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Are Rural Women Disadvantaged in Asset Ownership and Business Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic?

Renée Giovarelli

Rural Development Institute, and Seattle University School of Law,
Seattle, Washington.

BASIS CRSP

This posting is provided by the BASIS CRSP Management Entity
Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics,
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Tel: (608) 262-5538
Email: basis-me@facstaff.wisc.edu
<http://www.basis.wisc.edu>

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Renée Giovarelli

reneeg@nwlink.com

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 10 years, Kyrgyzstan has privatized most of its agricultural land and distributed it to individual households. These households either farm alone or join together and farm cooperatively. This research seeks to examine whether women have been adversely affected in the process of privatization, asset ownership, or business development. While the legal rules do not disadvantage women, historical customs and beliefs play a major role in rural areas. Using a key informant and focus group approach, we find that women want to and do participate in the market economy. The major impediment to women in asset ownership and business relations is the traditional understanding of gender roles within a family or small business enterprise when both men and women are involved. Many programs exist to assist women in receiving credit and operating small, independently owned enterprises. While dramatic change is not required, women would benefit from additional training, specifically in non-traditional areas for women such as business management and agronomy.

ARE RURAL WOMEN DISADVANTAGED IN ASSET OWNERSHIP AND BUSINESS RELATIONS IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC?

INTRODUCTION

The Kyrgyz Republic, one of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, declared its independence in August 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Kyrgyzstan is a small, mountainous country with a population of approximately 5 million people. Approximately 60 percent of the population lives in rural areas. Presently, most of the large collective and state farms have been dismantled, and former members have received land into ownership on a per capita basis. While there were pockets of problems with the distribution of land and machinery, for the most part the distribution process was fair and treated men and women equitably.

Since the devolution of farms from large state and collective farms to individual and very small private farms, some landowners and agricultural workers have combined their resources with others and started cooperative-style enterprises. These enterprises are often started both to increase the economic well-being of the chairperson and to provide work for her/his extended family and community members.

While Kyrgyz women are not legally disadvantaged in terms of asset ownership or business relations, this paper seeks to examine whether in reality women's positions are adversely affected by historical customs and beliefs and whether women have equal opportunities in asset ownership and business relations. This paper will examine women's opportunities for, access to, and control over assets; access to and control over credit; access to information and training; and ability to participate in local business enterprises and communities.

In transitional economies, the introduction of individual rights to land and a land market necessarily change the traditions and customs of a society to some extent. But, when women's rights are explicitly taken into account and they participate in the design of policy, equity is increased. In many cases, increased gender equality can also lead to increased economic equality (Moock, 1976; Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 1997). For agricultural sector policies, women's access to land is a major component of the success of these policies (Fong, 2001).

Background

The Kyrgyz economy is predominantly agricultural, with about 45 percent of GDP, 50 percent of employment, and 30 percent of exports originating in the agricultural sector. Since independence, the country has pursued a determined policy of privatization and market development. Land ownership and farm management have been distributed to more than 60,000 small private farms, 1,700 new cooperative or corporate farms, and several hundred thousand private plots of less than a hectare. Peasant and cooperative farms account for about 40 percent of agricultural GDP, household plots for close to 50 percent, and reorganized cooperative or corporate farms for the rest (Giovarelli, 2001).

The Kyrgyz Republic is a secular state, although the predominate religion is Islam, and over 85 percent of the population is Muslim. Since independence, there has been a notable increase in religious practice. Strict adherence to Islamic law can have an effect on women's ability to participate in certain business activities, especially those that are far from her home or cause her to be alone with men or away in the evening (irrigation activities, for example). Adherence to Islamic law varies across ethnic groups, but strict adherence is observed mostly in the south of Kyrgyzstan.

Historically, ethnic Kyrgyz people were nomadic, and women were more independent than other Central Asian non-nomadic women. Kyrgyz women generally are not veiled and are not segregated from men. Soviet rule also contributed greatly to the development of Kyrgyz women. For example, of 1,000 women polled, 806 have secondary and university education. Women constitute 59 percent of Kyrgyz Ph.D. holders. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz Government has been in the forefront of gender legislation in Central Asia. In 1996 it ratified the Covenants on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; on Political Rights of Women; on Consent to Marriage, Marriage Age, and Registration; on Civil Rights of Married Women; and on Safety of Motherhood.

