



**GSPS** | GENDER IN SOCIETY  
PERCEPTION STUDY

# WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Kyrgyz Republic



OCTOBER 2018

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RESEARCH REPORT:  
WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS  
BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Kyrgyz Republic



Bishkek, October 2018



# GENDER IN SOCIETY PERCEPTIONS

## STUDY (GSPS) OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

This pillar research report is part of the Gender in Society Perceptions Study (GSPS) funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, a joint undertaking of UN Women, UNFPA and IOM in the Kyrgyz Republic and in partnership with the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic. The GSPS is also supported by stakeholders from leading local universities, research institutions, non-governmental organisations and government ministries, including the Office of the President; National Academy of Sciences; National Defence Council; Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth; Department for Security, Law Enforcement and Defence, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The overall objective of the GSPS is to establish household, community and public level data and information on key risk factors for gender inequality and threats for violence affecting women and girls in the Kyrgyz Republic (what is known, believed and practised). Specific objectives of the GSPS are to understand:

- Pressing interpersonal and structural issues leading to gender discrimination, violence and exploitation;
- Community-level trends and shifting societal perceptions of gender stereotypes and relations;
- The relationship between gender inequality, insecurity and potential conflict triggers.

To reach these goals, quantitative and qualitative research was carried out on five topics of key interest to understand gender practices and perceptions in Kyrgyzstan today: women's political participation, women's economic empowerment, violence against women and girls in the form of bride kidnapping and child marriages, women's religious beliefs and practices, and women's involvement in labour migration. The GSPS National

Survey Results, collected by UNFPA and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, were published in Fall 2016. The GSPS pillar reports, each address one of the five topics of interest, and incorporate the findings of the qualitative and quantitative research. The pillar reports and survey are published in English, Russian and Kyrgyz. A general introduction, published separately, provides the full context analysis and methodology for the collection of GSPS publications.

The GSPS was launched to redress the lack of comprehensive studies that focused squarely on sources of gender inequality – and particularly on the attitudes and perceptions that can feed gender inequality – in the Kyrgyz Republic, and to identify the factors relevant for promoting a gender-inclusive peace. The GSPS attempted to identify opportunities and strategies for equal participation of women and girls in community level processes, provide focussed recommendations to state and non-state authorities, and provide evidence for more gender-responsive policies in the Kyrgyz Republic. The results of the GSPS are being widely distributed within the UN system, to the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, and among scholars and members of civil society and non-governmental organisations.

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## UN Peacebuilding Fund:

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## Joint Steering Committee:

The Joint Steering Committee (JSC), co-chaired by the Office of the President and the UN Resident Coordinator with membership from state and civil society organisations and UN agencies, provided oversight over implementation of GSPS. We are grateful to JSC members for monitoring progress to ensure achievement of key results.

## Joint Steering Committee Secretariat:

We also thank the JSC Secretariat for regular facilitation between stakeholders and for monitoring progress towards achieving project results and for raising public awareness about joint Government-UN peacebuilding efforts in Kyrgyzstan, including GSPS.

## Research Respondents:

The GSPS would not have been possible without the participation of more than 7,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan who devoted their time, energy, and insights to the study as respondents. It is thanks to them for us to be able to present the findings in this and other GSPS-related reports.

## Recipient UN Organization Partners:

The GSPS also benefitted from the support and managerial guidance of all three of its implementing partners, UN Women as lead agency and coordinator of the qualitative component, UNFPA which coordinated the quantitative component, and IOM which provided technical support to the overall study. We also thank all UN staff who supported the work, and the three agencies' staff, who offered written contributions, comments, ideas, and generous feedback.

## Stakeholders Advisory Group:

The Stakeholder's Advisory Group (SAG) represented a wide range of state stakeholders, research institutions, experts and civil society actors. The SAG served as a platform for multiple state and non-state stakeholders to inform, advise and consult on the research methodology and instruments, and ultimately approving them. We are deeply grateful to those who gave their time to this endeavour and showed their ownership of our joint effort.

## Research Team:

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# GLOSSARY

<i>Amanat</i>	Value given to someone temporarily for safekeeping and care
<i>Barakah</i>	Divine blessing
<i>Dua</i>	Supplication to Allah
<i>Fard</i>	Obligatory duty
<i>Hadith</i>	Words, actions or habits of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad
<i>Halal</i>	Permissible or lawful in traditional Islamic law
<i>Haram</i>	Forbidden, not accessible in traditional Islamic law
<i>Hijab</i>	Islamic veiling for women
<i>Hujra</i>	Home-based Islamic classes/school
<i>Iman</i>	State of faith
<i>Israf</i>	Excessive or wasteful consumption of goods and services
<i>Jahhiliya</i>	State or time of ignorance
<i>Jamaat</i>	Religious community or congregation/-gathering
<i>Kafir</i>	Unbeliever, disbeliever, adherent of a religion other than Islam
<i>Mahr</i>	Mandatory payment to the bride at the time of marriage
<i>Mahram</i>	Male chaperone (father, brother, husband, uncle, grandfather etc.)
<i>Mazaar</i>	Holy shrine, cemetery
<i>Makruh</i>	Not desirable action
<i>Mubah</i>	Neither commanded nor prohibited action
<i>Mufti</i>	Head of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan
<i>Muftiyat</i>	Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan
<i>Mustahab</i>	Desirable action
<i>Sabr</i>	Patience, perseverance
<i>Shukr</i>	Thankfulness, gratitude
<i>Tabib</i>	Shaman, traditional healer
<i>Tithe</i>	One-tenth part of earnings to be paid to the church
<i>Umma</i>	Muslim community
<i>Wajib</i>	Necessary action
<i>Zikr</i>	Repetitive invocation of Allah's name

# ABBREVIATIONS

<i>FGD</i>	Focus group discussion
<i>GSPS</i>	Gender in Society Perception Study
<i>HIV/AIDS</i>	Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome
<i>IOM</i>	The International Organisation for Migration
<i>ISIS</i>	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<i>NCS</i>	The National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic
<i>NGO</i>	Non-governmental organisation
<i>OSCE/ODIHR</i>	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<i>UN</i>	The United Nations
<i>UNFPA</i>	The United Nations Population Fund
<i>UN Women</i>	The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

# KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report of the Gender in Society and Perception Study (GSPS) project examines how increased religiosity in Kyrgyzstan is effecting women's equality, empowerment and ability to contribute to peace at the household, community and country level. Divided in two main sections, the report explores religion's effects amongst Muslim women and proselytes. The research data are analysed, presented and discussed through the dual conceptual lens of 'religious coping' and 'human capital'.

To summarise the main findings, religion offers women effective coping mechanisms in times of crisis, clear guidance for everyday life and the opportunity to re-negotiate their previous position in the family and community. Kyrgyzstan women are searching for coping mechanisms and social capital today due to the myriad of economic and social challenges that they face and that other GSPS reports address such as violence against women and girls, labour migration and accessing economic empowerment and political decision-making.

To deal with these modern-day challenges, the present report finds that some Muslim women refer enthusiastically to the concept of amanat, which entitles them to the right to be treated with respect, care and dignity, when they abide by their faith's limitations on their physical and professional mobility, and they are placed under men's direct financial, physical and moral guardianship. Muslim women are re-negotiating their family roles and positions with their husbands, facilitating the internalisation and reproduction of gendered habitus, and consolidating patriarchal gender relations and male domination in the private-public domain. This may be a risk factor for gender inequality, but religion is at times also having a noticeably pacifying or calming effect on women's individual lives, and therefore contributing to peace on the micro household level.

Women are also turning to Christian faiths as a coping mechanism against external shocks and stressors. While bonds with their new churches and communities may deepen their social capital, some proselytes suffer from marginalization and stigmatization from their former neighbours and co-workers, and themselves can have

discriminatory views on Islam. Kyrgyzstan's acquired religious diversity poses a number of challenges to social cohesion and sustainable peace, and requires careful management and dialogue to avoid further tensions and conflict.

**Recommendations** to ensure that increased religiosity can help generate greater gender equality and gender-equal peace include:

- Greater access for women interested in Islam to certified religious knowledge; public places of worship; and Kyrgyzstan's Spiritual Administration of Muslims, particularly the re-opening of its women's department.
- Protection of individual freedom of religion and belief, and non-discrimination for followers of "non-traditional" religious faiths, including access to burial grounds, religious literature and protection from hate crimes, in law and practice.
- Provision of opportunities to women to engage in inter-faith dialogue and gain new awareness about religious freedom and different religious faiths and practices.
- Inclusion of women in efforts to prevent violent extremism, the design of specific programs to support the family members of violent extremists, and support to the re-integration and rehabilitation of former violent extremists and their families.

Many of these points are closely aligned with the Kyrgyzstan Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere for the period of 2014-2020; others require amendments to existing legislation or new policies.

# INTRODUCTION

The epochal changes, which have been taking place in contemporary Kyrgyzstan since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have resulted in fundamental shifts in the socio-political, economic and cultural realms. Through the prism of multi-dimensional transformation processes, characterised by extensive democratisation and liberalisation endeavours, the country has experienced a widespread religious revival. The latter is evidenced by two major trends on the local 'religious market' - a strong Islamic renaissance and the arrival of different Protestant Christian denominations and other faiths in the country, all of which is notably accompanied by a simultaneous rise in secularist sentiments. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution. While the figures are imprecise, it is estimated that over 80 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population of 5,7 million is Sunni Muslim (mainly followers of the Hanafi school); 15 percent is Christian, mostly Russian Orthodox; and the other 5 percent includes Shi'a Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha'i communities or individuals who are unaffiliated with any religion (USCIRF 2017).

In response, Kyrgyzstan's society, academia and human rights activists have started discussing about religion's possible negative implications on gender equality and women's empowerment because of the society's persistent acceptance of traditional male-dominated gender roles, and patriarchal norms and values. Many gender researchers acknowledge that the female emancipation policy of the Soviet Union introduced substantial changes in centuries-old traditional norms in Kyrgyz society and promoted women's participation in education, employment and public life by equalizing women and men in productive labour and the socialization of household tasks (Engel 1987; Ashwin 2000; Fanon 2000). However, since the country's independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan's women have lost gains in the public and private domains. Sharply reduced employment opportunities for women, closure of state-supported childcare facilities and social support mechanisms, and substantial decrease of women's participation in political and decisionmaking processes have been coupled with increased levels of violence against women including domestic violence, bride kidnapping, trafficking, and early and forced marriage (World Bank 2011). All these tendencies have contributed to rising gender inequalities and regional disparities. Rural women and girls have increasingly restricted access to professional education, employment and career opportunities, and productive resources. At the same time, there is a perception in society that women's religious radicalisation and involvement in religious extremist activities has grown in recent years. According to a June 2017 UN Women report on "The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening in, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," out of total 863 people who travelled from Kyrgyzstan to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq between 2010 and 2016, 188 (23.8%) are women.

Women are traveling to conflict zones following their radicalized husbands not only out of obedience, but also because they see no other way to support their families if their husbands leave them alone and they are stigmatized by their communities (UN Women 2017). In light of this, such legitimate questions arise: Does the ever-growing role of religion in the country contribute to the emergence of negative gender-specific tendencies in the country? If yes, how?

Before exploring the above questions, however, it is first important to understand how the government of Kyrgyzstan has responded to the rapid changes in the religious environment at the policy and programmatic level. Malikov (2010) classifies Kyrgyzstan's state policy on religious affairs into three distinct stages. The first stage (1991-2000) can be defined as liberal, during which the government had a laissez-faire stance towards religion and restricted its role to the registration of religious organisations. The second stage (2000-2006), characterised as moderately repressive, occurred in the context of the global campaign against terror when a series of terrorist attacks committed by militant Islamist groups deemed to have extensive links to transnational terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda and the Taliban (bombings in Tashkent in 1999, incursions into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000) also effected Central Asia. During this period, the government started working towards combatting extremist movements, while the boundary between 'extremist' and 'non-extremist' was still vague. The last stage is contemporary, during which the government has become an active player in regulation of religious affairs.

The government's more active engagement in religious issues is evident with the passage of new legislation and policies. In 2006, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic adopted the State Policy in the Sphere of Religion, which emphasised the special importance and role of the Hanafi Mazkhab Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church in state-religious relations. Based on this policy, the State Agency on Religious Affairs initiated a bill 'On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations' which was signed into law in 2009.<sup>1</sup> The law outlines the rights to freedom of conscience, religious and atheistic activities, and determines the legal status of religious organisations, foreign religious organisations and missionaries. It introduced significant restrictions on the activities of religious organisations such as prohibition of the involvement of minors in religious organisations, the ban on conducting proselytising activities and distribution of religious literature in public spaces, or visiting homes and institutions with the missionary intentions. The severest restrictions were established on the procedure for official registration of religious organisations. According to the law, an applicant organisation should have at least 200 registered members, all citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic, who have reached the age of maturity and who permanently live on the territory of the country. The list of 200 founding members must be additionally notarized and approved by the local city council, which proves to be difficult to attain due to different factors including negative attitudes towards 'new' religions among the general public (OSCE 2011). The law was also criticized by the Advisory Council of the OSCE/ODIHR on freedom of religion and belief as non-conforming to the international human rights instruments of the United Nations to which the Kyrgyz republic is a party (Kabak 2015).

Further in 2012, the given law was amended with a number of changes and insertions to Article 22 „Religious literature and objects of religious orientations“. According to the legal review conducted by OSCE/ODIHR in 2012, the amendments are vague and leave sufficient space for abusive interpretation. For example, the state commission on religious affairs may now conduct theological analysis of religious materials including religious literature, media data and other printed

<sup>1</sup> According to the new law, a number of restrictions on religious freedom were imposed including restrictions on missionary activity and proselytism, heavy restrains in registration of religious organisations, time limits for missionary visits, prohibition of dissemination of religious literature outside the designated territories and others.

materials. However, the law does not specify representatives of which religious groups should participate or which criteria should be used to carry out the expertise, leaving it prone to possible arbitrary and abusive application (OSCE/ODIHR 2012: 6). Another example is the use of unclear terminology in the amendments which poses a considerable risk of biased interpretation of the law and of imposition of restrictions on the production and dissemination of religious material (2012: 7). Terms like religious extremism, separatism and religious fundamentalism are used without a clear-cut legal definition and lack sufficient clarity. The assessment whether a religious material has a religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist nature rests solely within the descretion of the assessing body (ibid.).

Another important legislative act that shapes the religious legal environment is the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere for the period of 2014-2020. It clearly states the intention to establish an effective model of state-religion relations through regulation and monitoring of religious and public organisations with a view to ensure public security, to enhance inter-faith dialogue and religious tolerance, and to counterfeit religious radicalism and extremism. The main focus of the concept lies on modes of cooperation with religious organisations, regulation of religious and religion-related education, and prevention of religious extremism. There is almost no reference to women-related problems or priority action fields besides mentioning the need to regulate home-based religious education for women and children.

