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ENGAGING WOMEN RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PVE WORK IN KYRGYZSTAN: REFLECTIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

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INTRODUCTION

From 2017 to 2018, UNFPA in Kyrgyzstan implemented the project “Women and Girls as Drivers for Peace and Prevention of Radicalization” jointly with UNDP, UNICEF and UNODC. The main goal of the project was to increase the resilience of the participating communities to radicalization by engaging women religious leaders to become drivers of tolerance and to help prevent radicalization among women.

UNFPA worked in partnership with the NGO Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI), which was responsible for implementing the project in the target communities. The purpose of this report is to present **experiences and lessons learned from the project**. These include the challenges encountered in the mobilization and involvement of women and girls, and, furthermore, the strategies employed to overcome them. Through the present document, the lessons learned and approaches applied in involving and working with hard-to-reach groups will be accessible to partners and to a diverse range of stakeholders.

Despite these challenges, the project “Women and Girls as Drivers for Peace and Prevention of Radicalization” has significantly **contributed to establishing constructive collaboration and open dialogue between Women-Religious Leaders** (WRL), government institutions and local self-governance (LSG) bodies. You can find out more about the results of the project in a report titled “**Post project evaluation report:**

It is important to note that the above-mentioned challenges were related to the sensitivity of the project topic of preventing violent extremism (PVE). Apart from that, this was the first time that UN agencies in Kyrgyzstan implemented a project in the field of PVE. Tendencies of social polarization between secular and religious communities further impacted how women religious leaders, who lacked experience of working with civil society or community initiatives, perceived the project. The subject of radicalization itself aroused mistrust and apprehension among them. To overcome the target group’s apprehension and fear, the partners from FTI needed to mobilize all of their professional knowledge and skills. Being a non-faith-based organization, they had to rely on prior experience of working with religious communities and needed to find effective and appropriate approaches for building trust and dialogue.

Women and girls as drivers for peace and prevention of radicalization”, which also discusses the limitations and risks that need to be taken into consideration when implementing such projects. Notwithstanding these limitations, the project brought about significant changes in the lives of WRL and other beneficiaries, es-

pecially in terms of their understanding of their own rights and opportunities in society. You can gain further insights into the changes experienced by the women participants in the brochure titled **“Women as drivers of peace and stability – stories of change.”**

The present report consists of three parts, the first of which introduces the project and the **context within which it operated**. Part Two reflects on the **challenges faced in the initial**

project stage aimed at mobilizing WRL, and outlines the **strategies for tackling these**. Part Three discusses the **challenges and response strategies at the stage of joint work** with WRLs, including their engagement in Women Leadership Schools, local-level initiatives on the prevention of radicalization, inter-regional exchange meetings as well as the project’s concluding conference.

I. CONTEXT

1.1 Main project interventions (UNFPA-FTI component)

UNFPA and FTI have worked directly with over 80 women religious leaders from 16 target project communities located in urban and rural areas in four provinces and the two large cities of the Kyrgyz Republic. So-called Women Leadership Schools were arranged for an initial training of the target group. Here, the participants improved their personal competencies, acquired knowledge and communication methods, which also helped them overcome social boundaries and stereotypes. In the course of two rounds of Women Leadership Schools, special lectures and modules were delivered and covered topics **like critical thinking, social responsibility, tolerance, the basic legal framework of prevention of radicalization, the state policy on religious affairs**. During the trainings, the educational and project staff tried to synergize (indicate synergies/complementarities between) **ideas of human rights and the rule of law with theological concepts**. In the final stage of the trainings, the women religious leaders prepared and carried out **local initiatives on the prevention of radicalization**, in which women and girls would participate alongside local authorities, the police and other stakeholders. In order to strengthen ties between women’s initiative groups from different regions and communities, the project team organized further meetings for the exchange of experiences, discussion of outcomes of the activities, as well as of challenges and successes.