However, Kyrgyz society is moving away from gender equality as promoted by the Soviet State, and as espoused in its own laws. There has been a sharp decrease in the number of women in the Kyrgyz Parliament and in all management levels in various sectors of the economy. Women constitute only 6.7 percent of the members of Parliament and in 2002 only two out of 12 ministers were women, compared to the Soviet period when over 35 percent of Parliament and the government were women. As well, in 2002, only one woman was in charge of a state (*oblast*) administration, and of 455 *aiyl okmotu* heads (local government), only 21 were women (UNDP, 2002).

Methodology and Field Work

This report is a synthesis of four rounds of field research conducted by the author focused on interviewing rural women in every *oblast* in the Kyrgyz Republic.¹ The field research was conducted in 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003 as part of a larger body of work by the author on legal issues related to land and enterprise development.

¹ There are seven *oblasts* or provinces in the Kyrgyz Republic: three in the south and four in the north. The southern *oblasts* are: Osh, Jalal-abad, and Batken. The northern *oblasts* are Naryn, Chui, Issyk-kul, and Talas.

Table 1: Field Research

Year	Oblasts	Research Focus	Methodology
2000	Osh, Jalal-Abad, Issyk-kul, Naryn, Chui	Women's Access to Land	Rapid Rural Appraisal; key informant interviews; focus groups
2001	Osh, Naryn	Customary Law and Institutions and the Impact on Women's Rights to Land	Rapid Rural Appraisal; key informant interviews; focus groups
2002	Batken, Issyk-kul, Chui, Osh	Women's Involvement in Agricultural Extension Programs	Rapid Rural Appraisal; key informant interviews
2003	Osh, Issyk-kul, Chui	Women's Involvement in Cooperative Enterprises	Rapid Rural Appraisal; key informant interviews

The primary methodology for this research was rapid rural appraisal and key informant interviews. The interview format was open-ended, based on a structured set of questions with one set of questions for women and another for authorities. The primary interviews were with individual women and groups of village women. The groups were generally made up of 15 to 20 women. Men were discouraged from participating in the women's groups, and men were interviewed separately, often in groups as well. Key interviews with NGO's involved in women's activities, local officials, customary leaders, judicial authorities, and women's leaders were also conducted. Field research was conducted in both mountainous areas and productive valleys, as well as in both remote regions and regions that were close to the *rayon* and *oblast* centers.

The findings related to specific enterprises are a part of a much larger project funded by USAID BASIS that focused on revealing the institutional and financial problems that lead to unprofitable and unsustainable use of co-owned resources. These problems can deprive the poor of current income, capital gains, and new livelihood opportunities. For the case studies, information that focuses on co-owned rural enterprises with some relationship to agriculture was gathered. One of the objectives of the case study interviews was to identify the priority gender issues within enterprises with co-owned resources.

The main question to be answered in this paper is whether or not women are disadvantaged in the agricultural sector as compared to men. Do women have access to and rights over agricultural land, including pastures? Do women receive adequate rural advisory services that promote their prosperity in agricultural or other rural enterprises? Are they receiving the type and amount of information they need or want? Are women involved in agricultural enterprises, and to what extent and at what level? What is necessary for women to form more economically viable small and medium enterprises?

Deterioration of the Economic Situation for Women

While the long-term impacts of the transformation from a centrally planned to a market economy are unclear, short-term consequences of the transformation include deterioration of the rural economy, collapse of the social safety net, increased unemployment, and poverty. Women account for 53.3 percent of the total number of unemployed workers; of those 15,000 or 45 percent reside in rural areas (UNDP, 2002). Rural women, as well as rural men, now rely more on agricultural production (on both their land shares and household plots) for their families' livelihoods. Only a fraction of the non-agricultural jobs existing during the Soviet era now exist. The most disadvantaged groups of women, as identified by local leaders, are widows, divorced women, mothers with many children, mothers with handicapped children, and young women.

