to their male counterparts. No significant patriarchal constraints were named in regard to gaining education, taking-up employment or participating in family discussions or decision-making.

Rather than evidence of any gender imbalances, a trend could be observed whereby in the regional context of Issyk-Kul young Russians would flexibly and pragmatically adjust their (university or vocational) education to match actual labour market development, thereby increasing their later employment opportunities.

In contrast, the responses of young Russian males and females from Bishkek evidenced that in this setting, the prime orientation for educational choices was often prestige, both that of attending a particular university and the more personal one of 'having a degree'. Detached from actual labour market needs, however, it was such university graduates in particular, who then found they had to take up temporary or low-salaried employment for which their professional qualification would not have been a requirement.

When assessing the labour market, young Russian respondents outlined the existence of an ethnic niche for their group in the service, medical and technical sectors, which are still informed by the Soviet association of 'Slavs' with qualities such as precision, honesty and reliability. Beyond this, Russian males and females voiced concerns that they are disadvantaged within Kyrgyzstan's nepotistic labour market, due to their weak social networks and their lack of Kyrgyz language skills. With regard to the latter, a regional dynamic could again be identified, according to which young Russians from the Issyk-Kul area showed that they have embraced the Kyrgyz language more fully than their peers from Chuy oblast or the capital Bishkek. Although many young Russian respondents indicated that they have relatives in Russia, and also mentioned first- or second-hand experiences with migrating there, there was widely shared doubt about the potential of Kyrgyzstani Russians to be accepted in Russia, because they had already become too close to the 'Asian mentality'.

Concerning their sexual and family life, Russian women pointed to their opportunities to make their own decisions or to participate equally in joint decision-making. Unlike for their peers of other ethnicities, for young Russian females pre-marital sex and co-habitation with a partner were acceptable practices, divorce was less stigmatised, and re-marrying was a realistic option. Russian women remarked, however, that due to such liberties they can be perceived by Kyrgyz men or those of other ethnic groups as easily 'accessible' and thus were prone to sexual harassment.

In young Russian families it was predominantly the case that both spouses worked, which women expressed as having the potential to elevate their self-confidence, and decision-making was considered an equally shared responsibility. Young Russian respondents framed such personal lifestyles of equal freedoms and

female societal participation as being in sync with a 'modern society' (sovremennoyeobshchestvo), for which the Soviet era's socialist 'achievements' in Central Asia served as the inspirational template. Interestingly, patriarchal tendencies were introduced into this picture by some young Russian women, who, regardless of a general readiness among their male counterparts to share in household duties, declared for example that the kitchen is a 'woman's place'. Most strikingly, this was exemplified by cases where women remarked that their typically female 'bad behaviour' would at times deserve physical punishment.

## Gender Perceptions within Smaller Ethnic Minority Groups: Young Tajiks, Kurds, Turks, Dungans and Uighurs in Kyrgyzstan

This section will present insights on the opportunity structures and perceptions of gender relations among smaller minority groups represented in Kyrgyzstan. These are Tajiks (0.9%), Turks (0.7%) and Kurds, Dungans (1.1%) and Uighurs (0.9%).<sup>10</sup> These groups enjoy stronger representations in certain regions of Kyrgyzstan and the interviews and focus group discussions for this report were arranged accordingly.

Following a brief comment on its data sources, this section will highlight the most significant commonalities and differences that could be observed between the responses of young representatives from these smaller ethnic minorities and those of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Russian groups.

### Data Source

In total, 29 interviews were conducted with young ethnic Tajiks, predominantly in the southern oblast of Batken (which borders with Tajikistan). Among respondents there were 23 females and six males, of whom 18 were unmarried and 11 were married. Another 16 interviews were conducted with respondents who identified as Turks or Kurds; 13 of these were females and three males. From among ethnic Dungans, a total of 11 interviews

<sup>10</sup> See National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2016a).

were collected, predominantly in Issyk-Kul and Chuy oblasts. Of these respondents seven were young females and four were young males. With regard to civil status, seven were unmarried, three married and one divorced. Another eight interviews were conducted with ethnic Uighurs, predominantly in the northern oblasts of Issyk-Kul and Chuy and in the city of Bishkek. Among them were five young females and three young males, seven of whom were unmarried and one divorced.

Finally, two focus group discussions were organised, one with Tajik respondents in the village of Uchkorgon (Batken oblast) and one with representatives of the Turkish and Kurdish group in the village of Amanbaevo/Kyzyl-Adyr (Talas oblast).

## Tajik Youth

Tajik youth resided predominantly within multi-generational households, where decision-making was structured by age-hierarchy, gender and a collective focus on the family unit (as opposed to the interests of individual family members). Respondents described how it would usually be fathers who decided on matters such as a child's education, marriage and employment, whereas mothers participated where domains such as household resources and expenses were concerned. Young Tajik females, similarly to their Uzbek peers, indicated their mothers as suitable role models, especially due to their strong will [sic!], patience and endurance (sabr).

Educational choices for young Tajik women tended to be made for them by parents or older relatives. Few Tajik girls pursued education beyond the 9th grade, for which the main reasons given were financial constraints and the parents' unwillingness to invest in a daughter's continued education due to the low age-threshold for marriage within Tajik communities. This is also captured in the following quote from a young Tajik woman, now 24 years old and a mother of two, who was forced to leave school after the 9th grade:

*'...but then my mother said: "To get you into university our financial resources are not enough. Understand it right, what can we do?" My parents are unemployed and at home. If there is no financial assistance, it will be difficult for them. And I really did not want to burden them. What should I have done?'*

Similarly to the Uzbek group, Tajik respondents depicted the preference of family heads to constrain female mobility out of fear for its negative impact on the family's reputation within the community, and general family harmony. This concerned both opposition to continued education for younger women, especially in cases when such would entail relocation to a city, and the conviction that a married woman should prioritise childrearing and household chores over ambitions to find employment outside the family home. This clear separation into a male-outside-representational domain and a female-domestic-caring domain can be illustrated by the following words of a Tajik male respondent:

*'But I think it is not right if I will sit at home with the children, thinking about what to cook for them, how to nurse them, while my wife will study, read and shine. I think it should be the other way round.'*

In line with this, migrant women, if not divorced or widowed, were perceived negatively. One respondent remarked on this topic that Tajiks would rather 'die of hunger than send their women for migration'. The continued experience of subordination to patriarchal preferences, as this quote by a young woman reveals, may evoke drastic thoughts:

*'So every day in this community you see other people, so you draw conclusions. They suffer. Girls have more difficulties in their lives. So I do not want to give birth to a girl and see her sufferings, I will not able to watch her sufferings. So therefore, I do not want to have a daughter.'*

Young Tajik respondents referred to parental efforts at 'matchmaking' as the most traditional and predominant way of initiating marriage. However, such marital arrangements, which were made without the young bride's and groom's consent, were criticised as being unlikely to result in 'happy' families; as one respondent put it: 'They live [in this arranged marriage], but they live like dead persons.' In regard to forced marriage, cases were also mentioned in which the necessary documents to officially register a marriage were signed by the bride 'at home', and were then filed with the registry office by the husband or another male family member. This raises doubts as to whether the young woman's signature was given voluntarily or under pressure.

Tajik respondents also showed little trust in law enforcement agencies to deal with cases of domestic or other violence in their communities. In contrast to the other ethnic groups, however,

they mentioned the informal councils of village elders (aksakals) as an alternative way to resolve family or community matters (although the impartiality of male elders towards young female victims is questionable). Women mentioned the fear of stigmatisation and village rumours as additional reasons for not reporting violence, but also a lack of information on trustworthy organisations to approach (e.g. crisis centres). In consequence, those women who experienced violence of different sorts tended to 'normalise' this as an integral part of life, something they were fated to accept. The following quote from a 15-year-old Tajik female illustrates the fact that female 'patience' is conceived as the primary way of responding to violence from early socialisation on:

*'Be patient (sabyrduu). You will overcome these difficulties because of your patience. So in the future, you will have bright days. The moon has 15 days of light and 15 days of darkness.'*

The focus group discussion among Tajik respondents showed that different opinions on family life, education and ideal marriage age exist between different generations. Older respondents criticised the fact that easy access to knowledge, migration to Russia, and the improved material situation from employment there would cause Tajik youth to loosen their ties to family and community and would liberalise them too much.

The younger generation, by contrast, reflected that women should at least obtain a vocational education after secondary school, before getting married. Although still arguing for a patriarchal family setup, men would prefer that their wives contributed to the overall budget. Accordingly, a trend could be observed whereby unmarried Tajik women attended practical skills courses (in cookery, sewing or hairdressing) while still at secondary school, in order to prepare for a future of being a co-breadwinner (or an earning divorcee). Economic independence from parents prior to marriage was a related matter of discussion. This is well reflected in the words of a young Tajik university student, who openly expressed his intention to marry only in his 30s:

*'I don't want to ask my dad: "Dad, can you please feed me and my wife?" because he has another three young children to take care of.'*

## Turkish and Kurdish Youth

In comparison to other ethnic groups discussed in this report, the insights provided by members of the Turkish and Kurdish communities pointed to severe limitations for females to participate in family decision-making. This concerned education, marriage, employment and physical mobility.

