

# **Changing Gender Norms: Impact of the Gender Action Learning Systems (GALS) Methodology on Housework Distribution and Women's Agency in Kyrgyzstan**

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**Cover Page**

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Learning Systems (GALS) Methodology on Housework  
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**Second Supervisor:** Professor Dorota Golańska

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2022**

## GEMMA Consortium Page



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*To my Grandfather and my Father who made such a great education possible  
for me, but not here to celebrate my success.*

*Rest in peace.*

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no material accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no material previously written and/or published by another person, except where an appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to critically review the NGOs' women empowerment approaches in Kyrgyzstan. The case study of the GALS methodology as a tool for women empowerment and gender norms change in Kyrgyzstan was analyzed through key informant interviews and a desk review of the project documents to explore the gaps between what was sought and what was achieved by the project. The postcolonial feminist theory with its critical response to the stereotypical image of the Third World Woman was applied to the analyses. I criticize the NGOs' language and bases of report writing which is generally biased and creates the results they want to see at the top. My contribution focus on how the NGO reports and evaluations justify and narratively build their truth for the donors while excluding the facts of beneficiaries' resistant or ignorant attitudes towards the interventions. I came up with the term 'collective gooding' to explain the rationale behind the NGOs' strive for the good reports by the NGOs' donor funding and Kyrgyzstan as a country with high foreign aid dependency. Strategically using the women as victims of domestic violence and patriarchal gender norms and applying biased project results measurement tools (beneficiary testimonials and counting the number of events and participants) NGOs secure their grants, skillfully avoiding addressing the women's issues presented in the project proposals.

*Keywords: Kyrgyzstan, NGOs, donor-dependency, GALS methodology, empowerment tool, women empowerment, collective gooding.*

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## List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CDA	Community Development Alliance
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil society organizations
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GAD	Gender and Development
GALS	Gender Action Learning System
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEMMA	Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies
GII	Gender inequality index
ICNL	International Center of Non-Profit Law
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
LSG	Local Self-Government
NGO	Non-government organization
ON	Oxfam Novib
PALS	Participatory Action Learning Systems
RWEE	Rural Women's Economic Empowerment Joint Programme
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WAD	Gender and Development
WEMAN	Women's Empowerment Mainstreaming and Networking
WFP	World Food Programme
WID	Women in Development

## 1. Introduction

*“Gender justice in the GALS system is an integral and indisputable part of analysis and strategies at all levels... Both men and women realize that if they do not change gender inequality, they will not be able to fulfill their true human responsibilities in this life.”*<sup>1</sup> This is what the second paragraph of the GALS manual adapted to the local context that I and my colleague were translating from Kyrgyz to English as interns at the UN Women office in Bishkek. Back in 2018 for a young lady, who was extremally excited to be part of a well-recognized institution on women’s rights, the statement, and intentions of the methodology were noble and even inspiring.

GALS (Gender Action Learning System) is a community-led empowerment system created by Linda Mayoux to help families and communities have more peaceful and violence-free interactions.<sup>2</sup> The author defines the methodology as a “philosophy of change which is founded on the values of social and gender justice, as well as inclusivity and mutual respect.”<sup>3</sup> The main idea of the methodology is to analyze data through drawing and diagrams as key tools. From the year 2007 GALS was funded by Oxfam Novib and IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) and utilized in various projects in Latin America, Africa and Asia.<sup>4</sup>

GALS was first piloted in Kyrgyzstan in 2016 as a complementary methodology of the Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment Joint Programme (RWEE) which was implemented by UN Women, IFAD, WFP (World Food Programme), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and local NGOs (non-governmental organization). The local NGO Community

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<sup>1</sup> IFAD, UN Women, ‘Gender Action Learning System (GALS) Methodology Manual [ГАЛС Ыкмаларын Ишке Ашыруу Колдонмосу]’, vdocument.in, 2017, <https://vdocument.in/gals-manual-kyr-12042018-final-2019-09-03-1-disclaimer-this-manual-presents-gender.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Mayoux, ‘Gender Action Learning System for Sustainability at Scale’, GAMEChange Network, accessed 20 September 2022, <https://gamechangenetwork.org/gender-empowerment/galsatscale/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Development Alliance (CDA) acted as a local implementing partner of all four UN agencies.<sup>5</sup> CDA claims that it has adapted the tools according to the Kyrgyz local context, including the development of a Kyrgyz manual explaining the facilitation of the five tools in great detail.<sup>6</sup> As a knowledge management intern, I and my colleague, besides translating the manual, we had a mission to research and evaluate the piloted project to come up with the lessons learned and the best practices for an effective upscaling of the GALS methodology in Kyrgyzstan. I was quite impressed to hear women's life-transforming stories with the help of GALS, and I would say it gave me the impetus to apply for the GEMMA program and study Women and Gender studies.

In 2018, the GALS methodology was utilized as one of the primary components of the EU-funded project “Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combating Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan”.<sup>7</sup> The project's goal was to eliminate non-consensual and early marriages by tackling the strongly entrenched patriarchal attitudes, prevalent gender stereotypes, and damaging social conventions in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>8</sup> In May 2020, I was asked to evaluate the project, which I have done with great interest. The manager of the “Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan” project asked me to evaluate the GALS' impact on the families that have practiced it. The total amount of people trained to use the methodology was 11,462 people (12,000 was the set target amount for the project's outcome) during the 32 months of the project duration.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Natalia Kosheleva and Elmira Kerimalieva, ‘Final Evaluation of the Kyrgyzstan Joint UN Women/ FAO/ IFAD/ WFP Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women’, World Food Programme, 22 November 2021, <https://www.wfp.org/publications/kyrgyzstan-joint-evaluation-joint-un-women-fao-ifad-wfp-programme-accelerating>.

<sup>6</sup> Rasulova Gulmira, Manual Gender Action Learning System (GALS) Implementation Toolkit, ed. Ainuru Bulekbaeva, 2nd ed. (UN Women, 2020), 6-9, [https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/GALS%20manual\\_ENG\\_SEP2020.pdf](https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/GALS%20manual_ENG_SEP2020.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Natalia Kosheleva and Elmira Brown, ‘Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation’ (UN Women, 2021), 14, <https://gate.unwomen.org/EvaluationDocument/Download?evaluationDocumentID=9547>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 89.

The interview analyses have shown positive changes appearing in gender norms, sharing the housework, in the families due to practicing the GALS methodology. Family members of the GALS practitioners started supporting each other more and sharing household chores. After learning GALS tools, participants' husbands, children, and mothers-in-law began observing that the most of the work was done by their wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law and changed their attitude towards them by sharing the housework. Women in rural areas also became taking part in the decision-making process in the family regarding the family budget. The GALS users also reported about planning the family budget that helps them to avoid unnecessary expenses and save some money, that it also helped to prevent the conflicts in the family because of the financial issues.

GALS looks so perfect, convenient and simple to use at the same time. The GALS methodology was praised by the project team, the implementing partners and beneficiaries. As a person, who have met the women and their families and heard their stories about how GALS has changed and improved their lives, I was also convinced about the magic effect of the GALS. Nonetheless, in both of my experiences, I have noticed no welcoming and reluctant attitude of the local NGO's implementing team, and extremally welcoming and shy beneficiaries in a project target places. In the summer of 2021, I was hired by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) in Kyrgyzstan to research the local peacebuilding initiatives in Kyrgyzstan. Surprisingly, some of the projects have also applied GALS methodology as one of the components of their project. This five-month experience has totally shattered my illusions of the perfectness of the methodology, and the work of the local NGOs and international organizations in Kyrgyzstan.

Reviewing the implemented projects in the rural areas and cross-border regions in Kyrgyzstan, I have understood and got a clear picture of how the donor-funded international organizations' projects work in Kyrgyzstan. After conducting numerous interviews with the

UN projects implementing teams, local NGOs as implementing partners, and project beneficiaries in the project locations, to my great wonder and disappointment, these rural development and women empowerment projects were just the embodiment and practical example of “continued coloniality today.”<sup>10</sup> This can be explained by the lack of ownership and voice of the local communities, imposed Western ideas of individualism and liberation, and beneficiaries being perceived by the international organizations as passive project recipients.

My goal in this paper is to analyze the role of the international organizations and local NGOs in the women empowerment process in Kyrgyzstan using the case of the GALS methodology as an empowerment tool. The case study of the GALS tools and their impact on women’s agency and gender norms change in Kyrgyzstan will be studied through the analyses of the primary data (43 key informant interviews) and the desk review of the project documents, reports, evaluations, and the GALS manual. I will attempt to respond how the GALS methodology’s moto (*“Gender justice in the GALS system is an integral and indisputable part of analysis and strategies at all levels... Both men and women realize that if they do not change gender inequality, they will not be able to fulfill their true human responsibilities in this life.”*<sup>11</sup>) is accepted and followed by the Kyrgyz society with its patriarchal gender norms. Postcolonial feminist theory with its critical response to the stereotypical image of the ‘Third World Woman’<sup>12</sup> will be applied to the analyses of GALS as a women empowerment project in Kyrgyzstan.

The notion of women empowerment traces back to the 1970s, with a series of initiatives by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and World Bank targeting

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<sup>10</sup> *Reframing Non-Western Feminisms: ‘Nomadity of Being’ in Kyrgyzstani Women’s Rights Activism*, Central Eurasian Studies in East Asia and Beyond, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QzJgBQ8Y64>.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Mayoux, ‘Gender Action Learning System for Sustainability at Scale’.

<sup>12</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, *Boundary* 2 12, no. 3 (1984), <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>.

women's issues at a global level. “The welfare approaches of the 1950s and 1960s were representing women’s reproductive and domestic role in development interventions more as passive beneficiaries.”<sup>13</sup> There is an evolution of the ideas of the role of women in development with different approaches such as Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD).<sup>14</sup> Starting from the 1970s with the WID approach acknowledging women as “an active participants in the development process through their productive and reproductive roles,” which led to the GAD approach “reorientation of development priorities, policies, and programmes to reflect the interests, concerns, and participation of women as well as men, and a commitment to gender equality as a development goal.”<sup>15</sup>

The 1995 Beijing Platform of Action, a conference on Women followed with the focus on “gender equality and women empowerment of all women, everywhere” to the point that this idea has become important to the development discourse.<sup>16</sup> The idea of a “rights-based development became popular where a Western human rights agenda” has been embraced by many donors, Western bilateral agencies, and international NGOs in their development initiatives.<sup>17</sup> Since then, women empowerment and gender equality objectives are one of the main international development agendas: “Promote gender equality and empower women”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Sherry C. Betts and Patricia Goldey, ‘A Multidisciplinary NGO: The Interface of Home Economics with Gender and Development’, *Development in Practice* 15, no. 1 (2005): 110, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4030172>.

<sup>14</sup> Eva M Rathgeber, ‘WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice’, *International Development Research Centre*, 1989, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Betts and Goldey, ‘A Multidisciplinary NGO,’ 110.

<sup>16</sup> UN Women, ‘The Beijing Platform for Action: Inspiration Then and Now’, UN Women – Beijing+20, accessed 23 September 2022, <https://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about>.

<sup>17</sup> Nalini Visvanathan, ed., *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, 2nd ed (Halifax: London; New York: New York: Fernwood Pub.; Zed Books Ltd.; Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 384.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations, ‘United Nations Millennium Development Goals’ (United Nations), accessed 31 August 2022, <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml>.

was one of the UN millennium development goals, now the “Gender equality: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”<sup>19</sup> is the UN’s fifth sustainable development goals.

However, the women empowerment notion is criticized by scholars for NGO’s liberal agenda limiting women to “small-scale entrepreneurs, factory and service sector employees,”<sup>20</sup> but not giving agency and power for decision making (Duncanson, 2019), rather disempowering, burdening them with more work, as it is increasing their responsibility and obligations of women both at housework, childcare and paid work (Khader, 2018), and creating ‘elite feminist’<sup>21</sup> groups that lead to exclusion and ignorance of those women who don’t belong to them (Narayanaswamy, 2016).

NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are also heavily criticized for the donor dependency that pushes them to prioritize donor agendas rather than addressing the needs of the local people. “Despite the NGOs’ capability of achieving some positive development results, it is hardly possible to say that they in reality represent the interests and needs of local people since they function as vehicles for Western funders or have been seized by the local elites.”<sup>22</sup> However, according to the project reports and evaluations, international organizations and NGOs are very successful with their empowerment mission, they are the ones who are improving the lives of people and making the real changes in Kyrgyzstan. To explain this very phenomenon, I came up with the term ‘collective gooding’ to which I am referring in the case study. I present the rationale of the collective gooding with three main reasons: 1. Kyrgyzstan’s high foreign aid dependency nature; 2. donor aid chasing NGOs; and 3. international organization and NGOs’ biased results

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<sup>19</sup> United Nations, ‘Goal 5 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs’, United Nations, accessed 31 August 2022, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>.

<sup>20</sup> Claire Duncanson, ‘Beyond Liberal vs Liberating: Women’s Economic Empowerment in the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security Agenda’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21, no. 1 (1 January 2019): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1518725>.

<sup>21</sup> Lata Narayanaswamy, ‘Whose Feminism Counts? Gender(Ed) Knowledge and Professionalisation in Development’, *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 12 (1 December 2016): 2157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1173511>.

<sup>22</sup> Maija Paasiaro, ‘Home-Grown Strategies for Greater Agency: Reassessing the Outcome of Civil Society Strengthening in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan’, *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 1 (March 2009): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930902796422>.



measuring techniques. All three factors coming together produce nothing else than the biased results of the successfully implemented projects.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 1991 Kyrgyzstan's independence was preceded by a period of quick changes and major economic and political reforms.<sup>23</sup> Following the new government's reforms, a large number of international development organizations and foreign donor agencies, including the Soros Foundation, Asian Development Bank, World Bank, USAID, Aga Khan Development Network, European Commission, United Nations (UN), and others, flocked to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>24</sup> In the 1990s inflows of foreign aid and FDI helped to finance the current account deficit in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>25</sup> Between 1992 and 2003, bilateral and multilateral development support to post-Soviet Central Asian countries totaled more than \$7 billion. Kyrgyzstan received one-third of this aid, making it by far the greatest receiver of international help in both absolute and per capita terms.<sup>26</sup>

Since then, donors have aided Kyrgyzstan in diverting humanitarian disasters and implementing basic market and democratic reforms. Nonetheless, scholars (Mahnovski et al., 2007) and various international agencies (IMF and BTI) evaluate Kyrgyzstan's dependence on foreign aid as high and estimate the country's heavily reliant remain on foreign aid. Due to the democratic reforms, Kyrgyzstan is considered to have diverse civil society organizations (CSO) and thriving dynamism in this field. Nonetheless, many of the claimed numbers are generally dormant NGOs, and those that are active are centered in the capital, Bishkek, with the majority of such groups relying on donor money, primarily from foreign sources.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Joanna Hoare, 'Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan', *SRC Research Report 1*, 2009, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Roman Mogilevskij and Anarkul Omorova, *Assessing Development Strategies to Achieve the MDGs in Asia: Macroeconomic Strategies of MDG Achievement in the Kyrgyz Republic* (Warsaw: CASE, Center for Social and Economic Research, 2011), 22-23.

<sup>26</sup> Sergej Mahnovski, Kamil Akramov, and Theodore Karasik, 'Conclusions and Implications for the United States', in *Economic Dimensions of Security in Central Asia*, 1st ed. (RAND Corporation, 2007), 68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg417af.14>.

<sup>27</sup> 'BTI 2022 Kyrgyzstan Country Report', BTI Transformation Index, 2022, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report?isocode=KGZ&cHash=3852cdf45776087281119c610120df56>.

