

NPRS-PRF

Helping Accelerate Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific

MAINSTREAMING GENDER INTO POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

A regional technical assistance (RETA), undertaken in four selected Central Asian Republics, was aimed at contributing to the poverty reduction efforts in these countries by supporting the governments in identifying key gender issues for poverty reduction.

Under the former Soviet Union (FSU) system, there was relative gender equality in the Central Asian republics (CARs) when women and men had similar access to activities in the economic, social, and political spheres.¹ However, the transition to a market-driven economy has been accompanied by a fall in living standards and social status for most of the population in the CARs, particularly for women. The transition period has been marked by economic reforms, including the privatization of state-owned assets and access to capital. It has also seen a decrease in state-funded social services and social protection programs as well as a decline in health and educational systems (sectors that were traditionally dominated by women). This decline has been accompanied by considerable impacts on women's income, employment, and quality of life.

Because of reduced incomes, increasing unemployment, and an eroding social protection system, the incidence of poverty is rapidly growing, specifically among vulnerable groups.

Identifying Key Gender Issues for Poverty Reduction

A regional technical assistance (RETA) financed by the Cooperation Fund in Support of the Formulation and Implementation of National Poverty Reduction Strategies was undertaken in four selected Central Asian Republics (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan²) for the integration of gender issues in their respective national poverty reduction strategies (NPRSs) and country partnership strategies (CPSs).

RETA 6177 (Mainstreaming Gender into Poverty Reduction Strategies in Four Central Asia Republics³) aimed to contribute to the poverty reduction efforts of the four republics by supporting the governments in identifying key gender issues for poverty reduction. The objectives were to improve the quality of NPRSs and CPSs by identifying, mainstreaming, and

implementing policies and programs that would benefit both men and women and maximize potential benefits for the poor.

Participatory country gender assessments⁴ (CGAs) were conducted under RETA 6177 to look into: (i) the different roles of women and men and their participation in the market and household economies; (ii) gender disparities in access, control over, and use of assets, productive resources, and human development indicators; (iii) inequalities between women and men in decision making at local and national levels; and (iv) laws, institutional frameworks, norms, and other social practices that contribute to gender discrimination and/or gender inequality. The CGAs identified gender-responsive policies, strategies, and actions for integration into NPRSs.

Policy and institutional analyses were also made as basis for recommending gender-responsive policies and operational interventions of CPSs.

Among the four republics, common findings emerged as priority gender concerns:

- **Women are more vulnerable to income poverty⁵ than men.**

Their access to economic resources such as credit, agricultural inputs, and land are more limited. In the countries covered, women tend to use income that they have control over—first for children and then food security—while men tend to keep a greater proportion for their own needs, rendering women's welfare at greater risk in low-income households.

In Tajikistan, an analysis of the 2003 Tajikistan Living Standards Survey (TLSS) recalculated poverty levels based on the actual allocation of resources between men and women within households. When 50% of the income of men and women is pooled within a household, poverty rates for women increase

from 63.9% to 66.1% and decrease from 63.5% to 52.7% for men. This results from women tending to take responsibility for household expenditures such as food, education, and health care. Men, on the other hand, favor expenditures on capital goods and tend to use any surplus income for their consumption, often on items such as tobacco or alcohol.

- **Women suffered more than men have from the reduction of state-provided social protection.**

During the FSU era, the state provided significant support for women to enable them to participate in the workforce. Support included child-care services at their workplaces. These services, however, are no longer guaranteed. Women have to find alternative strategies to balance work inside and outside of their homes.

The abolition of the state-provided child-care services in the Kyrgyz Republic during the transition phase led to the closure of almost two thirds of the country's kindergartens. This removed the child-care support that enabled many women to participate in economic work outside their homes.

- **The transition to a market-led economy generated large-scale job losses, which was experienced severely by women.**

Women have been laid off more readily than men and have remained unemployed for longer periods. Unemployment among women is increasing and more women are withdrawing from the formal labor market because of pressures on their time. Other issues contributing to diminished opportunities include reduced access to economic resources, and women having to compensate for cuts in social services through unpaid labor.

In 1990, immediately prior to the dissolution of the FSU, three quarters of women in the Kyrgyz Republic were in the official labor force. This workforce was supported by an extensive network of public services such as day-care centers, kindergartens, extended maternity leave, and access to basic health care. By 2002, the employment rate for women had almost halved.

In Kazakhstan, the average wage gap between men and women grew from 30% in 1990 to 38% in 2002. This demonstrates women's increasing segregation in the labor force, even as the economy has grown.