As regards educational development, among the Kurdish and Turkish communities of Talas oblast a significant early school dropout rate - after the 9th grade, and sometimes even after the 6th grade - could be noted. The major reasons given for this were domestic responsibilities, but the necessity for young family members to work in local bean fields, which for many households was the single source of income, was also a factor:

*'Usually children of our nationality are not allowed to go to school, education is considered to be useless, since children after school will be working in the fields.'*

A school teacher gave insights on the conflicting schedules that are a feature between the start of the school year (1st September) and the harvest season (September/October). Parents usually responded to her reminder about the obligation to attend school by saying that, before selling the harvest, their household budgets would simply not allow for buying school uniforms or other necessities:

*'It is a serious problem for school, especially in autumn. Parents openly tell us they cannot allow their children to attend school until they have harvested the beans. [They say:] "Are you going to feed them instead? They don't even have shoes to wear!" Usually a five-person family cultivates up to five hectares of land. Almost no family has a harvesting machine, so that all the work has to be done manually. This is especially true for Turkish and Kurdish communities who are predominantly farmers.'*

For girls, the major reason for leaving school before graduation appeared to be early marriage. Respondents indicated this to occur at ages 16-17, but also as early as 14-15, often as a result of bride-kidnapping. This tendency for early marriage rested on the conviction that women beyond a certain age-threshold, usually 25 years, were challenging marriage partners because it would take more effort to 're-socialise' (perevosпитat) them and have them assimilate

to new family surroundings. At the same time, a significant number of such forced marriages, sometimes arranged by parents, were reportedly dissolved after only a few months of cohabitation.

Despite this, respondents explained that to reject bride-kidnapping as an ethnic tradition would bring 'shame' on a bride's family, which in consequence would also limit the opportunities for other siblings to find a marriage partner. In addition, for the kidnapped bride herself, as the following quote depicts, chances for another marriage in the future would be slim:

*'If you were kidnapped once and refused to stay, other families will consider you as someone who has been married anyway.'*

The following case, described by a Kyrgyz school teacher who repeatedly tried to persuade a Kurdish family to allow their talented daughter to pursue further education, exemplifies the inclination to push young women into marriage, regardless of their academic or other future potential:

*'I should say some Kurdish and Turkish girls are very good at school...Etara, who finished 11th grade together with my daughter, was among the best pupils in her class. I talked to her parents several times, and requested very much that they let Etara continue her education after secondary school. She could have become at least a nurse, if she had entered the Talas medical college. But anyway...after school they married her off. Now she has two children.'*

During the same focus group discussion, a local Turkish community leader tried to bring the changing approach to education into perspective, highlighting that local families had only recently begun to embrace the value of knowledge for young men:

*'No way! A woman is a housewife. She is there to care for her husband and children. That is all that she does...Only in recent years have Turks slowly started paying attention to boys' education. Before that children used to attend school only until the 4th or 5th grades, and that was all. Afterwards, parents used to send them to work in the fields. But now a few families started sending their sons to Turkish lyceums...and three boys even entered the [Kyrgyz-] Turkish Manas University in Bishkek.'*

Looking to the future, a local Islamic cleric expressed the need to also overcome problems of female illiteracy and women's social marginalisation, citing his personal plans to enroll his eldest daughter in medical college:

*'I will openly tell, although it is being recorded, let it be. Today our girls need some occupation and education. They also need to become modern. Our girls are a bit wild: no school, no meetings [socialising], no community participation, no travel. All that they see is home, home and home. Most important is that they stay modest and honourable. Each of us has the right to choose one's way. We are all anyway accountable in the face of Allah for parents, spouses and children...'*

For the moment, such ideas about working women are strongly rejected by male Kurdish and Turkish respondents. Furthermore, those few women who in fact worked in the bean fields, or as hired labour in other capacities, were said to give up control over this income to their husbands and in-laws. In addition, with regard to unreported incidents of domestic violence suffered by women, or the level of knowledge about A/SRH choices, the interview data marks the Kurdish and Turkish communities as lying at the furthest point of the spectrum of gender perceptions among the different ethnic groups discussed in this report, in terms of their very 'traditional' standpoint .

## Dungan Youth

For young Dungan women, their position in family constellations and their participation in decision-making was reported to vary between different rural and urban locations. Females in cities such as Bishkek or Karakol (Issyk-Kuloblast) tended to work to the same extent as their husbands, combining professional and domestic life. Husbands were reported to provide a supportive atmosphere in regard to their spouses' career development and employment opportunities, although this did not necessarily entail taking over household or childrearing responsibilities. Family businesses with equal participation are common, such as running grocery shops or market stands.

In contrast, respondents reported that in villages or the city of Tokmok (Chuy oblast), it would rather be husbands - similar to other ethnic groups - who were the only breadwinners and dominated family decision-making, such as allocating household budgets. This was also reflected in the fact that urban female respondents identified their mothers as significant role models due to their impact on family matters, while rural respondents tended to praise their mothers' excellency in performing domestic tasks.

A majority of young Dungan respondents indicated that their parents encouraged them to work while receiving secondary education. However, unlike as was previously noted for many Turkish and Kurdish families, the reasons given by young Dungan respondents pointed less towards an economic necessity to contribute to family budgets, but rather to a desire to either have their 'own cash' (in urban areas) or to simply 'help' parents with their farming (in rural areas). As the following quote hints, the mind-set here might be more about mutual support and developing a working attitude than about actual material gains:

*'Basically all of us here have fields. Well, we helped parents. Not to say that we worked, we just helped parents after classes.'*

With regard to success in post-secondary education, there were recognisable advantages for those young Dungans who had the opportunity to attend extracurricular programmes because they lived in, or close enough to, an urban setting where these were available to them (as was also true for representatives of other ethnic groups). The following quote from a young Dungan woman from Bishkek, who studied at the prestigious Kyrgyz-Russian-Slavic University, illustrates that, aside from parental support and financial ability, geographic location can significantly impact on youth's opportunity structures in Kyrgyzstan:

*'Probably, there were no such difficulties, because during the whole of 11th grade I already attended preparatory courses of the "Slavic" university where they prepared us for the entrance exams. That is to say, I deliberately prepared for entering exactly IR [International Relations] at KRSU [Kyrgyz-Russian-Slavic University].'*

The observation that particular locations affected young Dungans' opportunities was also true for marriage decisions. Female Dungans from Karakol reported that they enjoy a considerable degree of freedom to choose a husband of their personal liking, even if this process also involves negotiations with their parents, who would still impose certain restrictions. In contrast, female Dungan respondents from the similarly sized city of Tokmok indicated that in this more 'traditional' setting (as compared to Karakol) parents would clearly dominate when selecting an appropriate spouse, and that daughters tended to accept this situation.<sup>11</sup>

Young Dungan males and females, in most cases regardless of family background, age and gender, expressed the desire to pursue higher education. For example, all female Dungan respondents from Issyk-Kul oblast indicated that after their marriage and motherhood, they had re-enrolled in their original university and had now successfully graduated. Nevertheless, as was the case for the Russian and other ethnic groups, it was also common among Dungan university graduates that their later employment was not in their field of specialisation.

Respondents explained unexpected professional situations, such as those of a trained software engineer working as a hairdresser, or an economics graduate being a supermarket cashier, as the result of un-informed choices that they had made about their study programmes. Young Dungans remarked that they felt neglected by school teachers, who were largely disinterested in guiding them to a suitable choice of university and subject. But parents also apparently did not provide useful input on this matter, as they usually suggested classic professions, such as doctor, teacher or economist, without taking into account actual labour market demands. Other respondents also expressed frustration about the quality of the actual qualifications that can be earned at universities where bribery is inevitable and endemic. As a result students stopped attending classes and simply paid-up:

*'In the second semester we were smarter about this. Anyway she [the teacher] takes money. Why then [go]? Then we are better not to go at all...'*

Migration among young male and female Dungans was not observed. But in contrast to other cases presented in this report, this was framed as a choice to stay, rather than as a constraint on their ability to leave. Female Dungan respondents reflected that discrimination in their workplaces in Kyrgyzstan would occur on grounds of their gender, ethnic belonging and age. A widespread lack of Kyrgyz language skills among Dungans was also identified as a highly salient factor for constraining economic opportunities.

<sup>11</sup>This observation can also be linked to the fact that Dungans in Issyk-Kul oblast and those in Chuy oblast belong to different ethnic sub-groups, which have quite different settlement histories in Kyrgyzstan. Whereas the Dungans of the Issyk-Kul area arrived there as early as the 1870s, and thus were exposed to 'Soviet modernity' early on, the Dungans of Chuy resettled from China only from the 1950s onwards, and thus are understood to maintain a comparatively more 'traditional' way of life.

## Uighur Youth

Young Uighur respondents depicted a broad variety of decision-making configurations in their families, from male to female predominance, to gender-equal councils. In addition, in regard to domestic chores, respondents noted that husbands would usually help their wives to manage the household. One respondent offered the following perspective, which presented an interesting invitation to reflect on the female vigour concealed behind upfront displays of patriarchy:

*'Mum is the coordinator, she knows everything. Even when dad does not know something, she knows it. On the other hand, I understand that our society, no matter how patriarchal it seems to be, is matriarchal from the inside. The whole society is supported by women. The illusion of patriarchy is just a golden varnish (spraying).'*

In contrast to what has been noted about Dungan youth in the previous paragraph, only a few Uighur respondents indicated that they would work while attending secondary school. Parents' primary preference was presented as a desire that young people should focus on their studies, even if a family was experiencing financial troubles. As this case of an Uighur female student illustrates, that perspective apparently extends into the realm of higher education:

*'I went to Bishkek. I said that I will work. I will study and work simultaneously. They [parents] said, no, you will not. You will first complete your studies, get your thing, and then after a certain time, you can...'*

Furthermore, the following quote from a young Uighur male about how he imagined his future married life also points to continuing female education as a possible option after marriage:

*'Yes, because I want my wife to strive for something. Because education is always a way to open up someone's potential. I am for it.'*

With regard to workplace discrimination, Uighur respondents remarked that this would happen on grounds of ethnicity and gender. Age, and the pressure that young professionals would be exposed to from their older colleagues, were also aspects highlighted by one male Uighur respondent:

*'If you are young, to most of the elder people it means you are inexperienced and unskilled. Therefore, you cannot be trusted in certain delicate issues and at certain moments.'*

Uighur respondents considered 25 years to be the ideal age for young women to marry. In line with the gender perceptions presented with regard to education, young Uighur males expressed that they were in favour of their wives being employed when they imagined their future married life. Quite in contrast to the perception of most other male respondents in this report, Uighur men went beyond thoughts of improving the family budget while reasoning about working women. As the following two quotes show, this concerned material as well as emotional support, and the view that working would diversify a wife's lifeworld:

*'First of all, I am going to listen attentively to how her workday went. Show interest in the progress of her work. Try to pay attention to her. If she is tired, I will cook dinner myself, organise some leisure activity for the two of us, kind of a romantic date in nature...'*

*'Having a job for a woman is not just a professional activity for her, it is also a chance to diversify her life. I think women who sit at home run out of their minds, get dull, become irritable. Let them work. Let them make money and find a common language with colleagues and create a circle of communication.'*

## Discussion

The examination of smaller minority groups widened the spectrum of perceptions on gender relations and on the distribution of opportunities in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. This enabled a further contextualisation of what already has been noted for young ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Russian males and females.

