

CHILDCARE, WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND THE COVID-19 IMPACT AND RESPONSE: THE CASE OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC



UNECE - UN Women series:
Rethinking Care Economy and
Empowering Women for Building
Back Better

ано ОФ кр поддержке ы в Кыргызстане

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE (UNECE)

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This report is the result of a collaboration between UNECE and UN Women in the framework of the United Nations Development Account tranche 13 project "Strengthening Social Protection for Pandemic Response", in particular its workstream on strengthening care policies with a gender lens, implemented with the participation of UN regional commissions and cooperating partners, including UN Women regional offices.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRI	International Republican Institute
KGS	Kyrgyzstani soms
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprises
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
VAT	Value Added Tax
WHO	World Health Organization

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6	LIST OF FIGURES	
1. INTRODUCTION	8	Figure 1. Reasons for choosing a job, by gender, 2016 (percentage)	18
2. OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT SITUATION	11	LIST OF TABLES	
Participation in the labour market	11	Table 1. Key economic indicators, 2020	9
Women's entrepreneurship	13	Table 2. Employment, unemployment and activity rates, by gender, 2019	11
Impact of migration on women and care work	14	Table 3. Breakdown of the employment rate, by gender and age, 2020 (percentage)	12
Informal employment	15	Table 4. Ratio of women's wages to men's, by territory, 2015–2019 (percentage)	13
Women's unpaid care work	15	Table 5. Daily time distribution of household members, by gender and settlement type, 2015 (minutes)	16
Social norms and gender stereotypes	17	Table 6. Daily time distribution of household members on homemaking, by gender and settlement type, 2015 (minutes)	16
3. PROVISION OF CHILDCARE AND EARLY EDUCATION	19	Table 7. Preschool institutions and enrolled children in Kyrgyzstan, 2019	21
Types of care	19	Table 8. Government expenditures, 2012–2019 (percentage)	22
Childcare coverage	20	Table 9. Number of school reopenings as of 16 February 2021, by territory	31
Funding model	21	Table 10. Number of kindergarten reopenings as of 16 February 2021, by territory	31
4. IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND THE PROVISION OF CHILDCARE AND EARLY EDUCATION	24	Table 11. Workers at risk: Sectoral perspectives	33
Socioeconomic response and recovery measures	24		
Assistance to enterprises impacted by the COVID-19 crisis	30		
Supporting jobs and incomes	32		
Mobilizing financial resources to combat COVID-19	34		
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	36		
REFERENCES	39		
ANNEX 1. Gender in employment policies and programmes	41		
ANNEX 2. Legal and regulatory context of early childhood education and care	43		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 has had a devastating economic impact. The current crisis in the Kyrgyz Republic has exacerbated already existing gender inequalities with extensive implications for women. With the closure of day cares and other social service premises and with a shift to working from home and online education, the need to perform unpaid chores in the household has increased. The higher burden of care duties and difference in employment rates contribute to the increasing labour inactivity of women. The policy and business measures that were introduced by the Kyrgyz Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic remain gender-insensitive and fail to address the existing income disparities.

Some key findings emerged in the areas discussed below.

Childcare provision

- There is a continued predominance of informal care provision, especially for preschool-age children (aged 0–7 years).
- In 2019, only about 37 per cent of preschool-age children were covered by preschool education, and the preschool coverage was almost twice higher in urban areas (34 per cent) than in rural areas (18 per cent). This low coverage rate, which is pronouncedly worse in rural areas, leaves a massive gap of 63 per cent of children not being taken care of by the preschool educational institutions across the country.
- The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) also found that the coverage of early childhood development for children at the age of 3 (36 per cent) was lower than that for children at the age of 5 (64 per cent). Most children under the age of 3 are being taken care of by mothers or other family members.
- The lack of infrastructural capacity is only one of the main factors contributing to the problem of low coverage in rural and urban areas. Private and public kindergartens face such issues as insufficient safety and nutrition provision and the lack of checks, regulation and control. There has been no survey to understand how preschool education providers are viewed by the parents, but there is a

sense that there is a general positive attitude towards the institutions.

- The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic remained socially oriented in its public expenditures and dedicated the largest portion of its budget to education. Thus, the share of expenditures to education grew from 19 per cent in 2010 to 26.4 per cent in 2019 and to 26.6 per cent for the first nine months of 2020. Private education providers make up only a small fraction of education services.
- Inefficient use of the currently allocated expenditures, as well as weak institutional and management capacity in the public preschool educational system, prevents the system from using the funding to introduce equitable, inclusive education and improve the quality of education.

Women's employment

- The labour force participation rate of women in Kyrgyzstan is the lowest among the Member-States of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The gender gap in the employment rates is the highest among the age group of 20-to-29-year-olds, when most women get married and have their first child.
- In general, 38 per cent of economically active women quit their jobs due to personal family reasons, with care taking responsibilities being one of the main reasons (the corresponding value among males is 11 per cent). Thus, the likelihood of quitting a job and caring for family needs is four times greater for women than for men.
- Despite progressive legislation and programmes as well as wage adjustment policy in 2011 that focused on the wages of education, healthcare and social service workers (i.e. positions that are predominantly occupied by women), the gender pay gap continues to grow. The biggest gaps are registered for the Issyk-Kul and Osh regions.
- The hurdles faced by women when establishing and running a business are vast and often differ from those encountered by their male counterparts. Thus, women have limited access to financing,

information and technology, they lack access to business networks, and they have to reconcile business and family issues.