Women's Involvement in the Agricultural Sector

Women in Kyrgyzstan are active in agriculture, although field research indicated that their labor contribution varied by village, location, level of poverty, ethnicity, and age. In the south, women interviewed were very involved in production on land shares. They estimated their contribution to comprise 50 to 70 percent of total labor input. In the north, where wheat is the predominant crop and therefore production is more mechanized than in the south, women were less involved on the land share, estimating their input at 30 to 40 percent of total labor. Regarding sales of crops in both the north and south, either men or women sold the crop to wholesalers who came through the village, while women were more likely to take on the task of selling produce at the market. Many Kyrgyz who were interviewed (both men and women) stated that it was customary for men and women to share duties regarding the land and this seemed to be the case in traditional Kyrgyz villages. Women generally have primary responsibility for cultivating the plot of land next to the house (household plots).

While women's labor input is high in agriculture, fewer women than men hold positions of authority. Field research indicated that even women who are partners in enterprises most often follow the lead of the male partners and have less actual input into production and management. Women account for only 18 percent of private business owners, and for 15 percent of farm owners in rural areas (UNDP, 2002).

In addition to their duties on the land, women care for livestock and assume such duties as milking goats and cows and raising domestic animals (such as poultry). In some villages women oversee the breeding of livestock. Women were primarily responsible for taking the animals to high summer pastures in the mountain villages visited, although some villages hire shepherds and in other villages men take the animals to pasture because women engage in trade.

FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS: WOMEN'S ROLE IN AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL ENTERPRISES

This section reviews four key areas related to women's access to and control over assets and agricultural and rural enterprises: land, credit, information and training, and ability to participate fully in enterprise and community management.

Access to and Control Over Land

The land reform process in the Kyrgyz Republic followed the written law to a great extent. During this process members of former state and collective farms received land on a per capita basis, with land share certificates (titles) issued to the household. Therefore, women who were former members of state and collective farms have a legal right to a share of arable land. New registration rules for immovable property attempt to document these rights, as well as rights to houses and adjoining plots. In 2001, of those receiving land shares from former state and collective farms, 50.8 percent were women (UNDP, 2002).

Women who are members of traditional households generally have access to arable land, household land, and pastureland and participate in the use and decision-making process regarding use of the land. However, when households break down, because of abandonment, divorce, or death of a spouse, women's access to land is jeopardized because, under customary law, men "own" the land and house, while women own the movable property within the house. Barriers to equal opportunities for women's ownership of assets are created by divorce, death of a spouse, bride price and dowry, polygamy, abandonment, and out-migration of men.

According to a major long-term study done in Ethiopia, ownership of assets, control within marriage, and disposition upon death or divorce only partially overlap. The study found that assets brought into marriage have little impact on disposition upon death, but matter in case of divorce. Control over productive resources tends to be centralized into the hands of the household head, be it a man or a woman, irrespective of ownership at or after marriage. Control over assets is associated with larger claims over these assets upon divorce, a finding consistent with the presence of incentive problems (Fafchamps, 2003). In Kyrgyzstan, as well, under customary law, men have control over productive resources such as land, and generally after a divorce they continue to control these resources.

Under Kyrgyz customary law, the house and household plot belong to the husband as part of the customary inheritance scheme. Males inherit a house from their family after marriage as a pre-mortem inheritance, and their families are responsible for building the house. Under the written law, property acquired by spouses during marriage is the common joint property of spouses, with the exception of property acquired as the gift or inheritance of one of the spouses, which is considered individual property.

Judges, who were involved in cases related to division of property, stated that when a woman asks for property division at the time of divorce, she must provide proof of her assistance and monetary contribution to the house to be able to receive a portion of the value of the house because it is otherwise seen as the husband's individual property (a gift or his inheritance) by the courts. Women generally have no proof of labor or money spent, so most frequently are not granted any value for the house and surrounding land. *Field Research, 2000.*

In Kyrgyzstan, women who divorce very often return to their family and do not necessarily manifest within the statistics as female head of household. In fact, families headed by women are less poor (42.4% in 2001) than families whose head is a male (49.4 percent in 2001). However, qualitative interviews with women consistently indicate that women who divorce and return to their family create tension because of a lack of land.