In regard to how youth's social and cultural embeddedness related to perceptions on family, education, employment and other topics, the responses from the Tajik group revealed most similarities with those of their Uzbek peers. To begin with, this concerned the strong tendency among male household heads to prevent female (geographic and social) mobility in order to safeguard family reputation. It could accordingly be observed that the consequence of presenting 'sabr' as the primary quality for female role models was to 'normalise' female discrimination within everyday life. Also related to this was the reference that family matters, including domestic violence, could better be handled by informal

councils of local elders (aksakals) than by law enforcement agencies. A discord was noticeable between different generations of Tajiks, as part of which the elder generation's criticism of deteriorating family and community ties could be read as an anxiety about loosening social control. This was in light of a younger generation who, especially if equipped with superior income from labour migration to Russia, advocated for a change in gender perceptions and aspired to seeing future wives being more educated and able to contribute to family budgets.

Insights on early school dropouts, exceptionally early forced marriages (through bride-kidnapping) and strictly patriarchal family structures made the Kurdish and Turkish communities appear to be located at the very 'traditional' end of the spectrum of gender perceptions. A one-dimensional orientation on agricultural labour, and the limited income opportunities associated with this, could be identified as a major factor as to why female biographies in these communities were rigorously defined through marriage and without regard to female academic or other future potential. Within local communities this was justified by highlighting the fact that families have only recently recognised the advantages of continued education for male siblings. In light of this, the voice of an Islamic cleric, who resolutely argued for the necessity of female education and mobility in a modern society, stood out. He remarked that he himself intended to send his daughter to a medical college.

In regard to their participation in family decision-making and access to education or employment, the responses of Dungan women underlined the importance of location for shaping youth opportunities. Whereas in the 'liberal environment' of Karakol (Issyk-Kul oblast) females reported being actively involved in the process of selecting husbands, and later would also have equal work opportunities to them, this was less the case in Tokmok (Chuy oblast),

a city of similar size and also located in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan. A desire to obtain higher education degrees was widespread among young Dungan males and females, and respondents from Karakol in fact indicated that they had re-enrolled and successfully graduated following a break upon marriage and initial motherhood. But many Dungan respondents also criticised a lack of guidance by teachers and parents when choosing a university and subject, and subsequently would often fail to secure adequate employment in their actual field of specialisation.

Young male and female Uighurs presented educational achievements as highly important in their everyday lifeworlds, which was also reflected in the fact that, unlike their Dungan peers, they were often prohibited by their parents to work alongside their school or even university studies. Female education and later employment were judged very favourably, which corresponded with a later idealised age for female marriage of 25. Furthermore, young Uighur males, quite unlike their peers of other ethnic belonging, showed an advanced awareness of the meaning of 'work' within female self-perceptions. Going beyond mentioning only the collective aspect of how a woman's material contribution would improve a family budget, young Uighur men proclaimed their readiness to provide working wives with an environment of proactive support, as opposed to just passively 'allowing' them to take up employment, as long as they continued managing the household chores. At this time, such statements might not represent a predominant opinion even among Uighur males, and often merely suggested a possible future for married life voiced by respondents who were still bachelors. Still, the ability to reflect on the ways in which, for example, workplace socialising could expand and diversify a woman's lifeworld can be seen as a rare indication of emphatic care for the other gender's overall wellbeing.

# Cross-cutting Perspectives: Language, Location, Violence, Information and 'Being Young'

During the interviews and focus group discussions, young people of different ethnic belonging highlighted particular aspects of their gender perceptions and opportunity structures. However it should not simply be concluded from this that any one such aspect would be relevant and 'typical' only for the members of a particular ethnic group. To account for the fact that young males and females in Kyrgyzstan share views, constraints and opportunities beyond their ethnic belonging, the following section will develop a cross-cutting perspective and aim to assess the varying degrees to which this could be observed. In the context of Kyrgyzstan, this seems important also in order to counter a trend of 'ethnicisation', i.e. the automatic assignment of certain 'traditions' or 'traits' to all representatives of one ethnic group (a practise that is prone to be instrumentalised for political agendas and can be identified as a continuation of Soviet nationalities policy).<sup>12</sup>

Such a perspective is also captured in the title chosen for the present report. 'Displays of Patriarchy and Female Vigour' is intended to express that many aspects of the everyday interactions between men and women in Kyrgyzstan tend to oscillate and are being negotiated in-between these poles. Depending on ethnic belonging, but also on other parameters such as place of residence, a display of patriarchy may be rather rhetorical, while in fact female vigour is the actual shaping force of opportunities. Such a concept was, for example, referred to as 'pragmatic patriarchy'<sup>13</sup> among respondents of the Kyrgyz group.<sup>14</sup> Yet a display of patriarchy might equally be forceful, i.e. not only a matter of discourse, but strictly structuring the trajectories of families and female biographies. Then female vigour is still present and even definitive, but may be concealed behind gendered performances of patience and perseverance (*sabr*), as could be observed among Uzbek or Tajik<sup>15</sup> respondents.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Reeves (2010), for example, discusses ethnicisation and ethnic nationalism in relation to the violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Marat (2016) presents the discourse of a group of 'civic-minded nationalists'.

For further illustrations, see Cummings (2008) and Gullette (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Referring to the transition from Soviet to early post-Soviet life, Kuehnast (1997, 1998) has described the approach of Kyrgyz women as 'collaborative conservatism', merging Kyrgyz 'traditionalism' with an 'openness' to societal change. Schröder (2015b) provides a recent case study on the geographic and social mobility of a young Kyrgyz woman. Ismailbekova (2016) reflects on how women can create authority 'through custom' and during their life-courses develop 'domestic power'.

<sup>14</sup> Handrahan (2001) discusses the connection of ethnicity and gender among ethnic Kyrgyz in light of Soviet history, being Muslim, 'tribalism' and 'Western influence'. See also Kandiyoti (2007).

<sup>15</sup> Harris (2004) employs the term 'gender masks' to research negotiations of social order in Tajik families and in the Tajik state. See also Harris (2006).

<sup>16</sup> Such a spectrum of possible realities is also captured in Kandiyoti's (2002) notion of 'bargaining with patriarchy', which describes the emergence of gendered subjectivities and women's rather active or passive resistances to gender oppression as an outcome of strategic negotiations oriented on particular contextual 'rules of the game'.

## Language (and Ethnicisation)

Language could be identified as an influential factor affecting the opportunity structures of all young Kyrgyzstani respondents. Within the country, it could be observed that Kyrgyz language skills have become important in order to access certain areas of employment, in particular the public sector. This was remarked upon, for example, by some of the young Russian and Dungan respondents. In line with Uzbek respondents, they also pointed out that, in a nepotistic labour market, which privileged ethnic Kyrgyz, the professional ambitions of minority groups would be constrained.<sup>17</sup> Ethnic economic niches could be identified from the interview responses, such as within the technical and service-oriented industries for ethnic Russians<sup>18</sup> in northern Kyrgyzstan, or in self-employment in the private sector for young Uzbeks in the country's south.<sup>19</sup>

With regard to education, the situation was depicted differently. Mono-linguistic Russian speakers, or members of smaller minority groups who had developed skills in Russian rather than in Kyrgyz, generally did not report being limited in their secondary or tertiary educational aspirations. In contrast, Uzbek respondents in southern Kyrgyzstan indicated that following their secondary education, for which they could attend dedicated Uzbek-language schools, their transition into higher education was complicated by the fact that nowadays the national university admissions test cannot any longer be taken in the Uzbek language, but only in Kyrgyz or Russian. With few higher education facilities offering classes in Uzbek, this language's general functionality<sup>20</sup> to increase educational or professional opportunities in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is rather low, which gains further significance in light of the ethnic Uzbek's strong regional presence in the country's southern areas.

## Location

In many ways, the geographical locations in which the young respondents of this report have grown up or currently dwell could be observed to matter for how young people perceive gender relations and realise opportunities. Different scales could be identified as playing a role, ranging from inter- to intra-regional tendencies (northern and southern Kyrgyzstan), to differences between urban and rural areas. Examining these patterns, the ethnic groups inhabiting southern Kyrgyzstan could in fact be identified as reflecting stronger displays of patriarchy that constrained female social and mobilities. For example, the aforementioned 'short courses', in which young females developed income-generating skill-sets based around domestic skills, were mentioned to be a popular trend in the country's south, including within Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik communities. By contrast, such courses did not feature in the responses of female respondents of different ethnic belonging from Kyrgyzstan's northern region. With a few exceptions, which could be observed especially in Turkish and Kurdish communities, young women of the north seemed to predominantly pursue higher education. An interesting intra-regional and intra-ethnic variation could be observed among Dungan respondents, who reported that young females in the rather 'liberal' city of Karakol would enjoy more opportunities to influence their educational career and choice of future husband than their peers in Tokmok, a city of similar size and located in the neighbouring oblast, close to the capital Bishkek, but apparently with a more 'conservative' social environment.

