

WOMEN AS DRIVERS OF PEACE AND STABILITY

STORIES OF CHANGE



Introduction

In the years 2017 to 2018, UNFPA has realised a project titled “Women as drivers of peace and stability” (working name of the project), which aimed at strengthening the capacity of women religious leaders (WRL) and their engagement in the prevention of violent extremism in their communities.

In the course of the project, 86 female religious leaders from 16 communities from all over Kyrgyzstan participated in the two rounds of Women Leadership Schools (WLS) and in the subsequent local initiatives on prevention of radicalization.

The project was implemented jointly with other UN agencies – UNDP, UNICEF and UNODC and with the support of the UN Peacebuilding Fund. The Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) was UNFPA’s implementing partner for this project and had five local coordinators working in close connection with the women religious leaders and their initiative groups.

In this document, the WRL who participated in the project share **their stories on how it helped**

them to change, what new things they learned and what impact it had on their lives.

The information in the document is represented in the form of two stories which contain more **in-depth reflection** on the impact of the project on women, and further, in **a number of brief reflections on key learning points** of women from various perspectives.

The material presented in this document was collected by UNFPA Project Manager through interviews with the respective participants in a period of 3 months after completion of the project in March 2019. More information on the project results is available in the project evaluation report “End of project evaluation. Women and girls as drivers for peace and prevention of radicalization.

Interested readers can find more information on the challenges faced by the project staff during the work with WRL and response measures in another **report titled “Engaging women religious leaders in PVE work in Kyrgyzstan: Reflections and good practices”**.

Personal stories of project participants

NARGIZA

Nargiza lives in one of the novostroika (make-shift) settlements at the margins of Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek. She shares her impressions about the project, the impact it had on her, and the new things that she learned.



"Our community, to be honest, is quite closed. It is mainly inhabited by people who arrived from various parts of the country. We convene religious women in our house and arrange taalim [lessons for women on Islam]. We first heard about the project from the district administration, they visited our house and asked if there were any women religious leaders in our house, but we responded, "Leave us alone, we don't know anything" and we closed the doors. Next time we held a taalim, Gulbarchyn [the project coordinator for Bishkek and Tokmok] attended and invited us to participate in the project. After that, rumors spread, like, for instance, "A woman came, an uncovered one, so beware". My husband also got in trouble because of this, as Imams asked him, "Why

“Women and girls as drivers for peace and stability”

Personal stories of project participants | NARGIZA

are outsider women coming to your house, what will happen now?” Even imams did not want to talk to Gulbarchyn and we also avoided her. She told us, “Please just attend one training and you will realize the importance of this project and how it can be helpful for you”. I am still astonished how she wasn’t scared and how she managed to be so insistent. So after all, my husband told me, “Alright, go to the training, maybe you will indeed learn something useful”.

We arrived at the Bishkek City Hotel, and when I entered it, I saw beautifully dressed people, saw intellectuals [by intellectuals, Nargiza means educated people, who have professional jobs]. I was following Gulbarchyn all the time and asked, “So what is next now?” She responded – “Now, we will have a coffee-break”, and I was watching these people, how they came and had coffee and ate cakes, and I was thinking to myself, “Won’t they scold me?” It felt like I was in another world.

On the third day of the training, children from the forum theatre performed a scene about early marriages, and we cried so much. After these adolescent pupils performed to us, I thought that if even such children are not scared, and they live like that, I realized that I can also live another way. The training was also attended by women from Issyk-Kul, Kelechek [novostroika settlement in Bishkek], so we stood there and were talking/wondering, “What if they take us somewhere?” [i.e., forcibly take them to Syria].

*When I heard the word “**tolerance**”, I thought, “Ohooo, so what is this, is it the name of some building material?” Later I learnt what it really means, that it is **when people, irrespective of their gender, religion or ethnicity, can have their own opinion, and you cannot force anyone to think a certain way**. We also learnt about social benefits, who can receive them and how to do it/how it can be done, and it has turned out that there are people who protect our rights.*

"Women and girls as drivers for peace and stability"

Personal stories of project participants | NARGIZA

*The topic of **critical thinking had a big influence on me**; I understood that before doing something, we have to think about it. After all, we have never communicated much with people, we have hardly completed the 11th grade at school and got married, and through participating in the project I realized, that we have to examine each word, analyze it and understand it.*

*Moreover, Manas [the representative of Service for Combating Extremism and Illegal Migration under the Ministry of Internal Affairs – SCEIM] told us about the **broken windows theory**, which tells us about the necessity of paying attention to even the smallest things, if they relate to the safety of the place where you live. While listening to him, I thought about how indifferent I used to be towards society. Now, I started thinking, "Oh, so we can leave our houses; there are, it turns out, other people, even among the intellectual ones, who understand us.*

*Some time ago, I used to be so scared of the police that I even became so stressed out that I stopped leaving my house. After the training, I realized that, **apparently, we can also trust them, they protect our rights**. So far I was living with the understanding that the police can put us to prison just like that and then torture you. We rarely leave our settlement, and if we happen to go very far into the city, we would go to TsUM (central department store). Once me and another woman entered the "Altyn" jewelry shop near TsUM. We looked so differently from people there, and as the security staff didn't take their eyes off us and kept following us, we started feeling uncomfortable and we thought, "Well, let's get out of here" and we left the shop.*

After the training, I said, "Gulbarchyn, now I fear nothing, invite me to these events!" Before that, I used to be scared not only of the police and intellectuals , but even of people who live nearby. So then I told my children, "Daughters, it seems like

"Women and girls as drivers for peace and stability"

Personal stories of project participants | NARGIZA

there is a good life, people move freely, they are not scared of anything, we should get rid of our fears, nothing bad is going to happen to us".