Another issue of concern related to women and their rights to land shares involves daughters who leave their home to marry a man from another village—a very common occurrence.

Under the Law on Administration of Agricultural Land, the land shares of one family cannot be physically divided. Women who leave their family to join their husband in another village have the legal right to receive the value of their land share, but would never ask for this because of the pressure of customary law.

In societies where women move to their husband's homes and where land is scarce, the issue of her loss of a right to land can become a problem within her new family. In both China and

On the Tameki Scientific Production Agricultural Cooperative in Uzgen *Rayon*, Osh *Oblast*, women stated that when girls leave the cooperative to join their new husband in another village, the land share and its value stays with her family and the cooperative. The daughter generally receives no value for her portion of the land share. The chairman of the cooperative stated that all family members are not listed on the land share certificate and that it is up to the parents and head of the household to decide what to do with their daughter's share of the land. However, conversely, women who are not from the cooperative but marry a man in the cooperative do not become members of the cooperative and have no privileges of membership although they generally contribute labor. These new wives and workers do not have voting rights. Given that the custom is for women to leave their families to live with their husbands, unmarried daughters who received a portion of a land share in the initial distribution basically have no real right to this land or its value. This is a problem throughout Kyrgyzstan and one that mothers and daughters indicate is of great concern, especially because the daughters do not have access to or ownership over their own land in their husband's village. *Field Research, 2003.*

Kyrgyzstan, where land is distributed to households, distributing land to the household often means that the male head of household has greater actual rights to the land than his wife or daughter, even though on its face, the law does not discriminate against women. A 1200 household survey in 60 villages in China in 2001 found that only six percent of women could receive land rights in their husbands' villages immediately after they married; 60 percent had to wait until a land reallocation in the village; and 24 percent were never able to receive land (Li, 2002). This is in spite of the fact that in China the UNDP estimates that women now constitute approximately 80 percent of the agricultural work force and perform more than 80 percent of the routine farm labor (Li, 2002).

Customary law, which greatly influences intra-household relationships, focuses on the maintenance and support of the household as a unit and reflects the value of family and community

rights, not individual rights. The written family law, in some cases drafted by western advisors, on the other hand, focuses on the rights of individuals and provides mechanisms for individuals to exercise their rights, even at the expense of the household unit. Customary law supersedes the written law in rural villages; although women have the legal right to land as individuals, this right is rarely exercised. In field research interviews, many women were satisfied with customary law and felt that it was generally superior to the written law. Most women agreed, however, that divorced and abandoned women are most vulnerable and would most benefit from exercising their individual rights under written law.

While access to land is critical to women, access to land alone is not enough. Women who were interviewed stated that to improve their situation they needed, in addition to land: access

to credit for inputs and small animals, extension services, job opportunities, assured access to education for their children, and healthcare.

Access to and Control of Credit

Before any discussion of credit issues specific to women, it is critical to point out that availability of credit is an issue for all enterprises in Kyrgyzstan. First, the decline in economic activity (GDP) in Kyrgyzstan creates a weak macroeconomic environment. Second, the aggregate supply of capital in Kyrgyz agriculture has declined precipitously (Erdolatov, 2003). There is no statistical evidence that indicates that women are more or less disadvantaged than men in relation to access to credit. Certainly women and men are often interested in different types of credit.

One of the greatest differences between men and women in terms of business development in Kyrgyzstan is the desired scale of the project.