Another significant difference for how gender relations were framed and opportunities distributed could be observed to exist between urban and rural domains. Generally, urban locations, especially the major cities of Bishkek and Osh, were indicated as providing more opportunities for youth of different ethnic belonging.<sup>21</sup> This concerned both the objective

<sup>17</sup>It should be noted, however, that, for ethnic Kyrgyz, employment opportunities are structured - facilitated or constrained - beyond this primary observation. Usually, developing a career for a young Kyrgyz is a matter of personal networks whose assembly is more complex than simply large-scale categorisations of clan or regional belonging ('north vs. south'), and may depend, for example, on the father of a school friend or on superiors in a law-enforcement agency. On the links between ethnicity, language and religion in Kyrgyzstan, see Chotaeva (2004).

<sup>18</sup>Kosmarskaya (1996, 2006) provides insights into the situation of Russians in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, including discriminatory experiences of an 'everyday [Kyrgyz] nationalism'.

<sup>19</sup>Ismailbekova (2013) discusses 'coping strategies' among ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of the 2010 violent events, among which were 'public avoidance', migration and early marriage (as mentioned before in this report).

<sup>20</sup>Korth (2001, 2004, 2005) has conducted extensive research on Kyrgyz language revival and the aspect of education and linguistic division, as well as on attitudes towards languages in Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>21</sup>See Kirmse's observations (2009, 2013) on 'youth spaces' and their relationship to donor-funded activities in the city of Osh.

availability of certain opportunities, for example preparatory courses for university enrolment exams, as well as the subjective understanding of whether it would be legitimate for young women to make use of them. An additional factor was that family budgets in urban contexts were generally described as including allowances for investing in a daughter's or son's education.

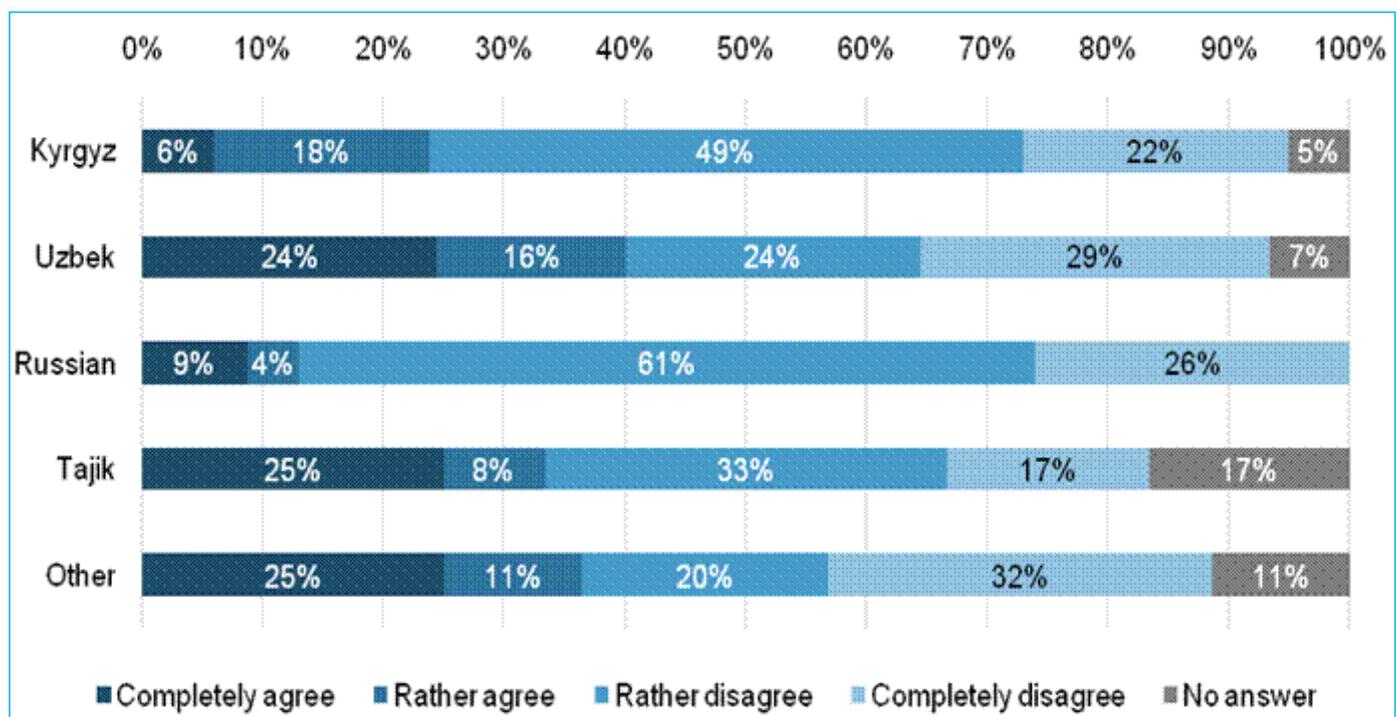
By contrast, in more traditional communities the primary concern was about the family's reputation as determined by views of the community. In such situations, to seize an opportunity that would be considered common in the city, such as to enable a daughter to enter university, demands considerably more struggle against the pressures to prevent outliers (potentially within and outside their own family). The case referred to here which was recounted by an Uzbek mother, furthermore showed that such patriarchal environments could not only be found in villages, but also within tightly-knit urban neighbourhoods of the mahalla<sup>22</sup> 'type' (which were also found to exist and to exhibit similar social effects among Tajik and Kyrgyz small-scale communities).

## Violence

The responses of young Kyrgyzstanis allowed for the recognition of pervasive experiences of violence and abuse of different sorts, from physical and emotional violence to verbal and financial abuse or neglect. 'Talking about violence remains a strong taboo and by most respondents was considered a private matter that should not be brought to the attention of official bodies, but was to be handled inside the family or reconciled by local, informal institutions (such as elder councils).'

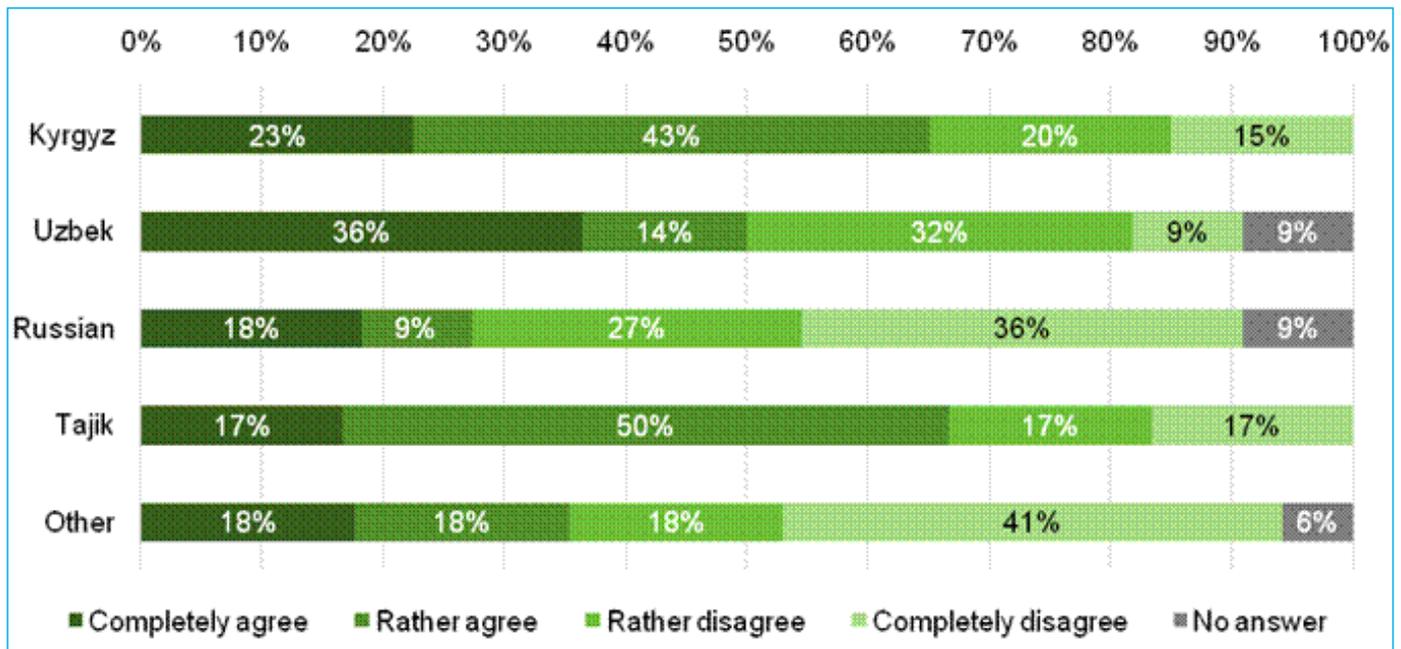
Charts 1 and 2 indicate whom among the young male and female respondents would 'completely agree' or 'rather agree' with the statement 'Domestic violence is an internal family issue, no one should know about it, it is a shame'. Within the Russian group only 13% of females and 27% of males voiced their agreement. In the Kyrgyz group this rose to 24% of females and 66% of males, and in the Uzbek group to 40% of females and 50% of males.

Chart 1: Domestic violence is an internal family issue, no one should know about it, it is a shame. (Female respondents)



<sup>22</sup> On the Uzbek mahalla as a socio-spatial field for urban dwelling and the 'cultivation' of proper personhood in southern Kyrgyzstan, see Liu (2012).