Jailobaeva claims that NGOs in Kyrgyzstan struggle to exist without donor funding, while they lack other sources of financing similar to international organizations.<sup>28</sup> Gender-related NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are criticized to be the most donor agenda-influenced. They are called the ‘grant-hunters’ and accused of chasing funds for future projects rather than committing to addressing gender-related issues in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>29</sup> Some of the NGOs proficiently use the gender-based violence and women’s empowerment discourse to acquire donor funding opportunities but getting away from their violence against women reduction goal.<sup>30</sup>

To please their donors, and to ensure them that their generous funds are empowering women, NGOs come up with reports and evaluations that describe the life improvements due to the interventions. Beneficiaries’ success stories in empowerment are used to meet the project expectations and confirm the chosen methodologies for the project implementation.<sup>31</sup> The interventions’ impact is usually measured and presented in the reports basically through the main three tools: “1. the number of activities and events organized within the project period time and the total amount of people who were part of it; 2. beneficiary testimonials about their accomplishments as a result of the project; and 3. independent consultants’ final evaluation of the project describing the project’s successes, the challenges presented as lessons learned.”<sup>32</sup> The measurement methodology is biased while it involves the interested parties who will do the gooding of the project.

The structure of the present study has the following hierarchy. Chapter I presents a literature review, theoretical framework and methodology with the data sample. Chapter II

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<sup>28</sup> Kanykey Jailobaeva, ‘All the Truth about NGO Funding in Kyrgyzstan’, n.d., 6, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/146221/report\\_3\\_kanykei\\_eng.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/146221/report_3_kanykei_eng.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Paasiaro, ‘Home-Grown Strategies for Greater Agency: Reassessing the Outcome of Civil Society Strengthening in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan’, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>31</sup> Elena Kim et al., ‘Making the “Empowered Woman”: Exploring Contradictions in Gender and Development Programming in Kyrgyzstan’, *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 235, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1450222>.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Cotts Watkins, Ann Swidler, and Thomas Hannan, ‘Outsourcing Social Transformation: Development NGOs as Organizations’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, no. 1 (11 August 2012): 301, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071811-145516>.

provides a detailed overview of the historical background of gender norms, NGO development, and GALS development in Kyrgyzstan. Chapter III follows with the GALS case study that is focused on project documents and GALS manual analyses, women's agency and the role of the GALS in increasing the women's agency and changing gender norms in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, the present study culminates in a concluding section.

# Chapter 1: Literature Review, Theoretical Background, Methodology

## 2.1. Literature Review

The notion of women empowerment and women's agency, its recognition, and promotion became one of the main parts of the development policies and interventions of the development institutions and NGOs.<sup>33</sup> These are development organizations such as UN agencies, IFAD, World Bank, and others. The development institutions use so-called household methodologies and participatory strategies for development purposes, and GALS is one of them. Therefore, this chapter is devoted to a review of existing literature on NGOs and international organizations' work on women empowerment and highlights the main debate on women empowerment themes.

Scholars (Fonjong, 2001; Karim, 2014; Parmar, 2003; Handy and Kassam, 2006; Radhakrishnan and Solari, 2015) agree on the topic of women and development became of great importance since the 1970s, with a series of initiatives of the international organizations such as UN and World Bank targeting women's issues at a global level. Since then, women empowerment and gender equality objectives are one of the main development agendas: "Promote gender equality and empower women"<sup>34</sup> was one of the UN millennium development goals, now the "Gender equality: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"<sup>35</sup> is the UN's fifth sustainable development goals. However, there was an evolution of the ideas of the role of women in development with different approaches such as Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development

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<sup>33</sup> Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips, and Kalpana Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Gender, Agency, and Coercion*, ed. Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips, and Kalpana Wilson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 10, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295613\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295613_1).

<sup>34</sup> United Nations, 'United Nations Millennium Development Goals'.

<sup>35</sup> 'Goal 5 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs', (United Nations), accessed 1 September 2022, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>.

(GAD).<sup>36</sup> While “the earlier welfare approaches of the 1950s and 1960s had emphasized women's domestic/reproductive role in the economic system, and had seen them more as passive beneficiaries.”<sup>37</sup>

From the “1970s *Women in development (WID) approach* recognized women as active contributors to the development process through their reproductive and productive activities.”<sup>38</sup> WID approach’s goal was to increase women's participation in projects and the local labor market, resulting in the notion of ‘women empowerment’ that became the global term for women’s freedom and economic capability.<sup>39</sup> Rai (2011) states that the WID approach became a turning point for “feminist engagements with development as discourse and as practice”.<sup>40</sup> The author emphasizes how liberal feminist analysis (of Ester Boserup (1970) *Women’s Role in Economic Development*, Barbara Rogers (1982) *The Domestication of Women*, etc.) became the bases for the WID agenda.<sup>41</sup>

Elliott (2015) mentions that Boserup presented gender as an independent variable in her economic analyses to measure the influence of women's subsistence agriculture on national economies at a period when women's household labor was still underreported or missing from national data. The author demonstrated how the macroeconomic policies and economic development affect men and women differently, presenting different results of the structural transformation related to modernization in agriculture and industry in African countries.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Rathgeber, ‘WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice’, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Betts and Goldey, ‘A Multidisciplinary NGO: The Interface of Home Economics with Gender and Development’, 110.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Smitha Radhakrishnan and Cinzia Solari, ‘Empowered Women, Failed Patriarchs: Neoliberalism and Global Gender Anxieties’, *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 9 (2015): 786, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12290>.

<sup>40</sup> Shirin Rai, ‘Gender and Development: Theoretical Perspectives’, ed. Nalini Visvanathan, Lynn Duggan, and Laurie Nisonoff (Halifax ; London ; New York: Fernwood Pub ; Zed Books Ltd. : Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 28, [http://encore.lib.warwick.ac.uk/iii/encore/record/C\\_\\_Rb2525927](http://encore.lib.warwick.ac.uk/iii/encore/record/C__Rb2525927).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Katja Žvan Elliott, ‘(Dis)Empowering Education: The Case of Morocco’, *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 44, no. 1/2 (2015): 7-8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24643135>.

Respectively, the failure of development programs to incorporate women as economic actors, the omissions of women's roles from the economic development, and the exclusion of women from the paid labor were all major concerns for WID. “Both the WID approach and Boserup proposed raising women's education and skills in order for them to compete more effectively with men in the labor market.”<sup>43</sup> Elliott (2015) states that Boserup attempted to reproduce “Western linear transformations from rural to industrialized civilizations,” which would result in educating women to contribute to the national economies development.<sup>44</sup> Dogra (2011) argues that “modernization theories of the WID approach emphasized Western values where individuals are seen as accelerators of social change”.<sup>45</sup>

However, by the 1980s WID was heavily criticized by feminist scholars and activists for centering gender relations rather than challenging the gendered development issues and women's status. Chandra Mohanty in her essay “Under Western Eyes,” critiqued WID scholars for generalizing women's subordination and claimed these women constituted a united, coherent group, without taking into account women's different classes, cultural and ethnic identities.<sup>46</sup> Betts and Goldey (2005) mention that WID programs targeted women and ran initiatives for them, and ignored power and control issues.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, scholars indicate Boserup's work as a pioneer for gender-aware economic analyses that have contributed to the policy area leading to events such as the First International Women's Conference held in Mexico City in 1975, followed by the UN Decade for Women 1976-1985.<sup>48</sup> WID approach urged policymakers and international organizations to address gender implications in

<sup>43</sup> Rai, ‘Gender and Development: Theoretical Perspectives’, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Elliott, ‘(Dis)Empowering Education: The Case of Morocco’, 44.

<sup>45</sup> Nandita Dogra, ‘The Mixed Metaphor of “Third World Woman”: Gendered Representations by International Development NGOs’, *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2011): 340, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41300233>.

<sup>46</sup> Visvanathan, *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Betts and Goldey, ‘A Multidisciplinary NGO: The Interface of Home Economics with Gender and Development’, 110.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

development models and policy reform packages that had previously been considered gender-neutral.<sup>49</sup>

*Women and development (WAD)* approach developed from the concern with the explanatory limitations of the WID method. However, according to Rathgeber (1989), there is no clear definition of when the approach has emerged. Some of the books and articles on gender and development even skip this approach. WAD perspective is based on Marxist and dependency theories, indicating that “women always have been part of development processes and that they did not suddenly appear in the early 1970s as the result of the insights and intervention strategies of a few scholars and agency personnel.”<sup>50</sup> The author clarifies that rather than concentrating on strategies for integrating women into development, the WAD approach focuses on the link between women and development processes. “WAD takes a more critical women’s position than WID, but it lacks a comprehensive examination of the relationship between patriarchy, various modes of production, and women’s subordination and oppression.”<sup>51</sup> “WAD approach focused mainly on the productive sector at the expense of the reproductive aspects and household-level relations of women’s employment and lifestyles.”<sup>52</sup>

“By the 1980s, feminist critiques of WID and WAD had shifted the discourse away from women’s involvement in the development and toward gender relations reform as the primary issue.”<sup>53</sup> *Gender and development (GAD)* approach has emerged as an alternative to the previous methods. “GAD’s development perspective includes an emphasis on the gender division of labor in the household and at work, access to and control over resources and benefits, and the material and social standing of women and men in various circumstances.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Rathgeber, ‘WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice’, 4-6.

<sup>50</sup> Eva M. Rathgeber, ‘WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice’, *The Journal of Developing Areas* 24, no. 4 (1990): 492, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4191904>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 493.

<sup>53</sup> Rai, ‘Gender and Development: Theoretical Perspectives’, 32.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 32.

Betts and Goldey (2015) refer to the approach as a “revolutionary agenda that has challenged existing social constructs of gender, class and race.”<sup>55</sup> This led to the “redirection of the development goals, policies, and programs to reflect the interests, concerns, and involvement of both men and women, as well as a commitment to gender equality as a development objective.”<sup>56</sup> GAD method rises the issues of patriarchy, capitalism and gender inequality.

The 1995 Beijing Platform of Action, a conference on Women followed with the focus on women empowerment to the point that this idea has become important to the development discourse.<sup>57</sup> Women's empowerment is rapidly boosted among the declared aims of development agencies and NGOs, that any realistic development initiative or strategy must have this component.<sup>58</sup> Batliwala (2007) describes the “new empowerment mantra” as NGOs being a bridge for “women to realize their own agency and capacity for change through the critical examination of oppressive ideologies and structures.”<sup>59</sup> Shared experiences of discrimination, poverty and exclusion pushed women to mobilize and fight for their rights. Resulting from the 1995 Beijing Conference, a rights-based approach to development evolved from two different women's movements, such as the movement for sustainable development and human rights. The idea of a rights-based development movement, which is described as a “Western human rights agenda”, has been embraced by many donors, Western bilateral agencies, and international NGOs in their development initiatives.<sup>60</sup>

However, many scholars critically assess the approach to women empowerment and the work done by the local and international NGOs. Khader (2018) refers to women's empowerment agenda as burdening them with more work, increasing their responsibility and

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<sup>55</sup> Betts and Goldey, ‘A Multidisciplinary NGO: The Interface of Home Economics with Gender and Development,’ 110.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>57</sup> Srilatha Batliwala, ‘Taking the Power out of Empowerment: An Experiential Account’, *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4/5 (2007): 559, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25548253>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 558.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 560-561.

<sup>60</sup> Visvanathan, *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, 384.



obligations both at housework, childcare and paid work.<sup>61</sup> The author brings an interesting argument of ‘overvaluing of choice,’ which is described by increasing the individual agency of women.<sup>62</sup> Khader (2018) argues that the notion of empowerment means improving women's capacity to accomplish anything they choose, however, in practice, women are forced to select among unsatisfactory choices and being expected to do more and accomplish more than men is disempowering.<sup>63</sup> The author stresses how the focus on agency is reducing the once-radical idea of empowerment unrecognizably.<sup>64</sup>

Wilson (2013) also critiques the use of agency in development and empowerment discourse for its being used as survival tactics of an individual rather than transformation of the community and calls empowerment approaches as ‘feminization of responsibility.’<sup>65</sup> The author believes that the ‘invocation of agency’ has helped to weaken attention to and analyses of gendered oppression of social structures and institutions.<sup>66</sup> It is emphasized that “describing a situation as oppressive and devoid of alternatives automatically portrays the persons who experience that circumstance as victims and denies them agency. As a result, structural power analysis and realization of the possibility for collective social transformation movements are marginalized.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the “agency concept was historically related to the liberal idea of the free individual, specifically with the capitalist notion of the enterprise. This is the reason why there was a big emphasis on agency in gender development theories that led to women’s poverty reduction agenda through microfinancing by the World Bank and other international donor organizations.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Serene Khader, ‘Passive Empowerment: How Women’s Agency Became Women Doing It All’, *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 2 (2018): 141–64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26927953>.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>65</sup> Kalpana Wilson, ‘Agency as “Smart Economics”: Neoliberalism, Gender and Development’, in *Gender, Agency, and Coercion*, ed. Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips, and Kalpana Wilson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 88, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295613\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295613_6).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 88.

Naila Kabeer (1999) uses the notion of agency in her theory of change or empowerment/power as one of the essential parts of women's empowerment. Kabeer defines empowerment as the “ability to make choices,” whereas she classifies choices as “first and second-order choices.”<sup>69</sup> The author describes the first-order choices as strategic life choices, calling them “critical for people to live the lives they want,” such as choice of livelihood, freedom of movement, choice of where to live, whether to marry, whether to have children, etc.<sup>70</sup> While the strategic life choices help to make the second-order choices that are less significant, they may be necessary for the quality of someone’s life but do not comprise its defining parameters.<sup>71</sup> As a result, Kabeer’s empowerment theory, or the ability to exercise strategic life choices presented on the ground of three closely interconnected dimensions in the process of social change: “Resources (pre-conditions) > agency (process) > achievements (outcomes).”<sup>72</sup>

Resources are the preconditions of empowerment, which contain economic, social, and various kinds of human resources that increase the ability to exercise choice. Resources are distributed through different relationships in society and institutions.<sup>73</sup> Kabeer (1999) defines “agency is the process of empowerment, which is the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them.”<sup>74</sup> According to the author, agency is the central part of the empowerment concept, while it is the process when the made choices are put into effect. The process contains the “meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or the power within.”<sup>75</sup> Achievements in the model are used as a measure of outcomes. Kabeer

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<sup>69</sup> Naila Kabeer, ‘The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement’, *UNRISD Discussion Paper No. 108*, August 1999, 2-4.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 2-4.

<sup>72</sup> Naila Kabeer, ‘Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment’, *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 437.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Kabeer, ‘The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement, 3’.

<sup>75</sup> Kabeer, ‘Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment,’ 438.

describes a necessary condition for the choices of the resources dimension, which is the process under which choices are made. The availability of alternatives is compulsory in the first place when there is always an option to have to be chosen otherwise. Hence, the availability of resources that allows choosing will lead to empowerment due to its interdependent close relationship. So, a change in one dimension will contribute to and enhance the other components of the model.<sup>76</sup> It should be noted that this empowerment model is used by the World Bank and international NGOs in their women's development programs.

Duncanson (2019) discusses how empowerment has evolved from ideas of liberating, “women collectively mobilizing to challenge the status quo,” to liberal that is used in UN in its Women, Peace and Security agenda.<sup>77</sup> For NGOs, the notion of women empowerment (“liberal- including women in the formal economy”) refers to investing in women’s human capital, health and education, increasing their access to formal sector jobs, and enhancing the accessibility of credit for women entrepreneurs.<sup>78</sup> As a consequence, NGO’s liberal agenda is criticized by feminists for limiting “many women to small-scale entrepreneurs, factory and service sector employees”, but not giving agency and power for decision making, as well as excluding women from “collective participation in economic policy-making and planning.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the liberal approach doubles burden women while they are still responsible for the housework and childcare.

Narayanaswamy (2016) also interrogates how the ideas of gender and development and its professionalization resulted in the emergence of ‘elite’ feminist groups and the exclusion and ignorance of those who don’t belong to them.<sup>80</sup> Professionalization of the development and

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 437.

<sup>77</sup> Claire Duncanson, ‘Beyond Liberal vs Liberating: Women’s Economic Empowerment in the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security Agenda’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21, no. 1 (1 January 2019): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1518725>.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 114, 117.

