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Peace in the Family is the Basis of Peace in the Country: How Women Contribute to Local Peace in Southern Kyrgyzstan

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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant amount of research on peacebuilding in Central Asia in general and in Kyrgyzstan in particular. This has helped us both understand socio-political processes in the republic itself, and the shortcomings of the liberal peacebuilding framework in general. However, this work has, with rare exceptions, focused largely on male peacebuilding at either the state or international scale. Correcting that trend, this article illuminates the role of women peacebuilders in the post-conflict city of Osh. Based on ethnographic research conducted in 2016, it argues that women have a hitherto overlooked but nonetheless important ‘invisible’ role in peacebuilding.

KEYWORDS

Peacebuilding; gender; Kyrgyzstan; family; elders; patriarchy

Introduction

In a patriarchal society like Kyrgyzstan, men are generally believed to be responsible for providing security, keeping social order and peace, and protecting the community. The considerable literature on peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan in particular and in the Central Asian region in general focuses almost exclusively on the role of men. However, it is crucial to highlight the informal role that women play in peace building processes, even though their role is not always readily visible. Although their influence is seemingly restricted to the private domain, they contribute to strengthening the role of men as informal leaders by empowering them and preserving their image as security providers and peace builders in their communities, and in so doing influencing them and securing positive peaceful outcomes to a variety of social conflicts. Women leaders achieve this by using a number of creative methods and practices developed in the domestic sphere including communicative skills, strategising tactics and negotiation techniques to achieve their ends. These strategies play within rather than challenge patriarchal gender rules and roles and are thus a form of ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ that Deniz Kandiyoti identified in her germinal paper three decades ago (Kandiyoti 1988).

In this article, we explore this task in the context of violence in the southern Kyrgyzstani city of Osh in June 2010. In the context of a political crisis and a power vacuum following the violent overthrow of corrupt president Kurmanbek Bakiev, a minor night-time street dispute escalated into a full-blown violent conflict. Although poverty, nationalism, corruption and organised crime played a role, violence fell along Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic lines

(Megoran 2017). The report of an international inquiry commission (KIC 2011) found that Uzbeks made up nearly 75% of the 470 people killed and that a ‘disproportionately high number’ of Uzbek-owned properties were destroyed (KIC 2011, ii). The violence lasted for almost a week.

The situation of Uzbeks in Osh clearly exemplifies the national contradictions within Central Asian states: the nation-state concept does not fit the situation of ethnic groups like the Osh Uzbeks, who look to one country for their ethnic identification and to another for their citizenship (Liu 2012). Even as these Uzbeks are caught between two republics, they are excluded from meaningfully belonging to either of them (Liu 2012, 10). The domination of such local communities by the central state has been a defining feature and amongst the most enduring characteristics of nation-building (Abashin 2011).

There is an extensive literature on peacebuilding in Central Asia, reflecting both the Osh violence of 2010 and other cases. This has given much attention to male leaders and their mediation and peace building capacities with international organisations, the mass media, scholars, and state authorities (Kutmanaliev 2015; Myrzakulova and Zhorokulov 2014; Fumagalli 2007). For example, John Heathershaw’s impressive and important 2009 book-length discussion of peacebuilders in Tajikistan focuses exclusively on *male* peacebuilders. Women occasionally feature as peacemakers in this literature, but usually only in so far as they move in the realms of male-dominated public peacebuilding (for example Heathershaw 2009; Khamidov, Megoran, and Heathershaw 2017) and even then, the role of gender is not theorised further. As Megoran (1999) and Kennedy-Pipe (2004) have both argued, this reflects the general failure of mainstream analyses to recognise the deeply gendered nature of the politics of state-building in Central Asian societies. As other feminist scholars have argued in other contexts (Martin de Almagro 2018; Read 2018), this is a broader problem in peacebuilding initiatives.

As a corrective to this oversight, we seek to illuminate the stories and experiences of women leaders as promoters of dialogue, mediators of conflict, and peace builders more generally during both the conflict in Osh and its aftermath. Following Williams, Megoran, and McConnell (2014) we explore how women act as peacemakers at different *scales*: starting with the family, moving to the neighbourhood, and then to the national and international scales. At the same time, we share the view that the establishment of peace through concepts like the so-called ‘peoples’ friendship’ (Russian: *druzhba narodov*), harmony (Kyrgyz: *yntymak*), the idea of peace (Kyrgyz: *tynchtyk*) and authority (Russian: *avtoritet*) is crucial in the context of Kyrgyzstan (Kreikemeyer 2020; Beyer 2013; Mostowlansky 2013; Liu 2012; Lottholz 2018). We do not use the term ‘peacebuilding’ in the liberal sense of the concept (democracy, the rule of law, human rights) as used by Western interveners. Rather our aim is to grasp societal actors’ everyday concepts, practices, and trans-local navigations.

This research is based on fieldwork conducted in the southern Kyrgyzstani cities of Osh, and Jalalabad and in the small towns of Aravan, and Nookat in 2016. These locations were chosen because Osh and Jalalabad are the major cities in the region and scenes of the worst violence in 2010; Nookat and Aravan are small towns nearby where mobilisation for violence occurred but where it was successfully averted (Kutmanaliev 2015; Khamidov, Megoran, and Heathershaw 2017). As part of a broader collaborative project co-led by Megoran (who has been studying inter-ethnic relations in the Ferghana Valley since 1995), field research was conducted first by Ismailbekova for two months (July–August

2016) using participant observation, in-depth interviews with twenty women, and two focus groups. Some of our informants asked us to use their names, whilst others preferred not to mention them.