Chart 2: Domestic violence is an internal family issue, no one should know about it, it is a shame.  
(Male respondents)



Violence may also be condemned as part of public moral discourse (what should be said to strangers), but still it was noticeable from the interviews that the barriers to resorting to violence are low, and perpetrators often do not need to fear serious legal or social consequences (such as restraining orders, community ostracisation or divorce).

Judging from the insights that young males and females of different ethnic belonging offered into everyday life in Kyrgyzstan, violence could thus be identified as a feasible means to enforce patriarchal agendas. This included, for example, cases of bride-kidnapping within Kyrgyz or Turkish and Kurdish communities<sup>23</sup>, which predominantly were not perceived as criminal acts of deprivation of liberty. It also included domestic violence or verbal abuse deployed in order to 'discipline' wives who were considered negligent of household chores, or who were failing to manage these satisfactorily alongside their employment. While such violence was reported to occur within almost all ethnic groups, alcohol abuse as a catalyst for domestic violence was primarily mentioned by Russian respondents. (Yet it must be noted here as well that this group showed the least reserve in verbalising violent experiences.)

Ultimately, the accounts of young Kyrgyzstanis attest that violence, abuse and neglect emerge primarily as a show of masculinity that is culturally legitimised by different audiences. These are male peer groups which, for example, challenge a man on whether he is able to keep his 'dominant' working wife in check;<sup>24</sup> but also females could be identified as being complicit, such as a mother-in-law who criticises the household performance of her son's new wife and does not oppose his disciplinary measures against her.<sup>25</sup>

Charts 3 and 4 use quantitative data to show how many respondents of different ethnic groups either 'completely agree' or 'rather agree' with the statement 'Physical abuse is preferable over divorce'. Separated into male and female respondents, this shows that within the Kyrgyz group only 8% of women and 18% of men agree with this statement, whereas in the Uzbek group these numbers are higher: 35% of women and 41% of men. Among Russian respondents 17% of females and 9% of males agree with this statement.

<sup>23</sup>Kleinbach (2003; et al. 2005; and Salimjanova 2007) has carried out extensive research on the issue of bride-kidnapping among Kyrgyz. Werner (2009) discusses the connection of bride-kidnapping with patriarchy and local discourses of shame and tradition.

<sup>24</sup>Another such audience are local courts of elders (aksakals). Beyer (2015) reveals how these traditional institutions 'customise law' in Kyrgyzstan. A recent report by Human Rights Watch (2015) critically remarks that with their focus on reconciliation, such elders' courts can limit the access to 'measures of redress' for survivors of domestic violence.

<sup>25</sup>Ismailbekova (2014) outlines the potentially dominant role of women in cases of male absence, such as due to migration.

Chart 3: Physical abuse is preferable over divorce. (Female respondents)

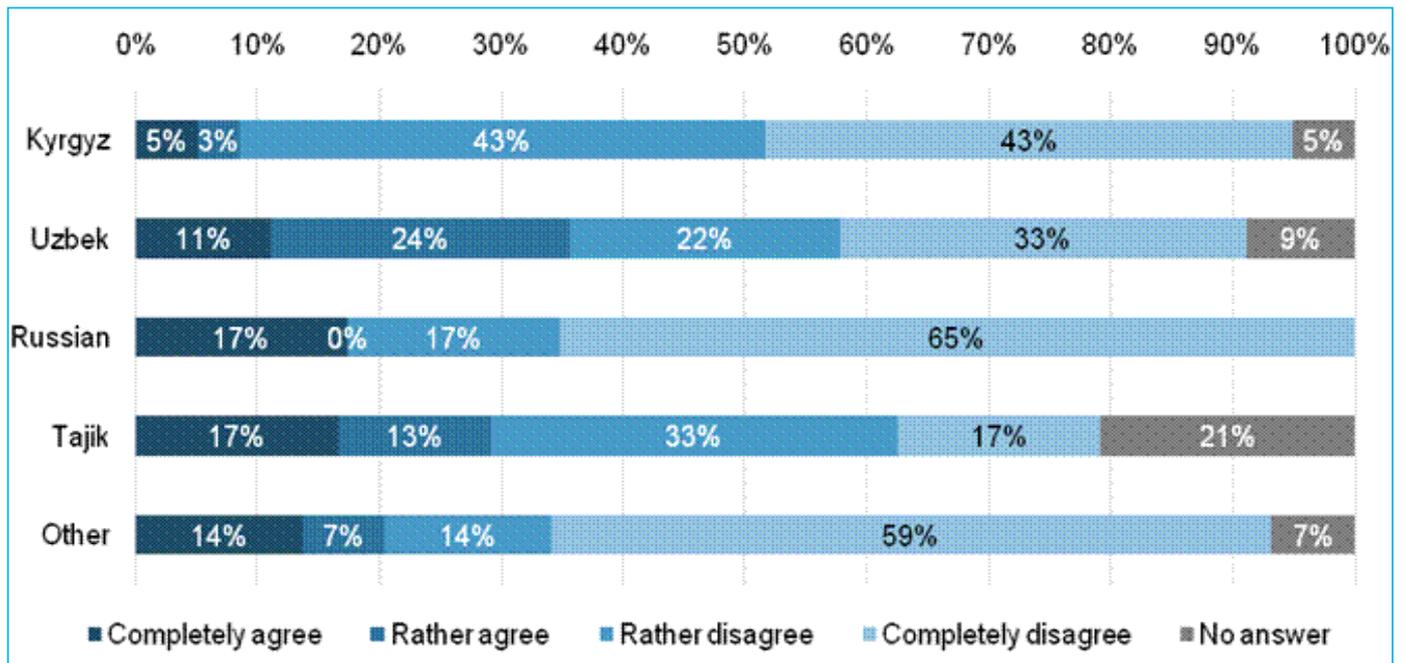
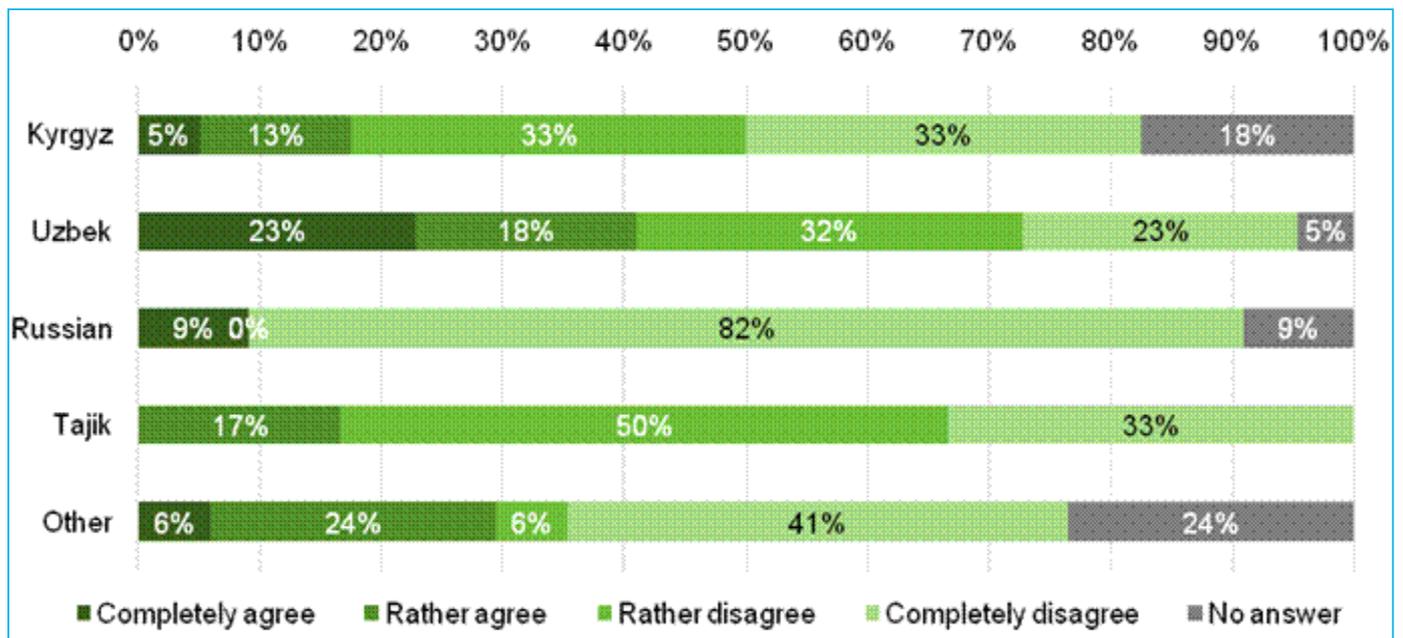


Chart 4: Physical abuse is preferable over divorce. (Male respondents)



From this emerges the necessity to identify alternative moral sources that can be promoted in order to oppose acts of violence and abuse in marriage and elsewhere, which so far tend to be legitimised by women's passive acceptance of the need to 'show patience' (sabr kyl) that part of

society encourages. In focus group discussions, for example, it was Islamic clerics in particular who pointed to religious tenets in order to criticise currently predominant 'traditionalist' patterns<sup>26</sup>, such as early marriage, the violent disciplining of women and the neglect of female education.

<sup>26</sup>McBrien (2009) discusses the nexus of 'veiling and modernity' in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. On a 'higher level (or is this a 'wider platform'??), Montgomery (2015) provides insights on how 'Muslims experience democracy and the state in Kyrgyzstan'.