However, the Concept includes a few key points of relevance for the present study. It strongly emphasizes the importance of establishing the environment of mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among believers of different religions and religious denominations, and non-believers. In the educational sphere, the concept calls for introduction of licensing of religious educational institutions for the purpose of unification of teaching curricular and prevention of dissemination of radical ideologies. At the same time, it requires the creation of a centralized training system to improve and standardize the quality of religious education among the religious clergy. Third, in the sphere of religious extremism, the concept defines its understanding of the term, 'religious extremism' as "adherence to extreme religious views and actions aimed at unconstitutional change of the

existing order, undermining integrity and security of a state, fostering social, racial, national, religious, class and tribal hatred, destroying human personality and threatening human health and life".<sup>2</sup> It recognizes the intensification of extremist religious manifestations in the country, and the existence of destructive Islamic movements that foster dissemination of extremist ideologies among the population.<sup>3</sup> To prevent religious extremism and to deal with the rising religious diversity, the concept advances a number of specific measures including promotion of ,traditional"<sup>4</sup> religions, Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity, both of which maintain long-standing historical and cultural roots in the region. An Action Plan to implement the Concept with eighty-eight activities was passed in 2015.

In light of the above developments and discourses revolving around religious revival in Kyrgyzstan, deterioration of women's overall quality of life and the risk of religious female radicalisation, the present study sets out to explore the social and gender implications of religion from the perspectives of Islamic revivalism and emergence of ,new' religions on the territory of Kyrgyzstan. It is important from a policy perspective because there are ongoing discussions in Kyrgyzstan about the necessity of passing new amendments to the Law on Religion, drafting a National Strategy to prevent violent extremism, working on a new National Action Plan (NAP) on Gender Equality once and implementing the new NAP on UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Moreover, acknowledging that researchers, experts and development practitioners in the international arena report about a deeply contextual and constantly evolving

2 The translation from Russian is borrowed from OSCE/ODIHR Comments on the Concept Paper on State Policy in the Sphere of Religion of the Kyrgyz Republic, Warsaw, 27 March 2014. Full text available at: [\[http://www.legislationline.org/search/runSearch/1/country/20/rows/10/type/2/page/2\]](http://www.legislationline.org/search/runSearch/1/country/20/rows/10/type/2/page/2)

3 Ibid.

4 There is a contradictory discourse about dichotomous categorization of Islam into 'traditional' and 'radical', which was first introduced in the national security discourse through its mentioning in the Concept of the state policy in the religious sphere for the period of 2014-2020 and defined as "observance of the Quran and Sunna by preserving customs and traditions established by ulemas and handed from generation to generation" (p. 19). Many experts and academicians believe that such dichotomization does not actually help to identify which Islamic movement, group or community should be considered as ,traditional' thus ,harmless', and which ,radical' thus ,banned' because the religious environment in Kyrgyzstan is complex, diverse and intertwined, and there is no single ,proper' way of following Islam. Such dualistic categorization is believed to embody the government's attempt to ban any Islamic movement deemed alien to local cultural context and interpretation of Islam in the name of counterfeiting Islamic radicalisation and extremism in Kyrgyzstan.

relationship between religion and social cohesion, we also want to explore possible implications of religious developments in Kyrgyzstan for sustainable peace on a household, community and country level.

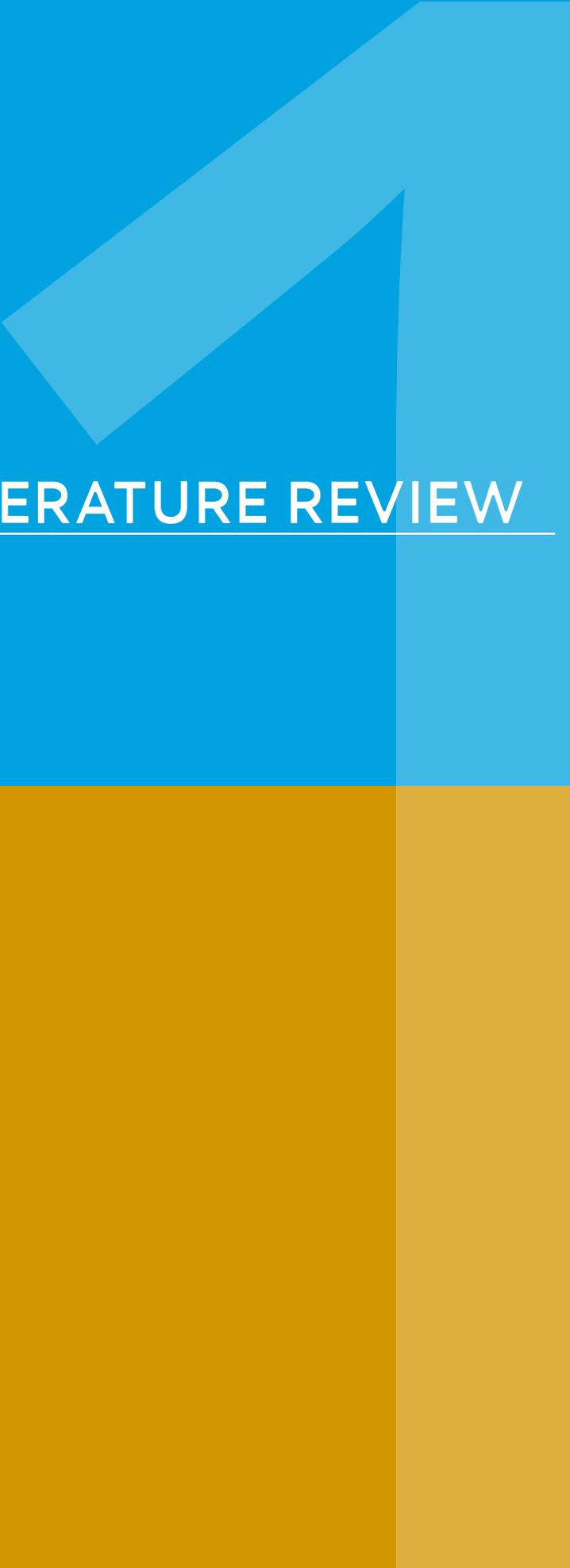
This report is part of the umbrella 'Gender in Society Perception Study (GSPS)' conducted by UN Women, IOM and UNFPA, which aimed to establish country level data on key factors affecting gender inequality, disempowerment and violence against women and girls. The project was implemented in close cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, and was supported by leading national research institutions, non-governmental organisations, universities and different government institutions.

Methodologically, the research applied a mixed methods approach and generated its primary data corpus from qualitative and quantitative sources. The Religion Pillar is one of the five thematic pillars of the research. In 2015-2016, a separate group of researchers developed the research pillar design, conducted the field research and generated the primary datasets. We, the research team involved in the production of the present report, have used these primary datasets to process, analyse and synthesise data into an analytical paper. Our work is mainly dedicated to examining the impact of recent religious revival in the Kyrgyz Republic on gender roles, cross-gender relations and female empowerment, and its possible implication on social cohesion and sustainable peace in the country. The primary data sources, which inform this report, include 196 individual interviews and 48 focus groups with female and male adherents of different religions active in Kyrgyzstan, religious leaders and experts. For data triangulation, we also made partial use of the raw data from the Kyrgyz national survey, which has a sample size of 5,949 households.

The present study report is organised into four main chapters. The first chapter deals with a brief literature review on evolution of the religious environment on the territory of contemporary Kyrgyzstan in the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras, and identifies gaps in the literature and research. The results of the literature review are then used as the basis for our further analytical work. The second chapter elaborates on the general methodology of data collection, processing and analysis, and further briefly introduces the theoretical concepts of 'religious coping' and types of capital that have shaped the process of data analysis

and synthesis. It also conceptualizes its understanding of the relationship between religious revival, female emancipation and general implications thereof for peace and peacebuilding in the country. In the third chapter, the report presents findings from the interviews and focus groups conducted with the Muslim group, which consisted of practising and non-practising Muslim women, men and experts. The findings are discussed through the lens of religious coping mechanisms and the impact of Islam on gender roles, cross-gender relations and women's human capital. In addition, the report aims to integrate qualitative and quantitative research findings on the topic of the public perception of religious extremism and radicalisation, using the method of data source triangulation. The sub-chapters first

introduce the main statements derived from the survey data and subsequently discuss these against the qualitative findings to identify possible commonalities and contradictions. In the fourth chapter, the report examines the data derived from the multi-faith group, which is comprised of interviews with Orthodox Christian, Protestant, Catholic, Baha'i, Buddhist, Krishnaist and Tengrist followers. The conclusion provides a summarised overview of the main chapter-based findings and matches them against the broad theoretical framework. We also advance here a new theoretical concept of 'female amanatisation' and present our deductive research theses. The report concludes with general programmatic recommendations derived from the overall research outcome, as well as from the research process as a whole.



# LITERATURE REVIEW

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to embracing Islam, the Kyrgyz are believed to have had a complex religious affiliation to Shamanism, Zoroastrianism and Tengrianism (Tabyshalieva 2000; Radford 2011; Sultanova 2011), characterized by strong belief in the cult of the sun and the sky, which is mythologically associated with a god comprised of male and female halves - Tengir Ata (Father) and Umai Ene (Mother). While Tengir Ata, who reigned in the upper sky, was seen to have created everything in the world from chaos and oceans, Umai Ene was worshipped as a deity for fertility and healing, and considered a patroness of young and newborn children (Sultanova 2011: 2-3). The cult of animals was also deeply embedded in the totemic concept that Kyrgyz tribes originate from certain animals and correspondingly possess their mystic powers. Kyrgyz tribes were named after their totemic animals, such as bugu (reindeer), bagysh (elk), boru (wolf), uku (owl) or zhoru (vulture) (Ashymov 2003: 134). Moreover, shamans, or bakshy in the Kyrgyz language, were considered to be intermediaries between the worlds of the living and the dead, and thought to possess magic healing powers. Interestingly, all the above concepts were partially adapted and transferred into the local version of Islam, which is practised in Kyrgyzstan, having been largely re-interpreted through the Islamic lenses.

The advance of Islam in Central Asia is associated with the victory of the Abbasid Caliphate over the Chinese Tang dynasty in the battle at Talas River in 751, which was followed by the embracing of the new religion by large numbers of the local ruling elites and the general population (Heyat 2004; Alisheva 2003; Radford 2011; Mugloo 2016). Although the Islamisation process proceeded at a relatively fast pace among the sedentary population of the Fergana Valley which gradually developed into a bastion of the Islamic faith in the region, acceptance of the new religion among nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakh tribes was slow and sporadic. The main carrier and disseminator of Islam among Turkic nomads was the Sufi brotherhood of the Naqshbandiya who travelled along the Silk Road and preached Islam to the tribes they traded with. Their success is largely explained through the mystical-ascetic approach of Sufism towards God and faith, which shared similarities with the Kyrgyz shamanist past (Abu Hasan 2002\_; Balci 2010; Myrzabekova 2014). Researchers theorise that the Islamisation process among the Kyrgyz tribes continued until the 19th Century, whereas the sedentary Uzbek populations had embraced Islam centuries before. The traditional Islam practised by Kyrgyz, Uzbek and other indigenous populations of contemporary Kyrgyzstan incorporates many elements of pre-Islamic faiths and traditions, including Zoroastrianism, ancestor worship, shamanism and the cult of nature (Heyat 2004: 277). Such traits have become deeply embedded in daily Islamic practices and are part of the dominant religious framework for the local Muslim population. This syncretism is manifested in, for

example, the prominence of mazaars (holy shrines), hot springs, water falls or mountains, which became hallowed spots for pilgrimage, immolation and socialising with others (ibid). Another example is the so-called Sufi-ised shamanism - a combination of Sufi mysticism and shamanism, reflected in such practices as zikr chalu (repetitive invocation of the name Allah to reach a state of ecstasy) or tabibs (shamans) who are assumed to possess spiritual powers to drive out jinns from the human body (ibid). The Tengrian cult which sees Umai Ene as a protector of fertility and patroness of women has been partially transferred to Aysha Ene, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, and Fatima Ene, his daughter (Sultanova 2011: 3).

By the time of the arrival of the Bolsheviks in the early 20th Century, Islam had already consolidated itself as an indispensable element of local culture and an important identification marker for indigenous peoples to distinguish themselves from non-Muslim outsiders.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Shoerberlein-Engel (1997) and Ubaria (2016) further discuss that it was the Bolshevik regime that first imposed an ethnicity-based nationality concept upon indigenous peoples of Central Asia, who used to identify themselves with supra-ethnic categories in front of aliens (like 'Turks' or 'Muslims'), and territorial ('from Osh', 'Andijani') or territorially defined lifestyle identities in front of culturally close people ('Tooluktarbyz' literally meaning 'We are mountain dwellers/nomads', 'Pastanmiz' or 'Vodylikmiz' meaning 'We are from the valley/sedentary'). The political mechanisms like census-taking and institutionalization of ethnicity as an obligatory legal category to indicate in most documentations and bureaucratic processes, forced people to decide for a specific ethnic category which was culturally closest or contextually 'beneficial' (Data excerpted from the Draft PhD Thesis by Aikokul Maksutova on «Social Integration of Labor migrants from

To a certain degree, Muslims did not directly oppose the Marxist-Leninist ideology despite the latter's evident atheistic agenda, mostly because the Soviets preached against the Western imperial doctrine and vowed to support socio-political and economic progress in Islamic lands. The main supporters of the Bolsheviks in Central Asia during the first post-revolutionary years were Jadids - a group of young Islamic intellectuals, who stood for reforming Islam and Islamic lands according to modern civilization (Sultanova 2011; Delshad 2003). The Bolsheviks had to appeal to local Muslim intellectuals as allies because they recognised the impossibility of waging a war against Islam on Muslim territory. In 1917, the Bolsheviks specifically addressed the Muslims of Russia and Asia as they spread Lenin's message: «To all Muslim workers of Russia and the East whose mosques and prayer houses were destroyed and whose religious convictions were trampled down by the tsars and oppressors of Russia. Your faith and customs, your national and cultural institutions are free and inviolable from now on. It is your right. [...]» (originally cited in the Russian language in Delshad 2003: 166). However, after the Jadids helped the Bolsheviks establish Soviet power in the region, the latter launched a gradual attack on Islam in the mid-1920s, beginning with the closure of some madrasahs. Over time, this became a full blown assault characterised by the physical destruction of Islamic educational institutions and mosques, the repression of Islamic clergy and intellectuals, and the shift of the Kyrgyz alphabet from Arabic to Latin and later to Cyrillic (Khalid 2003: 576-577). This was a strategic move in the war against pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic movements. Correspondingly, the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, a pan-Turkic state-building project, was dissolved by Joseph Stalin into five national Soviet republics (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). This project was meant to channel the allegiance of the Muslims towards the newly created national republics and de-construct their strong Muslim identity (Sultanova 2011: 8).