Building on her extensive previous research on ethnic minorities and conflict in Osh (Ismailbekova 2013), Ismailbekova interviewed women of ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek backgrounds using Uzbek, Russian and Kyrgyz languages. As a Kyrgyz woman, she was able to get access to women and their communities. Knowing that local women are empowered at the local level by being part of a large kin group rather than being individuals, Ismailbekova made sure that they verbalise their contribution to peacebuilding and their visible involvement by asking concrete questions. Otherwise, they would not publicly highlight their contribution to peacebuilding processes. At the same time it is important to highlight that we are not interested in investigating how accurate these claims are, but in understanding women's perceptions of themselves as peacemakers.

The article is structured according to four scales of peacemaking: family, neighbourhood, state and international organisations. First, we briefly describe the viewpoints of women with regard to their cultural roles as mediators within the family. Referring to Kandiyoti's concept of the 'patriarchal bargain', we argue that it is in the home that they learn to bargain with patriarchy, a learning that is useful for their role as peacemakers at other scales and boundaries. In addition, we draw upon the notion of 'translocality' (Freitag and von Oppen 2010) which enables us to integrate multiple views on social roles defined by age or gender (Kreikemeyer 2020; Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2018) and marked by neighbourhood, state and international organisations. Secondly, we examine the relationships between women leaders and male elders and the contribution to peacemaking made by women empowering male leaders in the community. Thirdly, we describe the relationship between women leaders and international organisations, and the active involvement of women despite different communal, national and international challenges. Finally, we consider the role of women leaders and their relationships to the state, in particular their contribution to the maintenance and stability of the state brought about by their engagement with international organisations.

Family: forging the qualities of women leaders

The institution of women leadership is especially relevant in southern Kyrgyzstan, in part because of the presence of densely populated multi-ethnic communities in a border region that has proved susceptible to occasional but deadly inter-communal conflicts in 1990 and 2010. Many women leaders in this region have played roles as mediators between several groups in society, and are involved in addressing a whole range of conflicts, from spousal relationships to state-related matters.

There are a number of ways in which Kyrgyz and Uzbek women in Kyrgyzstan come to be socially recognised as leaders, and these women differ in their views on how peace should be built. Some oppose traditions like bride-kidnapping, others support it; some prefer to adopt new Muslim norms of veiling or seclusion, while others look to more secularised liberal ideals (Ismailbekova 2015, 2014; McBrien 2012; Heyat 2004; Kuehnast 1998). We would not suggest that all female leadership models should be celebrated as progressive. For example, the so-called *Women Units for Special Purposes* (Russian: *OBON*) has emerged as an instrument in political mobilisation. These units often consist of elder

single mothers or widows with economic burdens and social stigmatisation, and are hired by patrons to cause disruption and engage in political protests, often in support of reactionary ideas (Beyer and Kojobekova 2019). They use their position of being elderly females, and thus demanding respect, to make it hard, for example, for younger male police officers to arrest or silence them.

The women leaders featuring in this article have so-called ideal family structures, namely a husband, children, grandchildren, daughters-in-law (Kyrgyz: *kelin*), sons-in-law (Kyrgyz: *kuioo bala*), and parents-in-law (Kyrgyz: *kuda*). Age is a significant prerequisite for leadership positions because women need to be aware of what it means to be a grandmother and a mother-in-law, and have established a respected relationship with their in-laws. In effect, women's careers start as *kelin* to their mother-in-law and after they reach that high status of mother-in-law themselves, they gain authority whereby they can influence over women and men in their own communities (Ismailbekova 2014). Because of the importance placed upon family values, it is difficult for single or divorced women to be leaders, regardless of their leadership qualities, because many within their community would not accept them.¹ Women leaders are also required to educate their children properly so that they are seen as mirrors of their mothers' qualities.

The acceptance of women leaders by the community (kinship networks, neighbourhoods and urban apartment blocs) is not easy. All women leaders face difficulties and challenges at the beginning. They are challenged by the men in their communities but, more importantly, they are challenged by other women. This means women leaders are in competition with other ordinary women. Women leaders are often not treated seriously and are expected to stay at home and busy themselves with domestic tasks instead of engaging in the public sphere. Such opinions are often voiced by other women. Therefore, they have to convince people that they are needed to assist men in the community, in terms of providing relevant or objective information and by drawing attention to pressing community problems.

In patriarchal southern Kyrgyzstan, it is hard for women to engage in public work without male support as otherwise, people would view such local women leaders suspiciously.² Women leaders, therefore, accept this requirement of family support as an important prerequisite, seeking their husbands' permission before attempting to mobilise other local women. With this permission women may engage in social work together with other women, because women leaders are seen to be teaching other women to respect their men, to preserve family values, and to honour their parents. In doing so, women highly contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy (Ismailbekova 2014). Following Kandiyoti's influential formulation, we analyse the strategies of local women peacemakers in Osh as 'bargaining with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1988, 274). Presented by distinct rules of the game, rather than openly challenging men, female peacebuilders in Osh adopt strategies which play within these rules in order to be able to influence formal male leaders and effect the outcomes that the women design and desire. In other words, leader women conform to the existing patriarchal structures in order to strategise for their own benefits. Similar dynamics, in which peace in the family is seen as a prerequisite for peace in the country, are observed in Sudan (Adam 2019).