- According to the Joint Report on Migration in Kyrgyzstan of the Kyrgyz State Migration Service, more than 50,000 people leave the country as labour migrants annually. Of them, 76 per cent are under the age of 35, and about 40 per cent of labour migrants are females.
- Employment in Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a high degree of informality. According to the official data, the volume of the informal economy is KGS 130 billion, or 23.6 per cent of GDP. A typical employee in the informal economy is a young female with limited education.
- Large-scale informal sector employment often leaves women without any legal protection, trapping them in low-paying, unsafe working conditions and without access to social benefits such as a pension, medical insurance or paid maternity and sick leave.

Impact of COVID-19

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated already existing structural and gender inequalities in employment, making occupational segregation and the uneven distribution of care provision more pronounced.
- Women's employment rate has been negatively impacted as there was a wide-scale reduction in working hours and increase in unpaid care labour. Moreover, 52 per cent of low-income families reported a deterioration in their financial situation. Quarantine orders, which forced many people to stay home and spend more time with their families, led women to spend 3.6 times more time on unpaid work than men and two times more time on childcare.
- In addition, children had to share in the increased burden of performing household duties during the pandemic, affecting their remote schooling performance.

Response and recovery

- The Republican Task Force was established in early 2020. However, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development of the Kyrgyz Republic, which is responsible for establishing a social protection system and implementing gender policy in Kyrgyzstan, was not included in either of the COVID-19 Task Force groups.
- In May 2020, an anti-crisis fund, amounting to 2 per cent of GDP in 2020 and 7 per cent of GDP in 2021, was established to support enterprises in the hardest-hit sectors. One of the main measures that were funded was the concessional financing of support businesses in several sectors of the Kyrgyz economy; this included those fields with high rates of women's employment, such as tourism, light industry, agribusiness, education, services, trade and others. Additional support measures include taxation and debt-service relief, a moratorium on business inspections, a temporary ban on bankruptcy procedures of businesses until 2021 and an exemption from paying rent on state/municipal-owned property.
- The Government introduced compensation schemes (usually one-off payments or a small increase in salary payments) to healthcare, social and education employees. From a care and employment perspective, however, the response was minimal. No measures were introduced that were specifically intended for working parents who were affected by the closure of childcare services and schools.
- Overall, COVID-19 policy responses have not addressed gender inequalities. To counterbalance the trend towards exacerbating existing inequalities, the most pervasive of which has been gender inequality during COVID-19, policies must focus on the vulnerabilities created or deepened by the pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Government of Kyrgyzstan, like many others across the region, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020 with lockdown and restrictive measures to contain the spread of the virus. Measures included border closures, travel restrictions, school shutdowns, a ban on large gatherings, transport restrictions, the introduction of curfews that spread over several days and closure of non-essential services. The pandemic and subsequent shutdown response has had a serious impact on the economy, with GDP falling by 8.1 per cent from January to November 2020 on an annual basis,¹ as well as a drop in remittances by 25 per cent and a rise in the unemployment rate to 21 per cent.²

In addition to such devastating economic disruption, it has been widely recognized that the current crisis in Kyrgyzstan has exacerbated already existing gender inequalities with extensive implications for women. With the closure of day cares and other social service premises and with a shift to working from home and online education, the need to perform unpaid chores in the household has increased.

Women in Kyrgyzstan carried a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from a time-use survey in 2015 show that females spend 1.3 hours less each day on paid work, while at the same time, they also spend 2.75 hours more per day on unpaid work than men on household work, work in the garden or orchard, and parenting. The discrepancy in the amount of time spent on unpaid reproductive labour does not depend on the employment status of women. The work and care loads are even higher for self-employed

empowerment. Following the global trends, the economic activity rate is lower for women (45 per cent) than it is for men (75.4 per cent).³ The difference in the employment rates is mainly due to the marked higher inactivity of women in the labour market. Inactivity rates in Kyrgyzstan are significantly higher for women, with the inactivity rate for women in 2019 at 57.3 per cent, against 28.1 per cent for men.⁴

Women in the country also take on more part-time employment and casual roles in the family. According to 2017 data from the National Statistical Committee, about 38 per cent of economically active females have quit their jobs due to personal family reasons (the corresponding value among males is 11 per cent).⁵ They are living in a society significantly influenced by traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The roles are divided into 'masculine' and 'feminine', with the latter being less paid and precarious. The conflicting demands on women's time for care (whether it is care for elderly members, the sick or young children) and paid work activities represent a fundamental barrier to their economic participation and contribute to the dwindling rate of labour-market involvement. Women are largely recognized as being primary care providers, and this societal expectation creates an unbalanced sharing of family responsibilities at home. Women invest more in childcare roles, and this has been especially true during the pandemic. These factors perpetuate gender-based inequalities and women's economic vulnerability.

This report explores links between childcare provision and women's labour-market participation in Kyrgyzstan in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. First,

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