

# Restriction of girls' access to education in Kyrgyzstan



## Context

Despite the fact that a number of international and national legal regulations give the chance for girls to take part in education, restrictions from family and relatives still have a strong impact in Kyrgyzstan. Most families prefer to give only boys the chance to get an education. It is thought that as sons remain in family, they are furthering a dynasty and can care for their parents until the end of their days. Conversely, daughters leave the family when they marry, and so spending the family budget on them is seen as unnecessary. In fact, the earlier a girl marries, the better it is for her and her family.

The MAP club members of school 22 of A. Gaidar conducted youth-led research among their peers who considered this problem as a very crucial one in their community and analysed the causes and consequences of the problem using a creative method called “Obstacle Tree”. By ‘problem mapping’ young people also determined the potential partners to solve this problem.

From January to May, 2022 the MAP Club participants conducted information campaign ‘Support the choice of girls to study’ to attract attention to the problem. They used different arts-based methods, such as Forum Theatre, film making, drawing and essays. The young people expressed their opinions and invited adults to discuss the problem. The experts, including psychologists, health care workers, social workers and lawyers were involved in dialogue.

## Dialogue through arts

Forum Theatre performance was based on a real story told by one of the MAP members - the story of a 15-year-old girl finishing 9th grade whose mother marries her to a son of a rich acquaintance for a large dowry. The mother does this to pay for her son's university education as she considers her son's education more important for the family.

The theatrical performance made people emotional and more open for discussion. Nobody was left feeling indifferent by the girl's difficult situation. Actors and spectators became as one, with everyone wanting to help the girl. Both adults and school students stepped onto the stage, having put themselves to the place of the girl, and tried to change the situation,

before discussing together what could help:

***"The Mass media could show the importance of education for girls instead of advertising."***

(woman, teacher)

***"Health care institutions must speak about the consequences of early marriage and early pregnancy for women's health. But because of the culture of silence people don't speak up, believing that both parties are in agreement and families live peacefully."***

(Women Council member)

After the performance a discussion about the problem between the young people and adults took place, with different points of view being presented, and the schoolgirls expressed their opinions on an equal footing with the adults:

***"A woman is a family-keeper. Her role is to service to her husband's, children's and family's interests. The earlier a girl marries and finds her place, the better. Parents wish only well to their children. Children must honour their parents. They are parents and have the right to decide the destiny of their children."***

(woman, parent)

***"Girls can decide their destiny too. They should think about their future and be able to advocate for their interests. Girls, you should know that there is the law and organisations which can protect you, such as women's councils, schools, local kenesh. It is impossible to assume that such cases occur."***

(woman, women council member)

***"We should all look for the solution of this problem together. We see consequences, we don't want our daughters to live such lives. If we want to change, it is necessary that the whole society stands up for the girl, and legal protection. Only by doing this will we be able to finish this problem."***

(woman, parent)

***"Us girls don't know what to do in such situations. We don't want to marry so early, but we are afraid to express this opinion to our parents. We think that, probably, we aren't right, and that we will be condemned for such thoughts in the village. But, now, when I heard what was said by the adults, I understood that we are not the only ones to think this way. Daughters should be given the chance to study too, to get an education, to have decent work. It is good that all of us together discussed these issues, now many of us know that it is possible to find a way out."***

(school girl)

***"We just saw the story of the girl whose life was broken by her parents will, but there were many reasons for that: the poverty of the family, the rule and prejudices settled in society, the indifference of structures which have had to deal with this problem for a long time. When the performance was shown many women in the hall cried, whether, remembering themselves, or whether their daughters."***

(woman, parent)

## Causes

- Kyrgyz mentality: a woman has to be next to her husband, a woman has no voice; before marriage a woman has to obey to her parents, after her husband and his family.
- Stereotypes about husband and wife roles: a woman doesn't need an education, her purpose and mission is family. If a girl isn't married for long, something is wrong with her or her life is unsuccessful.
- Gender stereotypes are common for families with low culture and education, or low economic status, and also among religious people who do not know Sharia rules and laws.
- Most women don't protest against such injustice, as they consider this behaviour model normal.
- Girls are not able/too afraid to disobey their parents as they are dependent on them.
- A girl who is brought up in family where her mother has no rights then repeats her destiny.
- There is lack of information about women's rights and few explanations about the consequences of early marriage and the lack of education of women.
- Organisations designed to deal with social problems (social services, women councils, youth committees, courts of aksakals, etc.) ignore this problem as if it is not right to interfere in private family lives.

## Consequences

Restriction of access for girls to education leads to negative consequences such as the social and economic vulnerability of women and the degradation of the population in general as the education of a new generation falls on uneducated and dependent women. Furthermore, early marriages are not recognised by the registry office, and as a result, newlyweds and their future children are not eligible for social services, so the family can drop out of legal social system. This leads to high divorce rate and polygamy.



## Recommendations

### To local authorities:

- to conduct information campaigns among the population, directed at withdrawing the pains of traditional stereotypes of women's education.
- to hold meetings with women's councils, aimag heads and local activists to discuss the problem and develop a plan of action.

### To educational institutions:

- to emphasise the prevention of the problem, to encourage parents to educate girls, to speak about statistics and negative consequences of early marriages.
- to create conditions at school for confidence-building between parents, school and pupils (forum theaters, videos, mini-trainings, games and competitions).
- to organise meetings girls with famous women for motivation in getting education.
- to invite health care specialists to parental meetings in order to inform them about consequences of early marriages for girls.

### To health care organisations:

- to lead discussions with female youth and parents about puberty, the development of the reproductive system and intimate hygiene.

### To law enforcement agencies:

- to hold information meetings with students about laws in Kyrgyzstan, e.g. on punishment for bride kidnapping and the prohibition of early marriages.
- to hold information meetings with the population during the village assemblies.

### To religious institutions:

- For religious women leaders to inform women and girls of the importance of receiving both religious and secular education.
- For imams of mosques to inform men on Friday Mohammedan prayers about the importance of educating the girls in Islam.

### To public organisations:

- to hold trainings about critical thinking for girls and also their parents with the purpose of affecting their positions concerning the education of daughters.