Atheism became an official doctrine of the Soviet state, as a result of which access to religious knowledge was denied, religious practice was heavily restricted, the Islamic infrastructure was completely destroyed and access to the foreign Muslim world cut off (Heyat 2004: 275; Akiner 2003: 97). This led to a massive loss of knowledge of Islamic doctrine and prayers, and even the basic Islamic profession of faith (Akiner 2003: 98). While the cultural revolution in Soviet Kyrgyzstan may have delivered education

for the masses, and introduced them to theatre, ballet, modern art and poetry, it also attempted to weaken the Islamic institute of family and the traditional way of life in general. The Communist Party encouraged those members considered to have the potential for building a successful career to marry Russians or other Slavs, which as a result inhibited the transfer of traditional family values to the next generation (Delshad 2003: 120). Women were forced to unveil themselves and encouraged to pursue a professional education and to take up employment side by side with men. Gradually, the veil disappeared and the public discourse was de-Islamised (Khalid 2003: 576). Nevertheless, the Soviet state was not so ambitious as to fully secularise Kyrgyz society, and people continued practising life-cycle ceremonies according to Islamic traditions, and kept attending clandestine prayer houses in remote areas (Akiner 2003; Khalid 2003; Heyat 2004).

It was evident to the Soviets that Islamic identity was deeply entwined with the cultural identities of the region's indigenous populations, and that the best way to monitor Islamic sentiments was to establish an officially sanctioned apparatus - the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SODUM). Two educational institutions were duly established under the auspices of SODUM, in Bukhara and Tashkent cities (Khalid 2003; Wolters 2014). Akiner (2003) argues that although some formal elements of religious observance were permitted to reappear, the highly intrusive secularisation policy of the state gradually resulted in turning Islam simply into more of a marker of cultural and ethnic identity for most Central Asians (p. 97) than an active faith. In similar vein, Pelkman (2007) theorises that the Soviet nationalities policies influenced the trajectories of religious categories so greatly that these had to amalgamate with ethno-national categories, which as a result contributed to the emergence of non-believing, 'atheist Muslims' (originally cited in Pelkman 2007: 883). Heyat (2004) also speaks about Soviet Azeris and Kyrgyz with 'religious hearts and atheist minds' in order to highlight the dichotomous approach to religion during the Soviet times (275). At the same time, Dilshad (2003) provides an explanation of why Islam allowed the syncretism of Soviet ideologies and Islamic identity. According to him, the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, which is predominantly practised in Central Asia, allows its followers to keep their Iman (faith) in secret in times of Jahhiliya (from Arabic: 'state of ignorance') even if they have to abandon religious rites in order to prevent the total extermination of the faith (p. 121).

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the advent of political independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan, like other newly established nationstates in Central Asia, witnessed a considerable religious revival. Misused mosques were brought back into operation, and new ones were opened; pilgrimage to Mecca was re-instated and diplomatic connections to Muslim countries were rebuilt; the number of new madrasas and other religious educational initiatives skyrocketed, and public manifestations of religiosity became visible.<sup>6</sup> In the context of Islamic revival and Kyrgyzstan's open door policy towards religious organisations from abroad, another important trend in the country's religious environment has emerged – the arrival and proliferation of different Christian denominations and other religions. A number of attempts have been made among researchers to explain these developments, a brief overview of which is provided below.

McGlinchey (2009) examines the growth and proliferation of Islamic identities in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan through a comparative analysis of three leading theories of Islamic revivalism. The transnational theories explaining Islam as a response to encroaching Western culture, or as a manifestation of nationalism, are not applicable to the Kyrgyz context and fail to explain the growing Islamisation of Kyrgyz society. He rather suggests that religious revival is, to a large extent, the product of a failing state. The Kyrgyz, like any other believers, resort to religion in the quest for spiritual insights and a sense of community connectedness. These needs are specifically exacerbated in times of deep economic crisis and socio-political instability in the country. Likewise, Heyat (2004) argues that extreme poverty, lack of viable prospects for youth, wide-spread corruption and a deep moral crisis among the mass population - all viewed as by-product of the post-Soviet transition period - have strengthened Islam's role as a means of providing spiritual and practical guidance. At the same time, Pelkmans (2007) and Balci (2010) agree that the Kyrgyz state, as elsewhere in post-socialist Central Asia, has instrumentalised Islam as a nation-binding tool to consolidate the national identity and reclaim the legitimacy of the state. The ethno-religious amalgamation of the Kyrgyz ethnic and Muslim identities has provided a perfect background for such a policy.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Aidaraliev (2016), the number of Muslim religious facilities grew from 20 in 1946, to 36 in 1989, which further ascended to 2,618 in 2015 with the projection of growth to 6,000 by 2030.

There is still an immense gap in research on radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan, including specifically on its gender dimension. As early as 2009, International Crisis Group (ICG) was writing about the feminisation of religious radicalisation in Central Asia, with specific reference to Hizb-ut Tahrir in the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan. This report mentions the estimated number of female party members as ranging from 2,000 to 8,000 (2009: 1-2). The main push factors behind the decisions of Muslim women to join Hizb-ut Tahrir derive from a number of sources. Firstly, the state-supported religious structures have failed to respond to Muslim women's quest for religious education, spiritual growth and a 'continuous reference point' for providing clear guidance on appropriate lifestyle (p.7-8). Secondly, after the demise of the Soviet Union it was predominantly women who felt the gradual loss of their social safety net most sharply, and who faced enormous challenges in order to provide for their families. This led to them becoming the most vulnerable strata of the new post-Soviet society (p. 8). In response, for example, Hizb ut-Tahrir conducted effective grassroots activities aimed at female recruitment by offering them religious classes in clandestine groups, clear prescriptive roles in the family and society, a wide range of self-help initiatives like child care or charity assistance - all with the gradual indoctrination of an alternative socio-political order to be provided by an Islamic Caliphate (p. 10-12). In this light, the leader of a local Islamic NGO, Jamal Frontbek kyzy, also asserts that foreign extremist recruiters strategically appeal to the economically most vulnerable groups of women who are usually more susceptible to the ideas of radical socio-political change in the name of a better life (Mutakkalim 2017).<sup>7</sup> The situation is further exacerbated in her opinion by the lack of official channels for delivering even basic religious education to the general female Muslim population, or to deal with a range of female-specific religious issues, as well as a blatant lack of places of worship and socialisation appropriate for women.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to shed the light on different state and non-state actors in the sphere of religion. The State Commission on Religious Affairs was established in 1996 as an administrative agency under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and underwent a series of organisational reconstructions and reforms since then. In 2012, the Commission was

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<sup>7</sup> The full text of the online article is available under "Religia: zhenshiny vse bolshe radikalizirujutsia", Mutakkalim, at: [http://www.mutakallim.kg/ru/publication/news/39] (29.05.2017)

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

shifted to direct jurisdiction of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. It is a central state organ which deals with development and implementation of the state policy in the religious sphere, and which coordinates the activities of other state organs in this realm. Its main activity fields include a) coordination and enhancement of the cooperation of the state with religious organisations; b) propagation of the values and principles of a secular and semi-confessional society; c) counterfeiting the activities of religious organisations inflicting harm, threat to health, morality, rights and legal interests of citizens, as well as the constitutional structure and security of the state; d) cooperation with other state organs on prevention of religious extremism; e) working in the field of prevention of inter-religious tensions and intolerance, among others. The Agency neither emphasizes gender-religion relations as one of its priority action fields, nor has female specific programming and interventions.

In the public domain, there are 4 distinctive types of institutionalized religious actors: the official clergy in the form of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan known as Muftiyat, religious educational institutions (madrasas, universities, faculties and centers), religious public organisations and informal religious groups, movements and communities (Malikov 2010: 8). The official clergy or Muftiyat is considered as the most influential and powerful of all the formal religious actors due to its close cooperation with the state organs, a widely spread regional representation including religious infrastructure and clergy, and a strong historical presence in the territory of the country.<sup>9</sup> Muftiyat's main functions include reviewing and standardizing Islamic educational literature printed and used in Kyrgyzstan, issuing legal opinions and interpretations of issues pertaining to the Islamic law, organizing and coordinating annual Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca, and overseeing the Islamic missionary activity known as *davaat*, among others. In light of the growing threat of female radicalisation and activation of their role in dissemination of religious extremist ideologies, in 2013, the Muftiyat decided to open a special department of women's

<sup>9</sup> According to the data provided by Muftiyat, in the early 1940s, Kyrgyzstan was under direct jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan with its central management located in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In 1943, a separate Kaziyat (a territorial representation of the Tashkent Muftiyat) was established in Kyrgyzstan with a view to regulate the activities of local mosques, clerics and religious schools. After the independence, Kyrgyzstan founded its own Muftiyat in 1993, and during the first All-Muslim Conference in 1996, the first Mufti, a head of the Spiritual Administration, was elected by the Council of ulamas (prominent religious scholars).

affairs with the principle goal of working with women deemed vulnerable to domestic violence, social discrimination and religious radicalisation. However, the women's department was closed in 2014 reportedly due to budget constraints. This decision was severely criticized by religious female leaders, female-headed religious public organisations, international human rights organisations and experts in the sphere of religion as counterproductive and regressive considering recent religious developments in the country (ICG 2016; Islamic Journal Umma 2017 ; Mutakkalim 2017 ).

Along with the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church is officially considered as a 'traditional' religion with the long-standing historical and cultural roots in Kyrgyzstan. The arrival of the latter is associated with the early immigration waves of Slavic settlers and the Russian troops on the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan in the late 19th century.<sup>12</sup> In 2011, it decided to separate from the Eparchy of Tashkent, to which it had been a party since 1871, and to establish the Eparchy of Bishkek under the Bishop of Bishkek and Kyrgyzstan. With 40 Orthodox Churches<sup>13</sup> and a few praying houses scattered throughout the country, the Russian Orthodox Church is believed to serve predominantly ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Belarus (deemed to follow the Orthodox Christianity).

At the same time, there is an important new phenomenon which is changing the social landscape of Kyrgyz civil society but which has so far been largely omitted from the academic and non-academic literature. Among 'traditional' NGOs advocating neo-liberal democratic values, of which there are a large number operating in Kyrgyzstan, a few faith-based Muslim female organisations started emerging in the early 2000s. These were

<sup>10</sup> The full text of the online article is available under „Chto volnuet zhenshin religioznikh liderov?“, Islamic Journal Umma, at: [http://ummamag.kg/ru/articles/sore/940\_cho\_tvolnuet\_zhenschin\_religioznyhliderov]

<sup>11</sup> The full text of the online article is available under „Jamal Fronbek kyzy: Musulmanskim zhenshinam neobkhodimo povyshat' uroven svoego obrazovaniya“, Mutakkalim, at: [http://www.mutakallim.kg/ru/publication/news/38]

<sup>12</sup> The first parishes were established to serve the military forts which were eventually turned into regular parishes as the Russian Orthodox Church. For further information on historical foundation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan see Ozmitel E.E. „Provoslavnie eparkhii na territorii Kirgizii“ available online at: [http://www.ctaj.elcat.kg/pdf\_files/e001.pdf] and „Istoriya provoslaviya v Kyrgyzstane“ available online at [http://cheloveknauka.com/istoriya-pravoslaviya-v-kyrgyzstane-ih-hh-vv]

<sup>13</sup> Data derive from the official webpage of the Russian Orthodox Christianity. See here [http://www.eparchia.kg/blagochiniya]

initially based in the capital city of Bishkek but have gradually extended their regional networks.<sup>14</sup> One of the leading examples of such organisations is the Progressive Public Association «Mutakalim», which was founded in 1999 by a group of Muslim female activists. This organisation is the first of its kind in the post-Soviet area. It strongly advocates for Muslim women's rights, their educational empowerment, and leadership potential, and promotes a positive image of modern Muslim women. It is one of only a few religious organisations that actively cooperate with international development actors on projects dealing with domestic gender-based violence, reintegration of female prisoners, AIDs/HIV, children's immunisation, legal advocacy and peacebuilding (Malikov 2010: 11). The organisation played a critical role in finding a solution to the problem of photographing Muslim women in headscarves for passports and in removing the hijab ban for female students of public schools.

Another significant grassroots movement involving Muslim women's participation is newly emerging in Kyrgyzstan (Mukaramova 2014). It is the "Mastoo-raat Jamaat" practice of the Tablighi movement, a non-political Islamic missionary movement founded in India in the late 1920s, which has made inroads into Kyrgyzstan in recent years, appealing in particular to the indigenous Kyrgyz Muslim population (Nasreddinov et al 2014; Balci 2010). The practice involves women undertaking three, fifteen or forty days of missionary work, mostly within Kyrgyzstan. Working together with their mahrams (male chaperones such as husbands, fathers, brothers or sons), the female missionaries follow a strict pre-endorsed thematic programme, ethical rules and procedural regulations. Their goal is twosided: 'self-purification' through receiving religious insights from more knowledgeable female group members, and calling other women to accept Islam or reminding other Muslim women of their religious obligations. Academic research is yet to establish what kind of gender roles, female ideals and family relations are being propagated by Tablighi women during their missionary work, and what implications these may in turn have for female empowerment and gender equality, as well as for how they deal with issues of gender-based domestic violence and other related problems.

While the Islamisation process of Kyrgyz society is steadily progressing, since Kyrgyzstan's

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<sup>14</sup> To see a full list of officially registered Islamic public organizations, please visit website of the State Commission on Religious Affairs at [http://religion.gov.kg/ru/religion\_organization/]

independence, Christian missionaries and those of other religious denominations have been operating in the country. According to government statistics, in 2014 the number of recognised Christian organisations reached 378. These include 49 Orthodox Christian parishes and a nunnery, 4 Catholic, 50 Baptist, 20 Lutheran, 56 Pentecostal, 31 Seventhday Adventist, 38 Presbyterian and 38 Charismatic Churches, as well as 41 Jehovah's Witnesses, 18 other Christian organisations and 26 foreign Protestant missions (The Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere for the period of 2014-2020, 2014: 11). In addition, some non-Christian organisations have successfully registered with the state, namely one Jewish, one Buddhist and 12 Baha'i communities (ibid.). While the Orthodox Christian, Catholic and Jewish communities have a long-standing historical presence and cultural legacy in Kyrgyzstan, most of the above listed religious denominations and faiths are considered 'new' on the Kyrgyz religious market. The missionary activities of evangelical Christians have proved to be exceptionally successful at attracting proselytes since the early 1990s, which experts now estimate range between 15,000 to 30,000 (Nasreddinov et al 2014: 41; Radford 2011: 3; Pelkman 2007: 883). Radford (2011), who conducted an extensive sociological investigation into the conversion of Muslim Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity in Kyrgyzstan over five years, asserts that despite the lack of representative statistical figures on converts, there are emerging sociodemographic trends. According to his research, out of 424 converts, 68% were women and 32% were men. The urban-rural ratio was also salient, at 63% to 37%. Radford (2011) and Pelkman (2007), found that converts are predominantly concentrated in the northern regions, specifically in Chuy and Issykkul, and Bishkek city.