<sup>80</sup> Lata Narayanaswamy, ‘Whose Feminism Counts? Gender(Ed) Knowledge and Professionalisation in Development’, *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 12 (1 December 2016): 2156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1173511>.

gender creates specific language and knowledge that is primarily available to experts, leading to the creation of a group with particular characteristics. In its turn, this forms prerequisites to participation, creating ‘elite networks’ with a common language and knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Focusing the analysis in New Delhi, India, the author concludes that “NGOs’ attempts to create spaces for subaltern voices are restricted to the local elite feminist priorities, which are based on the disciplining effects of professionalized global and neoliberal gender development discourse and practice.”<sup>82</sup> Cornwall and Molyneux (2006) also mentioned how women’s movements had changed their focus with the process of “NGOization, leading to some loss of activism to comply with the donor agenda for funding objectives.”<sup>83</sup> The professionalization of NGOs and civil society organizations and its focus on the dominated UN agenda became one of the main reasons for the activists has spaced activists from the real concerns and needs of local women.<sup>84</sup>

Roy (2018) questions the NGO’s empowerment strategies’ initial intention and emphasizes its double-edged nature. Referring to the notion of ‘governance feminism,’ the author believes that women empowerment strategies, in fact, can be described as interventions to women’s rights and their development, which eventually work against women’s freedom.<sup>85</sup> Roy argues that “the women empowerment technologies that are meant to prevent violence against women (sexual violence and anti- trafficking activities) used by states and NGOs are also simultaneously methods of ‘control, surveillance, and disciplining.”<sup>86</sup> Women empowerment became one of the priority development focuses of national and supranational organizations (like UN and World Bank) that is usually implemented through literacy, micro-

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 2158.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 2157.

<sup>83</sup> Andrea Cornwall and Maxine Molyneux, ‘The Politics of Rights—Dilemmas for Feminist Praxis: An Introduction’, *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 7 (1 October 2006): 1184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600933255>.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 1184.

<sup>85</sup> Srila Roy, ‘Empowering Women: The Contradictions of Feminist Governance’, in *Revisiting Slavery and Antislavery: Towards a Critical Analysis*, ed. Laura Brace and Julia O’Connell Davidson (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 282, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90623-2\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90623-2_11).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 285.

lending and health services such as contraception. “Donor support programs are more market-based instead of being redistributive.”<sup>87</sup> Accordingly, “on the neoliberal development language an empowerment defined by an opportunistic agency with its instrumental of microfinance.”<sup>88</sup> The author calls governance feminism a failure, and criticizes its empowering agenda not being realized, rather being focused on justifying women’s “unfreedom in marriage, in the market, in the securocratic state, and in the violence of the routine and every day.”<sup>89</sup> The following chapter of the current study continues with the detailed elaboration of the theory used for the case study.

## ***2.2. Theoretical Background***

However, the debate over the problem of theorizing agency should be mentioned here. Moreover, for the last two decades, feminist debates have split between those who support the “liberal belief in individual rights and autonomy” and their opponents, the postcolonial feminists, motivated by subaltern studies.<sup>90</sup> In this case, the definition of agency becomes very complicated, while it raises the question of women’s rights and cultural values. In most industrialized societies, in the environment of liberal feminism, an individual agency in terms of autonomy, choice or rights are the main indicator of women’s status. The notion of agency by liberal feminism is criticized by the postcolonial feminists for excluding those women and their experiences because they don’t fit the logic of binary ideas of agency.<sup>91</sup> For my further analysis, I use postcolonial feminist theory to reframe the NGO women empowerment methodologies and investigate the questions of the agency of Kyrgyz women. Taking into

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 284.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 300.

<sup>90</sup> Amy Borovoy and Kristen Ghodsee, ‘Decentering Agency in Feminist Theory: Recuperating the Family as a Social Project’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 35, no. 3 (May 2012): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2012.03.003>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 155.

account the traditional, religious and cultural background of the Kyrgyz community, Chandra Mohanty's arguments and Saba Mahmood's definition of agency will be applied to the analytical chapter, the GALS case study.

“The work of diasporic researchers from the Middle East and South Asia gave a rise to the postcolonial feminist theory, with an emphasis on women's representation in formerly colonized countries in Europe and the West.”<sup>92</sup> “The gendered component of history is highlighted by feminist postcolonial critics, who concentrate on the connection between colonialism and patriarchy.”<sup>93</sup> According to the author, “the critics of postcolonial feminism challenge the Eurocentric perspective that prioritizes Western concepts of development and emancipation while predominantly presenting Third World women as victims of ignorance and restrictive cultures and religions.”<sup>94</sup> Tyagi (2014) elaborates that “the interaction between the White feminists and their indigenous counterparts has always been a focus of postcolonial feminist thought.”<sup>95</sup> While the “White feminists defined as ‘oppressors’ for their negligence to the racial, historical and cultural specificities of the colonial women, and imposition of their own models.”<sup>96</sup>

Gayatri Spivak with her influential essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ and Chandra Mohanty with her critical essay ‘Under Western Eyes’ are considered to be the pioneers of the postcolonial feminist critics. Chandra Mohanty (1984) in her essay talks about the production of Third World Woman in Western feminist scholarship and how non-Western are codified as others. The author focuses on main three analytical principles which are present in the Western feminist discourse on Third World women: “strategic positioning of the category ‘women’ in

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<sup>92</sup> Gurminder K Bhambra, ‘Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues’, *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 2 (3 April 2014): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966414>.

<sup>93</sup> Chris Weedon, ‘Postcolonial Feminist Criticism’, in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 284, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139167314.019>.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>95</sup> Ritu Tyagi, ‘Understanding Postcolonial Feminism in Relation with Postcolonial and Feminist Theories’ 1, no. 2 (2014): 47.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

context analysis, uncritical proof of the methodological assumptions and political premise underpinning analytic and methodological strategies.”<sup>97</sup> Mohanty argues that Western feminism became the standard by which the Third World is measured. Third-world women are frequently represented as victims of male dominance and traditional cultural norms, and a little weight is given to history and difference. Mohanty believes that Third-world women are formed as subjects in historically and culturally unique ways by the societies in which they reside.

Saba Mahmood (2006) developed her own agency theory based on her two years of fieldwork in Egypt, studying the urban women’s mosque movement in Cairo. Coming from various socio-economic backgrounds, these women were gathering in mosques to learn scholarly materials and theological reasoning, which was before done only by men. Mahmood centers on the notions of agency, self and embodiment and how they are practiced within this movement. The author criticizes the Western feminist scholarship for limiting the concept of agency to resistance and argues that it restricts researchers' ability to investigate and understand the lives of those women whose sense of agency and aspirations have been formed by nonliberal traditions.<sup>98</sup> This approach to agency describes a binary model of resistance and subordination in gender relations. Moreover, it is not thoughtful of other aspects of agency like desires, motivations, and goals.<sup>99</sup>

According to Saba Mahmood, the poststructuralist agency ignores some scope of the individual actions whose “ethical and political status” does not fit onto the logic of “repression and resistance.”<sup>100</sup> Hence, Mahmood questions the poststructuralist feminist scholarship’s

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<sup>97</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, *Boundary* 2 12, no. 3 (1984): 336-337, <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>.

<sup>98</sup> Saba Mahmood, ‘Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt’, *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 42, no. 1 (1 January 2006), <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.4633>.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 42.

formulation of agency concerning “subversion or resignification of social norms” within the framework of those activities that oppose “the dominating and subjectivizing modes of power.”<sup>101</sup> That’s why this scholarship ignores the lives and actions of those who do not fit the binary subject of repression and resistance. She emphasizes the concept of agency by poststructuralist feminists as the “ways of women resisting the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their own interests and agendas.”<sup>102</sup> Consequently, the author argues that it is essential to disconnect the agency’s concept from “the goals of progressive politics” to understand “the modes of actions” confined in histories and other reasons.<sup>103</sup>

Hence Mahmood proposes to define agency in a broader term and comes up with her definition of agency which is “a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.”<sup>104</sup> Saba Mahmood explains the women’s mosque movement as women practicing their agency. She shows how subordination can be a form of resistance. The women’s movement was the first mobilization of women to learn Islamic doctrines in mosques, which historically was male-dominated. Mahmood elaborates on the concept by pointing out that wearing a headscarf or other practices of piety through submission may be the result of personal choice and proactive position, which are the signs of agency. Her main argument is to change the binary model approach to agency and treat it as a “capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective).”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 38.



### 2.3. Methodology

The data for my study comes from forty-three in-depth (43) individual interviews that I have conducted from the beginning of May 2020 until the end of June 2020. In addition, to my primary data (the key informant interviews), this research consists of a desk review of the project documents and evaluations. The main reason for using in-depth interviews for this research is the advantage of probing more and getting profound answers to the questions from “practitioners and experts” of the GALS methodology. In-depth interviews are the best method to ask how and why, “helping researchers to understand their interviewees’ views of processes, norms, decision making, belief systems, mental models, interpretations, motivations, expectations, hopes, and fears.”<sup>106</sup> Another advantage of the in-depth interviews is it allows the researcher to paraphrase the question in case if interlocutor did not understand the question, and it gives people a convenient time to respond to the questions in their own words. In this study, in-depth interviews perfectly suit while it allows asking sensitive and personal, and confidential questions, which other methods do not allow to.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, in this research, expert interviews are important, while my studies focus on the analysis of the practical consequences of their expert knowledge for others. Experts are, in this sense, responsible for the planning, implementation, or controlling of a solution to the questions on the using the methodology for bringing gender equality in the country. They have privileged access to decision-making processes and people.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, some of my interviews can be called elite interviews as well, while I have interviewed high officials in local government and non-governmental programs. Scholars (Mikecz, 2012; Harvey, 2011) raise the question of possible “methodological issues of interviewing elites, with an emphasis on gaining

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<sup>106</sup> Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell, in *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research* (1 Oliver’s Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013), 116, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506374680>.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>108</sup> Beate Littig, ‘Expert Interviews. Methodology and Practice.’, accessed 1 September 2022, <https://docplayer.net/23964509-Expert-interviews-methodology-and-practice.html>.

access, acquiring trust, and establishing rapport,”<sup>109</sup> as well as “coping with difficult scenarios and managing respondents who do not answer the question.”<sup>110</sup> To avoid the problems listed, I have carefully planned our communication before and during the interview, as well as some crucial factors such as the time and place of the interview.

Due to the pandemic, online interviewing was chosen as the best method for data collection. “The face-to-face interview has become somewhat of a ‘gold standard’ in terms of validity and rigor, and online interviews are presented as a second choice or alternative when this gold standard of interviewing is not possible.”<sup>111</sup> As a result, internationally recognized communication tools such as Skype, Zoom, and WhatsApp were essential instruments of the interviewing process, which allowed for communicating over a long distance. It should be stressed that the GALS methodology trainings were conducted in remote villages in four different regions of Kyrgyzstan. Adjusting to the quarantine situation, and conducting online interviewing became time and cost-efficient, and flexible for both interviewees and me in terms of organizing the interview time, and reducing the health and safety concerns.<sup>112</sup>

As the research population is quite large (11462 people trained in total for the whole duration of the project), simple random sampling was used to choose the respondents for the in-depth interviews in the case of beneficiaries and Champions. GALS upscaling in this project was done in a cascade method into three levels. Each of the Champions has to train ten people, who are the first level participants. These ten beneficiaries did GALS sessions with at least five people (second level), and these five people did the same GALS sessions with at least three people (third level). It should be mentioned that in the case of beneficiaries, only the first level

<sup>109</sup> Robert Mikecz, ‘Interviewing Elites: Addressing Methodological Issues’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, no. 6 (1 July 2012): 482, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412442818>.

<sup>110</sup> William S Harvey, ‘Strategies for Conducting Elite Interviews’, *Qualitative Research* 11, no. 4 (1 August 2011): 431, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404329>.

<sup>111</sup> Hannah Deakin and Kelly Wakefield, ‘Skype Interviewing: Reflections of Two PhD Researchers.’, 2014, 604, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1468794113488126>.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Hanna, ‘Using Internet Technologies (Such as Skype) as a Research Medium: A Research Note’, *Qualitative Research* 12, no. 2 (1 April 2012): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111426607>.

beneficiaries were selected for random sampling because there is a possibility of the lower quality of information dissemination by the lower levels (like third level beneficiaries). Using random sampling helped me to avoid the situation of interviewing the preselected respondents by the mentors or field officers, which might lead to information bias. Interviews were conducted with GALS methodology training beneficiaries, Champions, mentors, field officers, and villages' local authorities (Aiyl okmotu) in Kyrgyz and Russian languages. The project manager was interviewed in English. Depending on the number and depth of the questions for the specific group of the respondents, the length of the interviews vary, starting from thirty minutes to two hours.

The case study method has been used to analyze the role of GALS in changing gender norms, specifically housework division and women's agency. Using case studies as an analytical approach is useful in providing answers to "How? and Why?" questions, which can be used for descriptive or explanatory research.<sup>113</sup> In this research, a case study will be used to explore and explain the role of NGOs' projects, specifically the role of GALS in increasing women's agency and changing gender norms in Kyrgyzstan.

In total, there were conducted forty-three in-depth interviews with sixteen beneficiaries, sixteen Champions, four Field Officers, two Mentors, four representatives of the local authorities, and the project coordinator. Thirty-eight of them are female, and the rest five of the respondents are male. Having a higher number of female respondents was done on purpose to investigate the agency of women who were part of the project. However, it was also interesting to observe the reflections on women's agency of active male Champions who have worked with hundreds of female beneficiaries. It should be noted that in general, there were more female participants in the project, the total number of beneficiaries was 11,462, where more

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<sup>113</sup> Jennifer Rowley, 'Using Case Studies in Research', *Management Research News* 25, no. 1 (1 January 2002): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1108/01409170210782990>.

than half of the beneficiaries were female (sixty-seven percent). The other thirty-three percent of them were male.

A champion is a person who promotes GALS in their communities. GALS is upscaled in a shape of pyramid, and Champion is the first person that starts spreading GALS in the community.<sup>114</sup> A Beneficiary (also called as a Participant) is the person that upscale GALS after Champions to their family and friends. A Field officer (also called as a Regional coordinator) is a person who was the bridge between the project team and the local community, including the Champions and Local Self-Government (LSG or Aiyl Okmotu). GALS mentor is the person who trained Champions and the Regional Coordinators to prepare them to start the GALS upscaling process in their communities, the main resource person for the Champions. The Project Manager is a person who was coordinating and is responsible for the successful initiation, planning, design, execution, monitoring, controlling, and closure of the project. The project team referred to the people who were responsible for the implementation of the project: The project Manager, Regional Coordinators, Mentors, and Champions. The representative of the LSG is a person who has some information about GALS or has been actively taking part in spreading GALS in their community.

The number of respondents was equally distributed for all four provinces (Osh, Batken, Issyk-Kul, and Talas) to avoid bias due to misrepresentation issues. The average age of the interviewers is forty-three, the youngest respondent is sixteen years old, and the oldest is seventy-six. Sixty-four percent of the respondents are married, eighteen percent are single, and eighteen percent are widowed. The average number of kids is three, the minimum is none, and eight is the maximum. Five percent of respondents have attained primary education, seven percent have vocational education, and other eighty-eight percent have a university degree.

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<sup>114</sup> Rasulova Gulmira, *Manual Gender Action Learning System (GALS) Implementation Toolkit*, ed. Ainuru Bulekbaeva, 2nd ed. (UN Women, 2020), 11, [https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/GALS%20manual\\_ENG\\_SEP2020.pdf](https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/GALS%20manual_ENG_SEP2020.pdf).

About thirty-five percent of the respondents are unemployed: they are housewives, retired people, school, and university students. The other sixty-five percent are employed. The most frequent occupation is a schoolteacher (twenty-one percent), while fewer of them are local activists and representatives of the local authorities. The names that are used in the case study are changed, as the respondents confirmed their desire for the personal data confidentiality.

### 3. Chapter II: General Historical Background

#### 3.1. Gender Norms in Kyrgyzstan

Gender norms are a category of social norms that can be defined as widely held beliefs, attributes and unspoken rules, in a given community or institution, about the appropriate behavior of men and women.<sup>115</sup> According to scholars, gender norms shape how men and women see themselves as men and women, their sexuality, and their social and intimate relationships. Moreover, it defines power dynamics and the allocation of resources between men and women.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, “gender norms stand for a hierarchy of power and privilege that stereotypically supports male or masculine dominance over female or feminine.”<sup>117</sup> “Hegemonic masculinity, a dominance of men over women and over other men that do not live up to idealized norms like physical strength, technical competence, autonomy, and self-reliance,” reinforces and perpetuates inequality that reduces the rights and opportunities of women as well as other gender minorities to express their selves.<sup>118</sup>

“Despite a history of guaranteeing equal access to education, patriarchal gender norms are still prevalent in post-Soviet Central Asian nations. Kyrgyzstan is one of the countries in the region where women are exposed to the social norms for early marriage, followed by early and multiple childbearing.”<sup>119</sup> The theme of gender equality is frequently addressed and debated in Kyrgyzstan in the framework of local and international NGO projects, programs and the development of legislation. However, various gender-related issues are still there.