“For the last 2-3 years, I have not encountered any cases where access to credit was hindered only because of gender. Only three categories of women are discriminated against, widows, divorced women, and young women, recently married. These women do not have property for collateral.” *Executive Director of Women Entrepreneurs Association (WESA) 2004.*

According to focus group interviews with men’s groups and women’s groups, interviews with micro-credit organizations, and extension workers, women are generally more interested in small-scale credit and small-scale enterprises, while men are interested in much larger credit and much larger projects. The issue of scale has an affect on women’s ability to receive credit according to loan officers in branch offices of the Kyrgyz Agricultural Finance Corporation (KAFC), the major credit provider for rural areas. KAFC does not want to provide very small credits to people because the loan process is time consuming, as are efforts to recover small loans. In 2001, KAFC engaged in 7642 loan transactions from their main credit line, and only 168

transactions in their credit to small farms, and 176 from their farm development fund (Erdolatov, 2003). More than 80 percent of KAFC funds are allocated to the main credit line, while small farm credits account for only 7% of the total amount of credits (Erdolatov, 2003).

For this reason, micro-credit projects have had a major impact on women’s ability to develop small enterprises. There are, for example, 40 self-help groups that are establishing savings funds in the southern *oblast* of Osh.² The amount of money available through micro-crediting projects is significant, yet continues to be insufficient.

² Interview with head of Osh KAFC office.

Table 2. Credit Available in agricultural sector

KAFC Approved Credit (2000)	Micro-credit –agricultural sector (2000)
462.7 million soms	564.8 million soms

Many self-help groups have done research and have identified a product that they think could be provided at a low-cost and that would be widely purchased, such as macaroni or bread products. They have written business plans and in many cases have identified sources for in-kind donations. However, these projects had not come to fruition because they could not get start-up credit, often as little as \$500-\$1,000.



Kyrgyz women discussing customary law in a focus group in Osh oblast, 2000

In every *oblast*, many women are forced into subsistence farming by the poor economic conditions. These women are extremely interested in income generating activities, small businesses, and small amounts of seed capital. The credit programs that now exist are not appropriate as seed capital because of the high interest and short repayment period. The women interviewed understood how the market works, had ideas and business plans that made sense in the areas where they lived, and yet did not have the money to implement their

ideas. These women were members of self-help credit groups, which they considered positive, but the self-help groups were saving very small amounts of money. This lack of funding for innovative ideas constrains training to some extent. The women interviewed were frustrated by the fact that they had a workable business plan, knew how to process fruit or sew or market handicrafts, but were limited by capital.

Rural Advisory Services

Much has been written about the failures of extension services to reach women farmers, and the cultural bias that has prevented women from participating in group trainings or active participation in non-traditional learning (Gender Mainstreaming in Agriculture and Rural development, 2001). According to the FAO, only 15% of extension workers are women (FAO 1999). Women generally use lower levels of technology because of problems of access, cultural restrictions on use, or lesser interest in doing research on women's crops (World Bank, 2000).

“Location is critical for our participation in training. We cannot attend meetings at the *aiyl okmotu* (1.5 kilometers away). We would attend mixed groups without a problem, but we prefer for the male experts to come to our homes rather than to attend a meeting in a school or at the *aiyl okmotu*.” *Women's group in Batken Oblast.*

In Kyrgyzstan, cultural bias does appear to play a role in what types of training women receive under extension services. While many donor-funded programs have focused on information and training for rural residents, women interviewed often wanted a type of information and training not available to them. Field research indicates that while much effort and improvement has been made, women continue to be underserved in relation to agricultural extension and advisory services. Women have distinctive training needs in relation to agricultural

production and agri-business. On the one hand, women want training in activities that are traditional to women, while on the other hand they also need training in more traditionally male areas of agronomy and livestock because increasingly they are taking on more responsibility in these areas.

Cultural bias appears to be the main impediment women face in receiving training in traditional male areas. In every oblast in Kyrgyzstan, women are welcome to join men's training groups focused on agronomy and livestock. However, the location and timing of training for women is critical to their participation. Women find it more convenient to meet in their homes, while men prefer a more formal situation.