Moreover, the role of 'informal' leader – overlaps with and feeds into the formal level. Informal women leaders often wear more than one hat; simultaneously being mothers and wives in respected families, they may be representatives and deputies of local

administrations, heads of women's councils (Russian: *zhensovet*), members of courts of elders, and present and former state employees. At the same time, they may also be founders of NGOs and public foundations and serve as active participants in activities and projects of international organisations.

Having identified the strategies, language and techniques learnt by women in the domestic sphere, we now go on to scale these up and see how they form the basis of patriarchal bargains at local and translocal levels (neighbourhood, state and international interactions). Our argument is that women perceive international-local interaction in peacebuilding as part of the patriarchal bargain. They accept the gender rules of patriarchy and use them to effect their own desired peacebuilding outcomes in different social spaces by simultaneous situatedness both in concrete family structures and in multiple scales.

Neighbourhood: female peacebuilding initiatives

As mentioned above, being a women leader is not easy in a society where there is a strong belief that, as Gulsana Abdysheva (NGO leader in Nookat) put it, a 'woman's' place is in the kitchen, where the fire is, but not in society'.³ In Kyrgyzstan, the notion remains widespread that the home and the private domain is dominated by women, whereas the public sphere belongs to men. Although this is a general stereotype of women in southern Kyrgyzstan, the reality is more complex. Many women leaders frequently promote family ideals, values, and metaphors as relevant parts of peacebuilding processes in their communities. They claim that 'peace in the family is the basis of peace in the country, because the family is the nucleus of the society'.⁴ By using such statements, women leaders can assure community members of the importance of women as leaders and their contribution to peacebuilding being equal to that of men; they highlight the means and differences from male and female perspectives, and show how they are often complementary. The case studies below illustrate the role of women in the public life of the studied communities and give examples of their peacebuilding initiatives.

One local leader, an elected representative in the Osh city council and university lecturer, Rudieva Jarkinaï, reported that during the Osh disturbances she lived in a street in the Turan micro district of Osh city. In June 2010, her neighbours started gathering, were worried and confused about the situation in the city and concerned about what would happen next. Rumours were circulating very quickly in the district, causing fear, but fortunately Jarkinaï was one of the few in her neighbourhood who had access to the internet. She was able to calm people down by referring to her internet sources. Local people listened to her, learnt the news and got more information about the events. She also became very active in the distribution of humanitarian aid, because she was not satisfied with the way in which some of those responsible for aid were distributing food. She claimed that many Uzbeks in the Turan district of Osh were planning to leave for Uzbekistan, but she was able to reassure them, calm them down, and asked them to pray.⁵ This act of peacemaking was based on the fact that people followed Jarkinaï's suggestions.

Masha Artykova, a leader of a women's council, was also actively involved in the mediation of crisis situations, in hostage negotiations, and in preventing escalation of the conflict in Osh. She recounted that, during the conflict, an Uzbek family, consisting

of five people, were stuck in the predominantly Kyrgyz Osh city neighbourhood of Zapadnaya. She wanted to help the family and rescue them, but the only solution to the problem was to suggest an exchange of hostages. Apparently, there were Kyrgyz hostages in Uzbek neighbourhoods and Uzbek hostages in Kyrgyz neighbourhoods. Therefore, it was decided to arrange an exchange of people with the help of the police. Masha hid the Uzbek family in her own apartment for one week and did not tell this anyone other than the police. Finally, she received a call from an Uzbek family who had been sheltering a Kyrgyz family. Despite the fact that there was a curfew in place after 5 pm, Masha organised an escape for the Uzbek family, taking them to the blockades between her neighbourhoods and to the neighbouring village of Kyzyl Bairak. The hostage exchange was successful and both the Uzbek family and Kyrgyz families arrived safely.

Zhamugul Bolponova, the head of another women's council and director of the public association *Aiymdar* in Aravan (a small town in the west of Osh alongside the border to Uzbekistan), was also actively engaged in her community. Her team organised a support centre to help poor women with children after the 2010 violence. They offered a variety of activities for schoolchildren (such as a photography contest), ran a youth centre, and organised excursions. They also sought to open kindergartens and schools and undertook other charity work in the communities⁶ by attracting international and local sponsors. During the 2010 violence, they began collecting clothes, food, and other basic needs for the victims of violence, mainly in Osh and Jalalabad. The aim was in particular to avoid distribution of aid along ethnic lines and to ensure that the Kyrgyz gave their food and goods to Uzbeks and vice versa. Zhumagul had relatives from different ethnic groups and wanted to help people to restore broken bonds. These examples corroborate previous findings (Ismailbekova 2015) that women go beyond ethnic markers in peacemaking by focusing mainly on family and religious principles.

