

POLICY BRIEF



Empowerment of Female Deputies in Local Councils as Decision-Makers

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#57, April 2020

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The OSCE Academy's Policy Briefs became possible with financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Academy's Cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....3

Introduction.....3

The Introduction of Electoral Quota Policy in Kyrgyzstan.....4

Gender Stereotypes Impede Effective Implementation of Quota Policy.....4

Policy Options and Strategies.....5

Conclusion.....8

Recommendations.....8

References.....10

Executive Summary

In August 2019 Kyrgyzstan adopted a new electoral quota policy which reserves 30% of seats for female deputies in local councils.¹ This article argues that although this gender quota encourages more women to run for office, it alone cannot ensure equal decision-making. Deeply rooted, socially constructed gender roles and non-recognition of gender discrimination by the state hinders women's potential to become change-makers. To achieve gender equality in Kyrgyzstan today it is crucial to transform the political consciousness of the government and society. In addition to electoral quota policy, civil society and the state have to bring their specialized set of knowledge, expertise, and skills to the common effort.

Introduction

On August 13, 2019 the President of Kyrgyzstan signed a set of laws which aimed to improve electoral legislation.² A new policy setting a 30% quota for female deputies in local councils was the most important amendment. Article 59-1 of the Law “On elections of deputies in local councils” guarantees that 30% of seats in local councils are reserved for female deputies. If a female deputy steps down, the next female deputy in the list receives the mandate.³ Currently, there are only 928 female deputies out of 8384 deputies in local councils.⁴ Only 10% of female deputies represent the interests of women who constitute 52% of the population.⁵ An illustrative example is Joosh council, with 30 male and 1 woman deputies.⁶ In spring 2020 Kyrgyzstan will hold elections in 5 cities and 25 village councils. There are 418 councils which will elect their deputies in 2021. In 2022 three city and fourteen village councils will hold elections.⁷ Therefore, this policy brief discusses mechanisms to ensure the successful implementation of the electoral quota policy prior to and during the election period. The successful implementation in turn will establish the sustainable representation of women in legislatures.

¹ Local councils (village and city councils) are representative bodies of local self-government. See: “Article 6 of Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On Local Self-government,”” July 15, 2011, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/203102> There are 484 local councils in the Kyrgyz Republic. <http://stat.kg/ru/news/cifry-i-fakty-den-mestnyh-soobshestv-kyrgyzskoj-respubliki/>

² “Popravki v vybornoe zakonodatelstvo Kyrgyzstana. Chto izmenilos?” August 15, 2019, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_election_law/30110639.html

³ “Zakon KR “O vyborah deputatov mestnyh keneshi,”” August 9, 2019, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/111964>

⁴ “Za obyazatelnyuyu kvotu dlya zhenshin v 30% v mestnyh keneshah,” July 30, 2019, <http://dpi.kg/ru/press-room/news/full/1504.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Avazhan Ormonova (gender expert, deputy of Joosh local council in Kara-Suu district, Osh oblast), interview with the author, November 2019.

⁷ Centralnaya kommissiya po vyboram i provedeniyu referendumov Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, “Grafik vyborov zaplanirovannyh na 2020-2021 gody s uchetom vnesennyh izmeneniy v zakon o vyborah mestnyh keneshi,” October 16, 2019, <https://shailoo.gov.kg/ru/news/2864/>.

The Introduction of Electoral Quota Policy in Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz Republic adopted the electoral quota policy for the first time in 2007. This was due to the absence of female deputies in Zhogorku Kenesh (the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic) in 2005. This gave the impetus for civil society organizations (CSOs) to initiate the 30% quota for the political party list of candidates to ensure gender parity in Zhogorku Kenesh. After its adoption in 2007, the number of female deputies rose to 26 out of 120 total. However, due to the high level of corruption and pressure from the party leaders and male colleagues, women had to resign. By the end of 2018, the number of female deputies decreased to 19.⁸ In 2017 Zhogorku Kenesh adopted the policy according to which if a female deputy steps down or is appointed to different positions, her seat must be reserved for a female candidate in the party list. The new provision entered into force in 2020.⁹

The gender quota in local councils was initiated in 2016, after Kyrgyzstan adopted the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. In 2016 the Parliament turned the bill down after the first reading. It was adopted in 2019 because the Kyrgyz Republic volunteered for the UN Universal Periodic Review that took place in January 2020.10 Goal 5 urges the states to promote gender equality in all dimensions.¹¹ Target 5.5 pushes for “effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.”¹² The idea behind the quota policy is that the exposure to women leaders reduces bias towards women’s effectiveness in decision-making. The equality in the public sphere in turn will eliminate gender discrimination in the private sphere. It is a temporary measure to encourage more women to participate in the decision-making process.