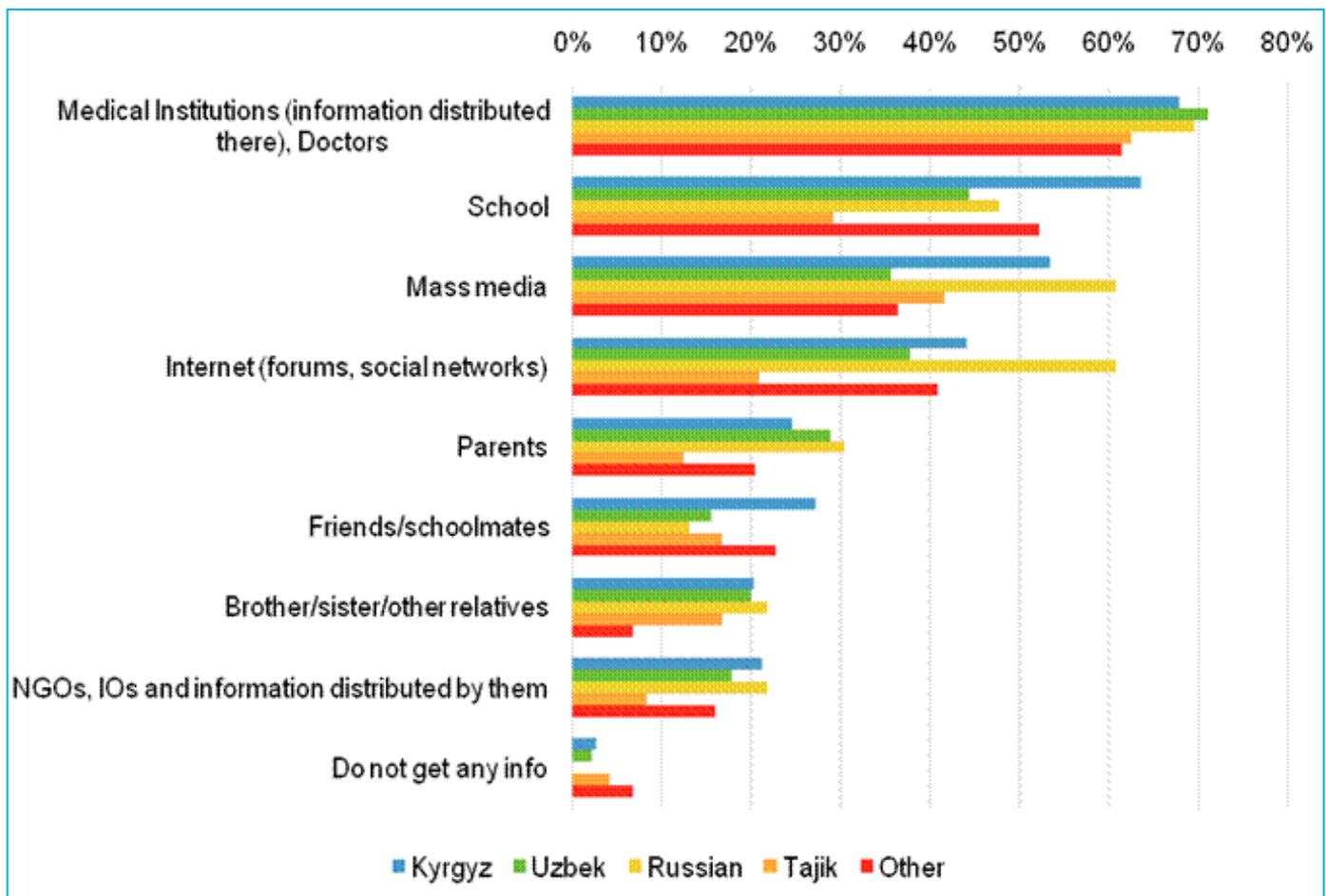
## Flow of information

Beyond the obvious need to reject violent acts on moral grounds and classify violent acts as a human rights issue in the absence of effective implementation of relevant laws, these must as well be understood as an inability to verbalise frustration and anxieties. This links to the observation that boundaries between genders tend to harden with a lack of knowledge about each other's lives, including little awareness of mutual expectations or of potential for compromise. From the responses of young Kyrgyzstani males, it could be concluded that quite a few of them find themselves faced with a kind of 'masculine silence', i.e. within their all-male peer groups they are not provided with a forum for expressing personal concerns about their own emotional states or the challenges they face when relating to the opposite sex.<sup>27</sup>

Further barriers for cross-gender communication on a wide range of 'delicate

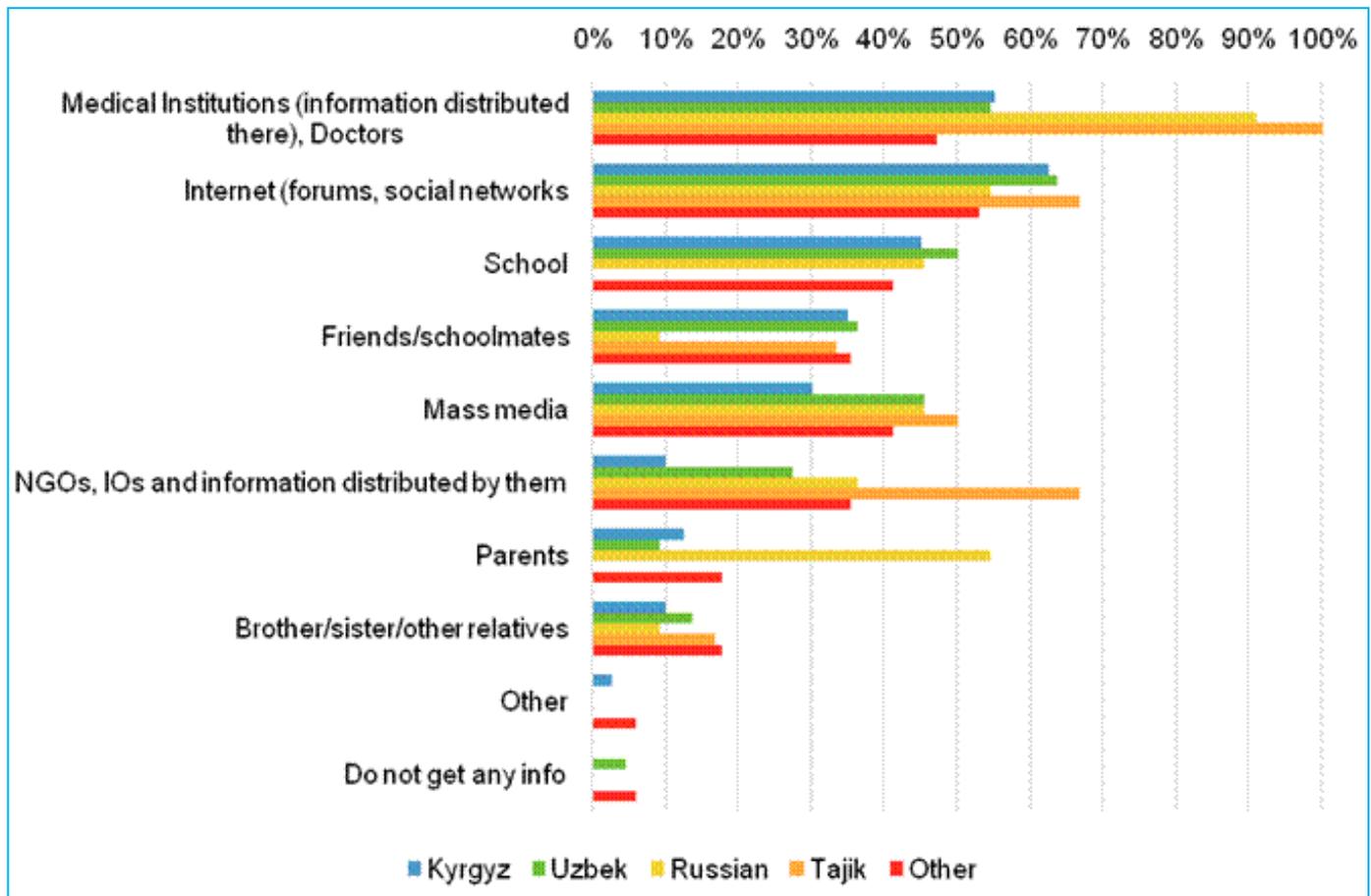
topics', especially sexuality, were reported to be present within families, meaning among siblings or between children and parents. Charts 5 and 6 present the main sources from which youth of different ethnic groups obtain information on sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV/AIDS. Separated into male and female respondents, this shows that more young men turn to friends or schoolmates (Kyrgyz: 36%, Uzbek: 36%, Tajik: 33%) for information on these topics than their female peers do (Kyrgyz: 27%, Uzbek: 16%, Tajik: 17%). At the same time, far fewer young males apparently discuss these matters with their parents (Kyrgyz: 13%, Uzbek: 9%, Tajik: 0%) than young women do (Kyrgyz: 25%, Uzbek: 29%, Tajik: 13%). In addition, young Kyrgyzstanis in general indicated that they utilise multiple other sources to improve their knowledge on STD and HIV/AIDS, ranging from mass media and the internet to medical institutions, NGOs and schools.

Chart 5: Where do/did you get information about STD and HIV/AIDS? (Female respondents)



<sup>26</sup> For the urban context of Bishkek, Schröder (2012, 2014) has provided insights on social integration among male youth, including the hesitation to verbalise emotions within peer-group settings.

Chart 6: Where do/did you get information about STD and HIV/AIDS? (Male respondents)



Respondents also did not mention any male-female friendship relations, which would potentially be sources for gaining first-hand insights into the other sex's mind-set and reasoning. On the other hand, it could be noticed that in regards to the (admittedly less delicate) topic of 'working women', those young males who reported having had experiences of their own mothers or sisters being employed were better able to move beyond strict gender perceptions, such as assigning the domestic sphere exclusively to females. However, the general paucity of such glimpses across the gender divide could be understood to further fuel speculation and stereotyping, as could be observed, for example, in regard to the mistrust of the 'female character' that existed among those men who tended to project a zero-sum-perspective onto male-female relations.