In the post-conflict context, one of the Uzbek women leaders, Mavlyuda Ahmadzhanova, organised festivities during the 2011 *Nowruz* (Kyrgyz: festival marking the beginning of spring in Central Asia celebrated on 21 March) celebrations in her Uzbek *mahalla* (Uzbek: neighbourhood) in Osh, called Amir-Timur. She and other Uzbek women invited a large group of Kyrgyz people from neighbouring districts and regions, such as Alai, to their *mahalla* in order to celebrate *Nowruz* together and start the New Year in a spirit of inter-ethnic harmony. She also organised a corresponding festival, inviting artists as well as singers and actors to a multi-ethnic fair at the local school of Amir-Timur.⁷ Children played together, women cooked different kinds of traditional food together, and men discussed peace-making initiatives, without thinking along divisive ethnic lines. According to Ahmadxhanova, 'this *Nowruz* celebration symbolised a growing friendship between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz'.⁸

In Jalalabad, Anarkul Mamasheva established a group of women singers called *Ayalzat* (*Womenhood*), consisting mainly of women aged 60 or above. This group went to Osh in the aftermath of the conflict and organised a concert for some of the most affected families in the city. It was open to everybody regardless of ethnic background and economic status. The group wanted to provide some comfort and support to those who lost their homes and businesses, and assure them that they were not alone. Moreover, Anarkul also mobilised many of the women in her neighbourhood in Jalalabad and together they baked bread for the victims of violence and distributed it to the needy, such as the elderly and women with many children (see also Akhmetshina 2012).

Simultaneously, these women leaders were actively organising humanitarian aid in the post-conflict context, and were also indirectly engaged in the peacebuilding process and alleviating tension between the two ethnic groups in southern Kyrgyzstan. In the interviews, they emphasised their role in their neighbourhoods, by encouraging people not to respond to provocations, and by publicly addressing angry crowds to calm them down. According to the women, despite the challenges and risks, peace had been achieved and interaction between ethnic groups had improved.

*Man is the head but woman is the neck*⁹

In Southern Kyrgyzstan, many agree with our informants that ‘a woman is the neck who, whilst not formally at the top of the power hierarchy, can turn the head anywhere she wants’.¹⁰ However, men dominate both Uzbek and Kyrgyz public life, and the role of male elders in peacebuilding processes is considerable. It is commonly assumed that no conflict can be resolved without the involvement of male leaders because it is them who command respect and authority in their communities. Their words are taken into serious consideration, and their voices are often heard without protest or opposition. Usually, courts of elders (Kyrgyz: *aksakal* courts) rely on the main sources of male authority, namely *aksakal* judges who are part of a large cross-lineage, cross-ethnic, cross-generational network (Beyer 2016). This implies that this institution’s legitimacy cuts across all communities of all Uzbek and Kyrgyz groups. Both Kyrgyz and Uzbek societies are not only highly gendered even more the status of men and women increases according to age and gender. According to Mavlyuda, ‘the status of Kyrgyz and Uzbek men is higher, both in private and public life’.¹¹

In both Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities, everyday practices and economic patterns are highly gendered. Thus, property rights, access to irrigation water, and land disputes are usually dealt with by men. Men are perceived to understand the technicalities of the problems better and tend to use a more authoritative language in corresponding disputes, which is needed if their opinions are to be taken seriously by conflicting parties.

Meanwhile, it is commonly expected that women deal exclusively with family-related disputes, such as misunderstandings between wife and husband, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law or children and parents. The women leaders whom we interviewed are active in resolving family conflicts because as women they can usually freely express their thoughts, opinions, and feelings to women mediators in a way they could not do with men. Both men and women leaders informally support each other and help in resolving conflicts by mediating between conflicting parties. Our research shows that although both female and male leaders work for the sake of peacebuilding in local communities, they have different approaches and work from different angles.

For example, our interviews show that many women leaders explicitly explain their approach to public-sphere engagement as being based on their own family values. Most women would not think of using a ‘command’ language with their husbands or elderly relatives at home, but instead, constantly seek to inspire and encourage their men in accordance with Kyrgyz and Uzbek traditions that expect women to treat men with respect and honour. These family values and qualities are used and practiced by women leaders working informally with male leaders in their public lives; by inspiring, encouraging, and restoring the self-esteem and confidence of these male leaders, the

women mimic the same approach as they do with their husbands at home. The cases below illustrate the working relationship between male and female leaders and show the strategies used by women in working with men in public life.

A theme that repeatedly emerged in our interviews was that women saw one of the best strategies of convincing men to do something was through interacting with them within the rules of patriarchal language. As Anargul Mashaeva, a local leader of a women's council says:

at the beginning of my work with male informal leaders, I always highlight men's superiority therefore [making it easier] to work with them. Of course, kind and encouraging words empower and motivate them to move towards goals without recognising how they agreed to work with me or help me.¹²