Women who were interviewed were most interested in improving household level nutrition and income. They were interested in growing vegetables and preserving them; in chicken raising, livestock, sheep raising, and agronomy; in handicraft groups; legal training; and cooking. Women wanted to be trained by women in traditional female skills. However, women did not want to be excluded from trainings that men received. Women felt like they had to sacrifice one or the other because no trainer could fulfill both roles. In both Issyk-Kul and Naryn *Oblast* in the north, women advisors work with women on traditional female activities, and male advisors work with men on traditional male activities, and there is little mixing of advisors or clients. Women had a difficult time getting information about livestock,

possible new breeds, or different types of animals that they might raise for food and income, even though they were often responsible for their family's livestock.

One possible solution can be found in a *rayon* in Chui *Oblast*, where there are two female advisors and one male advisor. Each advisor has four villages and works with both men and women. One of the advisors is an economist (male advisor), one is an agronomist, and the third is an irrigation engineer. If technical advice is needed, the advisor who has a particular skill usually provides technical advice to the other advisor who then takes the information to his/her villages. The exception to this is in the area of processing. If, in the villages covered by the male advisor, women are interested in training on processing, one of the other female advisors will go to the village to work with women on processing. In the villages covered by the male advisor, there is only one women's group per village. The two women advisors have mostly female groups. According to the advisors, this is partially due to the gender of the advisors and partially due to the fact that sugar beet growing is the main agricultural activity in those areas, and mostly women are engaged in sugar beet growing.

Other Types of Training and Information

Women who were a part of a male managed enterprise, stated that they lacked the specific training they needed to be an active member of the enterprise. This training was related to either non-traditional areas like management or the specific areas in which women worked (accounting). Women interviewed in all of the enterprises studied raised the issue of access to training.³

“One family member is designated to receive extension service training on behalf of the whole family. That person (a brother if possible) is expected to share the information with the rest of the family, but we never hear anything about it.”
Women's group in Osh Oblast.

In addition to training, women lack information about activities of the enterprises in which they are members. Women members of the Abshir – Tany water users association, who were head of their household, had no information about the WUA although they receive water and pay for the water as the other members. Those who were interviewed were irrigating their land because they were widows with only daughters. However, although the chairperson and accountant told us they were members of the WUA, the women themselves had no knowledge that they were members and no knowledge about the functioning of the WUA or that it was a separate association. Both women work outside of their home and take care of their land shares. They attribute their lack of information to the fact that they are women and all of the

“Information is usually disseminated at the teahouse outside of the mosque where women do not go.”
Woman from WUA, 2004.

representatives are male. The women pay for the water in-kind to the accountant. They don't

³ Case studies were developed for the BASIS CRSP Research Study, “Institutional Innovations to Improve the Viability of Equity Sharing Under Privatization and Farm Restructuring: Helping Land Reform Beneficiaries Gain Access to Land and Financial Resources in Central Asia and Southern Africa.”

know how much they must pay in advance, but usually come with 2-3 piles of tobacco. If the amount of tobacco exceeds their expense, they have a credit for next time. The person who performs the watering comes to the house and tells their children that it is time to pay.

Both of the founders of Ecoproduct are men. The board consists of the chief accountant, the executive director, the shopkeeper, and one of the founders. The founder is the male; the other three are females. The chief accountant would like to join as a co-owner but the founder who is not on the board opposes this. Even though there are three women and one man, the women board members stated that the man has the most power. The women stated that they are better at thinking about the long-term, and they have to control his spending but must do so without him thinking that they are taking charge. The women stated that men direct all four fruit processors in *Issyk-kul Oblast* because it is improper for a woman to be the head of an enterprise and have her husband work for her.

The executive director is the wife of the founder, who is a board member. As the director she makes many day-to-day decisions herself including all operating decisions. She determines pricing. She states that her husband gives her more and more power and says that he will turn over the enterprise to her, although he will remain the owner. *Ecoproduct Ltd. (Tuip Rayon, Issyk-kul Oblast)*

part of an enterprise run by their husband or another male. However, when women were the head on an enterprise, they did not feel that they had any more difficulties than men in the same position.