Aside from gender relations, both young male and female respondents were critical of how information was disseminated when it came to the important task of selecting an appropriate post-secondary education track, and thus a future profession that would present them with acceptable income opportunities.<sup>28</sup> The interviews revealed the difficulties that Kyrgyzstani youth face when consulting parents and teachers who are unmotivated or ill-informed on these matters, or when their choice is not based on current labour market demands but rather on perceptions of what are 'prestigious' professions or universities.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> DeYoung (2011) has published widely on education in Kyrgyzstan, for example as regards 'university experiences' (2010), problems and trends in the secondary education sector (2006) and the 'erosion of social upbringing' in schools (2007). Further contributions on the topic of education were provided by Shamatov (2013) and Merrill (2013).

<sup>29</sup> This is also discussed in Schröder (2011).

## Being Young

It could be observed that, as part of a gendered upbringing within most ethnic groups captured in this report, young women were expected to take over more household and other domestic responsibilities, while their male siblings were permitted time for extracurricular activities, of both an educational and leisure nature. Although the public behaviour of young males was also perceived to reflect on a family's reputation, this reasoning appeared to matter more for young women, with the paramount requirement being to maintain the image of raising a 'good daughter'. In consequence, opportunity structures for young women were found to be narrower, in regards to their physical mobility to leave the parental home and their potential to allocate time autonomously.

The major rationale for this seemed to be provided by the functioning of the local marriage market, which among young Kyrgyzstanis of all ethnic groups could be identified as a priority orientation when imagining their future biographies. Within that marriage market, a family stood to lose more from a 'misbehaving' daughter, whom they might have trouble matching with a husband and who thus could remain a burden as an additional family member, than from a 'misbehaving' son, who according to patrilineal principles will be associated with his natal kin-group for life (and beyond). Following that particular market logic, the demand-side of future husbands ended up dictating the terms for the supply-side of future wives. In practice, such disparity was highlighted when respondents referred to the low expectations for what qualified as a good husband, i.e. 'someone who does not drink, smoke or beat'.

Displays of patriarchy also concerned the older generation's perception of younger Kyrgyzstanis. Especially in focus group discussions on the topic of sexual education, quite a large number of parents expressed concerns about their children's ability to handle information on this matter without slipping into promiscuity. This reflected a more general scepticism on adolescence within the human lifecycle, which understood this transition from child- to adulthood not as an opportunity for someone to develop a responsible

personality, but as a period when young males and females could be easily seduced into delinquencies of any sort.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, parenting appeared to be focused strongly on protecting youth from 'negative influences' by means of social control, which adolescent males and females, however, often experienced as a disproportionate prejudgment on their decision-making ability, that constrained them from pursuing essential opportunities.

In Kyrgyzstan the transition from youth into adulthood is commonly understood to be marked by marriage rather than by age.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, it should be noted that a push towards marriage at a young age is not always instigated exclusively by parents, but such a step may also be related to youth's aspirations for a status change and new agency. Regardless of the fact that this transition entails new and serious responsibilities, such as for a young man to become a breadwinner and for a young woman to become a mother, marriage tends to be imagined as also opening up new freedoms from the aforementioned parental scrutiny.<sup>32</sup>

However, this again appeared to be more the case for young males than females, as the latter often depicted their new position of daughter-in-law (kelin) as also being characterised by vulnerability and the need to prove themselves as 'being worthy'. For young males, although there also seems to be significant peer-pressure not to marry much later than their friends or male relatives of similar age, the new status of a 'married man' promises to move the husband up the hierarchy of conditional decision-making. For example, this could be noticed when young Uzbek women mentioned that whether or not they would work would be a decision for their husbands.

Charts 7 and 8 illustrate this further, indicating the number of respondents from different ethnic groups who either 'completely agree' or 'rather agree' with the statement 'Now both partners in a marriage should also seek fulfilment in a job/career'. Separated into male and female respondents, this shows that 89% of both Kyrgyz and Uzbek women, and 87% of Russian women, indicated that they agree with this statement, while among men, 68% of Kyrgyz and 82% of Russians agree, but only 41% of Uzbeks.

<sup>30</sup> Taking the example of 'youth work' in local youth centres of northern Kyrgyzstan, Schröder (2015a) provides insights on the perception of youth by the elder generation and on gender among young males and females. Furthermore, a critical perspective on youth can be identified as a continuation of the Soviet practice, in connection with which Pilkington (1994) noted a binary opposition that perceived 'youth-as-constructors-of-communism' vs. 'youth-as-victims-of-Western-influence', with the latter group being more likely to become 'lost' and 'delinquent'.

<sup>31</sup> On this aspect, see also Schröder (2011).

<sup>32</sup> In the case of Tajikistan, Roche (2014) has described this as practices of 'domesticating youth'.

Chart 7: Now both partners in a marriage should also seek fulfilment in a job/career. (Female respondents)

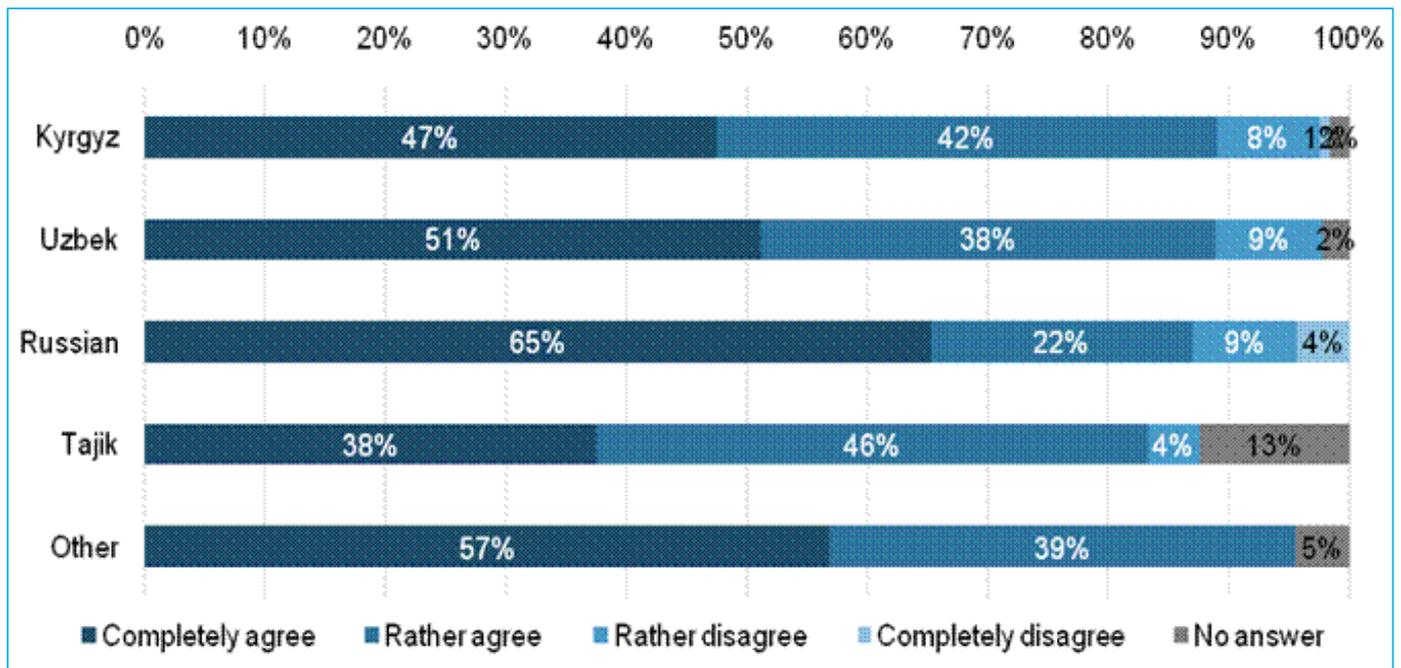
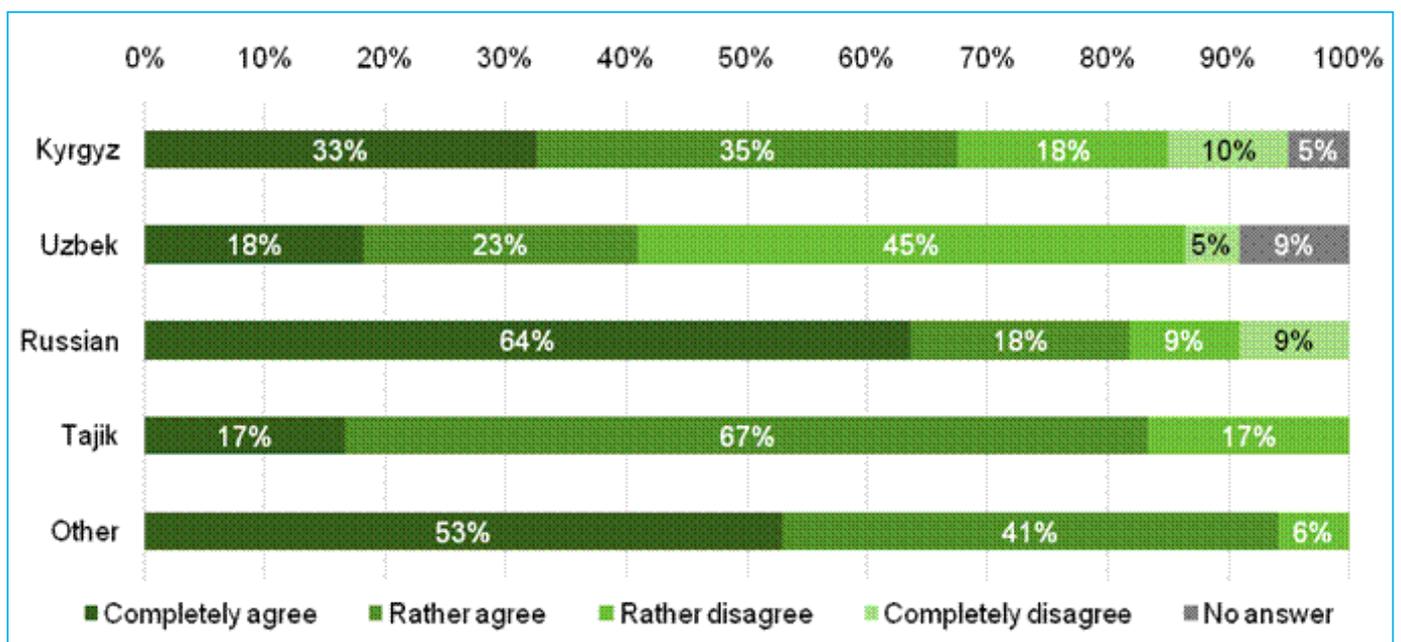


Chart 8: Now both partners in a marriage should also seek fulfilment in a job/career. (Male respondents).