Gender Stereotypes Impede Effective Implementation of Quota Policy

Despite the positive effect of gender quotas, gender discrimination impedes female deputies’ capacity to influence the decision-making process. The presence of women at the table does not mean that they will have a right to speak or that their voices will be heard. A woman elected through a quota is perceived as less qualified. Avazhan Ormonova (deputy of Joosh local council, Osh oblast) had to prove to her male colleagues and her community that she could solve problems effectively.¹³ She had to spend six months to gain the support of her eighteen male colleagues to promote her policies or projects. It means that women are more likely to be marginalized when there are only one or two of them in the office. Moreover, society has much stricter requirements for a female deputy than for her male colleague. People are proud of a male deputy, they call him *Bizdin uulubuz, baatyrybyz* (“Our son, our protector”). It is because he comes from

⁸ Aida Erkebaeva, “Odnim grafikom: Kak (ne) soblyudalis gendernye kvoty v parlamente za poslednie 5 let,” July 16, 2019, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/07/16/odnim-grafikom-kak-ne-soblyudalis-gendernye-kvoty-v-parlamente-za-poslednie-5-let/>.

⁹ Article 65. P. 4-1. Constitucionnyi Zakon KR “O vyborah Prezidenta Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki i deputatov Zhogorku Kenesha”, July 2, 2011, <http://www.cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/203244>.

¹⁰ Timeline for UPR engagement in the current cycle. <https://www.upr-info.org/en/review/Kyrgyzstan>.

¹¹ UN, “Sustainable Development Goals,” <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>.

¹² SDG 5. SDG Knowledge platform. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>.

¹³ Ibid.

the local village, whereas a woman moves there after her marriage. Therefore, double standards that exist for women discourage them from running for office.

Women face a steep uphill battle from the very start.¹⁴ They typically lack finances, time, and family support to run for office. A woman spends twice as much time on household and family than a man; in rural areas women spend more than five hours on housework.¹⁵ Local deputies work on a voluntary basis because it is assumed that they have a primary job. Hence, a female deputy has to manage her time between her family, household chores, her primary job and her job in the council. Such immense stress negatively affects her physical and mental health, her relationships with family, and her primary employee. Besides, she does not have funds to sponsor her election campaign. In rural areas the candidates participate in elections by self-nomination. On top of that, political parties support male candidates more than female candidates. Still, female candidates go house-to-house to collect votes or announce their program at her work or during *sherine* and *chernaya kassa* (“family and friends gatherings”). Due to the above-mentioned barriers, only an older and experienced woman is able to run for the local council.¹⁶ She does not have young children, her community recognizes her from her primary work, and her family and other male candidates support her. The profile of a female deputy in local council looks like this: an educated woman between the age of 35 and 70, with professional experience—or retired—who is respected by her community. Usually teachers, public servants, medical workers, and activists run for the local council.

Policy Options and Strategies

The quota provision is one of the strategies to ensure equal participation of women in the decision-making process. It is especially important for Kyrgyzstan, which has a two-level budget system. It means that local councils accumulate budget income and allocate expenditure autonomously.¹⁷ With more female deputies, the local councils will be able to address the questions considering the interests of different social groups. The new policy showed its effectiveness on September 22, 2019.¹⁸ The first elections after the adoption of the gender quota were held in Saruu local council of Issyk-Kul oblast. Female deputies won 9 mandates out of 21 in local elections in Saruu council, despite the opposition of local men who claimed that the gender quota restricted the voting rights of citizens.

Prior to the implementation of the quota there were only 3 female deputies.¹⁹ Because

¹⁴ Zulfiya Kochorbaeva (gender expert, director of PA “Agency of Social Technologies, Bishkek), interview with the author, November 2019.

¹⁵ UNDP, “Case study on combating gender inequality in political participation in Kyrgyzstan” October 11, 2016, https://www.kg.undp.org/content/kyrgyzstan/en/home/library/womens_empowerment/-case-study-on-combating-gender-inequality-in-political-particip.html.

¹⁶ Eliza Adzhieva (coordinator of PA “Women Support Center” Bishkek), interview with the author, November 2019.

¹⁷ Development Policy Institute, “Local budget.” http://vap.kg/en/activities/intergovernmental_relations/local-budgets/

¹⁸ Zhazgul Masalieva, “Kak zhenshiny sela uterli nos muzhchinam,” September 26, 2019. https://24.kg/vlast/130506_vyiboryi_vsaruu_kak_jenschinyi_sela_uterli_nos_mujchinam/.