Pelkman (2006; 2007; 2010) advances a number of inter-linked factors explaining why Kyrgyzstan was attractive for foreign missionaries. Firstly, it offered the most liberal religious policies of all post-Soviet Central Asian states, especially during the first decade of independence, which enabled foreign missionaries to openly conduct proselytisation activities. Secondly, its post-Communist Muslim community was easier to work with due to the limited influence of Islam on public and political life, and to a low level of Islamic knowledge in general (ibid). Thirdly, despite fundamental differences between communist 'atheisers' and Christian evangelisers, their approaches to dealing with culture demonstrate striking similarities (2007: 882-883). Both communists and evangelists have

tried to promote their ideologies by detaching religion from culture. In doing so, the Soviet secularisation policy unintentionally contributed to the growth of 'cultural Islam' through the amalgamation of national and religious identities. The latter proved vulnerable to both post-Soviet ideological and socio-economic challenges stemming from within, and recruitment efforts of evangelical missionaries from outside. This enabled many Kyrgyz to question their position vis-a-vis Islam (2010: 41). In a similar way, the goal of missionaries has been to detach the notion of 'Kyrgyzness' from 'being Muslim' by disentangling Christianity from 'Westernness'. As a result, they have unintentionally contributed to the objectification of 'culture' and reinstatement of ethnic boundaries. Radford (2011) argues further that Kyrgyz Christians have had to deconstruct their previous Kyrgyz-Muslim identity, accept traditional ethnic boundary markers and reconstruct their Kyrgyz identity in terms of Christian values.

These changes in the religious landscape have triggered aggressive reactions in the local mass media, and particularly among politicians and representatives of Islamic and Orthodox Christian clergy (Pelkman 2006: 35). Critics have spoken of the latent threat of disintegration of Kyrgyz society along ideological and confessional lines (Nasretidinov et al 2014). Specifically, the media started portraying foreign missionaries as using hypnosis and advanced psychological manipulation in order to brainwash people (McBrien et al 2008: 95) and claiming that, as Murzakhalilov put it: «[...]; they try to convince potential followers of their cultural, political and economic superiority and even offer false information about their religions» (2004: 86). According to experts, the most disturbing problem areas to arise as a result, are tensions in families due to conversion of their members to other religions, social exclusion of converts from community life, local mullahs' refusals to conduct burial ceremonies and the denial of a burial place in Muslim ancestral cemeteries. Over the last few years, cases of burial bans for deceased converts have begun to arise on a regular basis, resulting in much outcry in the international media, the Christian community and among human rights activists.<sup>15</sup> The ex-mufti Kimsanbai Hajji is known to have issued a fatwa banning the burial of non-Muslims together with Muslims, which created a precedent for local mullahs to deny burial places for converts in Islamic graveyards. Christian groups as well as human rights activists consider this a direct infringement of converts' civil rights and blame the Islamic

leadership for promoting religious tensions in the country.

Proselytisation in Kyrgyzstan is indeed a much under-researched topic. Pelkman (2006; 2007; 2010) is one of the few researchers to have made a significant contribution to the development of a solid evidence base and critical analysis of Kyrgyz Christianity. He highlights three main logical principles that underlie evangelical missionary work in Kyrgyzstan: 'de-Russifying Christianity', 'de-Islamising Kyrgyz culture' and 'Kyrgyzifying Christianity' (2007: 885). To summarise these principles in a theory of change, detaching Christianity from 'Russianness' is crucial to overcome negative associations and stereotypes, which should ultimately help to make inroads into the ethnic Kyrgyz community and persuade them to question their Muslim identity. The second is necessary in order to disentangle Islam from Kyrgyz culture by trivialising its role, while the third anchors Christianity in its new place. In order to put these principles into practice, the Evangelical missionaries have applied different strategies and have not always acted in a transparent manner (Pelkman 2009). For example, after the introduction of certain restrictions on public missionary work and official state registration in 2008, Evangelical missionaries began adopting neo-liberal and development rhetoric, and continued their missionary work in the guise of humanitarian development assistance.

In the context of the general religious proliferation in Kyrgyzstan, Tengrism - a syncretic faith combining elements of shamanism, animism and Zoro-astrianism - is also experiencing a renaissance and currently seeking state recognition.<sup>16</sup> With reputed 50,000 followers, its leadership includes prominent politicians, and people from the world of art and culture. Some Tengrists believe that the Kyrgyz authorities' refusal to recognise their faith as a distinct religion is the result of apprehension that it could generate intra-ethnic tensions and cause division among Islamic and Tengrist followers<sup>17</sup> Some followers, however, do not consider Tengrism

<sup>15</sup> For more information on similar cases visit the following websites (29.05.2017):

[[http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1966](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1966)]  
[<http://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-religious-divides-mother-buried-three-times/28063463.html>]  
[<https://barnabasfund.org/news/Newsdesk-2-Feb-2017#kyrgyzstan>]  
[<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-muslim-anger-over-protestant>]  
[<http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Kyrgyzstan2016.pdf>]

<sup>16</sup> The full text of the online article is available under "Kyrgyzstan's Sky Worshipers Seek Recognition", Euroasia.net.at

<sup>17</sup> [<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68355>] (29.05.2017) ibid.

Tengrism as a religion, but rather as a philosophical movement – an alternative way of living and vision of the world. A third group of adherents identify themselves as ‘Uzulmans’ (‘half Muslims’) who partially follow the Islamic set of values, but disagree with specific manifestations of Islam like the wearing of hijabs for women and of beards for men.<sup>18</sup> While the principle belief of Turkic Tengrism revolves around living in harmony with nature and worshipping its elements, like the blue sky (Tengri), the earth (Mother-Earth) and fire (Ot), as well as ancestor spirits, Kyrgyz Tengrism widely popularises the idea of returning to orthodox Kyrgyz culture and the ancestral faith. Islamic traditions are considered to stem from an alien Arabic culture, and are therefore unsuitable for the Kyrgyz natural environment.

Based on the above brief review of the research corpus on the pre-Soviet, Soviet and contemporary religious landscape of Kyrgyzstan, and considering the general research focus of the present study, the following major gaps in the evidence-based literature can be identified:

- Impact of historical transformative processes within the religious landscape of Kyrgyzstan on gender role construction (pre-Islamic - Islamic - modern);
- Influence of the contemporary religious revival in Kyrgyz society on women’s empowerment, social mobility and human capital; different trajectories resulting from affiliation to different religions;
- Public perception of, and reaction to, female religious mobility from cross-denominational perspectives;
- Reactions of secularist movements towards religious proliferations, emerging fears and grievances;
- Implications of rapid transformations in the religious sphere for social cohesion and peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan at household, community and national levels;

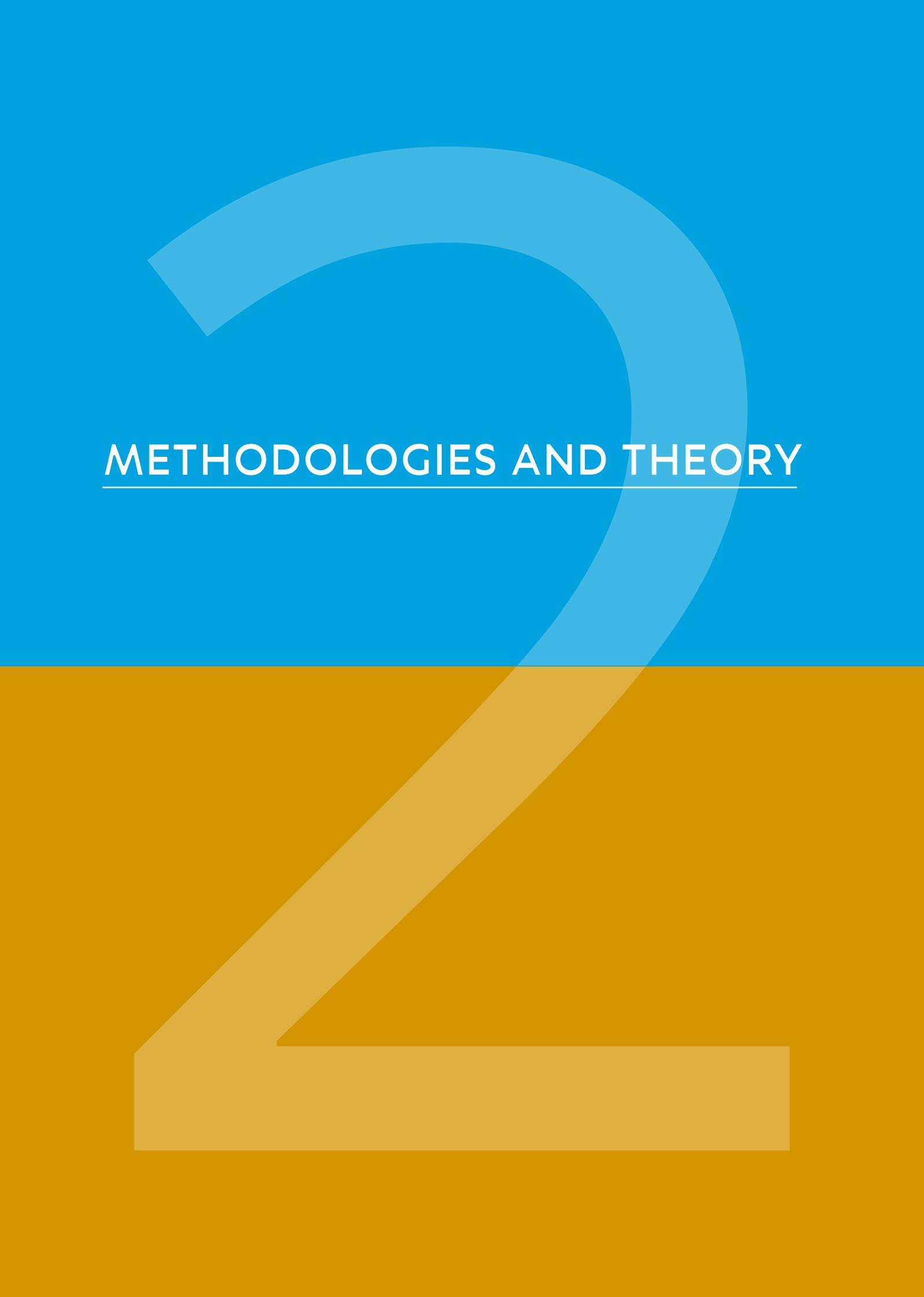
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<sup>18</sup> The full text of the online article is available under “Kyrgyz Religious Hatred Trial Throws Spotlight on Ancient Creed”, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty.at [http://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz\_religious\_hatred\_trial\_throws\_spotlight\_on\_ancient\_creed/24469022.html] (29.05.2017)

Extensive research is needed to better understand how extremist ideologies succeed in attracting women, what the actual roles of women in war zones are, what socio-structural infrastructure is available to facilitate the radicalisation of women and their family members, and what makes women resilient towards extremist ideologies. To find answers to these questions requires extensive interviews with women who have themselves become violent extremists, which was beyond the scope of this GSPS research. We do not provide an extensive literature review here on violent extremism amongst women in Kyrgyzstan but some sources are available in the footnote.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For more literature on women and religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan, refer to the following sources (all available on corresponding institutional websites):  
 Search for Common Ground: “Kyrgyzstan Publications on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)”  
 Search for Common Ground: “Key Messages and Media Channels of Youth Recruitment in Kyrgyzstan”  
 Search for Common Ground: “Review: Reducing Violent Religious Extremism and Promoting Peace in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia”  
 Search for Common Ground: “Search – Kyrgyzstan publications on violent extremism”  
 Search for Common Ground: “Search – Kyrgyzstan publications on violent extremism”  
 OSCE (2013): “Women and Terrorist Radicalization Final Report”  
 Saferworld (2016): “Saferworld briefing: Radicalisation and extremism in Kyrgyzstan: Perceptions, dynamics and prevention”  
 International Crisis Group (2015): “Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia”  
 International Crisis Group (2016): “Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation”  
 UN Women (2017): “The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening in, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan,”  
 Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia

The image features a solid blue background in the upper half and a solid orange background in the lower half. A large, stylized number '4' is rendered in a light blue color, spanning across the boundary between the two colors. The top part of the '4' is a curved shape, while the bottom part is a thick, horizontal bar. The text 'METHODOLOGIES AND THEORY' is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and positioned just below the top curve of the '4'. A thin white horizontal line is drawn directly beneath the text.

# METHODOLOGIES AND THEORY

## METHODOLOGIES AND THEORY

Considering the research gaps identified above, the present study investigates the social and gender implications of religious revival in Kyrgyzstan from a comparative cross-denominational perspective. The study is guided by the research questions: “How does religious revival in Kyrgyzstan influence gender roles, cross-gender-relations and female empowerment? How do women negotiate their gender roles within their immediate context (family, household, community)? What implication does this have for social cohesion and sustainable peace in the country?”

The study employs mixed methods research techniques, and takes advantage of the opportunity to draw its primary data from both qualitative and quantitative sources. It generally follows the ‘QUAL+quant’ convergence design, according to which qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysed separately, and then the different results are collated and compared during interpretation. Whereas the qualitative data are primarily analysed within the frames of the present report, the quantitative research results are borrowed from the Gender in Society Perception Study: National Survey Results produced by the NSC of the Kyrgyz Republic and UNFPA in 2016.

Research data for the qualitative and quantitative data were collected in 2016. The National Survey «Gender in Society Perception Study» is a representative sample study conducted with 5,960 households (16,145 individuals aged 15 years and above, and including 8,469 women and 7,676 men) in seven regions and the cities of Bishkek and Osh. A fully structured questionnaire was utilised as a primary data collection tool, which addressed all five thematic fields of the study, namely political participation of women, economic empowerment of women, violence against women, religious radicalisation of women and its impact on migration, as well as female labour migration. The specialised software programme CSPPro was used for arithmetical analysis, as well as quality control of the data. Further NCS analysts employed the quantitative data analysis software SPSS and provided the dataset to the present research team in an SPSS format.