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<sup>115</sup> Beniamino Cislighi and Lori Heise, ‘Gender Norms and Social Norms: Differences, Similarities and Why They Matter in Prevention Science’, *Sociology of Health & Illness* 42, no. 2 (February 2020): 410, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13008>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 411.

<sup>117</sup> UNICEF, ‘Technical Note on Gender Norms’, 2020, 1, <https://www.unicef.org/documents/technical-note-gender-norms>.

<sup>118</sup> Anke Samulowitz et al., “‘Brave Men’ and “‘Emotional Women’: A Theory-Guided Literature Review on Gender Bias in Health Care and Gendered Norms towards Patients with Chronic Pain’, *Pain Research and Management* 2018 (2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2018/6358624>.

<sup>119</sup> Zhyldyz Urbaeva, Eunju Lee, and Yeongeul Lee, ‘Reproductive Decisions as Mediators between Education and Employment of Women in Kyrgyzstan’, *Health Care for Women International* 40, no. 7–9 (20 August 2019): 898, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2019.1609963>.

Women's underrepresentation in politics, high rate of the violence against women in the family, and the inability of men to share responsibilities for joint housekeeping is associated with numerous gender norms and stereotypes that are vestiges of the past.

Hoare (2019), claims that the Soviet period in the history of the modern Kyrgyz Republic began in the early 1920s. Overall, “the Soviet period witnessed an extensive programme of ‘development’ aimed at integrating the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic into the USSR’s planned economy and turning the population into Soviet citizens.”<sup>120</sup> The policy was implemented through the “secularization of public life and repression of religious activity, industrialization, enforced collectivization of the rural population and a forceful program of russification.”<sup>121</sup> In the case of Kyrgyz women, this resulted in having the notion of “becoming a ‘new Soviet woman’, the meaning of women abandoning the veil, and other indicators of their Islamic and cultural identity that women were having prior to the Soviets coming to the region.”<sup>122</sup> The notion of the Soviet women was about “women being entitled to the same privileges as men in terms of access to education, full labor-force participation, and economic independence as part of the socialist liberation program.”<sup>123</sup> Women were involved in the paid workforce in large numbers, implying that they were expected to work full-time while also taking care of their families. Consequently, Soviet women a had double burden of responsibility for a full-time job and housework.<sup>124</sup>

“Despite the restrictive patriarchal family customs, the new identity of Soviet women as a ‘dual model of mother and worker’ was effectively implemented in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries.”<sup>125</sup> The comprehensive social welfare system of the Soviet

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<sup>120</sup> Joanna Hoare, ‘Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan’, *SRC Research Report 1*, 2009, 2.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Urbaeva, Lee, and Lee, ‘Reproductive Decisions as Mediators between Education and Employment of Women in Kyrgyzstan,’ 899.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 902.

government made it possible for women to work and take care of their families. Support programs such as paid maternity and sickness leave, heavily subsidized childcare and reproductive health services, housing, and public utilities made it possible to bear the identity of Soviet women for the Kyrgyz women.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, “engaging in a productive labor was considered to be a crucial aspect for Kyrgyz women to accomplish personal autonomy and enhance their social standing.”<sup>127</sup>

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and economic transition in the independent Kyrgyz Republic followed by a massive cutback of jobs in the formal sector both for women and men. Transition to the market economy and the decline of the generous social welfare system resulted in the lack of economic opportunities and increased income inequality, which in turn brought political dissatisfaction.<sup>128</sup> This continuous change has been followed by a mingling of cultural values, which both men and women utilize to deal with the new reality's numerous obstacles. “The elder generation felt dissatisfied with the new politics and the lack of security and predictability that they had experienced during the Soviet era.”<sup>129</sup> As a result, pre-Soviet traditional values and religion have been reinforced.<sup>130</sup> A revival of Islam occurred after over seven decades of state-sanctioned atheism during the Soviet period and its politics.<sup>131</sup>

As a result, women were significantly affected by the fall of the Soviet Union, economic changes, and the loss of jobs or employment in low-wage jobs since the shift to a market-based economy.<sup>132</sup> Now in an independent Kyrgyzstan, “women have significant hurdles in

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<sup>126</sup> Hoare, ‘Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan,’ 2.

<sup>127</sup> Susan Thieme, ‘Living in Transition: How Kyrgyz Women Juggle Their Different Roles in a Multi-Local Setting’, *Gender, Technology and Development* 12, no. 3 (1 September 2008): 330, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097185240901200303>.

<sup>128</sup> Asian Development Bank, ‘Kyrgyz Republic Country Gender Assessment’, 0 ed. (Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, December 2019), 16, <https://doi.org/10.22617/TCS190593-2>.

<sup>129</sup> Thieme, ‘Living in Transition: How Kyrgyz Women Juggle Their Different Roles in a Multi-Local Setting,’ 331.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ryan Muldoon and Ursula Casabonne, *Gender Norms in Flux: Bride Kidnapping and Women’s Civic Participation in the Kyrgyz Republic*, 2017, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1596/28989>.

<sup>132</sup> Thieme, ‘Living in Transition: How Kyrgyz Women Juggle Their Different Roles in a Multi-local Setting, *Gender, Technology and Development*,’ 330-331.



combining career and family responsibilities due to the deterioration of the welfare system that they had during the Soviet period.”<sup>133</sup> Moreover, with the revival of traditions and religion, Kyrgyz women had to obey and adapt to various aspects of new identities of traditional and religious women who are also influenced by Western democratic assistance in forms of NGOs that came to newly independent Kyrgyzstan early 1990s.<sup>134</sup> Handrahan (2001) lists four main dominant patriarchal models that have been reinforced in an independent Kyrgyzstan: “a former Communist-Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideological foundation or the Soviet women model; re-emergence and the new influence of Islamic/Muslim fundamentalism; re-traditionalization or a process of using the nomadic and tribal traditions again, and the influence of Western democratic support with the arrival of the international NGOs in Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>135</sup>

According to the Asian Development Bank’s latest gender assessment report, from the year 2019, a revival of conservative gender norms after the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a stereotypical presentation of women primarily as mothers and good wives who sit and home and take care of children.<sup>136</sup> According to the UNDP’s gender inequality index (GII), Kyrgyzstan’s ranking is 122 among 189 countries for 2018, while other post-Soviet neighboring countries have higher rankings: Kazakhstan is 50, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are 108.<sup>137</sup> This means that women in Kyrgyzstan have low reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status indicators. In other words, there is an unequal distribution of resources between women and men. For instance, for the year 2018, only women make up only 19.2% of parliament, and the total unemployment rate, a female to male ratio is 1.48, meaning there

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 331.

<sup>134</sup> Hoare, ‘Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan,’ 3.

<sup>135</sup> Lori M. Handrahan, ‘Gender and Ethnicity in the “transitional Democracy” of Kyrgyzstan’, *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 4 (December 2001): 474, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930120104645>.

<sup>136</sup> Asian Development Bank, ‘Kyrgyz Republic Country Gender Assessment,’ xi.

<sup>137</sup> United Nations, ‘Gender Inequality Index. Kyrgyzstan’, *Human Development Reports* (United Nations), accessed 1 September 2022, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index>.

are 148 unemployed women for every 100 unemployed men, and women comprise the majority of the unemployed in the country.<sup>138</sup>

Scholars mention that “in the context of post-Soviet Central Asian nationalisms, the newly independent states' intention for returning to tradition, and religion resulted in the affirmation of the hierarchical gender relations and increase of male power.”<sup>139</sup> In the case of the former Soviet Union Central Asian countries, re-traditionalizing society at different levels in each newly independent state expansion of national had led to the distancing or separation with the Soviet promotion of the identity of the “Soviet model women.”<sup>140</sup> On the other way, states use women to participate in the nation-building process as mothers, educators, workers and even fighters.<sup>141</sup> As a result, the return to traditionalism and religion provoked patriarchal rules and “celebration of masculinity”, leading to the rise of sexual and domestic violence, poverty of women, and increasing cases of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>142</sup>

### ***3.1.1. Gender Based Violence: Bride Abduction in Kyrgyzstan***

Despite its “official illegal nature from the year 1994, and county’s ratification of the international treaties which prevent violence and discrimination against women and girls (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other), bride kidnapping is one of the forms of marriage that has been practiced in Kyrgyzstan for a long time.”<sup>143</sup> According to the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic #127 from October 28,

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Drenberger, ‘Gender and Nation in Post-Soviet Central Asia: From National Narratives to Women’s Practices’, *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (March 2016): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1082997>.

<sup>140</sup> Handrahan, ‘Gender and Ethnicity in the “transitional Democracy” of Kyrgyzstan,’ 474.

<sup>141</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, ‘Women and the Biological Reproduction of “the Nation”’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Links Across Differences: Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationalism, 19, no. 1 (1 January 1996): 19, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(95\)00075-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(95)00075-5).

<sup>142</sup> Muldoon and Casabonne, *Gender Norms in Flux*, 7.

<sup>143</sup> Asian Development Bank, ‘Kyrgyz Republic Country Gender Assessment’, 22.

2021, article 172: Kidnapping for the purpose of marriage has to be imprisoned for a term of five to ten years. Those who forcibly marry a minor will be fined 200,000 Kyrgyz soms.<sup>144</sup> However, prosecutions have been rare, while “bride abduction is increasingly re-imagined as a national tradition, women, and activists who challenge this practice can be viewed as traitors to their ethnicity.”<sup>145</sup> As a result, in the Kyrgyz society, “the discourses of shame and tradition have helped men assert further control over female mobility and female sexuality.”<sup>146</sup>

Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007) differentiate three marriage practices: “the first kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman without her consent and with the protest of her parents. This kind of bride kidnapping was rarely used, because it could bring about tribal brawls and revenge. The second kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman with her consent, but against her parents’ agreement. This was mostly experienced during the patriarchy period as a struggle against the customs of those times. The third one is the false bride kidnapping, when the parents of both sides agree to the wedding party, but for the avoidance of spending much money, the young man kidnaps his future wife.”<sup>147</sup> The bride kidnapping in all three forms is still practiced in certain Kyrgyz rural communities today.

In most of the cases the forced kidnapping can be described by “three or four drunk men with a car, who went for a search of a girl that they know or think is attractive, usually from their own community.”<sup>148</sup> “Sometimes kidnapping is done in daylight with the woman captured as she is walking down the street. Other times the kidnapping is planned at night and

<sup>144</sup> Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic #127 from October 28, 2021.” [Кодекс КР От 28 Октября 2021 Года № 127 “Уголовный Кодекс Кыргызской Республики”], accessed 1 September 2022, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/112309?cl=ky-kg>.

<sup>145</sup> Cynthia Werner, ‘Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 2 (2009): 314, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20527710>.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 314.

<sup>147</sup> Russ Kleinbach and Lilly Salimjanova, ‘Kyz Ala Kachuu and Adat: Non-Consensual Bride Kidnapping and Tradition in Kyrgyzstan’, *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (June 2007): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930701517466>.

<sup>148</sup> Lori Handrahan, ‘Hunting for Women: Bride-Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6, no. 2 (January 2004): 209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461674042000211308>.

involves tricking the woman out of her house. The groom often has a full wedding feast already waiting at home. The groom's family provides the bride's family with an apology or compensation, and the groom's family usually establishes good relations with the bride's family after the abduction. Once the kidnapped woman crosses the threshold of the man's home, the oldest woman in the groom's family places the scarf on her head and the kidnapped woman is considered married. If after such a marriage the woman decides to escape, she is likely to face rejection by her family and her village because she has dishonored Kyrgyz tradition."<sup>149</sup>

Werner (2009) elaborates on how in these ways, "cultural values related to honor and shame have been mobilized in a way that justifies the popular view that a woman should stay after being abducted."<sup>150</sup> They have to stay also because this shame is complemented by the fear of the girl and her parents that she will not be able to get married if she was once kidnapped. Some girls stay because their parents will not accept them back, it is shameful if their daughter did not stay, and "it is a woman's fate to stay and it is bad luck for an abducted bride to return home."<sup>151</sup>

As a result, a portion of the abducted girls who remain divorce after a period of marriage. The rest of the women who live with their spouses do so because they have nowhere else to go and do not want to leave their young children without a father. They do not work and have no financial resources, and the majority of brides lack a university education and employment experience. As a result, despite their husbands' physical abuse, betrayals, and drunkenness, the majority of kidnapped women do not divorce. So, they remain at home, perform all of the household chores, and look after her children and the elderly. These women have no decision-making or property-owning rights, and they are never given the same

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 209.

<sup>150</sup> Werner, 'Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition', 315.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 322.

opportunities and independence as their husbands. Because of this disparity and reliance, males are able to mistreat women and violate their rights. Bride kidnapping became a tool of “masculine hegemony”, which demonstrates “not only an act of male power, violence, and authority but also an exploit specifically concerned with sexual dominance and control of women.”<sup>152</sup>

April 7, 2021, 27-year-old Aizada Kanatbekova was kidnapped in Kyrgyzstan to force her into marriage. The abductor first raped her and then killed her. Aizada’s mother reported the case of abduction to the police, earlier on April 5. However, the police ignored the report and said not to worry because there will be a wedding.<sup>153</sup> Earlier, on May 27, 2018, another murder occurred as a result of the bride abduction. A 19-year-old girl, Burulai Turdaali kyzy, was kidnaped against her will for the purpose of marriage. Her relatives reported to the police the crime and the police stopped the car of the kidnappers and delivered the two young men and Burulai to the police station. At the police station, the abductor brutally stabbed the young lady and had allegedly carved into her body her and the initials of a different man she had originally planned to marry.<sup>154</sup> After these cases, the issue of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan became an extremely sensitive issue that alerts the fact that bride kidnapping does occur in the country. Usually, the civil society organizations, specifically women and human rights NGOs with the financial support of international donors, are the ones who raise the awareness of the gender-related issues in Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>152</sup> Handrahan, ‘Hunting for Women: Bride-Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan’, 211.

<sup>153</sup> Aidai Erkebaeva, ‘Why Are You Worried?’ Kyrgyzstanis Accuse Law Enforcers of Killing 27-Year-Old Aizada Kanatbekova, Who Was Kidnapped for Forced Marriage.” [«Зачем Вы Переживаете?». Кыргызстанцы Обвиняют Силовиков в Убийстве 27-летней Айзады Канатбековой, Похищенной Для Брака По Принуждению.], accessed 1 September 2022, <https://mediazona.ca/article/2021/04/09/kanatbekova>.

<sup>154</sup> Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, ‘The Story of Burulai Was a Lesson for the Kyrgyz People. [История Бурулай Стала Уроком Для Кыргызстанцев.], 14 December 2018, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/20181214/kyrgyzstan-burulaj-ubijstvo-krazha-nevest-1042445248.html>.

### 3.2. NGO Development in Kyrgyzstan

According to the World Bank, gender norms in modern Kyrgyzstan have been undergoing significant changes due to its democratic transitions, specifically with the arrival of international NGOs and donors to the country.<sup>155</sup> As mentioned earlier, Kyrgyzstan declared itself independent in 1991, after the dissolution of the USSR. The starting point of the country's independence was the “period of rapid reforms and colossal upheaval and uncertainty for the population of Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>156</sup> Askar Akayev was elected as the first president of the Kyrgyz Republic, who has done “extensive political reform, to create a pluralistic society, which has freedom of expression.”<sup>157</sup> Moreover, “Kyrgyzstan was one of the first nations in the area to implement macroeconomic reforms aimed at liberalizing its economy and aligning its financial sector and monetary policy framework with the IMF's structural adjustment policy”.<sup>158</sup> Kyrgyzstan experienced difficult periods as a country with the ‘economy in transition,’ though it brought new opportunities and rapid social change in the country.<sup>159</sup>

Reforms done by the new government followed with the massive arrival of a large number of international development organizations and foreign donors to Kyrgyzstan such as the Soros Foundation, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, USAID, the Aga Khan Development Network, the European Commission, United Nations (UN), etc.<sup>160</sup> Kyrgyzstan's geographic isolation from other democratic countries, lack of previous democratic experience, and low level of economic growth made it a perfect state for the promotion and development of democracy and its principles.<sup>161</sup> “Askar Akayev's liberal reforms made Kyrgyzstan the

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<sup>155</sup> Muldoon and Casabonne, *Gender Norms in Flux*, 1, 25.