1.2 Who are women-religious leaders?

The project’s definition of women religious leaders (including girls) included so-called ustazas and atynchas, and women who study religion hold religious circles on Islam among women. Ustazas are women who teach at madrasas and have formal religious education. Atyncha is an informal status of a woman, who may or may not have formal religious education, but can consult other women on religious and family-related matters. The latter type of WRL is encountered mainly in the southern provinces of Kyrgyzstan. In the pilot communities situated in the north of the country, it was difficult to find WRLs. This is related to historical and cultural specificities of the north of Kyrgyzstan, which has historically been less religious than various southern regions. Therefore, in some communities in the north the project team selected women activists who did not have the status of ustaza or atyncha.

1.3 How were religious women-leaders engaged in the project?

The core group of the project were **86 women-religious leaders from 16 communities**, who participated in two rounds of Women Leadership Schools. Subsequently, the women organized local initiatives in their respective communities in collaboration with LSG bodies, representatives of internal affairs organs and other state structures, as well as with the wider population. Five Local coordinators from FTI formed the project team worked closely and systematically with the women religious leaders in the target communities.

II. A. Selection and mobilization of women-religious leaders – CHALLENGES

In the project's initial phase, to identify a circle of WRLs who could potentially participate in the project, the Local coordinators conducted consultations with local self-governance (LSG), women's councils (WC), youth councils (YC), leaders of neighborhood committees and neighborhood police officers. These actors advised to work with madrasah teachers and, in the southern communities, with atynchas. Even though atyncha is a social status rather than a formal one, most of people are well aware of who is the atyncha of a given village. The main criteria for the selection of women were, first, the **existence of a group to whom a given WRL could reach out; and second, a woman's willingness to participate in the project**. At the same time, due to the above-mentioned peculiarities, there were cases in the northern communities when these criteria were not met, as there was a lack of women who formed their group and worked as WRL. In these

cases, women who were interested in religion and participated in different awareness raising activities on Islam were selected.

(2) Once the potential project participants had been identified on the basis of the consultations, local coordinators organized group and individual meetings with them. **Some women perceived the opportunity of participating in the project positively**. One atyncha in particular expressed the opinion that this kind of project had been necessary for a long time. **Meanwhile, the majority of women refused to participate or agreed to do so only after additional attempts** of the Local coordinators to better explain the goals of the project and planned activities, as well as further reaching out to other actors (see below in this section).

The main reasons why WRL refused to participate in the project or which made them concerned about participation, are the following:

Fears related to distrust towards official institutions

- ▶ There was lack of trust towards representatives of government agencies, LSG, and internal affairs organs, and women/WRL were often afraid to communicate with them. On the one hand, the majority of WRL did not have sufficient experience of positive interactions with the above-mentioned actors. On the other hand, WRL, particularly from the southern communities, were experiencing fatigue with the increased attention of law enforcement agencies to their communities, as in some areas high numbers of residents had left to Syria. There were frequent inspections of madrasahs and of the activities of atynchas. In the perception of WRL, society considered them as radicals, and representatives of LSG and of the police considered them as a threat. Some women thought that they would be subjected to tests at the trainings and that they might get in trouble with the police if they said something wrong. There also were a few cases when representatives of

LSG themselves were not interested in the project and argued that the problems in its focus were irrelevant and should be dealt with by law enforcement agencies.

Unwillingness to focus on issues not related to the religion

- ▶ Some women were convinced that they should solely devote themselves to religious education and that they should not be engaged in events beyond the madrasah (or religion). As some women noted, "your goals do not correspond to ours". Apart from that, according to some women, their participation in the project could in fact serve to alienate them from their religion. There were some cases when women who had decided to participate in the project were pressured by their communities to cancel their commitment, because, according to them, this presented a deviation from the right path. As a result, some women refused to participate in the project, as they did not want to have conflicts with their community.

Prevalence of gender stereotypes:

- ▶ Some WRL held the widely established/widespread view that the husband takes responsibility for the wife, and that questions relating to the work with women are therefore in his purview. These WRL/women did not see how working with women and girls on the subject of the project would be in their interest. Moreover, there were frequent cases when husbands did not permit their wives to participate in the project, and of women fearing that they might not be allowed to participate and therefore refraining to join the project.
- ▶ In some cases, Imams were not interested in engaging woman into the project with the explanation that it was “their role was to stay at home and take care of children”.