Anargul told us that during discussions she never interrupts male leaders, but always listens intently until they have finished speaking. She would not correct a man, rather, she explains, she makes sure that the man acknowledges himself that he is not right, by skilfully directing him to that point by posing questions, giving hints, and providing examples. She notes that it is pointless to try to use 'commanding' language while working with men. Rather, she recommends that the best approach is to use what she calls 'gentle language': for example, 'maybe we try this way, that it would be better this way and so you can try and see and maybe it will work out, maybe not. It is good to try different ways. What do you think?'¹³ According to women leaders like Cholpon Sul'tanova, sometimes during mediation processes, men do not listen until the end of the story and often try to stop the conversation by raising their voice and using strong language, but she notes that this approach can be quite helpful in some cases. For example, elders can use their authority and respect to demand that the conflicting parties forgive each other:

you should say excuse me and the other will excuse you and you will be fine. Our mentality is different here. It is not in Europe and there is no need to organize a civilized round table discussion in mediation. Strong authoritative language would be enough.¹⁴

Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran (2018) and Lewis (2016) describe 'authoritarian conflict management' as the reliance upon hierarchical structures to defuse, de-escalate or prevent conflict, in opposition to liberal peacebuilding methods that valorize dialogue. Similarly, many male elders in southern Kyrgyzstan attempt to solve local conflicts in ways that have no bearing on the methods suggested by international organisations, who recommend that both sides should reach consensus through discussion of their mutual concerns. However, on other occasions, in times of mediation, male elders may ask women leaders to engage with and calm down young angry people, sometimes this might involve just being a listening party to hear their version of the story; on other occasions, it might be beneficial to the process if women approach the conflicting parties using gentle language to calm discussions rather than a commanding tone used by men. At the end of their discussions with the opponents, women will always back up their male leaders by revalorizing hierarchy and emphasizing that the male leader is right, encouraging the youth to listen to them.

Jarkinai Rudieva, a local deputy whom we met above, cited another occasion in which she was asked by community members to help solve a problem between two

aggressive neighbours right after the 2010 events in Turan, her district of Osh. In this instances, he concluded that she could not solve the issue without explicit involvement of the *aksakal* of the community. The issue was that two neighbours could not solve an irrigation dispute. The terrain was not flat in Turan, so following heavy rainfall run-off damaged one neighbour's garden. He asked the other to dig an irrigation ditch to prevent this happening again, but the second one was stubborn and, according to Jarkinai, refused to do so. At this point, Jarkinai personally appealed to the *aksakal*, who was highly respected and honoured in the community and asked him to influence the neighbours. She suggested he should ask 'what makes this problem unresolvable'? After all, the water flow cannot be stopped by itself, only people themselves had the ability to regulate it. Jarkinai suggested to the *aksakal* that he should tell the neighbours that he had experienced the very same problem himself and that he had regulated the water flow in such a way that overflows no longer bothered him or his neighbours. The recalcitrant neighbour took this to heart, and the dispute was successfully resolved. Jarkinai says, when it is important to persuade or convince elders to do something:

We tell them (elders), "you have a great credibility, your word is law, conflicting sides will listen to you and understand better their own problems when you are present. Without you this problem will not be solved." [The] elders are flattered to hear such words, they do not refuse, and one can see the joy in their faces.¹⁵

This is a clear example of bargaining with patriarchy, as Kandiyoti puts it, where women do not confront patriarchy directly but operate within its norms.

The common strategy of a women leader to plead with the elders of the community to resolve issues that, they say, women are unable to resolve by themselves. Once, Mavlyuda said, she had to beg the *aksakal* to pacify an aggressive youth. In this case, there was conflict between a Kyrgyz male and a young Uzbek male and it was important to stop the violence early on and not allow it to escalate inter wider inter-communal tensions. Fortunately, the Uzbek youth listened to the elders of their community. The women were able to help by asking these elders to intervene, implying that this was their religious duty as Muslims.

While working and training *aksakals* through her NGO-related projects, Gulsana Abdyshova, a peacemaking NGO leader, noted that the majority of *aksakals* were around 70 years or older, and they often had difficulties in completing complicated documents. Even though they are old and physically weak, culturally the *aksakals* are the most authoritative figures. Youth on both sides of a conflict feel obliged to at least pay lip-service, to listen to them and to take them seriously, even if they do not always act on their advice and admonition. Culturally this is something that Kyrgyz and Uzbeks have in common. Therefore, Gulsana and other women leaders always assist the men, being fully aware of their power and authority in the communities. They offer alternative theories in mediation in simple language to the *aksakals* so that they can use these methods in their practical work. Whether they use the suggested methods or not is another question, but gaining additional knowledge is always an asset, says Gulsana Abdyshova. One of the requirements of an *aksakal* court is to report their mediation activities to the state authorities and in such situations the women are able to help the elders by completing the writing of these formal reports for them. By making

themselves useful in a way that works within patriarchal norms, they build their capacity to influence men.

Cholpon Sultanova, a local NGO leader, asked several *askakals* to resolve local conflicts between neighbours. Furthermore, she sometimes encouraged men on all sides of a conflict to use their authoritative language and urged them to ‘*erkekche suiloshkulo*’ (Kyrgyz: ‘talk man-to-man’, literally ‘talk in men’s language’). In these cases she was aware that she could not mediate herself because she would have been ignored, being just a ‘*yubkachan aiyal*’ (Kyrgyz: ‘woman in a skirt’). After the resolution of the conflict, she would invite the *aksakals* for refreshments in the local tea house (Kyrgyz: *chaikana*) and provide them with a small amount of money for their transportation. As Cholpon works entirely on a voluntary basis, this money comes from her own pocket.