<sup>156</sup> Hoare, ‘Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan,’ 3.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Joanna Pares Hoare, ‘Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan’, *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (March 2016): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1007344>.

<sup>160</sup> Hoare, ‘Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan,’ 3.

<sup>161</sup> Chiara Pierobon, ‘The Development of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. An Analysis of the National and International Context’, *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, no. 1 (25 June 2018): JournalArticle\_1338, 108, <https://doi.org/10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2018/01/006>.

leading Central Asian target of Western support in the field of political reform, resulting in millions of dollars invested in the country in the establishment of a Western-style civil society equated to NGOs according to a neo-liberal.”<sup>162</sup> Above listed “donors and international organizations brought many new concepts about the way the new economy and society in Kyrgyzstan should be developing, for instance, the notion of democratization, free market, civil society, and gender equality were newly introduced to the local population.”<sup>163</sup> NGOs became those who represent this civil society and were funded by the donors to implement the projects to provide help to the local community and at the same time disseminate the values of democracy.<sup>164</sup>

With the generous financial and technical support of donors, the number of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan increased rapidly. Consequently, Kyrgyzstan has become the country with the highest NGO density per population in the Central Asian region. For instance, “in 1993, the total amount of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan was 611.”<sup>165</sup> According to the statistics of the International Center of Non-Profit Law (ICNL), for the year 2022, there are approximately 19,538 legally registered civil society organizations (CSO). “The civil society sector in Kyrgyzstan is considered to be one of the strongest in the region. CSO representatives are engaged with the government both at the national and local levels through various consultative public councils at the municipal departments and agencies. Moreover, CSOs' work is not limited to particular issues, it is diverse and complex. They cover and support a broad range of areas such as human rights and advocacy, health, education, protection of the environment, culture and art, etc.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>163</sup> Hoare, ‘Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan’, 281.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Kanykey Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, ‘New Donor Strategies: Implications for NGOs in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan’, *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29, no. 2 (2018): 285, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45105449>.

<sup>166</sup> ‘Kyrgyz Republic’, *ICNL* (blog), accessed 1 September 2022, <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/kyrgyz>.

Since the first appearance of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, for the last three decades, scholars divide into two main periods, the role of donors and the focus of the NGO's activities in Kyrgyzstan. If in the early 1990s, international donors were mainly focused on supporting the establishment of the NGO sector and its capacity-building activities. In the mid-2000s, donors changed their focus to funding NGOs with the aim to advocate for changes and reforms and promote accountability and transparency in Kyrgyzstan. This was done by the promotion of a close dialogue and partnership between the government and NGOs and moved from project-based funding to state budget support. The donors' new approach resulted in the termination of a few NGOs due to the lack of funding opportunities that made NGOs lessen their activities. However, those NGOs who survived this period became financially sustainable by diversifying and expanding their sources of funding.<sup>167</sup>

It should be stressed that the majority of the staff and leaders in the NGO sector in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, are women. Scholars also emphasize on that active NGOs and diverse women's organizations are mostly led by women leaders who work on a wide range of issues across the country.<sup>168</sup> "Women leaders who were incredibly intelligent and highly professional, active and brave, who believe in their own power and equality with men."<sup>169</sup> They were the ones who were able to negotiate the resources and constraints of international assistance. Women in NGOs were the ones who provided social services, who were openly naming and responding to social problems where the government has failed, making difference in the society. By facing and deploying international norms on gender equality, women's NGOs were supporting other women on a similar path, resulting in the

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<sup>167</sup> Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 'New Donor Strategies,' 287-292.

<sup>168</sup> Kanykey Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 'A New Look: Professionalization of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey* 33, no. 3 (3 July 2014): 370, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2014.953813>.

<sup>169</sup> Kim et al., 'Making the "Empowered Woman": Exploring Contradictions in Gender and Development Programming in Kyrgyzstan', 239.



process of women's empowerment.<sup>170</sup> Women working in the NGOs are described as the ones who were resisting the harsh conditions of their lives and cultural gender-based norms and worked very hard to make their lives better.<sup>171</sup>

### 3.2.1. *Gender related NGOs in Kyrgyzstan*

As mentioned earlier, “the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, which focused on women's empowerment agenda has also influenced the establishment of many women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>172</sup> The women's local organizations were influenced by international constructions of women's rights and women empowerment and addressed issues that women were facing in the country: bride abduction, domestic violence, and women's political participation.<sup>173</sup> “The Kyrgyz government ratified five international conventions on women's rights; ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, appointed a state commission for women, children, and families; declared 1996 the year of women; and developed a four-year program called Aialzat to improve the lives of women.”<sup>174</sup>

Accordingly, the country's legal framework on human rights, specifically on women's and children's rights, fulfills international requirements that allow the country to receive foreign aid. International donor organizations made funding available to assist women's empowerment efforts in Kyrgyzstan, recognizing gender equality as an essential component of the democratic

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<sup>170</sup> Meghan Simpson, ‘Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women's Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 1 (April 2006): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000600738608>.

<sup>171</sup> Kim et al., ‘Making the “Empowered Woman”: Exploring Contradictions in Gender and Development Programming in Kyrgyzstan’, 239.

<sup>172</sup> Michele E. Commercio, ‘Women in Kyrgyzstan - Electorally Marginalized but Legislatively Influential: A Theory of Transactional Activism’, *Politics & Gender*, 24 May 2021, 10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000689>.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 11.

process.<sup>175</sup> Simpson (2006) refers to “the women of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as the ‘receiving end’ of globalizing gender politics, as residents of the transitioning counties, meaning that the knowledge and recourses on women empowerment and gender from the Western countries were spreading through UN-funded the GAD approach and various women empowerment programs in the country.”<sup>176</sup>

Earlier, in 1994, the Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan was founded. “The Forum became an umbrella association uniting more than eighty NGOs committed to strengthening women’s activism, promoting women’s rights and gender equality, and monitoring the state’s commitment to the stated agenda on women empowerment.”<sup>177</sup> Commercio (2021) argues that women’s NGOs have played a key role in facilitating women’s political and economic participation in Kyrgyzstan. For instance, one of the first women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, the Women’s Congress organized a conference called “Women in a Transitional Society” in 1995 that has led to the above-mentioned conventions being presented in the national development programs.<sup>178</sup> The author also mentioned how women’s NGOs played a crucial role in Kyrgyzstan’s legislation regarding toughening the penalty for bride kidnapping.<sup>179</sup>

However, the conflicting characteristics of donor-funded women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are reflected by scholars. Hoare (2009) claims that despite the most active role of the women’s NGOs, remain the most dependent on donor funding that the actions of these organizations have been affected by the priorities of their donors. Simson (2010) reports that

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<sup>175</sup> Kim and Campbell, ‘Peace-Building and Violence against Women: Tracking the Ruling Relations of Aid in a Women’s Development NGO in Kyrgyzstan’, 189.

<sup>176</sup> Simpson, ‘Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women’s Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’, 11.

<sup>177</sup> Bekebayeva et al., ‘Formation and Development of Women’s Non-Governmental Organisations in Central Asia’, *Space and Culture, India* 6, no. 5 (31 March 2019): 148, <https://doi.org/10.20896/saci.v6i5.480>;

<sup>178</sup> Commercio, ‘Women in Kyrgyzstan—Electorally Marginalized but Legislatively Influential: A Theory of Transactional Activism’, 10.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 4.

there is a skeptical attitude towards NGOs, specifically regarding women's NGOs. Paasiaro (2009) elaborates on “NGOs’ capability of achieving some positive development results, although it's hardly possible to confirm that they in indeed represent the interests and needs of the local society since they function as vehicles for Western donors or have been captured by local elites.”<sup>180</sup> According to these critics, “NGOs have been discredited as potential agents of radical social or political change, focused to promote the neoliberal development agenda which is severed empower.”<sup>181</sup> Women's NGOs frequently perceived advocating gender similarity, or the idea that women are equal to men in all capacities and duties, which is off-putting to people in the rural areas living in a society with traditional Kyrgyz gender norms.<sup>182</sup>

Scholars came up with the common image of a professional NGO women’s rights activist as a person who is “well-educated, well-connected, well-traveled, Russian-speaking (and in some cases English-speaking),” who has very nothing in common with ordinary women in the villages where the projects are implemented.<sup>183</sup> These women’s rights activists are criticized for being more interested in securing the next grant for their NGOs, rather than committing to addressing gender-related issues in Kyrgyzstan. Paasiaro (2009) clarifies this trend with the “requirements from the donor organizations for high-quality project planning, reporting, budgeting, and management that attracted mostly the well-educated and highly motivated Soviet professionals to the NGO sector, who have no connection and understanding of the lives of the poor rural people’s lives.”<sup>184</sup> Commonly, these people are called ‘grant-

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<sup>180</sup> Paasiaro, ‘Home-Grown Strategies for Greater Agency: Reassessing the Outcome of Civil Society Strengthening in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan’, 60.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>182</sup> Hoare, ‘Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan’, 284.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 283.

<sup>184</sup> Paasiaro, ‘Home-Grown Strategies for Greater Agency: Reassessing the Outcome of Civil Society Strengthening in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan’, 61.

hunters'<sup>185</sup> and 'kofebreikniki' (coffee-break providers)<sup>186</sup> who mastered project proposal and report writing skills to meet the donor demands, who usually speak the fancy NGO language such as training, target groups, etc.<sup>187</sup>

Hoare (2021) portrays women's gender-focused NGOs as divided due to the lack of common purpose, source of funding and physical locations of the NGOs. The author explored that all of her respondents (NGO leaders) always called their NGO as women's NGO, making it clear that they work on women's issues. This way, they set apart themselves from the NGOs and activists who work with LGBT issues<sup>188</sup> or those who call themselves as feminist<sup>189</sup> while these notions are not welcomed by the local population, especially in the rural areas. Sultanalieva continues the classification of gender equality and women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan into main four groups: "1. women over 40 years old concentrated on women's political and economic rights; 2. women's right activist working in the small localities and villages; 3. grassroots feminist working without donor support, focusing on issues of LGBT communities, people with disabilities, etc.; 4. professional women working in NGO who learned about gender-based discrimination and violence in the country after getting their first grant."<sup>190</sup> Nevertheless, ordinary non-NGO people who don't differentiate the types of NGOs, calling people working for both international organizations and local NGOs as 'foreign agents' or even 'man-hating, feminists.'<sup>191</sup> Whenever I say that I conduct research or evaluation projects for various international organizations, people (mostly who work for the governmental

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>186</sup> Joanna Pares Hoare, 'Chapter 7 Activist-Professionals in Gender-Focused Development in Kyrgyzstan', in *Gender, Activism, and International Development Intervention in Kyrgyzstan* (Brill, 2021), 198, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004461390\\_008](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004461390_008).

<sup>187</sup> Simpson, 'Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women's Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan', 21.

<sup>188</sup> Joanna Pares Hoare, 'Chapter 5 Gender-Focused NGOs in Bishkek', in *Gender, Activism, and International Development Intervention in Kyrgyzstan* (Brill, 2021), 122, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004461390\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004461390_006).

<sup>189</sup> Joanna Pares Hoare, 'Chapter 6 Gender and Activism in Kyrgyzstan in: Gender, Activism, and International Development Intervention in Kyrgyzstan', in *Gender, Activism, and International Development Intervention in Kyrgyzstan*, (Brill, 2021), 177, <https://brill.com/view/book/9789004461390/BP000013.xml>.

<sup>190</sup> *Reframing Non-Western Feminisms*.

<sup>191</sup> Simpson, 'Unpacking East/West Tensions: Women's NGOs and Islam in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan', 285.

agencies or local entrepreneurs who do not trust either the government or the NGOs) reaction is usually: “Aaaa, so you are a foreign agent, a spy?!”

### 3.3. History of the GALS Methodology

As mentioned earlier, “gender norms and stereotypes put some constraints on the opportunities not only for women but also for men.”<sup>192</sup> Taking into account that gender inequality results from the patriarchal gender norms, women are the ones who take the burden of unpaid housework and care work. According to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank reports, the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and housework on women is one of the major contributors to poverty and the poorer health of women.<sup>193</sup> “With the aim of poverty eradication and gender justice, Oxfam, as an international organization working on the advancement of women's rights and empowerment and issues related to gender justice with various partners around the world, came up with the GALS methodology. The main idea of the methodology is to stress the fact that women are making productive and essential contributions to their community and country and recognize them as active agents.”<sup>194</sup>

GALS became the main part of Oxfam's Women's Empowerment Mainstreaming and Networking (WEMAN) program, which was created with the objective of ensuring gender equity in economic development interventions such as economic policy, financial services, market development, and value chain development.<sup>195</sup> “GALS became the evolution of other participatory methodologies Participatory Action Learning Systems (PALS), which was

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<sup>192</sup> UNICEF, ‘Technical Note on Gender Norms’, 1.

<sup>193</sup> Muldoon and Casabonne, *Gender Norms in Flux: Bride Kidnapping and Women's Civic Participation in the Kyrgyz Republic* vi, vii; Asian Development Bank, ‘Kyrgyz Republic Country Gender Assessment’, 21.

<sup>194</sup> PELUM Uganda, ‘Adapting the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) in Development Programmes’, 2016, iv, <https://gamechangenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Adapting-GALS-in-development-programmes-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>195</sup> Oxfam Novib, ‘Gender Action Learning System: Practical Guide for Transforming Gender and Unequal Power Relations in Value Chains’, 2014, 9, <https://resourceequity.org/record/3123-gender-action-learning-system-practical-guide-for-transforming-gender-and-unequal-power-relations-in-value-chains/>.

developed by Linda Mayoux and used for gender analysis and gender planning in developing countries such as India, Pakistan, Sudan and Kenya. GALS became a gender-focused adaptation of PALS, which puts more importance on how gender goals are in relation to other goals. GALS was designed with the idea that women will have the same rights and opportunities for growth as men through a mutual empowerment process.”<sup>196</sup> GALS as a methodology has been spread and praised in some of African, Latin American, and Asian countries since the year 2009, as part of a joint IFAD and Oxfam Novib (ON) pilot project in Uganda, which was focused on the production of coffee, maize, fruits and beans in the country.<sup>197</sup>

The results of the piloted methodology have shown to be effective in giving both women and men more control over their lives, leading to individual, household, community and organizational development. “GALS can be defined as a community-led empowerment methodology aimed at constructive economic, social and political transformation on gender justice.”<sup>198</sup> GALS promotes equality in rights and opportunities and uses the principles of inclusion by positioning poor women and men as drivers of their own development, as active agents who develop, negotiate, implement and monitor their own plans for improving their lives and being responsible for their economic decision-making.<sup>199</sup> “GALS as a methodology has demonstrated to be extremely successful in changing gender relations in property rights, violence against women, household planning, decision-making and stopping male alcoholism.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> IFAD. “Case Study Gender Action Learning System in Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Gender, Targeting and Social Inclusion,” 1.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Mayoux, ‘Gender Action Learning System for Sustainability at Scale.’