The research team of UN Women Kyrgyzstan simultaneously conducted the qualitative component of the study in 2016. With a view to capturing the main features of Kyrgyzstan’s religious landscape, the research sample included several subgroups: women from the general Muslim population, women who wear the hijab, Muslim women with international migration experience<sup>20</sup>, Muslim religious experts (mullahs, imams, atynchas), female converts to ‘newly introduced’ religious denominations, established female followers of minority religions (Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, Judaism), religious experts of minority religions (pastors, priests, other clerics, religious mobilisers), focus group participants (practising and non-practising men and women) and general experts on religion. In order to collect the primary data, 196 semi-structured interviews and 49 focus group discussions were conducted. Interviewees and FGD participants represented the following religions and religious denominations: Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Protestant Christianity, Baha’i, Buddhism, Krishnaism and Tengrism. Different interview guides were developed for different research sub-groups with both context specific and crosscutting questions. The below table summarises the research sample distribution in terms of gender, specific characteristics and research tools:

<sup>20</sup> A total of 22 hijabi women with international labour migration experience in Russia, Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates were examined as a distinct sub-group, based on the assumption that due to multi-faceted vulnerabilities and insecurities in the host and home country, migrant women can come under the influence of radical Islamic ideologies. The interview guidelines were correspondingly developed to examine structural factors influencing migrant vulnerabilities and insecurity in migration, and their gender dimension, female migrants’ perception of these, survival strategies and the possibility of encountering destructive ideologies.

TABLE 1

## GSPS Religion Pillar: Sample Group Distribution

1. Interviews		Female	Male	Total
1.1	National experts	8	2	10
1.2	Muslim religious experts	5	18	23
1.3	Minority religious experts	7	8	15
1.4	Muslim women from the general population	40	0	40
1.5	Muslim women who wear hijabs	22	0	22
1.6	Muslim women with international migration experience	22	0	22
1.7	Followers of minority religions (including converts)	64	0	64
	<b>Subtotal</b>	168	28	196
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGD)		Female	Male	Total
2.1	Men and women from general public (49 FGD in total)	220	110	330
	<b>Total</b>	388	138	526

The research team responsible for the current report received both qualitative and quantitative primary data for further analysis. It did not participate in the development of the research design, or data collection tools, or in the primary data collection. Large-scale qualitative data processing and analysis was conducted with the help of the computerised qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. This approach adopts a thematic text analysis method in accordance with which the raw data are organised into thematic codes and categories, and their interrelationships are extensively examined vis-a-vis the research questions (based on methodology by Udo Kuckartz 2014). The qualitative results are presented under the main thematic categories and triangulated with the quantitative findings where possible. Although the qualitative and quantitative components are conceptually interlinked, the methodologies do not fully align with each other, as the international practice of applying concurrent mixed methods would require. Whereas the qualitative research focuses predominantly on public perceptions of changing gender roles in the context of (cross-denominational) religious revival, the

is centred on examining the relation between Islamic and secular values in state building, and perceptions of religious radicalisation among the Muslim population. Moreover, the sampling strategies of both components differ. The qualitative research sample is differentiated by affiliation to different religions, general versus expert knowledge and by region, whereas the quantitative research sample utilises age, gender and regional categories without differentiation by religious affiliation. These factors create certain challenges for a fully-fledged source triangulation. Therefore, this report uses the qualitative findings as a primary data source, referring to the quantitative data where compatible, an approach felt to be justified by the exploratory nature of this research.

Given the thematic complexity woven into the study, this report is guided conceptually by two broad theories: Kennet Pargament's theory of 'religious coping' and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus. It also aims to understand and conceptualize general implications of religious revival and correspondingly attached social processes on peace and peacebuilding in the country.

Firstly, Pargament's theory of religious coping (1997) is employed to understand the factors leading to religious activation on an individual and community level in Kyrgyzstan. The main idea behind the theory is that, when confronted by personal crisis (involving different types of stress triggers, including loss or challenges, illness, death etc.), individuals tend to select from a range of coping mechanisms, with religion being one powerful option. According to the theory, religious coping occurs universally across faiths, but its expression is culturally dependent (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015). In particular, the elderly, minorities and people in life-threatening crises tend to resort to religion, which in turn can result in lower rates of depression and mortality, improved mental and physical health, and spiritual growth (Pargament 2000: 520). Building on the previous conceptualisations of the role of religion, Pargament proposes five key functions that faith may play in the coping process – any combination of which may play a role, depending on the personal context (Pargament et al 2000: 521):

- Meaning: the religion offers frameworks for understanding and interpretation of the meanings of life (Clifford Geertz, 1966);
- Control: the religion also offers specific avenues to achieve a sense of control in times when individuals are pushed beyond their own resources (Erich Fromm, 1950);
- Comfort: the religion offers the opportunity to acquire comfort by virtue of closeness to God; Intimacy: the religion also fosters closeness with others, social solidarity and shared identity (Emile Durkheim, 1915)
- Life transformation: the religion may lead to transformation from an old value system to new sources of significance.

The concept of religious coping is interpreted largely positively. However, a number of psychological studies have evinced that while the impact is most often beneficial, it can sometimes have the opposite effect and actually exacerbate the level of stress experienced by individuals (Pargament 1997, 1998; Bjorck et al 2007; Hebert et al 2009). Other empirical research examining the relationship between religious fundamentalism and religious coping has found that the religious coping methods can mediate the relationship between religious fundamentalism and managing stress (Ano et al

2015). In the context of this study, it is of research interest to explore if and how far the theory of religious coping is able to explain the recent religious mobility among Muslim and non-Muslim women of Kyrgyzstan.

Secondly, to better understand the implications of women's religious mobility on gender norms, roles and power dynamics, this study employs Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital. According to Bourdieu, there are three types of capital: cultural (mostly represented by knowledge, academic credentials and professional qualifications, and expertise, etc.), social (social networks, memberships, inter and intra-ethnic networks, etc.) and economic (labour inputs, physical capital, bonds, securities, etc.). These types of capital are directly and indirectly linked with each other (Bourdieu 1986: 243). For example, cultural capital is frequently translated into economic advantage through an individual being able to capitalise on their professional qualifications on the employment market. At the same time, originating from or belonging to a specific socio-cultural background can also be beneficial in gaining personal access to specific information and skill sets that may increase the chances for successful monetisation of cultural capital. Affiliation to specific families, tribes or social classes often fosters nepotism and corruption networks to the benefit of a few and at the cost of the majority, or in other words generates barriers to social mobility (negative social capital). Thus, a person's level of education combined with the value of the social networks and the amount of economic capital at his/her disposal result in a person's habitus - a predisposition, which structures men's and women's decisions, behaviours and opportunities (Ashall 2004: 26). For Bourdieu, gender cuts across all types of capital and thus produces a gender-differentiated habitus (Bourdieu 2001: 55). According to him, our social order prescribes for us gender appropriate behaviour and values, which we start internalising and reproducing from early childhood onwards. Some theorists use Bourdieu's concept of gendered habitus to explain why women continue to conform to socially ascribed 'female' roles, and in doing so contribute to male domination. The core idea theorises that women who are guided by their gendered habitus tend to capitalise on their gender when making choices about their education and career (if there is an opportunity to choose at all). This does not tend to yield economic advantages equal to those of men. So women contribute to the consolidation and cross-generational transfer of

female habitus, and thus unwittingly promulgate unequal power relations between the sexes.

Within the scope of the present study, we start from the premise that gendered habitus does not only define the access to different types of human capital for men and women, but also shapes and reproduces specific roles, responsibilities and aptitudes assigned to them. In patriarchal societies, such access to capital and gender roles are founded on the notion of men's superiority over women. It is important to understand how unequal access to capital, resources and opportunities have serious effects on micro-and macro-level peace in the country. Religiously defined violation of women's rights and their exposure to systematic social discrimination based on their religious convictions

may negatively influence social cohesion and peace in the families, communities and the whole society. According to the understanding of the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), a gender approach to peacebuilding is based primarily the axiom that women's inferior status is a cause and consequence of their systematic violations not only during conflicts but also in periods of relative normality. In this report, we specifically want to examine how religiously constructed gendered habitus affects micro or household peace in religious families, and how the general tendency of Islamization and growing religious diversity may impact the sustainable peace in communities and the country as a whole.

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<sup>21</sup> Available at  
[<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osaginew/oWomenPeaceSecurity.html>]



*From top:*  
GSPS respondent, a teacher in local female madrasa, is in Osh public transport. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov  
In a classroom, where GSPS respondent teaches religious provisions and encourages women to pursue higher education. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov



RESEARCH FINDINGS  
MUSLIM GROUP

### 3.1

## RELIGIOUS COPING

## SHUKR, SABR AND AMANAT

Before addressing the core research question regarding interaction between religion and gender roles, it is necessary to carefully examine the specific contexts of women's conversion to religion in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. It is essential to try and understand how they interpret the pre-defined sets of gender roles and relations in which they find themselves, how they carve out their own standing vis-à-vis their faith and how they negotiate their own religious path. The research findings indicate that there are two prevalent ways in which Muslim women come to religion. Firstly, there is the generation of young women who have been brought up in the post-Soviet period in already religious families and who have practised Islam from childhood onwards, incorporating Islamic beliefs and practices into their lives. Secondly, there are women from different age groups who come from non-religious or nominally religious backgrounds and who turn to religion at a certain point in their lifetime.

Such moments are usually characterised by a critical event (loss of a family member, relative or a close friend, serious illness, surviving a catastrophic incident), a change in family status (marrying into a religious family, painful divorce, widowhood), or other pivotal experiences that lead them to search for a transcendent meaning of life, spiritual support and clear guidance. Zarina<sup>22</sup>, a female Muslim from Chuy region, 55-60 years old, confesses that after her husband's death she suffered from severe depression for a long time, until one of her Muslim relatives taught her how to make supplications to God on behalf of her late husband and to cope with her loss with the help of the Quran. The closer she got to the religion, the more clearly she started to understand the 'true' meaning of life, death, resurrection and reunion in the after-life. This guided her out of an irritable and melancholic state, and helped her to focus on her children's upbringing again. In another example, Marina, an ethnic Russian married to a Muslim man, reported that she arrived at the decision to embrace Islam after years of observation. She was mainly attracted by Islamic teachings on how to build respectful relationships with her spouse, children and in-laws, and how to promote a moral and secure environment for raising a family:

*"When my husband died, my religion was a source of advice. When I started praying and understanding what Islam is about, it brought me back to a normal, peaceful life. [...] I have a distant relative in Kochkorka, who attends the mosque. He is not a mullah. He taught me to say special prayers that helped to calm me. Before that I just couldn't stop crying, for hours. When I started praying, I became calm and less irritable. I could get back to bringing up my children."*

*«I got married to a Muslim. [...] I started to observe their way of life. [...] Loyalty, customs handed down from father to son, very beautiful. Obedience, dignified talks and deeds, decency and unity. [...] I have been married for 36 years now. I married my husband at the age of 17. Alhamdulillah! I had followed Christianity for a long time. He never forced me to accept Islam. It makes no sense to do so, does it? It is like forcing someone to drink poison, I think. [...]»  
(CH\_06\_Muslim\_hijabi\_general: 38-44)*

The twin Islamic virtues of sabr and shukr prevail in Muslim women's speech about Islam's role in their lives. Sabr (Arabic *صَبْرٌ* meaning 'patience'/'perseverance') teaches Muslims to remain spiritually steadfast in times of distress and accept these as trials imposed on them by Allah for their own benefit. Meanwhile, shukr (Arabic *شُكْرٌ* denoting 'thankfulness'/'gratitude') exhorts them to stay thankful for the material and spiritual bounties provided by Allah in times of both prosperity and hardship. In the Kyrgyz context, these twin virtues specifically help Muslim women to endure economic hardships and social challenges within their families, and to survive marriage crises. Although Islam generally tolerates divorce, it considers a family breakup to be a reprehensible failure and encourages couples to address tensions between them through honest reasoning, and with patience and tolerance. In fact, a number of female interviewees emphasised that they had been able to tolerate their husbands' alcoholism, foul language and violent character, as well as tensions with in-laws, by relying on sabr and dua (supplication to Allah). However, passive endurance

<sup>21</sup> All names of participants used in the report are changed.

and self-victimisation alone were not sufficient to change their situation. They needed to spread Islam and its virtues among the rest of their family members in order to establish an environment where everyone is aware of his or her specific rights, responsibilities and position in the family, and recognises their legitimacy. In reality, the prevailing majority of practicing female Muslims were the first family members to embrace Islam and gradually spread the religious doctrine among their close relatives and beyond, which stands in opposition to the salient public belief that women in Kyrgyzstan are mainly forced by their religious husbands to convert to Islam and to veil themselves. In the following quotes, women emphasise their prominent role as knowledge holders and carriers in grassroots Islamisation: *'A woman is a madrasa', 'By teaching a man, you educate a person. By teaching a woman, you educate a nation', or 'Women plant values in children, but men only plant food'.*

*"My parents were illiterate. They couldn't attend school because they were very religious. But I do my best to bring my children to religion, to motivate them to pray, to teach them to fear Allah and not to seize someone else's property; about amanat and being careful about someone else's amanat. Therefore, a woman is a madrasa. She is a school. A lot of things depend on a woman, because a man is always outside the home, while the mother raises the children in the home."*  
(OS\_30\_Muslim\_general: 70-70)

*"Women are more perceptive about religion. God created women to be more perceptive and clever. Why do you think only women work in kindergartens? And are in the majority in schools? Universities? Because of their strong educational capacity. They have a natural talent for teaching. Some Kyrgyz men don't understand what they do. They don't let their wives work and make them stay at home. Some extremely religious men completely cut their wives off from society. If women get decent and correct religious education, they can easily educate their communities. It is women who can save the integrity of our country!"*  
(CH\_06\_Muslim\_hijabi: 57-57)

Paradoxically, by seeding Islam in their families, women consciously accept a deeply patriarchal model of intra-family gender relations and voluntarily deny themselves certain liberties that they had enjoyed before coming to Islam. Although the Holy Quran underlines the spiritual equality of a man and a woman in the face of Allah, it ascribes

different social roles, rights and responsibilities based on their different natures. The man is a protector of and provider for his family, and, under specific circumstances, for his mother, female siblings and any underage children of deceased male siblings, which automatically grants him the right to act as head of the household and the main decision maker. Since women have no obligation to earn a livelihood, their roles are primarily fixed in the domestic sphere, i.e. managing the household budget, raising children, cooking meals, and cleaning the home. This places women under men's direct financial, physical and moral guardianship or, as an interviewee put it, in the state of amanat – representing something of value given to men for safekeeping and care, which they are accountable for in front of Allah. For these women, the status of amanat in theory entitles them to the right to be treated with respect, care and dignity by their husbands, and should ensure them protection from domestic violence inflicted upon them and their children by their spouses, as well as from any abusive attitudes on the part of their in-laws. However, in practice this requires that husbands also recognise the legitimacy of these rules and accept them as right and proper. In order to achieve a situation where wives and husbands 'speak the same language' and legitimise each other's claims, they first need to internalise the Islamic marriage and family code of ethics in their private lives, agree on its practical interpretation and start negotiating their individual positions based on this code. For many women, on a sub-conscious level, the very amanat status appears to be a trade-off they make in exchange for their previous life where they found themselves vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse, with little social protection from outside their homes, and while bearing a triple burden of earning a livelihood, raising children and running a home. It is striking that women use the arguments in favour of Islam purely from the perspective of the domestic domain, rather than the public, expressing notions like 'gained respect', 'peace and understanding at home', or 'inner wellbeing':