Some Imams perceived the possibility of engaging WRL in the project as a threat, as it could unnecessarily intensify their involvement and activities. It is worth noting that there were also some cases when Imams supported the mobilization of women.

Insufficient experience of women in public activities:

The majority of WRL who qualified for participation in the project had never participated in trainings or in any other projects outside of the religious sphere. Some of them had never participated in the public life of their communities, for instance in village gatherings or festive events. This foregrounded women’s resistance to participate in initiatives that seemed unknown to them.

II. B. Selection and mobilization of women-religious leaders – Response strategies

When encountering the above-mentioned challenges, the project team discussed them and devised measures to address these situations and to prevent possible risks and tensions. The most important aspects in tackling/dealing with these challenges are presented in the following.

Systematic and close collaboration with WRL through Local coordinators:

The project’s key strategy was the involvement of Local coordinators who closely collaborated with local stakeholders and women-religious leaders. They visited the pilot communities several times during the mobilization phase and undertook additional measures when they faced difficulties with the formation of women’s groups. In cases when a woman consented to participating in the project but needed their husband’s permission, Local coordinators explained the goals and planned activities of the project to both imams and the husbands of women. In addition, Local coordinators took part in taalims that were held in the communities, which, on the one hand, helped them to identify potential participants, and, on the other hand, helped them to introduce themselves and establish a good basis for communication.

Establishing communication and dialogue:

- ▶ In communities where women experienced tensions with law enforcement agencies and feared interaction with local authorities, the coordinators/project team organized dialogue meetings on which they introduced the WRL to the representatives of LSG and the police and informed them that the women would work on the prevention of radicalization, and called/encouraged the involved parties to constructive collaboration. In a number of communities, the representatives of police and LSG expressed their readiness to cooperate, affirming that “we do not consider you to be enemies”, and encouraged the women not to be afraid and to openly hold their events. These meetings helped WRL realize that these actors/people in the LSG and police/law enforcement organs are open to collaboration and willing to support their efforts. This also

further increased the number of WRL committing to participation in the project.

- ▶ In a number of cases, a letter of support from the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Kyrgyz Republic (DUMK) contributed to a positive reception of the project by imams and WRL, including the heads of madrasahs, who gave their approval for individual students' participation in the project.

Engagement through local leaders:

- ▶ It proved particularly effective to approach the leaders of religious women's groups, whose approval and support of the project often helped to engage the other women. In each community, the project team engaged five to seven WRL were, one or two out of whom would commit to the project and subsequently engage other women and establish cooperation with them.

III.A. Working with women (trainings and initiatives) – Challenges

As it was noted earlier, the organization of Women Leadership Schools and of subsequent initiatives and exchange meetings constituted the key activities of the project. In this section, there we present the challenges and difficulties faced by the project team during the implementation of this phase/component.

Challenges related to WRLs' visits to other cities:

- ▶ As noted earlier, the WRL selected for participation in the project reside in 16 rural and urban communities across four provinces of Kyrgyzstan. The large-scale events of the project, which involved participation of several women's groups from different communities, were held in urban centers. The Women Leadership Schools, for instance, were held in the cities of Osh and Bishkek, the final conference in the city of Osh, and the experience exchange meeting in the city of Tokmok near Bishkek. To join these occasions, the participants from some of the target communities needed to travel to these cities and spend the night there (1-2 days). This complicated their participation as either their families or the women themselves felt uncomfortable about the idea of travelling without an accompanying person or "makhrum".

Confrontations within communities:

- ▶ As indicated above, the project faced particular challenges in communities with a

low level of cooperation between LSG, law enforcement and other state actors with the population and religious groups. Besides a lack of trust and reluctance to participate in initiatives and concrete dialogues with local authorities, such a situation could produce various forms of disruption. In one community, for instance, people spread the rumor that the participant registration lists from the events organized as part of the initiatives, would be passed on to the law enforcement agencies. Even though this was a false information and the participant lists were restricted to internal use by FTI and UNFPA only, this raised concerns of some residents about participation in the project's activities.

Difficulties with mobilization of local population:

- ▶ Some communities had experienced particular confrontations between WRL and local institutions (LSG and schools), which created difficulties in finding venues where events in the frame of women's initiatives could be held. Furthermore, in some cases it was difficult to

mobilize residents to participate in the events organized by the women; particularly in those communities, where representatives of LSG did not work closely with the population.