The major impediments to women's involvement were culture and tradition. In some cases, women were asked to be part of management but turned down the opportunity because women managers are not part of their custom and tradition, and, therefore, women do not feel capable of performing management duties. In addition, some husbands oppose their wives

The core theme of the interviews with women members of co-owned enterprises was their sense of isolation. The biggest priority for female members was more training and more information. Women are treated differently than men in terms of what they are able to do within an organization, and women members believe that because of this they have less chance to participate fully. It seems clear that the enterprises, as well as individual women, would benefit from an increase in training and communication for female members.

Women's Involvement in Agricultural Enterprises

From the focus group interviews with women who were involved in enterprises either as the head or as a member and in women's groups involved in assisting women entrepreneurs, it became clear that there is a distinction between the experience of women heads as opposed to women who are members of enterprises where the head is a male. Customs, traditions, and in some cases religious law do have an impact on women's involvement in enterprises where men are also involved. If a male is the head of an enterprise, women must fill their customary role as a support person and not a leader. Women's involvement varied by enterprise, but generally women were not as involved in enterprise management and decision-making as they wanted to be when they were a

"The only difficulty I have faced has been the negative attitude of some officials toward me because I cannot be taking care of my family, since I am opening a business. Women are less able to oil the wheel because they are not part of the male system." *Director of Aiylsut (Rural Milk) Cooperative, Chui Oblast.*

participating in a management role. In other instances, timing of board meetings where the majority of members are male was an impediment to women's involvement. Women generally have less spare time than men do and are unavailable for meetings early in the morning or late in the afternoon when household duties and childcare are most necessary. Women in male-headed enterprises seemed to have mixed feelings about their role. On the one hand, they stated that women should not be superior to their husbands, and on the other hand they were interested in exercising control over the enterprise. In several cases, women were satisfied to have actual control as opposed to a "named" position of control.

In contrast, women who were the head of enterprises did not feel like they faced any impediment that men did not face. They lacked credit, they had difficulty in dealing with

Of the 1,700 landshare holders in this Agricultural Cooperative, 70 percent are women. Tobacco is a crop primarily produced by women and, during the Soviet era, this farm mainly produced tobacco. The farm is primarily made-up of ethnic Uzbeks. Several levels of decision making exist within the cooperative, but most of the day to day decisions are made by men.

General Meeting. The general meeting is the supreme decision making body according to the charter, and makes major decisions affecting the whole cooperative. Rather than a one-member-one-vote approach, one member represents 10 other members at the general meeting due to the large size of the cooperative (10,000 people, 1,700 workers). The representatives to the general meeting are selected at a brigade meeting. Approximately 50-70 percent of the delegates to the general meeting are women. The general meeting is held infrequently.

Management Board. The next level of decision-making occurs at the level of the board, and the board is responsible for management decisions. The general meeting elects the management board members. The board has 13 members and consists of workers and specialists or department heads. The departments include: machinery, seed, tobacco fermentation, planning and accounting, and irrigation. The department heads are all male, and the chair and deputy chairman are men as well. Twelve of the board members are men and one is a woman. The board meets in the morning approximately once or twice a month. The meetings are from 6:30 or 7:00 until 8:00. It is a difficult, if not impossible, time for women to attend because of their household duties. The sole woman board member rarely attends. Women are sometimes asked to be board members but refuse because they do not feel like they have sufficient management skills.

Brigades. There are six brigade leaders, who manage smaller groups of workers, all of whom live in one neighborhood. Each brigade corresponds to a *mahallya* or neighborhood, and the *mahallya* elects the brigade leader. *Mahallyas* are traditional among the Uzbeks and exist throughout Uzbekistan and in the south of Kyrgyzstan. *Mahallya* leaders are traditionally men, and all six brigade leaders are men.

Administration. The cooperative also has an administrative body, which is responsible both to the board and the general meeting. The administration runs the day-to-day operation and includes the head of the cooperative, an accountant, a social issue specialist, and others involved in administrative tasks related both to the farm and the neighborhood. The social issue specialist, who is a woman, handles issues that specifically affect women. She raises issues to the board, and the board takes action on them. She also attends the general meetings and provides accounts and reports of her activities. *Tameki Scientific Production Agricultural Cooperative (Uzgen Rayon, Osh Oblast)*

authorities and getting the required permits, but they did not feel like any of this had to do with their gender.