We had the event in Osh, Gulbarchyn told that we would be leaving at 5 am in the morning, and I was scared to sleep as if they could depart there without me... I saw the airport and airplanes for the first time in my life. When we arrived in Osh and I saw the good work that women in the south were doing, I was very much surprised. Here, they always say "Oh well, those Osh people are not even worth talking about...", we would talk like this amongst each other, even without seeing or knowing them. But there, I saw so many good things, how they keep their yards clean, and that they are such friendly people.

It was difficult to convene women for local initiatives. Here we have such an arrangement that if

*there is an issue, you tell your husband, then your husband goes to the mosque and your issue is solved there. So, when we invited women, they asked, "Did the Imam give his permission?" It turned out that I am unable to tell them things in the language of the intellectuals. Sometimes, five or six women gather and I start like, "You know, tolerance is....", and they tell me, "Oh, Nargiza, just leave us alone with all that". **Actually, for myself, I learned a lot and realized many things, but it is still difficult to explain it to other people. We have to collaborate with neighborhood committees and women councils.***

I have changed. My life has transformed very much, but there are so many women like me. So many.

Personal stories of project participants

NASIBA

Nasiba lives in Nookat and works in a madrasah [Islamic education institution for girls]. Recalling the time when the project was implemented, she feels awkward as at the beginning they could not allow Jumagul ezhe, the project coordinator for Osh province, to enter the madrasah because they failed to obtain permission from their chairman/head.



"I got married after graduating from 11th grade at school and gave birth to two children. I stayed at home for 10 years. Then I decided to work at the market, and together with my husband we were selling carpets. After that, I wanted to get religious knowledge. In the beginning, I attended taalim, and started to study the Quran, and later I started working in the madrasah.

When I was walking in the street, I thought that police officers always looked suspiciously at those who cover themselves. At first I was scared of the police, I was avoiding them, and if I saw policemen, I took a different route, I did not want them to ask me questions and ask me why I was covered. In order to submit documents for getting a passport, it was necessary to go to the police department, but I so much didn't want to go there. And also, when I needed to go

“Women and girls as drivers for peace and stability”

Personal stories of project participants | NASIBA

to ayil okmotu (municipality), I felt that if I went there, they would tell me, “Why did you come here? Get out of here!” I thought that only accountants, cashiers, teachers and health workers go there and that housewives are not allowed to go there.

After participation in the project, I realized that those whom we are afraid of are the same kind of people as we are, as it seems... I learned things that I was not taught at home, before the project, I looked at a tree and saw only a tree, and now I learnt to think about why the tree is green, what do we have to do to keep it green, we have to water it, and so on. I did not understand that I have rights, that I am also a citizen of Kyrgyzstan, just like other people, that I can go to the ayil okmotu, ask my questions and get answers to them. People from the police made a presentation at the workshop and I realized that if someone violates my rights, I can actually go to police.

When Jumagul ezhe came to visit us, we could not even allow her to enter the madrasah. We talked with her at the entrance to the madrasah and told her that we would think about her offer. We were scared; I was thinking: why is she convening just religious women? Maybe they want to have/create a file on us? Now, I understand why they decided to work with us. There are many women who come to our meetings, but who do not attend meetings with “rais” [under the word “rais” Nasiba means staff and heads of local authorities]. They would say, “What would the rais from the top tell us?” and they would not show up at the meeting, as they thought it does not concern them.

When I told my husband that I was going to the workshop, he asked me, “So they couldn’t find anyone else other than you? May rais and members of the Local Parliament attend this kind of event, but of what use will you be? What do they want from you?”

"Women and girls as drivers for peace and stability"

Personal stories of project participants | NASIBA

*I used to live with such a/n position/understanding that when you are 49 years old, you do not need anything anymore, it is too late to start something new. **But it turned out that even at 49, one can still learn.** Now I always tell other women, those like me, "There is no need to be scared all by yourselves, as if you have done something bad, and if you did not do anything bad, then you should not be scared of anyone".*

After the training, when we have organized several events in our madrasah, even people in the

*streets started to say that we are doing the right thing. Social workers and representatives of vocational schools came to us in the madrasah. **We felt that those who are educated and those who don't have an education started to talk to each other.***

I was constantly sharing with my husband those things that I learnt on the trainings, and now he already relates positively to my participation in the workshops."

Key insights of participants

Many of the project participants revealed how the attitude and beliefs that they used to hold changed in the course of the project. Below, we provide some examples of these key insights.