Furthermore, it could be observed that displays of patriarchy concerned not only the unequal distribution of male and female opportunities, but also the unequal valuation of their respective contributions. Before or after marriage, the manifestations of female efforts, regardless of whether these related to education, domestic work, child-rearing or employment, tended to be downplayed and 'taken for granted' in comparison to those of their male counterparts. This was vividly illustrated in cases where working wives were criticised, not only by their husbands but also by other women or even themselves, for failing to properly manage

the double burden of being entirely responsible for the domestic domain while doing their professional job at the same time. Another illustration of this concerned the symbolic exaltation of male income as more 'blessed', even if, as in the case of the 'housemen' of Naryn, the actual contribution might be comparatively low. While addressing the unequal sharing of responsibilities and lack of appreciation of their efforts during the interviews, many working women underlined the social and emotional benefits that would come with employment, especially their elevated self-confidence and opportunities to socialise with colleagues.

# Recommendations

## Actions to be taken as proposed by the research team in relation to the general recommendations made in the final report

### Awareness raising campaign against all forms of violence against girls

With internet resources accessible to youth across Kyrgyzstan and the internet being a media platform popular with youth, internet and specifically mobile phone based applications lend themselves as tools to carry out a systematic and targeted awareness raising campaign against all forms of gender based violence, and against discriminatory cultural practices and gender-roles in family and society, early marriage, and educational discrimination against women. The campaign should be driven by individual activists and supported by interested organizations that provide evidence and data to guide discussion.

Sub Recommendations:	To produce short video clips and infographics presenting research findings and evidence to catch the attention of youth.
	To have celebrities in popular culture and the arts, opinion-makers in the media, business leaders and well-known individuals in society who have influence over youth to advocate against harmful practices and beliefs that hinder empowerment of young women and men.
	To commission youth artists to produce visual art including comics covering research findings on gender-based discrimination and girl empowerment successes for a teen audience.
To whom:	Local NGOs, INGOs, UN bodies, informal movements that advocate gender equality, activists; in close cooperation with the State Agency on Youth and Sports and Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism. Use should be made of existing formal and informal networks of local youth organizations, specifically the nationwide network of UN Women peer-educators.
Beneficiaries:	Youth but specifically those age 14 to 22.
Inputs required:	Budget for producing professional video clips. Participation of celebrities should be on a volunteer/pro-bono basis. Preparation of information material to be part of regular work done by communications' specialists of involved entities.
Additional comments:	Research material (final report, pillar reports, anonymized primary data) is to be handled in an unbiased, culturally and ethnically sensitive manner. Partners should sign an agreement specifying terms and conditions of the use and storage of the anonymized research data.

### Summer school on conducting engendered social science research

Considering often limited capacity of young Kyrgyzstan-based researchers in conducting social science research, and specifically in relation to applying the mixed methods approach, and in order to expand the cadre of professional researchers it is recommended to organize a summer school on conducting engendered social science research. The target group is both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the social sciences, and PhD students and young researchers. During the summer school participants are in an interactive, participatory learning environment and receive introductory courses on how to design, conduct, process and evaluate research projects using mixed methods, and applying the theoretical knowledge to individual/group based micro-research projects in gender-related thematic areas. The initiative will make a solid contribution to qualifying young researchers on qualitative research. Further, this cadre will be sensitized to the utility of engendered social science research.

Sub Recommendations:	The initiative should be implemented in cooperation with one of the universities offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in social sciences.
To whom:	Universities with research faculties.
Timeframe:	Summer 2017.
Beneficiaries:	Undergraduate and postgraduate students, PhD candidates, young researchers and youth activists.
Required budget:	Premises and supplies to conduct classroom training; research stipends for participants to conduct field research; computers supplied with QDA software or similar to process and analyse data; trainer services; accommodation and meals.
Additional comments:	For field research, UN Women and partner institutions will select pertinent research topics/questions.

### Introduction of ASRH education at all schools

Considering the general lack of knowledge among Kyrgyzstani adolescents on sexual and reproductive health and puberty issues, and given the absence of mandatory ASRH education, it is recommended to initiate a discussion on the mainstreaming of ASRH topics into the mandatory curriculum. ASRH experts, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, UN Women, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO and NGOs working on SRH issues should participate in working groups to identify an effective and culturally sensitive way to integrate ASRH education into mandatory subjects taught at secondary schools and universities. Infographics and video clips covering basic ASRH knowledge should be produced to WHO standard, as should be infographic material showing results of this research in relation to ASRH for distribution online. Focus group discussions with university students regarding what content should be presented, how and through which media should inform the curriculum.

Sub Recommendations:	Secondary school and university students should be involved in creation of material and in discussions. Short video clips should be produced presenting research findings to raise awareness.
To whom:	Relevant government ministries, UN organisations, civil society actors.
Beneficiaries:	Young people, specifically those age 14 to 22.
Required budget:	Cost for curriculum revision and printing, and for teacher training.
Additional comments:	Research material (final report, pillar reports, anonymized primary data) is to be handled in an unbiased, culturally/ethnically sensitive manner.

### Campaign on education and employment opportunities for girls

Organize campaigns on post-secondary educational opportunities, current and emerging labour market trends, and skills requirements for effective labor market participation especially for youth from remote areas and those not having full access to information. This to raise awareness on what career opportunities exist and how to take advantage of them to provide less advantaged youth groups with a range of options relating to their educational and career prospects.

Sub-recommendations	<p>Education and career fairs to be held under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor and Social Development with involvement of independent career experts, universities, post-secondary educational facilities, educational exchange programs, private sector companies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Guest speakers presenting success stories</li> <li>- Information booths of educational facilities to inform on degrees and courses, on admission requirements, scholarships, etc.</li> <li>- Information booths of private sector, non-commercial organisations, and state agencies on job and internship opportunities</li> <li>- Career center with a professional photo booth, and consultancy on how to prepare job applications and for interviews</li> <li>- International labor migration corner to inform on risks and opportunities of migration, and on legal and documentation issues</li> </ul> <p>These events should enjoy broad media coverage and public visibility via TV, radio, and internet-based social networks</p>
To whom:	Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Labour and Social Development, universities, colleges, career development experts, private sector companies, non-commercial entities, state agencies. The proposed activities should also be incorporated into ongoing educational projects implemented by stakeholders.
Timeframe:	Annually from September through December, to give senior school students/university graduates sufficient time to make informed decisions and undertake targeted preparation.
Beneficiaries:	Direct: young people, in particular those age 14 to 18 Indirect: participating universities, colleges, private companies and other organizations.
Required budget:	For hosting career fairs, production of information materials. Information booths and the related logistic costs should be covered by participant universities, colleges, private companies and other organizations.

### Enhancing usefulness of the school curriculum to retain girls in secular education

Given the fact that girls from ethnic minority groups often drop out of school in favour of attending housework related commercial courses that close off their educational and career prospects, it is recommended to offer alternatives within the school curriculum to motivate girls and their parents to continue with secondary education. Life-skills modules such as basics of rural entrepreneurship, effective agriculture, financial management, computer literacy, sewing and cooking should be integrated in the existing mandatory labour subject or into compulsory extra-curricular activities for girls and also boys.

Sub-recommendations	Modules from the existing textbook 'My Prosperous Farm' which has been in used for many years with thousands of students at more than 100 secondary schools and where a cadre of trainers exists can be complemented by additional modules and courses to train livelihoods skills. Use should be made of the 'My Safe and Peaceful School' life-skills curriculum to empower youth and especially girls at secondary school. Both course have been approved by the state for use in public schools.
To whom:	Ministry of Education and Science, (I)NGOs and development partners working on relevant topics, independent experts in various disciplines. The proposed activities should also be incorporated to current educational projects and programmes.
Beneficiaries:	Secondary school students and school teachers.
Required budget:	Development of curriculum and printing costs, costs for teacher training.

### Skills training for female migrant returnees

A large number of female migrants bring skills and sometimes also capital back to Kyrgyzstan. In the absence of an enabling environment that would permit migrants to deploy their assets the economy loses out and returnee women are unable to protect their rights as they cannot use their agency. Returnee female migrants should be given skills to deploy knowledge and capital as private entrepreneurs in Bishkek or their communities of origin. Such capacitation should include courses on how to develop a business plan, how to launch and grow a business, how to access financing, financial management of a business, marketing and targeted vocational training for female returnees from migration.

To whom:	Ministry of Labour and Social Development, vocational training institutions, towns and municipalities, ILO, IOM, and other development partners.
To whom:	Using local government budgets, skills training could be provided locally in towns and cities by qualified service providers.
Beneficiaries:	Female migrant returnees. Many female returnees of migration prefer not to return to their villages of origin fearing that they will lose hard-earned independence and because of negative stereotyping of females in migration. They stay in Bishkek where they are exposed to multiple dangers.
Required budget:	Use of local budgets plus development partner funding.

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