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> PELUM Uganda, “Gender Action Learning System (GALS) Methodology Training Manual for PELUM Uganda Members,” 1. [https://knowhow3000.org/wp-content/files/HR-CS/Manuals%20Studies%20and%20other%20helpful%20Material/Gender/ENG\\_EA\\_MAN\\_Training\\_Gender-Action-Learning-System\\_2019.pdf](https://knowhow3000.org/wp-content/files/HR-CS/Manuals%20Studies%20and%20other%20helpful%20Material/Gender/ENG_EA_MAN_Training_Gender-Action-Learning-System_2019.pdf)

“The key technique of using GALS is drawing its tools which are Road Journey, Trees, Circle maps and Diamonds. Each of the tools has its own purpose such as a strategic planning framework with SWOT analysis, concept mapping, relationship mapping, analyzing priorities for change and impact assessment. Drawings and diagrams are the most accessible form of communication for people who have limited opportunities for getting a formal education. For people who do not have a higher education, drawing is a very convenient way for them to express their opinions and views. Drawings and diagrams are especially important for people with limited literacy skills, including children, since they can use them to explain their positions to those who make political decisions, or simply to express more complex ideas and thoughts more accurately and easily.”<sup>201</sup>

“The main target group of the projects that use GALS as a methodology are people living in extreme poverty and food-insecurity, involving persons such as jobless youth, smallholder farmers, individuals with disabilities, as well as different community-based organizations, which depends on community specificities and the goals of the project implemented.”<sup>202</sup> Moreover, GALS methodology tools can be adapted according to the project. Linda Mayoux believes that the methodology can be used in projects with various thematic areas of work such as community development, rural finance, etc. It should be stressed that “GALS tools and techniques were adopted as a response to the resistance and costs generated in more traditional gender awareness and gender training.”<sup>203</sup> Overall, according to the author’s reports and project evaluations, the GALS methodology, demonstrated a positive impact in the areas where it was piloted tackling power dynamics in a various levels starting from the households, communities, religious and traditional authorities, including the private sector and

<sup>201</sup> Mayoux, “GALS Facilitators Guidelines,” 5. [https://gamechangenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GALS-Manual-English-Translation-from-Russian\\_Draft1.pdf](https://gamechangenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GALS-Manual-English-Translation-from-Russian_Draft1.pdf)

<sup>202</sup> IFAD. “Case Study Gender Action Learning System in Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Gender, Targeting and Social Inclusion,” 2.

<sup>203</sup> Mayoux, ‘Accelerating Progress Towards Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Kyrgyzstan (RWEW) 2012 – 2017’, 7.

government actors. Use of the GALS tools that empower household members to accommodate their interests and needs and to find new, gender-equitable solutions in their livelihoods planning.<sup>204</sup> The following chapter is devoted to the GALS methodology in Kyrgyzstan and experiences of the GALS practitioners.

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<sup>204</sup> PELUM Uganda, 'Adapting the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) in Development Programmes'; Oxfam Novib, 'Gender Action Learning System: Practical Guide for Transforming Gender and Unequal Power Relations in Value Chains'.



## 4. Chapter III: GALS Case Study

### 4.1. GALS Methodology in Kyrgyzstan

GALS was first piloted in Kyrgyzstan in 2016 as a complementary methodology of the Rural Women's Economic Empowerment Joint Programme (RWEE) which was implemented by UN Women, IFAD, WFP and FAO.<sup>205</sup> The local NGO Community Development Alliance (CDA) acted as a local implementing partner of all four UN agencies. CDA adapted the tools according to the Kyrgyz local context, including the development of a Kyrgyz manual explaining the facilitation of the five tools in details. In order to add the greatest value to the RWEE project, the following tools were piloted: Vision, Journey to Vision, Happy Family Tree, Income Increase Tree, and Diamond (or in other words, Brilliant).<sup>206</sup> "The RWEE's goal was to promote and assist rural women's economic empowerment in the Kyrgyz Republic by ensuring their livelihoods and rights in the context of sustainable development. The RWEE was based on providing training and free or heavily subsidized economic incentives to beneficiaries."<sup>207</sup> Furthering this, the "RWEE Kyrgyzstan focused primarily on women's empowerment through working with women's groups, women activists, and with some men, to help in the debunking of preconceptions about women's incapacity to manage efficient agriculture production and support female leadership and participation in the local governments."<sup>208</sup>

"The RWEE project stressed on rural women being key agents in the development of the national economy through agricultural production and promoting the development of rural

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<sup>205</sup> Kosheleva and Kerimalieva, 'Final Evaluation of the Kyrgyzstan Joint UN Women/ FAO/ IFAD/ WFP Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women', 8.

<sup>206</sup> Linda Mayoux, 'Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale. RWEE GALS Pilot in Kyrgyzstan 2016: Edited Report and Upscaling Plan.', February 2017, 25, [https://gamechangenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GALS-Process-for-RWEE-Naryn-Pilot\\_-ConsolidatedReport\\_Feb2017\\_ed.pdf](https://gamechangenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GALS-Process-for-RWEE-Naryn-Pilot_-ConsolidatedReport_Feb2017_ed.pdf).

<sup>207</sup> Kosheleva and Kerimalieva, 'Final Evaluation of the Kyrgyzstan Joint UN Women/ FAO/ IFAD/ WFP Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women', 14.

<sup>208</sup> Mayoux, 'Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale. RWEE GALS Pilot in Kyrgyzstan 2016: Edited Report and Upscaling Plan.', 10.

areas.<sup>209</sup> “The RWEE project also emphasized women represent a great proportion of the agricultural labor force, who play a key role in food production, and at the same time perform a large part of the unpaid house and care work in rural areas. Rural women, on the other hand, frequently have restricted access to productive resources including agricultural inputs, land, finance, and credit, and leading-edge agricultural technology and extension, which undermines progress towards achieving sustainable and inclusive development in rural areas. Due to gender norms and other social practices, rural women face greater challenges than men in obtaining access to public assets and services, social protection, decent job opportunities, local and national market and other productive services.”<sup>210</sup> As a result, “the RWEE project was implemented in five target provinces: Naryn, Chui, Batken, Osh, and Jalal-Abad with the participation of 2,731 women across 73 villages. By the end of 2016, the Programme directly benefited 3,150 people and indirectly benefited about 8,500 people. Rural women participating in RWEE have gained knowledge and skills, engaged in productive income-generating activities, and increased their income. They strengthened leadership skills and actively participated in forming policies, service provision, and decision-making processes both at the national and local levels.”<sup>211</sup>

The second project that used GALs methodology in Kyrgyzstan is the project named “Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan,” on which this research is focused. “The project aimed to bring communities members together to act against nonconsensual marriage practices and associated violence against women and girls of all ages, and its main goal was to reduce the gender-based violence

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<sup>209</sup> Kosheleva and Kerimalieva, ‘Final Evaluation of the Kyrgyzstan Joint UN Women/ FAO/ IFAD/ WFP Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women’, 80.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>211</sup> Jipara Turmamatova, ‘A Day in the Life of a Rural Woman’, UN Women – Europe and Central Asia, 2017, 2, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/07/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-rural-woman>.

in target communities.”<sup>212</sup> The EU was the donor of the project that was implemented by UN Women in corporation with two other NGOs Agents of Change and HelpAge International. The duration of the project was 32 months, from 2018 to 2020, which was implemented in four targeted provinces of Kyrgyzstan, namely Issyk-Kul, Talas, Batken and Osh.<sup>213</sup>

As a result of the project interventions, 50 women and 16 men, in a total of 66 Community Champions were selected and trained on the GALS methodology with the purpose of further upscaling the obtained knowledge and skills in their local communities. Each champion was committed to train at least 210 people in their own communities, resulting in a total of 12,000 community members trained by the end of the project as a target goal. Depending on each Champion’s capacity and ability to reach out to community members, as well as subject to her/his consent, the total number of beneficiaries is 11,462.<sup>214</sup> Employing a cascading method to upscale the methodology made it possible to reach the target goal. The cascading method worked this way: each Champion trained 10 beneficiaries (1st level beneficiaries), each beneficiary from among 1st level beneficiaries trained 5 beneficiaries (2nd level beneficiaries) and finally, each beneficiary from among 2nd level beneficiaries trained 3 beneficiaries (3rd level beneficiaries).<sup>215</sup> “The catalyst process clearly demonstrates that people from all backgrounds can learn and practice the GALS methodology to improve their lives and share the tools with other people.”<sup>216</sup>

One of the latest projects where the GALS methodology was utilized is the Spotlight Initiative (SI) Kyrgyzstan implemented by the UNDP Kyrgyzstan between January 2020 to

<sup>212</sup> Kosheleva and Brown, ‘Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation,’ 23.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>214</sup> UN Women, “GALS Analytics: Quantitative Research for January 2020,” 13.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>216</sup> Mayoux, ‘Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale. RWEE GALS Pilot in Kyrgyzstan 2016: Edited Report and Upscaling Plan.’, 14.

December 2022.<sup>217</sup> The Spotlight Initiative's main goal was to address the immediate needs of women and girls who have been or are at risk of being victims of violence as a result of physical isolation and heightened economic and social pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>218</sup> According to the project documents, the number of domestic abuse complaints in Bishkek, the capital city, have surged by more than 60% during the quarantine compared to the same period last year. Therefore, SI has invested \$200,000 to assist addressing the issue of growing violence against women and girls in 12 target municipalities in Osh, Chuy and Naryn provinces.<sup>219</sup> GALS methodology was adopted with the goal of "promoting a life free of violence."<sup>220</sup> The interim project evaluations report that 60 leaders were already trained and supported to implement the GALS tools as positive deviance champions.<sup>221</sup> The project is still going on, the implementing agencies do not have the final numbers of people trained by the methodology and the changes it has brought.

#### ***4.1.1. GALS Tools***

Both the GALS and PALS methodology consists of a different sorts of key diagram kinds that are called tools.<sup>222</sup> The main tools are Visioning, Visioning Journey, Trees, Circle Maps and Diamonds. The tools can be modified depending on the project's purpose and level of use from individual to organization and adapted according to the specific contexts, specific

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<sup>217</sup> United Nations MPTF Office Partners Gateway, 'Programme Title: Spotlight Country Programme in The Kyrgyz Republic. Programme Start Date: 01 January 2020. Reporting Period: 01 January 2020 – 31 December 2020.', 2019, <https://mptf.undp.org/project/00119461>.

<sup>218</sup> Spotlight Initiative, 'Safe spaces to protect women and girls from violence arranged as part of Spotlight Initiative in Kyrgyzstan', accessed 24 September 2022, <https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/fr/node/25671>.

<sup>219</sup> United Nations MPTF Office Partners Gateway, 'Programme Title: Spotlight Country Programme in The Kyrgyz Republic. Programme Start Date: 01 January 2020. Reporting Period: 01 January 2020 – 31 December 2020.'

<sup>220</sup> United Nations MPTF Office Partners Gateway, 'Country Programme Document Kyrgyz Republic. November 2019', 2022, 42, <https://mptf.undp.org/project/00119461>.

<sup>221</sup> United Nations MPTF Office Partners Gateway, 'Spotlight Mid-Term Assessment Report Using ROM Review', 2021, 30, <https://mptf.undp.org/project/00119461>.

<sup>222</sup> Mayoux, 'Gender Action Learning System for Sustainability at Scale.'

needs of the target groups, and also different types of development intervention and organizational implementation.<sup>223</sup> According to Linda Mayoux, “the tools were created in reaction to pushback and costs rising in more traditional gender and gender awareness training, as well as the lack of consistency in many participatory methodologies due to the inherent power relations.”<sup>224</sup> In the case of Kyrgyzstan, there are set five key tools that are described in detail in the “Manual GALS Implementation Toolkit,”<sup>225</sup> which has been used in all implemented projects, which I will be referring to in the next chapter.

1. “Visioning” tool highlights participants’ goals, objectives, expectations, and dreams of a happy life with their loved ones, now and in the future through drawing. With the help of the “Visioning” tool participants re-examine the most important priorities in their lives. Drawing specific dreams and having them in front of you as reminders gives more motivation to achieve them.”<sup>226</sup>
2. “Journey to the Vision” tool is used to set goals to achieve the vision by analyzing current opportunities and the hurdles that are present or might appear on the way to the implementation of the goal. Therefore, “Journey to the Vision” tool helps to plan steps and actions for achieving the important goals set within the specified period of time.”<sup>227</sup>
3. “Happy Family Tree” (also called Household Efficiency or Gender Balance Tree) tool is used to improve and expand the relations between family members. “Happy Family Tree” tool analyses some aspects of family relationships such as gender equality, joint decision making, making decisions on the distribution of money, respecting each other,

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Linda Mayoux, ‘Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale. RWEE GALS Pilot in Kyrgyzstan 2016: Edited Report and Upscaling Plan.’, February 2017, 7, [https://gamechangenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GALS-Process-for-RWEE-Naryn-Pilot\\_-ConsolidatedReport\\_Feb2017\\_ed.pdf](https://gamechangenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GALS-Process-for-RWEE-Naryn-Pilot_-ConsolidatedReport_Feb2017_ed.pdf).

<sup>225</sup> Rasulova Gulmira, *Manual Gender Action Learning System (GALS) Implementation Toolkit*.

<sup>226</sup> Linda Mayoux, ‘Gender Action Learning System for Sustainability at Scale’.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

and solving other family problems together. It clearly demonstrates how the division of labor within the household is done and can be made more efficient.”<sup>228</sup>

4. “Income Generation Tree” tool is used to improve family relationships by increasing the household and entrepreneurs' incomes. The tool helps increase the profit from income-generating activities or determine income-generating actions by analyzing and identifying solutions to existing problems. Placing problems in the areas of production, human resources, and marketing, and analyses of each area separately creates incentives to increase revenue by developing solutions to problems.”<sup>229</sup>
5. “Gender Justice Diamond” tool is used for preventing violence by determining the effects of violence that are occurring in the family or community. The tool allows participants to identify and analyze all forms of violence and work together to develop measures to prevent them or find ways to resolve the existing issues peacefully. The tool examines and compares women's and men's perceptions of gender differences and what they want to change.”<sup>230</sup>

#### ***4.2. The Project Details and GALS Manual***

GALS methodology was first utilized and disseminated by the UN Women office in Bishkek with the aim of gender equality and women and girls' empowerment in Kyrgyzstan. The project “Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan” was implemented as component of the UN Women County Office Programme Portfolio in 2018 – 2020.<sup>231</sup> “Targeting 16 communities, the project's major

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Kosheleva and Brown, ‘Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation,’ 12.

purpose was to minimize gender-based violence and the frequency of non-consensual and early marriages by motivating local communities to act against discriminatory practices and societal norms in Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>232</sup>

The high number of cases when women suffer from domestic violence, and how women feel unsafe walking alone in public spaces in Kyrgyzstan. As well as, the commonality of the bride kidnapping, child and forced marriages in Kyrgyzstan, despite their illegal nature, are listed as the issue that has to be solved with the project. The project reports that men are perpetrators of domestic violence, and continuous practices of child marriage and bride abduction are the results of patriarchal power relations in the Kyrgyz society reinforced by the traditional values and social norms in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>233</sup>

This is Mohanty’s (1984) first critique of Western scholarship’s appropriation and categorization of “Third World Women as a powerless group of victims of some certain cultural and socio-economic systems.”<sup>234</sup> Men and women are divided into two groups of people, “powerful men as perpetrators of physical violence and the ones who control women’s sexuality, and powerless women - victims who are the object who defend themselves.”<sup>235</sup> Bias toward showing women as victims in Kyrgyzstan is mentioned by other scholars as well. Kim and Campbell (2012) explain the reason behind the bias by “neo imperialism, when the aid-administered world is made over in the language, categories, numbers and images that conform to ruling ideas and interests.”<sup>236</sup> The authors investigated the case of “an anti-violence NGO in Kyrgyzstan skillfully uses the women victims’ discourse to acquire donor funding opportunities, but getting away from its violence against women reduction goal.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>234</sup> Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, 338.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 339.

<sup>236</sup> Kim and Campbell, ‘Peace-Building and Violence against Women: Tracking the Ruling Relations of Aid in a Women’s Development NGO in Kyrgyzstan’, 203.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 186.

The project's theory of change is "IF the patriarchal attitudes and behaviors are changing to support gender equality and resist violence against women and girls, THEN the gender-based violence is reduced in target communities, BECAUSE a community with zero tolerance of gender-based violence or discrimination will enable women and girls fully realize their potential in education, economic empowerment, and political participation."<sup>238</sup> In other words, according to the presented theory of change, it is expected that trainings (including GALS tools) provided in the targeted areas with the local communities will change the patriarchal attitudes and behaviors leading to reduced gender-based violence.