Many local women leaders are actively engaged in mediation processes. They present themselves as more patient when it comes to listening to the views of both sides in a conflict and they are better able to stay quietly and give convincing advice. A woman can often persuade each side to listen and influence them to reach a peaceful resolution. However, when a woman is unable to change the situation, she has to convince someone else to persuade others to resolve the problem. In this instance, women leaders appeal directly to the men or elders (*aksakal*), flattering them and saying ‘people would listen to you and respect your qualities’.¹⁶ Even though in such cases women take the lead in peace building and decision making, they strategically frame their own role as secondary. They emphasise that ‘they would not go beyond men’, rather ‘they would obey men by helping them’, and explain their behavior in terms of the ‘eastern mentality’ that is ‘in their blood’. These women make sure that patriarchal rules and regulations of their families and communities are followed and consider it impossible to act otherwise.

Here we see the character of women’s agency. In their own view, their effectiveness does not come from seeing their contribution to their communities in terms of competition. For example they did not like the idea of dividing activities separately according to men’s contribution and women’s contribution. As one woman put it to us, women leaders see

the neighborhood peacebuilding process as a family process writ large, in which both women and men should engage; they suggest a comparison in which the head represents men, husbands, male colleagues, and male informal leaders (*aksakal*, *mullah*), and the neck (that supports the head) is signified by the women.¹⁷

Only by helping, constantly supporting, providing backup and assisting men informally can men reach high status and receive public attention – this, they say, is women’s contribution to peacebuilding.

Although women seem not to be present in formal decision-making processes, they are often the ones who take the initiative to convince others to take certain decisions behind the scenes. They are good advisors, adept at using persuasive respectful language and are skilled in organising the practicalities of the mediation processes. This is achieved primarily by praising the strength of male leaders in the community, by highlighting their superiority, authority and power, and by giving them confidence to know that people will listen to them. As they do so, they carefully suggest specific actions that ought to be taken. These qualities and skills are accepted as culturally given values. Moreover, although the women we spoke to are playing with and reinforcing patriarchy in such ‘bargains’, they are explicitly aware of what they are doing.

Women leaders and the state

Many women work informally with the state while being previously used to work as women counsellors at the local level. This women's counsel *zhensovet* position is unpaid, but attached to the state. Women leaders work on a voluntary basis and work closely with local authorities over a range of community issues. Examples from our interviews show that women leaders do not directly engage in 'formal' politics, but indirectly challenge and simultaneously empower the state in many ways by attracting international donors and helping many state-related institutions to repair, rebuild and improve the infrastructure of their communities.

If state involvement is necessary to address a particular problem, women engage in so far as they seek to extend their influence on men in the decision-making process. However, 'under no circumstances we would openly criticise the state authorities, as this would be counterproductive'¹⁸, our informants told us. Instead, the women leaders say that they demonstrate their capacity and skills through their hard work by actively engaging in community related issues, so that their voices are heard and taken into account. Secondly, they try to suggest alternative ideas and give constructive criticism of state authorities, but frame them in such a way that they seek to complement, extend or elaborate the ideas and proposals of male leaders. To date this kind of approach has been quite successful, our respondents claimed, and is deemed 'acceptable' by the state authorities.

Women leaders secure a considerable amount of the funding of infrastructural projects such as electricity, roads, and water supplies from international organisations to their communities. Thus they help empower their local police office or state administration, rather than setting themselves up as alternative sources of power and patronage. Women leaders not only undertake administrative tasks such as writing project proposals and budgets, but also engage in finding staff to implement those projects. In addition, they are responsible for a wide variety of practical work behind the scenes. However, when it comes to addressing mass media or reporting on their public activities, the role is always given to the men who represent the (state) authorities.

For example, in 2015 Cholpon Sultanova ran as a candidate for elections to the city council, but did not win a seat due (she told us) to her previous work for the OSCE, which according to some meant she was considered to be a western spy. Moreover, she was not very well-known, whereas her male rival had more properties and thus was more powerful. Nevertheless, soon afterwards, the state authorities approached her and asked her to join the State Agency of Local Self-Government and Inter-ethnic Relations organisation (GAMSUMO) because they needed someone who was capable of good report writing. Cholpon Sultanova agreed to help implement a project by GAMSUMO and was charged with reporting, organising events, writing presentations for the speakers, and budgeting. Cholpon said: 'women are doing many things behind the scenes in promoting state authorities and elders; women would never say that they are contributing to their community in public, especially in the south of the region'.¹⁹

Women leaders in Aravan and Tunmoyun report that their communities face constant border-related problems (Megoran 2017; Reeves 2014). In such situations, women can play a bridging role by establishing good relationships between Kyrgyzstani and Uzbekistani state authorities, and they feel responsible for bringing together state authorities and

village heads from each region. For example, at a gathering of state representatives of both countries in Aravan in June 2015, the women raised issues related to the difficulties of obtaining birth and marriage certificates, passports, and applications for state benefits for children. In particular, many women who had come from Uzbekistan to marry local men had problems obtaining these documents. The women leaders were able to informally ask the authorities of both countries to help local people procure documentation.²⁰ Here we see, as elsewhere, women bargain informally with patriarchy using gender rules learnt at home, from other women, or by practicing strategies to effect positive peaceful change in the aftermath of the 2010 Kyrgyz-Uzbek conflict.