- ▶ In cases when WRL worked in madrasahs, the activities and initiatives were run in the madrasah and under participation of its students. The relatively high number of events (two to three per month) in some cases lead to the disruption of classes and took a lot of time for the women to prepare and conduct them. In spite of such challenges, the WRL continued to participate in the project and implemented the activities according to the plan.

Insufficient public speaking skills and experience:

- ▶ The majority of WRL had experience in speaking in public and participating in discussions, but had only made/acquired

these within their circles of women and girls and in relation to religious topics. At the same time, they did not have experience with speaking in front of a wider audience, which caused difficulties during the implementation of the initiatives. For instance, some women refrained from addressing public audiences or, when they did speak, failed to convey to participants their intended messages.

Expectations of financial remunerations of the women:

- ▶ Some women who had participated in the Women Leadership Schools did not continue their participation in the project as they had held expectations of financial remuneration which were not met, because this had not been envisaged, nor communicated, by the project team.

III.B. Working with women (trainings and initiatives) – Coping Strategies

Constant and close collaboration with WRL:

- ▶ One of the key strategies of working with WRL was close and systematic interaction with project participants. Local coordinators arranged regular meetings, that is, monthly and in some cases weekly ones, with the women to discuss planned activities. In addition, a constant connection between Local coordinators and WRL was maintained via mobile phone and online channels, such as Whatsapp groups. Local coordinators were able to build up close collaboration particularly through participation in important events of the women, which was beyond the scope of the project itself. By arranging joint meetings and discussions, they also facilitated cooperation of WRL with local authorities. These efforts helped to sustain the interest of WRL in the project and to keep it as a priority on their agenda.

Building cooperation:

- ▶ During Women Leadership Schools, the third day of the training was devoted to the planning of initiatives in the communities. Representatives of women’s committee and social workers joined the training at this stage or were present from the very beginning in other cases. Besides, representatives of internal affairs organs and particularly from the Service on Combating Extremism and Illegal Migration of/in the Ministry of Interior Affairs were involved as experts and trainers both during the Women Leadership Schools and during implementation of initiatives in the communities. Before proceeding with the realization of the initiatives, the women presented their plans to representatives of LSG, women’s councils, youth councils, police officers and Courts of Elders (Ak sakals) to answer questions from these audiences and receive

recommendations. This enabled the women to establish partnership relations with the main stakeholders and to further appreciate the importance of their work.

- ▶ In the case of the community where rumours about the passing on of participant lists to law enforcement organs had spread, a meeting was arranged between WRL, participants of the events in question, and the police. On this meeting, the participants of the event could address their question to the law enforcement staff, who affirmed that they did not receive any participant lists from the project team. This helped to ensure that residents of the community did not again get irritated by unconfirmed information about the project.

Arranging experience exchange between various women groups

- The project team organized experience exchange visits to give the participants the opportunity to learn about the work done in other communities. The visits helped WRL to anticipate and effectively deal with a number of aspects in the preparation and carrying out

of events in their communities. As WRL from the southern provinces visited the north and vice versa, they were able to reconsider some of the stereotypes that they had held about each other. Lastly, the visits made them realize that their efforts are the part of a larger initiative that covered various parts of the country and made a significant contribution to the improvement of relations of LSG, law enforcement agencies and other state structures with communities.

Ensuring ownership of the project:

- ▶ WRL were directly and actively engaged in the implementation of events as part of their local initiatives and mobilized the local population. The coordinators helped the women with rehearsing speeches and preparing presentations. In most cases, experts were invited to speak about the respective topics, but the WRL and other participants still took to the stage and presented information about the project and the work they did. This has helped the WRL to perceive these activities as their own and to develop ownership to the project, and, respectively, to increase their motivation and responsibility.

IV. CONCLUSIONS, REMAINING CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD

In concluding this report, we briefly summarize its findings and synthesise the good practices that have proved useful in implementing the various project activities. We also highlight the contingent character of the project's impact and point to remaining challenges and ways forward in the work with women religious leaders in Kyrgyzstan.