The major difference between female-headed enterprises and male-headed enterprises was in the gender make-up of the members. When women headed the enterprise, males were reluctant to work for them. However, women, especially single mothers without husbands, were more likely to want to join a female-headed enterprise because they thought they could arrange a schedule that would suit their situation. Moreover, men have more chance for employment because they can travel away from their home, so they were less willing to work for a female-headed rural enterprise.

Social Services and Enterprises

In the former Soviet Union, the collective and state farm structures were often the village structure as well, providing many public services. With the breakdown of the collective farms and the Soviet structure, traditional institutions are re-emerging. These traditional structures—the courts of elders, clan leaders, and religious leaders—have been primarily male dominated. Across Kyrgyzstan, there are efforts to include women in the traditional community structure, and there is some recognition that women are much more likely to participate in community activities that are within their sphere of activity and relationships, and/or if there is a woman decision-maker within the institution.

Provision of social services appears to be a special concern of women in relation to enterprises. Women members in the larger two cooperatives in our case studies indicated that they were interested in how the enterprise dealt with social issues such as widows, divorced women, and the poor. Women members of the cooperative were interested in having a kindergarten/daycare established and in receiving healthcare services. Tobacco work is very harmful to women's health, and women provide most of the labor on tobacco farms. So far these two issues had not been addressed and the members thought that, for this reason, it would be helpful to have more women in management and decision-making positions.

Women from the production cooperatives and the water user association stated that social services were a concern for them, and they did not feel as though men understood this as a priority issue. Women generally volunteer to provide these services.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Kyrgyzstan, women are not striving for a status of sameness with men. Women interviewed were generally not interested in taking on traditional male roles. Women did want equality of opportunity to participate in the market economy and to be a member of an economically viable family or family business.

The major impediment for women entrepreneurs appears to be the traditional understanding of gender roles and the lack of understanding about how to develop enterprises where both women and men play an active management role. Because Kyrgyzstan has a tradition of women and men working together and of families functioning as a single household, dramatic change is not required. However, for women to experience equal opportunities, actions and decisions must be directed at this outcome. Following are possible recommendations related to women and asset ownership and involvement in business enterprises.

Asset Ownership

There are two legal changes that would have an impact on women's ability to receive an equal portion of property upon divorce or abandonment. First, the legislation could be clearer that all property in common use by a married couple is considered community property and the value of this property should be equally divided in case of divorce. This provision would strengthen women's right to equal distribution of property even though they have moved to their husband's household. The second change would be to require that for divorce proceedings and distribution of property, the court fee should be divided evenly and paid after the division of property occurs. Neither of these provisions should be unacceptable culturally because when women do request property division, generally the village leaders try to divide the property evenly.

Training and Information

To further women's economic empowerment, at least two types of training are required. First, women who are members of enterprises as well as women who lead enterprises need training related to their specific duties (accounting, social service provision, etc.), and training related to management and board involvement. Such training can be provided by international organizations and local NGOs that focus on small and medium enterprises and women entrepreneurs.

Second, women involved in agriculture need training by male specialists in agronomy and livestock raising. While traditionally men have been most involved in these areas, women do not want to be consigned only to processing and craft making. Women need training that will be at a time and place convenient to them, and probably the training should be focused on more elementary issues more appropriate to those with little experience in the area. This training would be best provided by extension service workers who are already engaged in training men in these areas.

Social Services

For women's needs to be met in terms of healthcare, childcare, dispute resolution, and poverty reduction, women must be involved in decision-making and management. One way to encourage such involvement is to provide management training to women, and to address women's needs as to meeting times. Women need to be represented at the community and governing level. In interviews with men's groups, women's groups, and traditional community leaders, we found very little real objection to women in governing roles, but we did find a lack of awareness of the necessity for this on the part of men in particular. Gender awareness training in agricultural enterprises will be necessary for attitudes and perceptions to change.

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