Women leaders and international organisations

External donors can either empower or disempower women as they engage in mediation processes. Many international organisations, including the United Nations (UN), the Soros Foundation, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) actively engage with women leaders in their peacebuilding work in southern Kyrgyzstan. The women leaders we spoke to actively participated in international projects, by writing project applications and reports and working hard to implement those projects at the local level. Their role is important in making sure that these projects are implemented in such a way as to promote a reduction of inter-communal tensions – or at least, to avoid inadvertently exacerbating them. They are actively engaged in creating different kinds of platforms for dialogue between different groups of society and governmental institutions through the organisation of round table discussions and seminars. Furthermore, they attract funding to their communities in order to fund festivals, fairs, fitness centres, toilets, and children's art schools.

However, it is not easy for women to cooperate with international organisations, and they face many challenges. They have to deal with requirements and regulations in reporting, organising and training that do not correspond local practices or realities. For example, some international organisations require public reports on the work of leaders. This requirement puts many women in very difficult positions because they lose the trust of local people if their names are given to international organisations and made public (see Megoran et al. 2014).

Occasionally women leaders have to seek personal permission of their husbands to participate in international projects on prevention of violence, mediation or human rights with the argument that they can thus educate their children in these fields. They assure their husbands that they will participate in the projects only once they have finished all their domestic tasks and family obligations. Zhumagul, a leader of a former *zhensovet* from Aravan, told us that she always recruits young women for training by asking permission from their husbands. These women work as intermediaries between international organisations and the local community, speaking the languages of both sides to explain how projects fit into the local context.

A further example is Zhumagul Bolponova, who explained that she had cooperated with Soros Kyrgyzstan and with the OSCE. They worked together on controversial water irrigation issues between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and, they claimed, helped implement projects in both countries and organised round table discussions with

water-using committees. In the end, this project was successful and, she reported, reduced water loss, an issue crucial in both countries. However, in the beginning, one of the main difficulties the team of women faced was the scepticism as to whether either of the women's organisations in Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan had the ability to resolve such issues. Furthermore, the women had to convince both the Kyrgyz and Uzbek authorities of the importance of the project, because they were reluctant to work with the OSCE in southern Kyrgyzstan, suspicious that the women were 'foreign agents' or 'agents of the OSCE'. Here, Zhumagul and her team of women relied on their state connections and on support gained from previous working experience with the local state administration.²¹ Without their personal relations the international project would not have been successful.

The UN first initiated peacebuilding projects in Osh immediately after the troubles of 2010 by organising a women's round table among Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. Initially, both Kyrgyz and Uzbek women were very suspicious of the process and did not trust each other. The Kyrgyz were anxious about entering an Uzbek *mahalla*, and similarly Uzbeks were reluctant to host Kyrgyz guests. Therefore Uzbek women leaders from the Amir Timur district (such as Mavlyuda and others) convinced many Uzbek women to participate and highlighted the importance of meeting with Kyrgyz women for the sake of peace in Osh. Finally, as a compromise, local women, and local authorities brought Osh women from both ethnic groups into a more neutral city-centre venue to engage in dialogue sponsored by the UN. These women told us that initially they felt uncomfortable about leaving their mono-ethnic community neighbourhoods and going there to meet other women. This fear was due in part to the uncertainty and insecurity of the moment, and also to the perceived risk of engaging in a heavy and contentious discussion on the causes of conflict, which they did not want to take part in. However, although the first meeting was not easy for either side, the Kyrgyz or the Uzbek women finally overcame their fear and started rebuilding inter-ethnic relationships.

Anargul Mashaeva, a university-educated mother of several children, and a women's counsel leader in Jalalabad, has good contacts with state authorities, they have a mutually interdependent relationship and support each other in times of need. State authorities frequently receive her assistance in addressing disputes that the state authorities are themselves not able to resolve. Anargul is engaged in improving the quality of services provided by local government bodies on inter-ethnic relations by giving advice and helping in inter-ethnic issues. Her connections are needed and are important for cooperation with international organisations. This becomes clear when her services are not used. On one occasion, according to Anargul Mashaeva, OSCE representatives did not approach her first. Instead, she recounts, they sent a formal letter to the office of the mayor of Jalalabad district. As a result, the state administration failed to talk to the OSCE representatives, either because they were too busy or on a business trip. Anargul Mashaeva commented that if the OSCE had approached her first and she would have found ways to deal with the state authorities to ensure that the international organisation gets approval for its projects. She emphasises that she always uses informal ways of talking to state authorities to explain the aims of the international organisation's project in a very simple and comprehensive way. Typically her approach would be

peace is needed for the local community not for the international organisations. We need peace, but we also need some financial support that only international organization can help [give] us.²²

Personal relationships with representatives of the state authorities are crucial in southern Kyrgyzstan, according to Anargul Mashaeva, who notes that ‘Women are the ones who build this bridge!’