The project team encountered a number of challenges in the mobilization and involvement of WRL in the project. In the initial phase of the project, the **majority of women refused to participate without further discussion and only some of the women were willing to consider the project** in detail amidst their reluctance to participate. The main factors contributing to this situation were the lack of positive interactions with official institutions and corresponding fear to communicate with them, the prevalence of gender stereotypes

and a conviction of some women religious leaders that they should not be engaged in events beyond the madrasah (or religion).

Notwithstanding these challenges, the project engaged 86 WRL (as initially planned), **more than 80 of which continued their participation from the very first events of the project to the Concluding conference** which looked back at more than a year and a half of comprehensive training, awareness-raising and dialogue activities in the participating communities.

The implementing partners have made significant efforts to build up a trustful basis with the women and help them to overcome their fears. The following good practices of building collaboration with WRL can be highlighted and taken into account in future projects in this area:

- ▶ Involvement of Local coordinators, who maintained systematic and personal communication with women religious leaders and other stakeholders, including local self-governance, law enforcements and other state organs as well as civil society actors;
- ▶ Thorough explanation of the content and aims of the project not only to women but also to stakeholders, who had influence on the women's participation (including husbands or family members);
- ▶ Building dialogue and communication between WRL and official institutions, which helped to mitigate tensions and increased the readiness of the women to engage in the project.

The project team faced a number of challenges throughout the project when carrying out the main project activities together with the WRL. These included complications with the participation of WRL in the activities conducted outside of their community; challenges in mobilizing local populations to participate in the events organized by WRL; the relatively high number of planned activities with WRL in the communities and the corresponding time investments required to prepare and implement them.

As noted above, more than **80 WRL not only participated in the project, but took an active part in its interventions and organized their activities in the communities**. Despite the high number of activities, the WRL saw through all planned events, and in some cases initially unplanned ones. The following strategies for securing this commitment of the WRL can be highlighted:

- ▶ *Building constructive and close collaboration with WRL on a systematic basis. As it was previously noted, the Local coordinators' role was significant in this, and their actions went beyond activities foreseen in the project plan.*
- ▶ *Following from the previous point, flexibility and context-specific interpersonal and intercultural communication skills on part of Local coordinators and other implementing staff present an important ingredient for the successful implementation of the project, as well.*
- ▶ *Throughout the different phases of the project, communication and engagement was consistently built up and maintained with official institutions, including the Service on Combating Extremism and Illegal Migration of the Ministry of*

Interior, local authorities and police during the planning and implementation of events, organized by WRL.

- ▶ *Ensuring ownership of the women in the project activities on both the community level and regarding the project in general.*

Taking into account the sensitivity of the topic of PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) and the peculiarities of the project target group, the project team considers the experience presented in this material as a positive one. Examples of how the project affected the **WRLs' attitudes and, in some cases, behavior have been documented in detail** (refer to Introduction) and despite the initial fear, the majority of WRL eventually appreciated the experience they made in the project.

Alongside these main findings, some other important aspects affected the project implementation. For instance the fact that some WRL did not participate in the important project events despite their explicit desire to take part, due to the inability to leave their community without an accompanying person; a situation that in some cases could not be resolved. The project team also attempted to **engage more young women and girls in the project as WRL, which was, however, not possible due to the fact that WRL are usually middle-aged or older**. Therefore, out of the core group of ca. 80 WRL, there were about 10 younger women.

Furthermore, some questions are still left open. For instance, should the project team try to engage a woman in the project if she is afraid of participating and does not express an interest in it in the initial phase? This kind of question becomes even more complicated by cases in of women gradually accepting and appreciating the project interventions and the impacts they have on them. In other words, to what extent is an engagement of women who are not interested in the project or do not understand it acceptable and justifiable, if only participation itself will serve to make them understand the importance and value of this initiative? UNFPA and FTI will continue exploring these issues and questions **within the framework of another project titled "Communities for sustainable peace"**, which started in January 2018 and will last until December 2020. The reflections and good practices provided in the present document are of great value in implementing this new project, as well as other initiatives in the field of PVE and societal projects in Kyrgyzstan and beyond.