*«We stopped fighting! [everyone laughs]*

*End of shouting and screaming at each other!*

*We just stopped insisting on gender equality...  
We don't speak loudly now.»*  
(FGD\_47; 216-219)

*«In the 1990s, our small town was full of drunken men, who kept abusing their wives at home. Since we have Islam, we have no drunkards in the street. Only peace in the neighbourhood, peace in the families!» (FGD\_27; 4-4)*

*“We used to fight with each other very often, because he drank too much. Once we had a huge argument, after which I left him. Later, he began praying, and one day he came after me and asked for forgiveness. ‘Forgive me! I didn’t understand many things. I will try for our child,’ he said to me. Then we started living together again. [...] These last three or four years, he started to change. He embraced religion and started praying. Before that he didn’t listen when I asked him to stop! Now, he does understand a lot of things. Because of him, I got interested in religion. I pray for my children’s bright future. They shouldn’t behave like their father.” (BA\_09\_Muslim\_general: 172-177)*

As indicated above, it is often a question of a trade-off between a previous lifestyle and the new Islamic one, where women, as well as men, have to give up something. In the case of women, self-imposed restrictions, based on religious convictions, mainly touched on two areas: physical mobility and labour market behaviour. The more religious the Muslim women became, or the more they integrated the Islamic code of ethics into their private lives, the more restricted they became in their physical movements. While in their pre-Islamic life, they could travel a long distance to visit their families and friends, or to attend social or study events, and even enter labour migration alone, now they acknowledge the need both to ask for the amanat holder’s permission to travel and to be assigned a male chaperone, to act as a physical protector, to accompany them for distances exceeding 90 km. Many find it difficult to reconcile with their real-life situations. It is not always possible to find a male chaperone who is available for the required period of time, or the latter simply does not want to spend that much time away, or paying double travel costs inflicts extra financial burdens on the household. However, religious women seem to have negotiated a concession to their situation in such a way that within Kyrgyzstan they are generally allowed to travel alone. It is only when they travel outside the country that they need to find male or female relatives who could house and take care of them. At the same time, a few veiled respondents reported to that they had been forced to travel to Kazakhstan or Russia

alone, and had had to live and work in a non-mahram<sup>23</sup> environment, despite the fact that they had been well aware of the ‘deviance of their deeds’. The main reasons for such situations were economic hardship and the inability to sufficiently provide for the family, or, in the interviewees’ own words, ‘жоктуктан’ (from Kyrgyz ‘a state of utter poverty’):

*«[sighing deeply] Certainly, from the religious point of view, if you travel a long distance you cannot leave without a mahram. But my brothers were not able to accompany me that time because of their own families. I had to leave alone although I knew it was not right. [...] I just talked to my family and got permission to travel alone. I had financial problems to settle. [...]» (Bishkek\_50; 52-66)*

*«No, I travelled alone. Because, as I said... I am a single mother. My brother just met me there [...] Of course, it would have been better to have a mahram beside him. But I had to do without one [...]» (JA\_10; 44-47)*

*“At that time, we had a really hard life. We couldn’t even afford to buy enough food and clothing. We needed to get our children married, on top of everything else. As a teacher, I earned 2,000 Soms a month. This is not even enough to buy food. Therefore, I had to leave and work as a migrant [there]. But I didn’t stop praying five times a day. I worked there with the Arabs, as a cook. We had a lot of debts to repay...” (OS\_14\_migrant: 66-73)*

Moreover, veiled Muslim interviewees reported an inability or unwillingness to attend mixed gender sport and leisure facilities like fitness centres, public swimming pools or stadiums, due to the lack of appropriately segregated venues. Furthermore, there was no indication of respondents taking part in self-organised recreational and leisure activities suitable for practising Muslim women.

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<sup>23</sup> Mahram is a category of men whom a Muslim woman cannot marry because of their close blood relationship, breastfeeding history or relationship by marriage (e.g. her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc., and her son, grandson, great-grandson, etc., her paternal and maternal uncles, her brother, brother’s son and sister’s son; the brother and husband of the woman who breastfed her; the mother’s husband, the husband’s father, grandfather, etc., and the husband’s son, grandson, etc.). More details on the subject are provided here: [https://islamqa.info/en/5538] (29.05.2017)

## 3.2

# FEMALE RELIGIOSITY UNDER INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

The interview data from veiled Muslim women re-vealed ambiguous findings on the influence of international migration on female religiosity. Out of 22 female migrants, the prevailing majority had had labour migration experience in Russia, and a few had studied in The United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Women reported that they had already been practicing Islam on different levels prior to their departure - some had been conducting daily prayers, observing annual fasting, and learning the Quran and hadiths for many years, while others had just begun to establish their daily prayers and had only recently veiled themselves. With regard to the impact of their migration experience on the way they perceive, treat and practise their religion upon return to Kyrgyzstan, two salient patterns emerged. On the one hand, the women who left for Russia as labour migrants acknowledged experiencing a certain degree of decline in their faith during their stay abroad.

A subtle sense of self-blame was evident as they explained that living conditions in Russia did not allow them to observe a five-times-a-day prayer routine at work and home. It was not possible to adhere to annual fasting, or to attend Islamic lessons. While it was generally not permitted to pray at the workplace, the women found it difficult to perform prayers even at home, because their migrant flats are usually shared with a dozen unrelated men and women. Everyday stress and weariness from hard work, a constant feeling of insecurity and lack of time were also mentioned as additional disincentives. Interestingly, most of these women stayed for a shorter period of time in Russia than initially planned. Upon their return to Kyrgyzstan, they made considerable efforts to restore their faith and intensified their religious observance. In the following quotes, exmigrant women sum up their religious experience during and after migration:

*«I had already been praying before I left for Russia. There I gave it up. [...] I kept asking myself: 'How am I going to pray there? What to do about the ablution? [...] In fact, we used to rent a room shared by 5-6 or 7-8 people. [...] Sometimes, I felt terrible about missing my prayers. I even promised myself to restore them when I am back. And now, thank God, I am trying hard not to miss even one.»*  
(Chuy\_15; 237-246)

*«[...] I told myself, as soon as I am back home I will get more engaged. I just desired to learn more. I even wanted to bring my child to a mosque so*

*that he could learn too. In Russia, it didn't turn out how we wanted.»*  
(JA\_10; 151-151)

*«Indeed, my faith used to be much stronger here. We knew what is allowed and what is sinful. In migration, however, we just became weak. Our soul should be fed by our faith like we feed our body with food. Without constant religious feeding there, we felt we resembled Russians. We gave up our prayers as well as hijabs! Faith is such a thing, which goes up and down. Thank God, now I have a lot of religious experience to share.»*  
(Bishkek\_51; 152-155)

On the other hand, a few migrant women declared that they had noticed only minor or no changes in their religious observance before, during and after migration. They did not experience a sharp decline, rise or change in the way they fulfil their faith-based duties. Many continued attending religious classes and lectures abroad, largely due to benevolent working and living conditions which they organised for themselves. Labour migrants in Russia purposefully looked for jobs in Muslim families or Muslim-owned entities, where there was tolerance towards praying and wearing of the hijab. On rare days off, they were able to attend courses on the Quran, the Arabic language or the hadith, organised for women in local mosques. These women reported encountering and socialising only with Muslims adhering to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.

### 3.3.

## IMPACT OF ISLAM ON WOMEN'S HUMAN CAPITAL

### Social capital and public participation

Religion appears to prompt Muslim women's social networks to develop along certain trajectories after they start practising Islam. If we categorise women's interpersonal networks as 'close' and 'weak', defined by the intensity and character of interactions, we can argue that these two categories undergo gradual structural changes as women's religiosity progresses. Veiled Muslim women reported that with time they have distanced themselves from some of their close friends, colleagues or companions, due to gaps in common interests, intolerance and lack of respect for each other's way of living.

The interviewees who are practicing Muslims found it difficult to continue attending common social events, which inevitably involved such practices as consumption of alcohol, gossiping and socialising with non-mahram men - all disapproved of from the religious point of view. Some even tried to encourage their non-religious close friends to demonstrate greater piety and to abandon such 'condemned' practices. Such attempts mostly ended up in mutual estrangement and alienation. Although the interviewees did not entirely break their ties with non-practising Muslim or non-Muslim contacts, they were shifted into the category of 'weak' ties. At the same time, the interviewees found themselves longing for active socialisation with other Muslim women whom they might happen to meet at a local mosque, university, religious class or simply in the neighbourhood. They shared a common interest in integrating Islam into their everyday lives, discussed the related challenges, and sought advice and guidance from more knowledgeable Muslim women. With time, these intra-religious social networks can turn into a Muslim sisterhood, bound by feelings of mutual trust, inner morality and reciprocity. Trust seems to be a fundamental relationship building element among Muslim female networks, which can be characterised by the 'insider/outsider' concept of *nash* and *ne nash* (from Russian 'ours' and 'not ours'), as argued by Schrader (2004). Practising Muslim women rigorously construct their 'nash' networks with a circle of trusted co-Muslims through whom they gain access to mutual aid in different life circumstances, channel trustworthy information on matters of religion and beyond, and develop secure business relations on religiously *halal* (Arabic: *حلال* *halāl*, 'permissible') terms. The following quotes reflect such a socialisation pattern among practising Muslim women:

*«Because there are a lot of girls around who smoke and drink. I just try to distance myself from them. And I choose my friends rigorously. [...] Religious women, first of all, do not tell lies and betray one another. They are mostly amiable. They can support you at a time of need, and share their own experience.» (OS\_14\_Muslim\_general)*

*«These 60 women are all my family. There are Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Dungan, Kazakh... [...] We are all like siblings. Out of them, six women have become sisters for this life and the afterlife. One of them is an Uzbek woman from Tashkent, who married a man from Kyrgyzstan, and has no relatives here. She keeps crying because she feels alone and her mother is out there. She asked me to become her sister. Even her husband calls me sister and her children - grandma. We became sisters for the afterlife here.» (CH\_17\_Muslim\_hijabi)*

There is apparently a strong desire among practising Muslim women for gender segregation in public and, partly, private domains. Such preference is dictated by the belief that women and men should not act as a source of temptation and distraction to each other while they receive education, socialise, do sports or engage in other projects. In the private domain, some families have started introducing gender segregated seating arrangements during major life events such as weddings and circumcision parties, funerals, and the like. While such a tradition has long been practised in the country's southern regions, it has been (re)-introduced in the north only within the past decade, with the on-going Islamisation of society. The quest for gender segregation in certain public and private spaces should not, however, be equated to self-marginalisation from public life. In fact, both interviewees and Islamic experts

emphasised the strategic importance of women's participation in the socio-political life of a society undergoing religious transformation. According to them, all Muslims, regardless of their gender, are supposed to participate in political elections in order to cast their votes for pious Muslim candidates or programmes that intend to promote the integration of pro-Islamic principles into community development. Muslim women with a robust religious and secular education are specifically encouraged to actively take part in community gatherings to offer their view of the issues under discussion and to make the Muslim voice heard. But in practice, the situation looks slightly different. Although the prevailing majority of practising Muslim interviewees emphasised their religious entitlement to public participation, most of them still preferred to lead a rather passive public life, allowing their husbands to speak for them. Only a few women, mostly aged 40 and older, reported having been engaged in community-based peacebuilding and charity projects, political campaigns and public councils. But none of them had stood as candidates for local or national parliamentary elections. As Kanykei, a veiled Muslim from Osh, cogently summarised it, there is a set of religious restrictions which explain why Muslim women are discouraged to enter politics. Firstly, a heavy workload would make it impossible for them to fulfil their 'primary' mission of caring for their families. Secondly, with politics being traditionally male-dominated, it presupposes frequent, intensive and conflictive contact with men, which is forbidden for self-respecting Muslim women. Moreover, political intrigues, 'filthy games' of corrupt politicians and the related stress are perceived as too heavy a burden for the 'mild' nature of women. Such 'mildness' is also emphasised by Chubak Aji Jalilov, a renowned Islamic scholar from Kyrgyzstan, who frequently addresses the topic of women's role in Islam in his lectures. In the quote below, he explains why women should be excluded from the upper echelons of the political environment:

*«In Islam, a woman is not allowed to become a head of state, a judge or a mayor. Our religion forbids it in order to protect womanhood and femininity, so that a woman stays a woman. A female ruler will gradually become like a man. A female judge who hands down a verdict to a criminal will lose tenderness and warmth towards her children. [...] This does not mean that Islam degrades women! As soon as we let our women go out and earn money, they start feeling like men. Of course, we should respect women, respect them according to their nature.»<sup>24</sup>*

As described above, the discourse over women's presence in the public domain is constructed from within and follows a protectionist narrative. Women's participation in community-level public and political life is generally tolerated, if not even encouraged in the realms of charity, children's and women's health and security affairs, and public morality. Should women's socio-political engagement go beyond the local context, however, they are automatically seen to be exposing themselves to harm which can jeopardise their moral chastity, health and family integrity - all of which would stand in contradiction to the axiom that 'women are men's amanat'. Thus, for their own protection, women should be shielded from the potential hazards of emerging into the wider public domain.

### Cultural capital

Although all of the practising Muslim interviewees had remained generally content with the level of their own public involvement, they expressed considerable concern about a number of deficiencies that curtail their right to acquire standard religious knowledge. Both Muslim interviewees and independent Islamic experts confirmed that the Holy Quran and hadiths made it clear that it is imperative for women and men to attain religious knowledge and education. Therefore, it is essential that a Muslim society should create equal educational opportunities for its female population, with a view to building a just society where all members are aware of their divine ordained rights and obligations. Knowledge is believed to be a powerful instrument in the hands of women, which should enable them to negotiate their position with men in accordance with the terms recognised as legitimate by both parties. According to the experts and practicing Muslim women, Islam considers religious and worldly forms of education as complimentary and integral to each other, in that both should lead to better understanding of the Creator through studying and pondering the profound nature of the universe.