Overcoming fear and opening up to the unknown

Hadizha is a teacher in a madrasah. She has never participated in any events outside of the madrasah or outside of her daily routine. At the beginning, it was a challenging for/it felt problematic to her to leave her native Tokmok, arrive to Bishkek and to stay at the training. It was even frightening.

"Before the training, I was scared and did not trust the local authorities. This was because representatives of the Mayor's Office often came to us in the madrasah and inspected our activities/work. They checked our documents... We felt like they suspect us to be doing something wrong. It was uncomfortable.

During the school [Women Leadership School arranged for women and girls], I got acquainted

with that person from the Mayor's Office. She turned out to be a very nice and competent woman. She helped us with the planning of our initiatives in the communities on the prevention of radicalization among women. She said she would help us during in carrying out the events and that we can ask her assistance.

Today, I personally know staff of the Mayor's Office and can approach them and ask questions on religious or social issues, if I need to. Now my life became much more peaceful and comfortable. I realized that each of us lived in their own world, and these worlds did not intersect. After participation in the project, I understood that we have a lot in common and that we want to attain the same goal – peace and safety in society".

Key insights of participants

Overcoming fear and opening up to the unknown | TOTIKHON

Totikhon always had good results at school, but her dream of pursuing higher education did not come true. Her parents were against it, and so she got married early on and devoted herself to her family. When her kids came of age and started living their own life, Totikhon found herself a job in a madrasah, where she also learnt about this project.



"I am 55 years old, and until a year ago I thought that my time was up and it was too late for any more education. Today, however, my determination has increased, and I enrolled as a 1st year student of the pedagogic faculty of Jalal-Abad State University... The participation in the project activities helped me realize that there are

immense horizons of information nowadays, that we have to work on self-development and that one cannot stay in one spot. Nowadays , I realize how lucky I am that I can take part in the project and that I have so many ideas for the future, which I already started realizing".

Key insights of participants

Overcoming fear and opening up to the unknown | AINAGUL



At first, it was tough to engage Ainagul in the project, but now she expresses her gratitude to coordinator, who, despite her resistance, convinced Ainagul to participate in the project.

"I realized that there are laws, as it turns out, and that there are prohibited religious movements. Before that I thought that the 10th department [Service for Combatting Extremism and Illegal Migration under the Ministry of Internal Affairs – SCEIM] prosecutes those who read the namaz

and who are religious. It turned out that isn't so. I understood that, when a person is intolerant, that is not right. Tolerance starts at home, and so I started being tolerant to my children, despite the fact that their views can be different from mine".

Key insights of participants

Believing in yourself and contributing to a better world | ZULFIYA

Believing in yourself and contributing to a better world

For the past years, Zulfiya faced various family and psychological problems. To her, participation in the project became a chance for self-realization, which she needed so much.



...there appeared an incentive for me – to live life to the fullest, and I started seeing new goals in my life. I want to bring something good to/into society, I want my children to get education and I want them to find a place in life. I want to communicate with people; I became convinced that we have so many good people here. I understood that we should not only dwell on problems, or stay at home without communicating and get alienated from society. I started looking at many things positively. I feel much happier than before..."

Key insights of participants

Believing in yourself and contributing to a better world | NAZGUL



Nazgul works at the market and in her free time studies Islam and shares her knowledge with other women. When the project coordinator visited and invited her to participate in the project, she did not agree so easily. She had never participated in any training so far.

"Prior to participation in the project, I did not leave my house or go beyond the confines of my group of religious women and relatives. I did not cooperate with the territorial administration in any way. Only when I needed some official documents, I simply had to go there. For us, there are many restrictions in the community, a woman should stay at home, and she should not work and should not study. After I learnt about social responsibility and the "broken windows" theory at the trainings, something changed in me. I started to collaborate more closely with the neighborhood committees, and it turned out that they are and so on, and we jointly organized various events. And now they already started inviting me to public events, and recently I took part in a discussion of issues related to city development/improvement and cleanliness".

Key insights of participants

Believing in yourself and contributing to a better world | GULGUNCHA

Gulguncha works at a school and besides that studies Islam. She participated in other trainings in the past in her capacity as a teacher, but as a religious woman, she attended a training for the first time.



"At the training we discussed relations in the family and I realized that in everyday life we alienate our children from us from us, we reprimand them, and tell them things like, "Keep silent, you don't know about that!", and we don't listen to their opinions. I learnt to devote my time to the children and it turned out that if one talks normally with children, then they open up as well. I allowed my daughter to attend English and Russian language courses, started to support her and she took part in another project, she analyzed problems and wrote a small project herself. When we implemented our initiatives in the communities, we invited a psychologist and arranged events on the topic of family relations, and, as a result, some women permitted their daughters-in-law to continue education in the university [after they had discontinued their education after the wedding]".

The success of the project was achieved through the close and systematic cooperation of the project staff with 86 women religious leaders, the majority of whom participated in such activities for the first time in their lives. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders, the project has become a platform of new opportunities for women and girls who discovered new horizons of cooperation with local self-governance bodies, mayor's offices and social service providers in the area of peacebuilding.