Women are thus well-placed to interact informally with international organisations and can channel funding by showing them what they regard as pressing issues in the community, suggesting that women know the local context better than local men. It is important to understand that, for ideological reasons, many western-funded organisations put emphasis on supporting and funding women, and therefore women have a particular advantage here. Some organisations prioritise one sphere of activity only, but women can provide alternative suggestions and promote issues that have not been taken into account by international organisations. The women are actively involved in mobilising their own people by using the ‘family’ argument. Women leaders play a unique mediating role not only between the two main ethnic groups and state authorities but also in terms of bridging the gap between different local and trans-local institutions. They can do this because they are close to their own communities and at the same time understand the work, requirements, expectations, and the effective ‘languages’ of persuasion (praise, encouragement, ‘white lies’, etc.) of different ethnic groups, state authorities and international organisations. Even though the women’s job opportunities and projects come from international organisations, they continuously stress family values in their work to convince local people of the merit of those projects and they continue to support their men in both private and public domains. They strive to ensure that the aims of the international organisations are expressed in a culturally acceptable way using an appropriate language within the community.

Conclusions

Studies of peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia more generally have focused almost exclusively on the work of men, be it formal, informal or international peacebuilding. In contrast, this article has illuminated the important role that women leaders play ‘behind the scenes’ to promote local peace. The approach of communal women leaders is to bolster the effectiveness of state authorities, by refraining from openly criticising them and instead offering advice and suggestions. They know how to find what they call ‘*proper ways*’ of dealing with state authorities and that only by being wise and restrained they can achieve their goals. They recount that they are not interested in increasing their reputation and authority, but instead work for the benefit of the community. But this does not mean that women are naïve and lack self-interest in gaining power and prestige because without these qualities it is hard to imagine them influencing the decision-making processes of men. At the same time, they recognise that the success of state authorities depends to a large extent on the support they receive from the women who have assisted and supported the authorities with their initiatives, ideas and practical work. With Kandiyoti we understand this form of engagement as ‘bargaining with patriarchy’.

Local women leaders influence men in many ways. They bolster their status in the community by using personalised or soft language. On occasions, if need be, a little strategising or ‘*white lies*’ are employed to save face. The rationale behind this approach is not to impose their ideas on men or to force men into a corner concerning the issue at hand, rather to seek to give advice and alternative solutions to problems facing the whole community as well as the men in it. The women we interviewed tell us that they do not mind being behind the scenes because the success of men is culturally linked to the women. The cases of Cholpon, Anargul, Gulsana and Jarkynai illustrate how women’s successful projects were presented to a wider public by male state authorities and elders. Even without being publicly named, people know this and implicitly appreciate that the success of men is grounded in part in the effort and encouragement of women, both in private and public life. Furthermore, women’s agency for peacebuilding has trans-local qualities. Grounded in patriarchal family ideals learnt in the domestic sphere, it is applied directly and indirectly in peacemaking activities at multiple scales: in the neighbourhood, at the level of communal and national state administration, and at international levels. Women make use of their family values in different ways and successfully integrate their skills in different sectors and scales by crossing family boundaries through (trans-)local networking. To put it differently, women make translocality an everyday reality through their creative combination of customary family values and strategies within a patriarchal society, but also by work experience and competence in relations with governmental and international organisations.

Our research found that women’s understanding, and practices of peacemaking are learnt in the family, from other women and put into practice in multiple social configurations. Whereas mainstream research has missed this role of women peacemakers in Central Asia, our fieldwork reveals the crucial role of women leaders both in local and trans-local peacebuilding. Women’s peacemaking activities take the form of a ‘patriarchal bargain’, playing with local gender rules in a patriarchal system in order to influence male leaders and secure outcomes that they (the women) want. This has been under-researched not only in relation to southern Kyrgyzstan, but in Central Asian studies and in the peacebuilding literature more generally. Future studies of the specificity of women’s everyday experiences could usefully seek to better understand the (trans-)local qualities of counter-ing, resisting and transforming violence into peaceful coexistence.

Notes

1. Focus group in Nookat, 20 August 2016.
2. Interview with Gulsana Abdysheva, 20 August 2016, Nookat.
3. Interview with Gulsana Abdysheva, Osh city, 15 August 2016.
4. Interview with Zharkina Bolponova, Osh city, 15 August 2016.
5. Interview with Jarkina Rudieva, Osh city, 14 August 2016.
6. Interview with Zhumagul Bolponova, Aravan, 18 August 2016.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview with Mavluyda Ahmadzhanova, Aravan, 20 August 2016.
9. Focus group in Nookat, 15 August 2016.
10. Ibid.
11. Interview with Mavlyuda Ahmadjanova, Osh city, 7 July 2016.
12. Interview with Anargul Mashaeva, Jalalabad, 1 July 2016.
13. Interviews with Anargul Mashaeva, Jalalabad and Mavlyuda ezhe, Amir-Timur. 3 July 2016.

14. Interview with Cholpon Sultanova, Osh, 2 July 2016.
15. Interview with Jarkynai Rudieva, Osh city, 5 July 2016.
16. Focus group with women, Nookat, 15 August 2016.
17. Ibid.
18. Focus group with women, Nookat 15 August 2016.
19. Cholpon Sultanova, Osh city, 21 August 2016.
20. Interview with Zhumagul Bolponova, Aravan, 18 August 2016.
21. Interview with Zhumagul Bolponova, Aravan, 18 August 2016.
22. Ibid.

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