However, the above idealistic axioms prove to be difficult to implement in the contemporary Kyrgyz realities. Whereas the Kyrgyz universities which offer higher theological education are accessible to both male and female students, out of 83 officially registered madrasas, only a few accept girls and young women. The absence of female religious

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<sup>24</sup> Lecture by Chubak Aji Jalilov «Women's place and role in society», published in youtube on 07.05.2016. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vfYysx4mHY] (29.05.2017)

schools in the local area, and lack of opportunity to attend those located in large cities, has prompted Muslim women to organise informal study circles in their neighbourhoods under the leadership of female instructors - *otyncha*, *atynbu* or *bibiotun*.<sup>25</sup> While some of these instructors may have formal qualifications as teachers of the Quran, hadiths, Islamic laws and the Arabic language, many of them received their knowledge in informal home-based Islamic schools known as *hujras*<sup>26</sup>. Such clandestine schools were a feature of the traditionally sedentary areas of Central Asia during Soviet times, and served to preserve Islamic knowledge among women and to transfer it to the next generation.<sup>27</sup> However, in the context of modern Kyrgyzstan with its policy of religious freedom, *hujras* and other informal home-based educational initiatives are more likely to be a tactical response to a growing demand for Islamic knowledge among Muslim women which is not served by the existing educational infrastructure in this area, which is felt to exclude women. At the same time, Muslim women from remote mountainous communities that have not preserved an institution for the transfer of Islamic knowledge like *atynchas*, bitterly complained about the lack of any such formal or informal educational infrastructure in their villages. They are not always able to attend religious classes organised by different Islamic foundations and madrasas in district or regional centres. They find it inappropriate and shameful to approach local mullahs with questions concerning peculiarities of female prayers, women's hygiene during ablution, spousal relations and tensions, motherhood and similar female specific issues. As a result, they zealously desire the opportunity to consult with more knowledgeable women. They try to address gaps in their knowledge and practice during occasional visits to female madrasas in the cities, by reading accessible literature and listening to TV, radio or Internet lessons provided by renowned Kyrgyz scholars like Chubak aji Jalilov and Abdyschykyr Narmatov.

25 Fathi, Habib (1997): "Women Clerics of Central Asian Islam", Central Asian Survey, vol.16/1: 32-34

26 There are numerous concerns revolving around the topic of *hujras*. First of all, female instructors, mostly being *hujra* graduates themselves, do not necessarily hold an official qualification and certification. In many cases, they are mothers, wives or daughters of local mullahs and other religious clerics. Secondly, their educational curricula are not officially approved, which creates public suspicion about the nature of literature sources, teaching methodology and ideological discourses conducted during classes. Thirdly, none of the interviewed religious clerics and experts could provide even a rough estimation of their numbers throughout the country. The Kyrgyz law enforcement forces claim that such informal religious circles have the potential to breed grounds for extremist ideas and to help recruit Muslim women for radicalized groups.

In the following quote, a focus group participant from Issykkul describes the challenges she faced while organising basic Arabic courses in her hometown. These challenges are in fact largely representative of the situation faced by many Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan in their quest for further knowledge:

*«Do we have a religious instructor in our city? No. No one masters the Arabic language. Actually, the wife of our kazi [city mullah] can read the Quranic letters. 'Visit my wife, and she will teach you,' he said to me. So I went to her. She had four children, one of whom was still in a cradle. I visited her four or five times with no progress, because she just cannot get free from her children. I went to the kazi again and told him, 'I cannot learn in such a way. She needs to come to us for an hour without children.' So we got a hall in Dom Byta [a public amenities and personal service centre], where young people have discos. In the beginning, there were three of us, and later 10-15. [...] Then our instructor left us and we found another girl to whom we paid 200 soms each per month. [...] When there were 20 students in our group, I started asking the mosque to provide us with a space with basic amenities. We had nothing in that hall. Not even heating.»*  
(IK\_34\_hijabi\_women; 86-90)

Before examining the impact of religiosity on religious women's educational choices, we decided to look at the levels of formal education of our interviewees and how they split along 'practising versus non-practising' and 'hijabi versus non-hijabi' lines. The frequency distribution across the sample group which consisted of 62 validated cases reveals that around three quarters of all the practising Muslim women (35 out of 45) and hijabi women (20 out of 27) obtained higher and technical vocational education, whereas national indicators for the population as a whole show that only 23,1% have vocational or higher education degrees.<sup>29</sup> When studying the results of the cross-tabulation below, it must be noted that the quantified qualified data are not necessarily representative.

27 Safa Altaf (2014): «Role of Muslim Women in the Islamic Revival of Central Asia: Soviet and Post-Soviet Period», In: Islam and Muslim Societies: A Social Science Journal Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014). Available at [http://www.muslimsocieties.org/Vol7\_2/Role\_of\_Muslim\_Women\_in\_the\_Islamic\_Revival\_of\_Central\_Asia.pdf] (29.05.2017)

28 The interviewees identified themselves as 'practising Muslims' or 'non-practising Muslims' according to their own parameters. 'Conducting daily prayers', 'fasting during Ramadan', 'reciting the Holy Quran' and 'doing the hajj' were the most frequently mentioned indicators of religiosity. As the research instruments were not designed to investigate levels of religiosity among women, the primary data allow us to use self-defined categories only.

Frequency Distribution Table 1:

## CROSSTABS

### Education \* Hijabi vs Non-Hijabi (Absolutely frequencies)

Education	Hijabi	Non-Hijabi	Total
Higher education	15	17	32
Secondary education	7	6	13
Technical vocational	5	12	17
Total	27	35	62

Valid cases: 62; Missing cases: 0 (0.0%)

### Education \* Practising vs Non-practising (Absolutely frequencies)

Education	Hijabi	Non-Hijabi	Total
Higher education	6	26	32
Secondary education	3	10	13
Technical vocational	8	9	17
Total	17	45	62

Valid cases: 62; Missing cases: 0 (0.0%)

Looking further at the range of specialisations the Muslim interviewees chose we found two specific patterns. Firstly, due to the fact that many came to religion in early or mid-adulthood, they had not been guided by their faith while choosing what and where to study. After embracing Islam, however, they tried to adjust their professional life so that it conforms to religious norms. They usually chose 'female-appropriate' specialisations such as humanities, medicine, education, social services, economics and management, sewing or gastronomy, which generally reflect the average national indicators.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, among a younger generation of Muslim women, medical and teaching professions appear to be particularly popular. An ideal career choice for a Muslim woman matches individual inclination and religious requirements to one of the 'female' professions. According to the latter, the chosen

profession should be useful to society (the Muslim umma) and should not inflict any damage on religion. The range of professions that conform to religious requirements is further defined by local labour market opportunities, a family's economic standing and the degree to which they are prepared to invest in education. One of the most notable representatives of female Muslims who were intrinsically guided by their religious convictions while making post-secondary educational choices is Adiya, a 60-65 years old hijabi woman from Issukul. She holds two university degrees in teaching and one in medicine. At the age of 40, she made the decision to re-qualify in general therapeutics after she read the Quranic verses about organisation of the human body. Both teaching and medicine are the most respectable, publicly useful and

<sup>29</sup> National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2016): "Social Tendencies in the Kyrgyz Republic 2011-2015". Available at [\[http://www.stat.kg/media/publicationarchive/26ff4a14-9261-42d1-af10-62ef8e5b008a.pdf\]](http://www.stat.kg/media/publicationarchive/26ff4a14-9261-42d1-af10-62ef8e5b008a.pdf) (29.05.2017)

<sup>30</sup> Compare with National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2012): "Women and Men in the Kyrgyz Republic 2007-2011". Available at [\[http://stat.kg/media/publicationarchive/5f8a3ff7-e9b7-480a-87c0-2b011d7e64fe.pdf\]](http://stat.kg/media/publicationarchive/5f8a3ff7-e9b7-480a-87c0-2b011d7e64fe.pdf) (29.05.2017)

## Economic capital

In this sub-chapter, we will employ the Bourdieusian concept of economic capital, albeit in its reduced form, to illuminate the questions of if and how Muslim women's access to and participation in the labour market are influenced by their religious convictions. The research findings allow us to advance the following set of axioms that regulate the conditions of female access to the labour market, the modes and morals of their participation, and the management of financial sources owned by Muslim women:

*-Men's career development takes priority over that of women: women are expected to support the professional growth of their husbands by all possible means, and, in case of necessity, to*

*sacrifice their own career in favour of that of their spouse. This is considered legitimate because it is men who have a religious obligation to provide for their families, and should therefore be granted this advantage over women.*

*-'Women are entitled to have full control over their own earnings': women are not obliged to hand over their earnings to anyone, including their husbands, parents or parents-in-law. Neither are they expected to spend their money on the household, unless they express a wish to do so. This rule is also applicable to women's mobile and fixed assets, presents and marital gifts (known as mahr from Arabic: **مهر**), which should provide them with financial security in case of divorce, widowhood or other critical situations.*

Frequency Distribution Table 2:

## CROSSTABS

### Employment \* Hijabi vs Non-Hijabi (Absolutely frequencies)

Employment	Hijabi	Non-Hijabi	Total
Disapproved	0	3	3
Employed	25	25	50
Unemployed	2	7	9
Total	27	35	62

Valid cases: 62; Missing cases: 0 (0.0%)

### Employment \* Practising vs Non-practising (Absolutely frequencies)

Employment	Non-practising	Practising	Total
Disapproved	2	1	3
Employed	13	37	50
Unemployed	2	7	9
Total	27	35	62

Valid cases: 62; Missing cases: 0 (0.0%)

*-Islam teaches Muslims to abstain from prohibited actions (haram from Arabic: **حرام**): Muslims try to resist involvement with bribery, theft, negligence and unjust treatment of people in their workplace out of fear of Allah's judgment. Many interviewees emphasised that the Islamic ethics of business integrity should be established and disseminated through greater involvement of pious Muslims in the labour market. Nargiza, a practising Muslim woman of 20-25 years of age, reported that she was frequently overwhelmed by temptation to seize some money while she was working as an accountant for a local company. Her awareness of the sinfulness of such an action, and the ultimate accountability she would face for it, helped her abstain from theft.*

*- Muslim women learn to manage their financial resources sparingly: Islam prohibits excessive or wasteful consumption of goods and services (israf from Arabic: **إسراف**) and calls for the spending of money to be done with humility and in observance of obedience to God. Indeed, the interviewees proudly noted that they have curtailed their lavish spending on festivities and mourning ceremonies, despite public disapproval, as well as on luxury clothing, cosmetics and eating out in expensive restaurants. Earning a lawful income without being unjust to others, restraining themselves from prohibited actions, and spending their earnings modestly should bring barakah (divine blessing) upon their wealth and satisfaction with life.*

Among those female interviewees who came to Islam in late adulthood, many were already of pensionable age, and had a rich employment history which had not been influenced by Islamic guidelines. However, there is an interesting trend to be observed among the younger generation of female Muslim converts who, after embracing Islam, tend to move to employment sectors that are less male-dominated and offer more flexible work schedules as well as the opportunity to pray at the workplace. One of the most notable examples is Zhumagul, a veiled woman of 40-45 years, who left her well-respected position at a regional state because of frequent contacts with male directors, department heads and chief specialists, which she found unsuitable for herself as a Muslim woman. Another veiled woman, Nuriza, who is in her early 30s, used to work as a radio DJ thanks to her passion for contemporary music. After she came to Islam and took the veil, she no longer found appropriate to continue working as an entertainer, and found herself a modest job at regional television. However, for the majority of working Muslim women, the primary challenge of harmonising their employment with religious practice is the need to conduct daily prayers at the workplace. This requires permission from the management, a place to pray, and time. Inability to reconcile these two domains, or fear thereof, induces Muslim women to look for more conducive employment options or, in extreme cases, to refrain from working altogether. This phenomenon is emerging among working Muslim women in the light of their increasingly religious persuasion.

*“A professional career is important to everyone. I cannot put an end to my own professional development just because my husband wants me to. I should carry on my own career like he does. If there is any disagreement between us concerning this... I should tell you openly that my husband was once against my work. I graduated from the Islamic university with distinction, and my teachers offered me a teaching position there. My husband told me: “You just gave birth. Where do you want to go? Without a mahram, you are going to commit sins. Do you want to earn money, or what? Sit at home!” To this, I answered: “Sorry, but I am obliged to sit at home only while I am breastfeeding my child, because I need to feed him on time. This is my obligation to my child. But after that, sorry, but I am going to work!” Luckily, he understood my position and reached a compromise with me. I don’t know what I would do if he still forbade me to work. I think I would ask for a divorce. Now I regularly leave for business trips for a week or so.” (BISH\_04\_hijabi: 110-110)*

*“I used to work as a bank manager, as I told you before. After my contract wasn’t extended, I attended the madrasa for three years. I took it easy, but it was still painful. I had worked in the banking sector for almost 19 years. I was just kicked out because of my hijab! It was very painful at first, but then I realised that this is my destiny. After a while, I found another job, this time thanks to my hijab. The young men who hired me were religious. I worked as a bookkeeper. In addition, I attended bookkeeping courses and got certified. In the end, I believe that I won.” (OS\_11\_hijabi: 156-156)*

Yet the participation of Muslim women in the labour market is not without hurdles. A number of interviewees shared their negative experiences of discrimination in the workplace, or in the hiring process, because of their wearing of the hijab. This was especially problematic in state and public organisations, banks, schools and medical institutions which sometimes directly or indirectly demanded that they take off their headscarves, making reference to a corporate dress-code or the secular nature of their state. This prompted them to change their employment sector preferences and search for workplaces that would tolerate their dress choices. Whereas some women were encouraged to establish their own businesses in the trade, tailoring and small production sectors, others decided to attain professional qualifications in more religiously tolerant spheres of employment. A notable example of the latter group is Aiperi, a veiled Muslim of 55-60 years of age, who had worked as a bank branch manager for many years before she decided to wear a headscarf. Soon after she changed her outfit, the senior bank management failed to extend her employment contract. She had to re-qualify in accountancy to find a new job where she was paid much less than in her previous workplace, but where she was free to keep her hijab and conduct daily prayers. Aiperi’s case is neither unique nor exclusive. Many interviewees voiced their concerns about Muslim women’s exclusion from the formal labour force on the grounds of their outwardly manifest religious belief:

*«For example, our neighbour’s daughter graduated from university. Her major is English. They say there are a lot of good jobs, and she has been applying for them. She is usually invited for interview, but as soon as they see her, veiled, they refuse her.» (Issukku\FGD\_31\_IK\_Baltabay\_hijabi\_women: 178 - 180)*

*«Schoolgirls are being urged to take off their hijabs in school. In many schools. For example, in our village,*

*there are only two or three veiled girls. They are constantly told not to wear headscarves in school. They are afraid that others would follow these girls' example. But they cannot stop it, can they? My daughter studied IT technologies at university in Bishkek. She speaks fluent Russian, and has excellent computer skills and knowledge. She applied for a job at Beeline. They even invited her for a three-day prejob training in Osh, where they kept asking if she could wear her hijab in a different way. When she told them she cannot do so, they refused her a job. [...] After a while she went back to Bishkek and applied for the Islamic Institute. She says now she wants to learn the Arabic language and become a teacher.» (FGD\_43\_BA\_Batken\_hijabi\_women)*