The main activities that were planned to reach the set goal were training 12000 people on the GALS methodology, training some of the Aksakal courts (court of elderly people) and organizing an awareness-raising campaign against gender-based violence.<sup>239</sup> Using the GALS methodology in the project is assessed by the project evaluators as highly innovative that "offers a specific solution to the addressed problem," and that "the project and its results are highly relevant to the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries."<sup>240</sup> Another finding of the project evaluation is "The project has strengthened the UN Women's comparative advantage in the area of gender-based violence by reconfirming its position of the knowledge broker bringing to the country internationally developed effective innovative approaches and strengthening its network of national gender experts by building the capacity of local NGOs to apply GALS."<sup>241</sup>

And one of the identified impacts of the GALS tools is presented as follows: "The project has made an important contribution towards its ultimate goal of reducing gender-based violence in target communities through increased awareness of community members about

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<sup>238</sup> Kosheleva and Brown, 'Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation, 13'.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 9, 29.



laws prohibiting bride abduction and early marriages, greater awareness of and greater acceptance of the concept of gender equality, changing the patriarchal norms and promoting economic empowerment.”<sup>242</sup> Both, the final evaluation and the GALS manual present GALS tools as the ‘magic tools’ that change and improve people's lives and solve family and community issues. Collective praising of the methodology raises many questions regarding the validity and possibility of the tools, to which I refer as “collective gooding” of the project or rather the international organization that provides funding for the projects. The rationale for the collective gooding I relate to these three main factors: 1. country’s high donor dependency; 2. project measuring techniques bias; 3. and grant-hunter professional NGOs in Kyrgyzstan.

The main reason is in Kyrgyzstan as a foreign aid-dependent country, donor priorities dominate both at the local NGO projects and at the national policy level. Hoare (2009) confirms that in Kyrgyzstan, in terms of “service provision, advocacy, and lobbying, NGOs engaged in gender and women's rights issues are among the most active groups of civil society. However, they continue to be disadvantaged while donor priorities have shaped the actions of these organizations.”<sup>243</sup> Before visiting the targeted areas for the project implementation purposes, the implementing agencies meet with the key government officials to ensure the support from the local authorities of the targeted locations. In the villages, the local authorities in advance prepare a group of people who can attend the meetings, events, and trainings organized by the international organizations, who are instructed in advance to be good participants, so they could attract more donor-funded projects. This is done in advance while people in the rural areas are usually busy with work such as farming and cattle breeding. Consequently, as a result of the reports, project assessments, monitoring and final evaluation the projects achieve all set goals and everyone is happy.

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 9, 36, 40.

<sup>243</sup> Hoare, ‘Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan’, 9.

Active dissemination of the GALS methodology which is developed by the Western scholar for Western donors (Oxfam Novib and IFAD) is can be read from the postcolonial perspective as imposing Western ideas and values on Third World Nations. And so-called ‘GALS manual adapted to the local context’<sup>244</sup> is just a translation of the English manual into Kyrgyz. Is a person who has translated the first version of the manual from Kyrgyz to English, only with the addition of the property law in Kyrgyzstan in the Happy Family Tree session, illustration of a Kyrgyz rural man and woman, Champions’ smiling photos and their success stories. Women and men who were part of the trainings are usually passive beneficiaries, having no voice and ownership of the program. The needs assessment process prior to the project is usually ignored. Hoare (2016) stresses how gender-focused NGOs in Kyrgyzstan prioritize donor agenda rather than the needs of the local women, and questions the sustainability of these NGOs without donor funding and the incentive of a regular remuneration.<sup>245</sup>

The donor dependency nature of the country in general leads to unequal power relations between the donors, NGOs and the project beneficiaries. So, the local donor-funded NGOs as an organization which is conditional on the power of external funding, they are essentially serving the interests of their contributors rather than those people’s needs they profess to represent. Kyrgyzstan’s donor dependency pushes the government always to glorify the projects implemented by international organizations. In my practice, at the end of the project implementation, organizations host a big event for presenting their project activities and results. And several key people from the government agencies are always invited to complement all the work they have done in the rural areas. Consequently, the collective gooding strategy does not leave an opportunity and space for questioning the used women empowerment tools.

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<sup>244</sup> Rasulova, *Manual Gender Action Learning System (GALS) Implementation Toolkit*.

<sup>245</sup> Hoare, ‘Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan’, 293.

### 4.3. GALS as an Empowerment Tool: Women's Agency

In addition to the existing “the patriarchal gender roles that prevent participation and decision-making in private and public life, traditional and strongly networked family structures, and lack of knowledge, empowerment and agency seem to be making women especially vulnerable to radicalization leading to violent extremism.”<sup>246</sup> Therefore, the project document insists on the need for interventions to build skillsets and empower beneficiaries, especially girls and women, so they could overcome vulnerabilities and actively engage in social and public life.<sup>247</sup> And the empowerment method which is used to increase or provide women with agency that they lack is the GALS tools. The project simply assumes that GALS tools will magically change deeply rooted gender norms, and cultural and traditional practices and grant women agency and knowledge that they never had before the GALS.

The project manager, Akylai (30 years old, single), shared the story of one of the woman's transformations with the help of the GALS methodology. She described the experience of one of the women who was chosen to be a Champion. Akylai described the story of the woman from the Batken region who was a housewife who has never had her own voice, and her husband and parents made all the decisions in her life:

*"She was so much lost at the interview, and she couldn't even tell us what was her motivation to apply, and couldn't tell us anything. She informed us that it was the first interview in her life, although she is 40 years old. In her case, she was not the owner of her life at all, and nobody ever asked her what she wants to do in her life. She didn't have any work experience in her life except being a wife and a mother and maybe a daughter."*

Akylai, as a person who led the project, truly believed in the magic power of the GALS methodology that has changed the woman's life and empowered her. The PM has shared her

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<sup>246</sup> Kosheleva and Brown, 'Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation' 40.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 11.

observation of how the woman from the Batken region to the end of the project transformed into an empowered person:

*"For us, it was amazing to observe how she was changing with the project implementation, because I can say for sure that the first training when we invited her, there was a huge risk that she wouldn't come to it. After all, she had lots of conflicts with her husband because she needed to go from her village to Osh city. But at the end of the implementation, she benefited a lot because she took so much control of her life towards the end of the project. Now she has a smartphone, which she owns because she never had a phone. She was only using her husband's phone. Now she's attending cooking classes in her village. She has changed a lot, even visually. If we compare her at the beginning of the project and now there are two different people. For me, it was amazing that the methodology also helps people and especially women, to take more control of their life, and become self-efficient and make decisions on their own. Her example inspired other women in her community because her progress was so much invisible that she had become a great role model."*

I find it already problematic the language Akylai has used to describe, or what Mohanty says 're-present'<sup>248</sup> the woman using the same language of appropriation and othering as the Western feminists:

*"She was... [uneducated] although she is 40 years old. In her case, she was not the owner of her life at all..., She didn't have any work experience [domesticated] in her life except being a wife and a mother and maybe a daughter [family-oriented]... she had lots of conflicts with her husband... [victimized]... she never had a phone [backward]... She was the person for whom all the decisions were made by different people [powerless]."*<sup>249</sup> Mohanty argues that by re-presenting her in this manner, Akylai's self-representation is in contrast: she is "educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions."<sup>250</sup> Akylai uses the word 'experiment' the moment the project team decided to let her participate in the project, the GALS trainings, degrading as she was not a human being

<sup>248</sup> Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', 334.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 352.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 337.

but an object on which you make experiments. So, you feel the power dynamics and superiority of the project manager over the beneficiaries:

*“But the trainers said that they want to experiment and they want to see how she can start working in her community as a civil activist, as a Champion. We have decided just to give it a try. Later, it was a problem for her to attend the training every time she needed to take permission from her husband. She was the person for whom all the decisions were made by different people.”*

As the GALS methodology is an empowerment tool, it was interesting what have the respondents have drawn in their “Visioning and Journey to the Vision tools, which allow beneficiaries to think on and communicate their ambitions, desires, and aspirations, as well as plan for their realization, resulting in personal empowerment.”<sup>251</sup> It is very remarkable that the young women, who are still studying at school or university, were the ones who were mostly focused on themselves in their Vision and were career-oriented. They have planned to gain new skills like learning new languages to study abroad, to learn playing on a musical instrument, travel, and become the best specialist in their field of study.

While the Visions of the middle-aged women and older generation (women aged from 30 to 65) were focused on their families, on a better future for their kids, and improvement of their household conditions. The younger women had dreams of bringing up their children and sending them to good schools so that they would have a better future. In contrast, the elderly women were Visioning about marrying off their sons and daughters, buying a car, and a house for them, and mentioning that they need to help their children in any case. Gulumkan eje (57 years old):

*“I gave them life in this world, and who will help them besides me. My task is to build a house for my son, to conduct a wedding ceremony when he gets married, I need to help the children in any case.”*

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<sup>251</sup> Kosheleva and Brown, ‘Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation,’ 26.

Or women wanted to improve their household conditions and family income by visioning house repairs, building additional rooms for their children, and growing flowers and fruit to sell them. Nurgul (46 years old): "*...when your children are happy; the mother is also happy.*"

Saba Mahmood stresses on the understanding of agency not only as the "capacity for progressive change but also, importantly, as the capacity to endure, suffer."<sup>252</sup> Mahmood explains her argument supported by the studies of other scholars, that experience of pain is not just restricted to passive suffering but allows one to analyze the world where the pain resides.<sup>253</sup> I can draw the parallels between the pain that Mahmood describes and the women who sacrifice their dreams and lives for their families and especially the well-being of their children. Women, especially those in middle age and seniors want to provide a good education and better life, the one they did not have themselves.

An explanation for these intergenerational differences might be the historical and political background of Kyrgyzstan. As mentioned earlier, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was a rival of Islam and traditionalism in Kyrgyzstan. The arrival of the International Organizations started at the end of the 90s and became more influential in the late 2000s. So, the younger generation (people younger than 30 years) of Kyrgyzstan are influenced more by NGOs' agenda of liberation and individualism. While the older generation, as Saba Mahmood mentions, exercises their agency with the commitment to the actions and practices of specific value systems.<sup>254</sup> The older generation of the women interviewed has pro-family values.

Interestingly, all of the four RCs didn't remember what their exact Vision was. To the question "do you use GALS tools in your everyday life?" mentors have not given a clear

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<sup>252</sup> Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt', *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 42, no. 1 (1 January 2006), 217, <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.4633>.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 205.

response. Akylai, the project manager, shortly mentioned that she has used it only once. This attitude of the people who promote and disseminate GALS as an empowerment tool recalls the Sultanalieva's classification of women's rights activism in Kyrgyzstan into main four groups: 1. Women over 40 years old concentrated on women's political and economic rights; 2. women's rights activists working in the small localities and villages; 3. Grassroots feminists working without donor support, focusing on issues of LGBT communities, people with disabilities, etc.; 4. professional women working in NGO who learned about gender-based discrimination and violence in the country after getting their first grant.<sup>255</sup> The last group of women's rights activists who do not necessarily share gender equality principles, specifically outside of their workplaces, blend their personal patriarchal ideas with gender equality which is part of their professional responsibilities.<sup>256</sup>

Hoare (2021) also portrays women's gender-focused NGOs as divided due to the lack of common purpose, source of funding and physical locations of the NGOs. The author explored that all of her respondents (NGO leaders) always called their NGO as women's NGO, making it clear that they work on women's issues. This way, they set apart themselves from the NGOs and activists who work with LGBT issues or call themselves feminists.<sup>257</sup> One of the GALS mentors, Ainura (43 years old, married, has 2 kids) also mentioned avoiding the word gender in their work in the rural areas:

*"In our society, the word 'gender' causes only rejection, negative emotions. And this is, probably, the mistake of all Genderists and international organizations, because in 1998 our approach was very feminist. To achieve gender equality, we must work with men and women, because violence is applied on women by someone from the population. At that time, we did not take this moment into account, now we understand it, before we were only focused on women. Now during the trainings we do not say the word 'gender', we just say man and woman."*

<sup>255</sup> Reframing Non-Western Feminisms: 'Nomadity of Being' in Kyrgyzstani Women's Rights Activism.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Hoare, 'Chapter 5 Gender-Focused NGOs in Bishkek', 147..

Scholars mention the NGO professionals who are skilled in writing quality project proposals, reports, and evaluations for the donors that are all in English. Hoare (2016) describes the common image of a professional NGO women's rights activist as a person who is "well-educated, well-connected, well-traveled, Russian-speaking (and in some cases English-speaking)," who has very nothing in common with ordinary women in the villages where the projects are implemented.<sup>258</sup> These women's rights activists are criticized for being more interested in securing the next grant for their NGOs, rather than committing to addressing gender-related issues in Kyrgyzstan. I am far from accusing the mentors of being ignorant of the questions of gender equality, most probably they are empowered enough to not use the magic tool.

Analyzing the beneficiaries, specifically the Champion profiles, I could clearly trace that the above-mentioned NGO professionals' characteristics can be observed in most of the Champions. In most cases, Champions are the activists of the villages who were invited for a meeting about GALS and were interviewed by Field Officers and UN Women staff. Generally, Champions can be described as a person with higher education, activists of their community who already has a particular experience of working with the projects of various international organizations. Aigul, a Champion from the Barken region (31 years old) mentioned that she is a professional coach and she monetized her GALS trainings:

*"Now, if someone will come to me and ask, "Please train us GALS", I will not train them for free. It has been 1-2 years during which I was able to learn well on GALS, I have been working with people well. I am being invited a lot: "Please train us what is GALS". I look at the current situation of the inviting person, if that is an ordinary citizen, I don't take money for that. However, if it is some organization, I take payment. I have been paid two times."*

By the end of the project, there were 49 Champions who made it until the end of the project (it started with 66 Champions), some had to leave due to various reasons. According to

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<sup>258</sup> Hoare, 'Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan', 283.



the interview analyses, they were the most who benefited from the project (traveling around the oblast to conduct trainings and regular travels to Bishkek for various project-related events) and they were the ones who had the most success stories in the project. This questions the selection process of the beneficiaries, which looks like more selecting those who are already empowered with the purpose to empower them. They made an exception, to experiment on the life of the ‘uneducated, backward and powerless’ women, to civilize and empower her and grant agency with the magic GASL tools.

Asylzat (51 years old, widowed, has 3 kids), the regional coordinator of the Issyk-Kul oblast, mentioned the required qualities and skills they had to have in to become the regional coordinator. She was chosen because of her previous work experience with international organizations and local self-governments, had a knowledge in the field of gender policy. She also described herself as being sociable, responsible, executive, flexible and knowing the mentality and traditions of people, and being able to work with different generations. It should be noted that regional coordinators were responsible for the Champions selection and coordination process, as well as supporting them throughout of their training process. Asylzat has told:

*“I monitored the work of the champions in filling out the journals-reports, and also monthly I submitted descriptive reports. If possible, I went to the villages, helped the champions, guided them.”*

Akylai appreciated regional coordinators for their work, and expressed her gratitude to them especially for selecting the ‘right’ Champions for the project:

*“They were very successful in targeting our Champions and selecting them. And I think it was the key factor for success, because when they selected right people for this championship, this actually determined the success for the project interventions. And I think that also when we were doing these quantitative analyses, we also revealed that those field officers, who selected right people, in the very beginning they faced less turnover during the implementation phase. Because there was less turnover, they were more successful in upscaling the methodology in their communities. So, I would say that the decision of how we were deploying*

*our field officers in the field was the right one and thanks to those people who wrote the project document, because this were not people coming from Bishkek, this were the people living in those villages.”*

The project manager was very happy to have the champions who can write good reports which is the “*the key factor for success*” in NGO projects.

The magic empowerment of the women from the Akylai’s story and her becoming a role model was only possible because she was a Champion who had to get out of her comfort zone, travel to Bishkek, and interact with many people. This is not the case for ordinary 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level beneficiaries (depending on the cascading method) who were trained in their living areas for several hours. The cascading method worked this way: each Champion trained 10 beneficiaries (1st level beneficiaries), each beneficiary from among 1st level beneficiaries trained 5 beneficiaries (2nd level beneficiaries) and finally, each beneficiary from among 2nd level beneficiaries trained 3 beneficiaries (3rd level beneficiaries). The cascading method questions the quality of the knowledge transfer until it reaches the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of beneficiaries. The project teams have could experiment only with one beneficiary, while they need those educated, already empowered people who have a good report writing skills, for them to show good results and do the collective gooding of the project to secure funding for the future project.