- **Social indicators remain persistently low in all four CARs despite improvement in economic indicators.**

Differences between men and women are striking—contributing to women's reduced ability to lift themselves out of poverty (capability poverty). Gender gaps in educational achievements are growing in most countries. Enrollment rates in the Kyrgyz Republic remain high, but girls' enrollment rates in primary education are declining.

In Kazakhstan, on the other hand, girls remain in school longer than boys do, but they cannot convert their higher education

into well-paying jobs, resulting in an inefficient use of investments in education.

While other health indicators have improved, the maternal mortality rate⁶ (MMR) remains relatively high and is proving persistently hard to tackle.

MMR (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)⁷

Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyz Republic	Tajikistan
37.0 (2000)	36.9 (2004)	49.3 (2003)	43.1 (2004)

High levels of nutritional deficiency among women and girls are of concern in Azerbaijan. In particular, the prevalence of anemia among women of childbearing age is extremely high. Official statistics record that one out of six women (16.4%) suffered from anemia in 2003 (SSC 2004:155).

- **The demise of the socialist system has led to sharp declines in women's participation in political processes.**

The Soviet system ensured quotas for women's participation in political decision-making and representative bodies. The disbanding of the quota system resulted in a sharp decrease in representation of women at all levels of elected bodies, revealing systemic barriers to women's political participation. The democratization process in the four republics has yet to address this inequality in political representation.

Elected Women in the National Parliament⁸ (in %)

Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyz Republic	Tajikistan
10.4	9.5	1.3	1.3

Women comprised 40% of the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan Republic in 1989, largely due to the quota system. Within a year of independence, women's representation dropped to only 6%. In 2004, only 13 of the 125 members of the National Assembly were women.

As far as policies and programs are concerned, efforts have been initiated by governments to address gender issues to a limited degree (such as within education and health care). However, gender mainstreaming at the strategic policy formulation and development level is not being routinely implemented.

The new Tajikistan Gender Equality Law was adopted in December 2004 to address gender concerns—among them discrimination in the workplace—by defining statutory guarantees in several areas, including employment. The law stops short of creating specific structures through which discrimination can be addressed.

- **Increased vulnerability of women and girls.**

Infrastructure development and regional cooperation have brought economic growth, but they have contributed to making

women and girls more vulnerable to trafficking, the spread of HIV and AIDS⁹, and violence.

Recommendations

The findings of the RETA 6177 studies clearly indicate that gender equality and women's empowerment in CARs have regressed during the transition period. A shift to democracy or accelerated economic growth does not automatically guarantee that the different needs of men and women are addressed. Gender-sensitive policies are essential to narrow the growing gender gaps. Strong political will, a policy environment that is conducive, and a vibrant civil society movement are necessary for ensuring that gender concerns are adequately addressed.

RETA 6177 forwarded recommendations to support and inform the gender mainstreaming initiatives of the four CARs. Among these were the conduct of more detailed social and gender analysis as a basis for gender-focused programs with accompanying adequate financial and human resources.

RETA 6177 also stressed capacity development for gender initiatives, particularly for the national women's machineries in each of the four CARs, which made limited progress in advancing gender equality or effectively implementing policies. Likewise, it proposed continuous monitoring of key gender gaps in national poverty reduction programs.

References:

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Endnotes

¹ Women actively participated in the workforce in the Central Asian republics (CARs) during the FSU era where the state provided social services and protection schemes to release them from many household responsibilities such as child care, so they could enter the paid workforce. Women were likewise guaranteed access to education, resulting in high education achievements among them.

² These countries are experiencing similar political and economic transition, but have different levels of poverty and gender concerns. The TA was particularly timely, as it formulated a gender strategy for Azerbaijan for 2005 and provided critical inputs to the CSP updates in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan.

³ RETA 6177 (Mainstreaming Gender into Poverty Reduction Strategies in Four Central Asia Republics); TA amount – \$60,000 was government financing and \$350,000 was financed from the Cooperation Fund in Support of the Formulation and Implementation of National Poverty Reduction Strategies contributed by the Government of the Netherlands; approval date was July 2004; and completion date was 30 September 2006.

⁴ Country gender assessments (CGA) were done from 2004–2005.

⁵ Income below that is needed to subsist is measured by means such as \$1 per day.

⁶ Key macro indicator that illustrates women's vulnerability to health risks is the MMR (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births).

⁷ UN reports note that this data is unreliable because of inconsistencies in definitions of live births and unreliable data collection methods. In all cases, UN sources cite higher MMRs than those provided through official data.

⁸ CGAs data from 2004–2005.

⁹ HIV – human immunodeficiency virus
AIDS – acquired immune deficiency syndrome

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