¹⁹ Ainur Omorova (deputy of Saruu local council in Zheti-Oguz district, Issyk-Kul oblast), interview with the author, November 2019.

of low female representation of women both in Zhogorku Kenesh and local councils, there was a growth of domestic violence, sexist rhetoric by public servants, calls for legalization of polygamy, and an increase in child marriages. The government reduced its financial support for gender sensitive policies.²⁰ It would be wrong to say that men do not address social problems. However, the decision-making is more inclusive when more women participate in it. Female deputies consider how their policies affect the interests of women, children, people with disabilities, and senior citizens. As a result, policies proposed by the local council will meet the needs and requirements of a greater number of social groups.²¹ To achieve inclusive decision-making we need to empower women to become decision-makers. The joint efforts of CSOs and government bodies coupled with the new quota provision are the possible solutions.

In order to eradicate gender discrimination, the Kyrgyz government implemented a set of laws to equip women with legal provisions to ensure equal participation, protection from violence and harassment, and equal pay. However, these cases are left unsaid due to stigma, corruption in law enforcement agencies, community and family pressure. There is a wide gap between legal provisions and their implementation due to the superficial attitude of Kyrgyz state authorities towards gender policy. In 2012 the Kyrgyz government adopted the National Strategy of the KR to Achieve Gender Equality until 2020 and the National Action Plan on Gender Equality in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012-2014.²² It states that Parliament, the Government, the State Personnel Service, and the General Prosecutor's Office carry out state controls over the implementation of gender equality in decision-making. However, weak state supervision and monitoring lead to the state bodies themselves violating the norms and procedures in appointing candidates for the office. Political parties and local governments promote candidates to enter political service. Yet, these institutions do not have normative mechanisms that would promote gender-responsive budgeting and gender-sensitive regulations. The non-recognition of gender discrimination results in the fact that the court, the law enforcement system, and state institutions do not incorporate gender-sensitive norms in professional and social practice.

Currently, not all local councils are informed about the gender quota, while others do not know how it works.²³ The example of Saruu elections in 2019 illustrates how the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) failed to provide timely information on the newly incorporated quota policy. Sixteen female candidates ran for local council without knowing about the new quota policy. There would have been more women candidates if they had received the information prior to election campaigns.²⁴ Furthermore, the timely and accurate information is important for the voter's choice. The quota does not restrict

²⁰ Avazhan Ormonova (gender expert, deputy of Joosh local council in Kara-Suu district, Osh oblast), interview with the author, November 2019.

²¹ Zulfiya Kochorbaeva (gender expert, director of PA "Agency of Social Technologies, Bishkek), interview with the author, November 2019.

²² Government Decree «On National Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for Achieving Gender Equality until 2020 and the National Action Plan for Achieving Gender Equality in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012-2014. Dated June 27, 2012, #443. <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/93343>

²³ Kubanychbek Kanaev (deputy of Kotormo council in Kadamzhai district, Batken oblast), interview with the author, November, 2019.

²⁴ Avazhan Ormonova (gender expert, deputy of Joosh council in Kara-Suu district, Osh oblast), interview with the author, November 2019.

their choice, but rather ensures a more diverse composition of candidates that represents the interests of different social groups. It also ensures active voter mobilization and, as a result, a better voter turnout.

Moreover, the media plays a crucial role in instilling positive attitudes towards gender empowerment and in raising awareness about new policies and norms. The Saruu elections gained nation-wide interest and support due to the strong media coverage. Many national media outlets openly criticized the opposition of local men to incorporating gender quotas in the September elections. They celebrated the victory of female deputies and encouraged women in other regions to actively participate in the upcoming elections in 2020.²⁵ Media outlets are very effective in generating public opinion in Kyrgyzstan. However, there are 484 village councils in Kyrgyzstan, and 137 of which do not have access to the Internet.²⁶ Therefore, the role of local self-governments is important in raising awareness about new electoral provisions and women empowerment. They have resources to assist CSOs to reach the most remote areas in the country. On top of that, the Forum of Women Deputies in Zhogorku Kenesh must be actively involved in recruiting women to run for office, as local deputies represent a national pool, which has a potential to be re-elected in Zhogorku Kenesh or other top ministerial positions.

After adopting the quota policy, many NGOs began training projects to increase the capacity of female candidates and deputies in local councils. It is a two-step education program. First, they teach women how to run for elections. They learn how to build their electoral campaigns, how to prepare necessary documents, and about electoral legislation. Second, after they are elected they learn about budget planning, monitoring and evaluation of their policies and projects, how to coordinate with other state bodies, and the jurisdiction of local councils.²⁷ Such training is crucial for local deputies who often lack education and professional experience in public office. Currently, Parliament is debating about whether or not to include an education requirement for local deputies. Local deputies agree that candidates must at least have a secondary education because some candidates do not know how to fill out the papers, not to mention the functions of local council. Due to some incompetent deputies, local council is sued for violating state law.²⁸ Local councils do not have experts who they can consult on economic, environmental, and legal issues. Therefore, CSOs are important for providing significant resources to local councils in the form of funds, expertise, guidance, and consultation. With the upcoming elections in 2020, all local councils are looking at elections in Saruu council. Women now comprise 42% compared to 14% in previous legislative terms. These elections illustrate that women are active and there is no lack of female candidates as the critics claim. Moreover, the composition of a newly formed council is diverse and competent. There are 9 women between the age of 28 and 68. Eighteen deputies out of twenty-one have higher education and professional experience. Female deputies actively participate in trainings and teach other women to be active participants in their

²⁵ Zhazgul Masalieva, "Kak zhenshiny sela uterli nos muzhchinam," September 26, 2019, https://24.kg/vlast/130506_vyiboryi_vsaruu_kak_jenschinyi_sela_uterli_nos_mujchinam/.