#### ***4.4.GALS and Changing Gender Norms?***

The final evaluation of the project states that “the project made an important contribution towards its ultimate goal of reducing gender-based violence in target communities through increased awareness of community members about laws prohibiting bride abduction and early marriages, greater awareness of and greater acceptance of the concept of gender equality, changing the patriarchal norms and promoting economic empowerment.”<sup>259</sup> Both, the

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<sup>259</sup> Kosheleva and Brown, ‘Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation,’ 9, 36, 40.

project team and beneficiaries also report that they have noticed changes in their changes in gender norms in their society while they were spreading the methodology to other people and could track the change that was happening in the families. Women especially stressed the improvement of intergenerational relationships, such as better understanding between mothers and children, and mothers-in-law getting well with their daughters-in-law. That they started openly talking about what they disagreed with and dislike about each other and knowing each other better thanks to the GALS methodology.

Linda Mayoux, the author of the methodology, in her project implementation review report of the GALS in the RWEE Kyrgyzstan, presents the major alterations in gender attitudes of mothers-in-law towards their daughters-in-law and men towards their wives as a result of the GALS tools practices. Mayoux (2017) brings the example of power dynamics not only between men and women but also the power relations between older and younger women that strongly exists in the Kyrgyz culture. The author elaborates on the inequalities between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law as one of the problems identified during the GALS methodology implementation process. She explains it with the effectiveness of the GALS tools, specifically Gender Diamond and Happy Family tools that help to make joint decisions and establish discussion and understanding between older and younger women. This results in improved self-confidence and personal agency of daughters-in-law after the GALS workshops. Moreover, the author reports that the men who have participated in the training were open to talking about gender-related issues and taking action to change them.<sup>260</sup>

According to IFAD, the practice of the household methodologies results in not only in development but also in the “change of the cultural norms within one or two years that have

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<sup>260</sup> Mayoux, ‘Gender Action Learning for Sustainability at Scale. RWEE GALS Pilot in Kyrgyzstan 2016: Edited Report and Upscaling Plan.’

been existing for generations.”<sup>261</sup> The household methodologies are very efficient in recognizing and tackling gender and inter-generational inequalities and health-related issues, as well as they can be used to encourage the social inclusion of households. GALS tools practices bring changes due to its quick benefits, like more sustainable and resilient livelihoods, increased income and food security, and gender equality. IFAD’s report stresses on how the methodology has changed the lives of people in African counties: Uganda, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Rwanda. As a result of GALS tools, in these countries, more girls and boys started attending school, the incidences of gender-based violence has dropped, and men started sharing the housework and childcare with their wives. This provides women greater control over their life, more decision-making power, and more influence over how family resources are allocated.<sup>262</sup>

Nazira from Naryn oblast, beneficiary (36 years old, married, has 4 kids): *“I noticed a lot of changes. For example, my husband used to say: “I am responsible for earning money, you do the rest.” Now he shares some of the housework with me, he cooks dinner when he has free time, goes out to walk with the children. He helps me to bath the little ones. After seeing his changes, children said that GALS helped them to become more responsible.”*

One of the mentors, Kasiet (46 years old, single) mentioned: *“Changes have occurred in the planning of household chores. People learned about paid and unpaid work. Relations between spouses, between the daughters-in-law and the mothers-in-law, have improved. Women with happy eyes tell us that their husbands began looking after the children, preparing food. I wonder how we could otherwise have an impact on the everyday life of people without these tools.”*

Atabek a Champion from the Osh region (44 years old, married, has 3 kids) has shared his experience using the GALS methodology: *“After work, I help my family weeding potatoes and tomatoes, fetching water home. In the past, I would come and lie or meet with my friends, go to a tea-house and have tea. Now I have reduced such expenditures and activities. I have reduced spending on going out. I started saving money give to my children.”*

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<sup>261</sup> IFAD, ‘Household Methodologies for Results and Impact in IFAD-Supported Programmes and Projects’, 3 February 2020, <https://resourceequity.org/record/2465-household-methodologies-for-results-and-impact-in-ifad-supported-programmes-and-projects/>.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

No wonder all this impact is presented in the project documents and the evaluations of the parties who are interested in having positive responses about their projects, to secure the funding for their future projects. This makes me question the methods of measuring the impact (mostly success) of interventions. The impact is usually measured and presented in the reports basically through the main three tools: 1. “the number of activities and events organized within the project period time and the total amount of people who were part of it; 2. beneficiary testimonials about their accomplishments as a result of the project; and 3. independent consultants’ final evaluation of the project describing the project’s successes, the challenges presented as lessons learned.”<sup>263</sup> Kim et al. (2018) also extend the idea of beneficiaries’ success stories in empowerment used to meet the project expectations and validate the chosen methodologies for the project implementation. In reality in one of the women empowerment projects implemented in a rural area in Naryn oblast, the scholars contend that the project failed to examine age, class inequalities, and other indicators of difference among women, such as status, seniority, female-to-female gender relations, that resulted in the exclusion of some women's groups.<sup>264</sup>

In the case of the GALS projects, the impact of the GALS tools was evaluated by the consultants as well with the counting activities of the project and number of participants, and testimonials of the beneficiaries which has the same structure looking as “before GALS I was... now, after using GASL I am...” The focus on the amount of the activities and their participants is usually done to show the donors that have been reaching out a great amount of people with their messages, and the more is better. From what I have observed from my evaluation projects, the project team’s real concern is reaching the set target numbers (they are optimistically high!), but they miss the quality part of their interventions, 12000 people for this project. The reported

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<sup>263</sup> Watkins et al., ‘Outsourcing Social Transformation: Development NGOs as Organizations’, 301.

<sup>264</sup> Kim et al., ‘Making the “Empowered Woman”: Exploring Contradictions in Gender and Development Programming in Kyrgyzstan’, 235.

number is 11,462 which is considered successful, but the question of information dissemination quality is never concerned the project team. To reach out to more people, NGOs target several more implementation locations (in the case of GALs, “16 target municipalities of four provinces: Batken, Issyk-Kul, Osh and Talas).”<sup>265</sup> In order to cover all the targeted numbers and locations, they organize short trainings and events in each locality. And I wonder how these several hours sometimes a few days of trainings would change the deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms in Kyrgyzstan?

After the events and trainings, there are a series of monitoring and evaluation missions that the participants have to be an active part of. As a result, the participants who are busy with their housework, farming, and cattle breeding are exposed to a continuous process of evaluations throughout the project period and after the end of the project. And usually, participants say what the project team and the evaluators want to hear, only the good aspects of the project. Akylai, the project coordinator, mentions people’s mentality in the rural areas:

*“I think it's just in their mentality that when they see people coming from Bishkek, they don't want to offend us. We were also reflecting with some of the development practitioners from UN agencies and other development organizations that actually people in the South, they tend to talk only mostly about positive things and which actually, in fact, impacts the progress, because when people are keeping silent about something, it's difficult for them actually to progress.”*

Besides the mentality, beneficiaries do “gooding” of the projects because they are afraid to lose the benefits they are getting from various international agencies. They do not criticize and question the approaches, so they won’t be on the ‘black list’ of the NGOs as non-cooperative Aiyl Okmotu. Akylai confirms people’s unengaged attitudes in the projects:

*“Those people in the south are more reluctant to talk about negative things. It's easier for them and it's more convenient for them to keep silent, kept silent, but at the end of the day, they don't ask questions, and at the end of the day, you don't see any results.”*

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<sup>265</sup> Kosheleva and Brown, ‘Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan 2018-2020: Final Evaluation,’ 17.

It is interesting that the project manager understands and accepts that just sitting up in the projects will not lead to any positive changes, however, these project details are not mentioned in any reports or final evaluation of the project.

I would read this silence or ignorance of people as the way of resistance to the methodology, the imposed Western ideas of empowerment which are not presented in the project documents in any case. For instance, 10 out of 16 respondents shared their experiences of resistance from their family members in the form of being rejected and being laughed at. Most of the resistance came from husbands:

Kanzada (42 years old, married, has 4 kids): *“My husband and my family said it was a fairy tale. Common, it’s impossible.”*

Fatima (38 years old, has 2 kids): *“My husband said, “Common, we don’t it have in the Kyrgyz culture.”*

Anara (32 years old, married, has 2 kids): *“When I first told my husband about GALS, he didn’t pay much attention. I wanted to convey to him the information that there should be equality between women and men in the family. I’ve heard words like, “don’t talk about it to me.”*

Mairash (65 years old, widowed, has 5 kids): *“I explained everything that I have learned from GALS to my children. My kids made fun of me, laughed at me, and said I was stupid. My son replied: “Oh, mom, do you really believe it, it is not possible.” I invited women from the village to take part in GALS, but nobody came. They said: “We are not that young to participate in such activities,”. They were not enthusiastic to come to the training venue. So, I visited them at home and conducted lessons for about ten women, giving them the task to draw their visions. But not all villagers are much interested. Some of them do not believe that it can change their lives.”*

Even the Champions, community leaders, as people who were spreading the GALS tools to many people, starting from their families and friends and ending with the many other people whom they already knew or did not were also experienced negative attitudes from the people whom they were teaching it. Nine Champions have reported that they have faced

resistance from their family members. In most of the cases, their husbands did not want to listen to them or thought that GALS was useless.

Mirgul (40 years old, married, has 3 kids): *“Right after classes on GALS I told my family about GALS and my husband said: “Oh no, go and tell this to your students”.*

Chinara (62 years old, married, has 6 kids): *“Yes. At the start my husband didn’t like it, he said, “If it doesn’t have anything to do with your main direction, why do you bother to participate there. You are also old now”.*

Gulsun (60 years old, married, has 2 kids): *“My husband looked at me with a different look, “What is she saying” look.”*

From the responses of the women, it is noticeable that women expected to be supported and understood first of all by their husbands, that they sounded disappointed.

Jazira (39 years old, married, has 2 kids): *“Even my husband told me, “Come on, what are you talking about”.*

Gulmira (48 years old, married, has 2 kids): *“My husband didn’t like it at the beginning, “What type of a thing did you bring?”, he didn’t allow me to talk about it.”*

Even the Project Manager confessed that she, herself was skeptical about the methodology and didn’t believe that it would be changing the lives of many people:

*“First, I was quite skeptical when I first reviewed the methodology because I knew the mentality of people who are living in the rural areas. As a project manager, I was supposed to implement and convince other people to actually believe in this methodology, and to upscale this methodology according to the set indicators. So, it was a quite interesting experience for me.”*

The ignorant or resisting attitude to the methodology demonstrates how challenging to present the Western liberal notions of individualism, empowerment and equality (“Gender justice in the GALS system is an integral and indisputable part of analysis and strategies at all levels... Both men and women realize that if they do not change gender inequality, they will not be able to fulfill their true human responsibilities in this life.”<sup>266</sup>) to the people (especially

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<sup>266</sup> Rasulova, *Manual Gender Action Learning System (GALS) Implementation Toolkit*, 10.



in the rural areas) who have been living and experiencing the patriarchal gender norms which are deeply rooted to their cultural, traditional and religious identities.

Akylai has also mentioned that it was difficult for them to attract people and expect commitment to the project because of the Western ideas of tools as well as lack financial remuneration which also traces back the donor-dependency notion. The development interventions coming to the rural areas usually provide some financial and non-financial (t-shirts, bags, caps, notebooks with the logo of the organization and of course coffee breaks during the trainings, that is why they are called “kofebreikniki” (coffee-break providers)<sup>267</sup>) incentives to attract people to their trainings.

*“And I think that the first two training, they were the most difficult ones for GALS mentors and the project stuff, because people couldn’t see the results of this methodology, and for them it was very difficult to connect themselves to this methodology because of its name, because of its origins, etc. That’s why I think these people actually left the project at the very beginning, because they saw that they didn’t want to accept something that is coming from the West. And because there were no any financial incentives, they were leaving the project,”* concluded Akylai.

Analyses of the interviews have shown that there was resistance from beneficiaries and their family members. No wonder why most of the respondents shared their experience of people not accepting the methodology when the Mentors and the PM themselves from the beginning were skeptical about the methodology. It is important to note that at the beginning of the trainings, almost all of the people who started learning GALS had a negative attitude towards it, and some time is needed for understanding and acceptance of it. Most of the respondents reported that it was difficult at the beginning to convince people to listen to them and attend the trainings.

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<sup>267</sup> Hoare, ‘Chapter 7 Activist-Professionals in Gender-Focused Development in Kyrgyzstan’, 198.

## 5. Conclusion

The notion of women empowerment and women's agency, as well as its acknowledgment and promotion, have become important components of development strategies and interventions by development organizations and NGOs.<sup>268</sup> The modern terms of empowerment, gender equality, and democracy also resulted from the international organizations' development interventions in Kyrgyzstan. After the country's independence declaration, the period of rapid reforms toward the open market and democracy attracted the massive arrival of a high numbers of foreign donors and international development organizations.<sup>269</sup> With the generous financial and technical support of donors, the number of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan increased rapidly, including the women's NGOs.

The women's local organizations were influenced by international constructions of women's rights and women empowerment and addressed issues that women were facing in the country: bride abduction, domestic violence, and women's political participation.<sup>270</sup> Women's NGOs have played a key role in facilitating women's political and economic participation, as well as in toughening the penalty for bride kidnapping legislation in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>271</sup> According to the World Bank's policy paper, gender norms in modern Kyrgyzstan have been undergone considerable transformations due to its democratic transitions, specifically with the arrival of international NGOs and donors to the country.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips, and Kalpana Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Gender, Agency, and Coercion*, ed. Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips, and Kalpana Wilson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 10, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295613\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295613_1).

<sup>269</sup> Hoare, 'Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan'; Hoare, 'Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan.'

<sup>270</sup> Commercio, 'Women in Kyrgyzstan - Electorally Marginalized but Legislatively Influential: A Theory of Transactional Activism'.

<sup>271</sup> Campbell and Teghtsoonian, 'Aid Effectiveness and Women's Empowerment: Practices of Governance in the Funding of International Development'; Commercio, 'Women in Kyrgyzstan - Electorally Marginalized but Legislatively Influential: A Theory of Transactional Activism'.

<sup>272</sup> Muldoon and Casabonne, *Gender Norms in Flux: Bride Kidnapping and Women's Civic Participation in the Kyrgyz Republic*.

The aim of this thesis was the review the case study of the GALS methodology and its impact on women's agency and gender norms change in Kyrgyzstan. A primary data analysis (43 key informant interviews) and a desk review of the project documents, reports, evaluations, and the GALS manual were conducted to explore the gaps between what was sought and what was actually achieved by the project. The postcolonial feminist theory with its critical response to the stereotypical image of the Third World Woman was applied to the analyses of GALS as a women empowerment project in Kyrgyzstan. The case study analyses revealed uncritical approaches of the gender-related NGOs to their women empowerment mission.

My contribution focus on how the NGO reports and evaluations justify and narratively build their own truth for the donors while excluding the facts of beneficiaries' resistant or ignorant attitudes towards the imposed Western ideas. Collective gooding of the projects in the virtue of foreign funds dependency problematizes the women empowerment of the NGOs. The case study revealed that the project team has essentially selected for the project 66 people (the Champions), the active members of the society working at the local administration or school, who can produce good project reports. Neglecting ordinary rural women for whom empowerment would be more needed, the project team empowered the already empowered women. The ordinary rural women only used for the project proposals were re-presented as victims of domestic violence, religious and cultural norms, and patriarchal gender norms who need to be saved and liberated, similar to what the Western scholarship appropriation and classification of the Third World Women.<sup>273</sup>

The collective gooding, specifically the biased project results measurement methods (the focus of the projects to the numbers of activities and participants and beneficiary testimonials as a successful result) is leading to the biased reports and evaluations reproducing the biased women empowerment projects and tools. The lack of a critical lens and orientation

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<sup>273</sup> Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'.

of the quality results will contribute to the new generation of skilled report producers, and prevent NGOs from addressing the real needs and issues that women are having in Kyrgyzstan. This is the case when not only GALS becomes as a magic tool that solve all the problems, but any Western donor funded empowerment tool or knowledge will be praised as or even more than GALS.

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