²⁶ "Cifry i fakty: Den mestnyh soobshestv KR," October 26, 2019, <http://stat.kg/ru/news/cifry-i-fakty-den-mestnyh-soobshestv-kyrgyzskoj-respubliki/>.

²⁷ Eliza Adzhieva (coordinator of PA "Women Support Center" Bishkek), interview with the author, November 2019.

²⁸ Sabyrbek Kalberdiev (deputy of Kyzyl-Too local council in Uzgen district, Osh oblast), interview with the author, November 2019.

community's life. They also talk to the candidate's family to support her in her political career. Moreover, after the elections other local councils and CSOs have contacted them to plan peer-to-peer training. International non-governmental organizations and financial institutions such as Issyk-Kul Fund for Development expressed their readiness to invest in their projects.

Conclusion

The idea behind equal gender representation in decision-making is that with more women in power, the policies will become more attentive to gender-specific issues. Furthermore, exposure to female leadership will gradually eliminate bias towards women's effectiveness in solving issues. When in power, women can use it as a shield to guarantee equal access to justice²⁹ and inspire other women to run for the office. However, the gender quota alone does not guarantee equal decision-making. Although a gender quota ensures positive effects by bringing more women to the table, it cannot empower women to become decision-makers. Deeply rooted, socially constructed gender roles and non-recognition of gender discrimination by state bodies undermine the political leadership of women. The political consciousness of the state and society needs to be transformed, which requires a lot of time and resources. According to the World Economic Forum's research it will take "108 years to close the gender gap and 202 years to achieve parity in the workforce."³⁰ Bridging the gap between policy and practice will empower women to become real change-makers. Therefore, the collective efforts of CSOs and government bodies are crucial to achieve gender equality today.

Recommendations

- Local self-government bodies provide additional support for CSOs to reach the most remote rural areas to train local women. The Central Electoral Commission provides timely information about new electoral legislation and procedures. Local law enforcement bodies must provide a safe environment for candidates during electoral campaigns and elections, thereby preventing gender-based electoral violence.
- CSOs in partnership with the government and local self-government bodies conduct comprehensive nation-wide political education programs for female candidates and deputies. The local population should be involved in gender and conflict sensitive awareness sessions to learn about the negative repercussions of gender discrimination and gender-based violence. The local male population, including religious and community leaders, should be involved in information campaigns to raise awareness about women's political empowerment.

²⁹ Zh. Zheenbaeva, "Narusheniya politicheskikh prav jenshin (PPZh) v vybornykh processah v KR," http://wsc.kg/narusheniya-politicheskikh-prav-zhenshin-ppzh-v-vyborykh-protsessah-v-kyrgyzskoj-respublike-otchet-issledovaniya-avtor_-zh-zheenbaeva/.

³⁰ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report," http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/?doing_wp_cron=1546871908.8928940296173095703125.

- Media outlets can inform citizens about the gender quota in a timely and comprehensive manner. Prior to elections, the local population must be informed about both female and male candidates equally. It is important to highlight the achievements and programs of female candidates. Additionally, documentary movies about female leaders in rural areas can contribute to women's empowerment by reducing bias towards female political leadership.
- Female MPs strengthen interactions with female deputies in local councils. The Forum of Women Parliamentary Deputies carries out regular peer-to-peer training activities to form a national reserve of female deputies to empower them to run for managerial positions in higher state institutions. Online educational materials about budget policy design and implementation, budget formulation and auditing, and electoral legislation and campaigns is an efficient tool to develop the potential of local deputies.
- Local councils must incorporate gender sensitive regulations to ensure a safe environment for female deputies. Children-friendly facilities should be provided for women deputies who have younger children. Female deputies with children and full-time jobs must have an opportunity to work flexible hours or online. Deputies of local councils must have financial benefits which will improve their performance.
- The OSCE Academy in Bishkek can organize a one-week capacity building seminar for female deputies representing seven oblasts of the Kyrgyz Republic. As an alternative, it can organize a Central Asian Network of female deputies to exchange effective mechanisms to empower women and eliminate gender discrimination in Central Asian countries.

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