*“Now, hijabi women cannot get jobs at state institutions. I also fear if I start wearing hijab, I won't get employment. I don't pray and don't wear the veil, because I am just afraid of being excluded. I know many veiled girls who graduated from my university and still cannot get jobs.” (NA\_11\_Muslim\_general: 201-216)*

The controversial topic of veiled women has become a matter of public discussion within the last few years as the presence of the hijab in public spaces has become more visible and prominent in everyday life. One of the most notable cases of public outrage regarding the issue was provoked by a government-backed campaign in the summer of 2016. Under the auspices of the campaign, billboards with controversial images were sited across the country. These depicted three different images of women: one in traditional Kyrgyz dress, another wearing white Islamic attire, and a third in black Islamic niqab - inscribed with the legend «Oh poor nation, where are we headed?» The campaign's ideological message was to criticise growing Arabic influence in Kyrgyzstan and oppose the 'zombification' of Kyrgyz women through the wearing of 'culturally incongruous' outfits<sup>31</sup>. This not only yielded heated public discussions on social networks, but also received a

response in the form of alternative banners depicting the comparison of women in Kyrgyz traditional costume and women in miniskirts, signed with the same legend. Nasretdinov et al (2016) offer a broad analysis of the discourse from two interlinked perspectives. On the one hand, it is about a patriarchal struggle to exert control over the female body, prescribing what women should and shouldn't wear. On the other hand, it embodies a secular-religious confrontation over an urban space where the female body is used to symbolise the transgression of secular norms. In accordance with this argument, the current research further proposes that the hijab in the contemporary Kyrgyz context represents a strong symbolic good that effectively deifies the image of a veiled woman. A woman wearing this positive symbol in a public space automatically becomes a representative of her religion and should perfectly conform to the idealised image of how a Muslim woman should look, dress and behave. A compilation of such qualities gives rise to an image of a woman who wears neat, modest, clean clothes; avoids having all-back Islamic attire obscuring her face; gives preference to hijabs with Kyrgyz ethnic motifs; and does not smoke, drink alcohol, stare or shout at people, and is not seen to have 'inappropriate' close contact with men. A woman who does not conform to any one of these indicators violates the hijabi code and therefore deserves public reprimand. Both practising and non-practising interviewees expressed their discontent about young women who wear hijabs solely to improve their marriage chances, or for the sake of fashion, without realizing that they become the face of Islam for people when they step outside their homes. Any 'incorrect' step could damage the country's Muslim image. Among the veiled interviewees, none was forced or persuaded by their male or female relatives to wear hijab. It was not something men imposed on women to protect women's chastity, but a commandment ordained by Allah in his Holy Quran.

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<sup>31</sup> See the following web sources (29.05.2017):  
[<https://globalvoices.org/2016/07/29/kyrgyzstan-in-war-of-womens-and-billboards-over-womens-clothing/>]  
[<https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-islam-hijab-women/27888178.html>]

### 3.4.

# PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS RADICALISATION

This sub-chapter seeks to integrate qualitative and quantitative research findings on the topic of religious radicalisation in the public perception, using the method of data source triangulation. In doing so, we will first present the main statements derived from the quantitative data and then discuss them against the qualitative findings, with a view to identifying possible similarities and contradictions.

The religion component of the quantitative survey (with a sample size of 5,949 households)<sup>32</sup> mainly addressed the following research aspects: (a) public perception of growing religiosity; (b) public attitude towards Islamic jurisprudence as opposed to secular legislation, and the integration of the former into politics; (c) the awareness of religious radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan. The sample is differentiated by gender, region, age, nationality and the level of education of each household representative (respondent), but not by his/her religious identity or level of religious practising. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the key findings of the survey as presented in the final report: 'Gender in Society Perception Study: National Survey Results' (2016: 85-92).

## Perception of islam versus secularism

Firstly, the majority of respondents support the principle of full separation of religious and government structures, although 1/4 believe that state policy should partially integrate Islamic

norms, and a very small minority voiced support for their full integration. If we disaggregate these results across the main socio-demographic characteristics, we can observe some interesting patterns. A highly significant correlation can be identified between the variables 'Attitude towards integration of Islamic norms in state policy' and 'Nationality', with the Pearson's R-value smaller than 0.1% (where a p-value under 5% is considered significant). The results of the tables below can be interpreted as follows: while the prevailing majority of ethnic Russians tend to back the principle of full separation of religion and state (96,2%), more than one quarter of Uzbek, Dungan and Tajik respondents would like to see Islamic norms become a part of public policy in Kyrgyzstan, while less than 20% of ethnic Kyrgyz support this idea. Correspondingly, representatives of the three ethnic minorities (traditionally considered to be stricter Muslims than the Kyrgyz) expressed more inclination towards the full integration of Islamic principles into public policy than ethnic Kyrgyz respondents.

<sup>32</sup> For the detailed description of the survey methodology and analysis please refer to UNFPA (2016): "Gender in Society Perception Study: National Survey Results" p. 16-20, 85-92.

Frequency Distribution Table 3:

## CROSSTABS

### Which of the following statements best reflect your views on the roles or religion in society? \* Ethnicity (Column percentages)

Which of the following statements best reflect your views on the roles or religion in society	Kyrgyz	Uzbek	Russian	Dungan	Tajik	Other	Total
Religion should be a private affair and should not influence public policy	77,4	68,4	96,2	65,4	73,3	74,0	77,5
The Islamic principles should be a part of public policy	19,8	26,6	3,2	29,6	23,3	22,7	19,6
Public policy should be fully based on the principles of Islam	2,8	4,9	0,7	4,9	3,3	3,3	3,0
TOTAL	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Valid cases: 62; Missing cases: 0 (0.0%)

## CORRELATION: PEARSON'S R

### 1. Which of these statements best reflect your views on the roles of religion in society?, 2. ETHNICITY

	Which of the following statements best reflect your views on the roles of religion in society?	Ethnicity
Which of the following statements best reflect your views on the roles of religion in society?		- 0,050 (p=0,0001) N=5949
Ethnicity	- 0,050 (p=0,0001) N=5949	

p-value: 2-tailed

Comparison of the variables 'Attitude towards integration of Islamic norms into state policy' and 'Educational level' yielded similar results, with a highly significant negative correlation value of -0.052 (see table 4). A negative relation means that if the values of one variable increase, the values of the other tend to decrease. Extrapolating this to the research findings, it is evident that the higher the educational level of respondents, the less inclined they are towards either a partial or full adoption of Islamic norms into public law sphere. The most salient argument advanced by the respondents was that, while Islamic values are beneficial for children's upbringing and intra-family relations (51.1% of responses), their incorporation into public policy

could lead to increased religious extremism (55.6% of responses). At the same time, however, almost 30% of the respondents (27.6% female, 30.4% male) supported the statement that 'The laws of Islam from God are more important than state legislation', suggesting that, although they acknowledge the superiority of divine law, they prefer to live under a secular legislature. Only 16.7% (15.5% female, 18.4% male) would rather follow the advice of mullahs than appeal to law enforcement forces. Correspondingly, almost half of the respondents (49.4%) welcome the on-going Islamisation of society, defining it as 'very good' or 'normal', whereas 36.6% expressed some concern about it, or consider it a threat to society.

Frequency Distribution Table 4:

## CROSTABS

### Which of the f...ion insociety? \* Education (Column percentages)

Which of these statements best reflect your views on the roles of religion in society?	Basic general (1-9)	Secondary (10-11)	Vocational	Higher	Total
Religion should be a private affair and should not influence public policy	71,3	76,6	80,6	78,0	77,5
The Islamic principles should be a part of public policy	24,7	20,6	16,3	19,2	19,6
Public policy should be fully based on the principles of Islam	3,9	2,8	3,1	2,7	3,0
Итого	100	100	100	100	100

## CORRELATION: PEARSON'S R

### 1. Which of these statements best reflect your views on the roles of religion in society?, 2. EDUCATION

	Which of these statements best reflect your views on the roles of religion in society?	Education
Which of these statements best reflect your views on the roles of religion in society?		- 0,052 (p=0,0001) N=5949
Education	- 0,052 (p=0,0001) N=5949	

p-value: 2-tailed

The qualitative data derived from expert interviews with religious clerics, scholars and female instructors, in-depth interviews, and focus groups with practising and non-practising Muslim women revealed a strong interest in whether Islamic jurisprudence is compatible with Kyrgyzstan's public policy. According to the majority view, the existing secularist public law regime in Kyrgyzstan does not only contradict fundamental Islamic laws, but also provides legal guarantees of religious freedom, which Muslims of Kyrgyzstan should cherish highly. Islamic norms are perceived not as antithetical to the Kyrgyz Constitution, but as complementary and enriching. The experts frequently referred to the following classification of priority according to which Islamic norms are applied: 'fard' (obligatory), 'wajib' (necessary), 'mustahab' (desirable), 'mubah' (neither commanded nor prohibited), 'makruh' (not desirable) and others. According to the experts, the Kyrgyz legislation provides all the necessary conditions for Muslims to perform the acts classified as 'fard', such as performing prayers, doing pilgrimage, attending mosques, attaining religious education and wearing of religious attire for women. This is seen as a 'privilege' which is mostly denied to their Muslim fellows in neighbouring countries. As long as Muslims are free to perform the principal and obligatory acts ordained by Allah in the Holy Quran, so the experts, Muslims are obliged to follow secular public laws. However, on certain questions, where Sharia and secular laws have different views, Muslims are supposed to obey the legislation in force. As an example, a mullah from Osh quoted instances of death penalties, amputation of hands, or punishment for unlawful sexual intercourse, all of which are non-existent in the criminal code of the country and therefore cannot be put in practice in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the experts emphasised that legislators should take Islamic values into consideration while issuing laws, policies

and decrees, not only because the major ethnic groups of Kyrgyzstan are Muslim, but also because Islamic laws are believed as to be essentially governed by the ethical principles of social justice, equality, pluralism and peace. The mullahs referred to the Quranic verses stipulating Muslims' obligation to obey their political authorities as long as they rule justly:

*«O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result.» (Quran 4: 59)*

In this respect, the renowned Islamic scholar from Kyrgyzstan, Chubak aji Jalilov, argues that the Constitution, which is based on the principle of justice as stipulated in the Quran and hadiths, can be considered as a local version of Sharia. In his public lectures, he actively calls his followers to respect the Kyrgyz president and obey the state law, and to express shukr (gratitude) to Allah for the religious rights and liberties bestowed upon the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan.

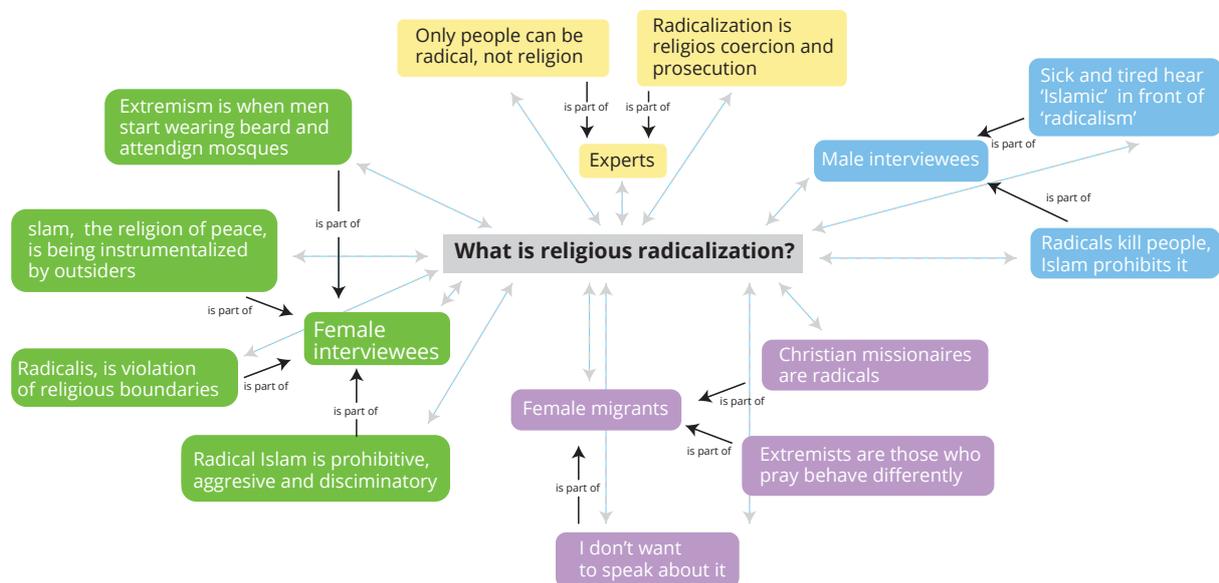
*«We live in a country, where the president, speaker and 30 members of parliament perform their daily prayers, and where 250-300,000 people can pray in front of the White House. We are a unique country! [...] Kyrgyzstan is a Muslim country regardless of whether or not our constitution is secular. According to Sharia policy, the fatwa and in front of God, we are a Muslim country because we have been ruled under Islamic laws before. Even if certain Islamic norms are not applicable here, we enjoy all the necessary liberties to pursue our religion. Thank God! We haven't had a bad president during our 20-year sovereignty. All of them have had a good attitude towards religion.» (Other Sources\Chubak\_aji\_Jalilov: 6 - 6)*

## Understanding of religious radicalisation and extremism

In addition, the survey examines the public perception of religious radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan, specifically through questions concerning personal knowledge of those recruited by banned religious organisations for jihad in conflict zones, sources of information on extremist religious organisations available to the broader population, and public awareness of legal liability for participation in religiously motivated extremist activities. Unfortunately, the survey did not explore people's understanding of the disputed terms 'religious radicalisation' and 'religious extremism', which are used interchangeably in the survey questions. However, this knowledge gap can be supplemented by the qualitative data. In the following network diagram, we have attempted to cluster the most salient response categories provided by four different interviewee groups (religious experts, female interviewees, male focus group participants and female ex-migrants) with regard to their understanding of religious radicalisation and extremism. These two terms are essentially understood to have similar connotations.

The interviewees were notably protective towards Islam when it was mentioned in the context of radicalisation, producing arguments along the lines of, 'How can Islam be murderous if it calls for peace, justice and mercy?', 'People can only be radicalised with extremist ideas by interpreting their religion wrongly,' or 'Islam is a victim of political instrumentalisation by non-Muslims'. While the experts readily elaborated their views on this issue, ordinary Muslims found it difficult to explain their positions. While some of them associated radicalisation with the phenomena of men starting to wear beards and attend mosques, others would interpret Muslims praying or simply dressing themselves differently from the majority of the population as extremist behaviour. A few even linked Christian missionary activities in Kyrgyzstan with extremism, arguing that this goes beyond the limits of what is culturally acceptable. As examples of radical and extremist groups known to be active in Kyrgyzstan, many named Hizb-ut Tahrir, Jaishul Mahdi, Akramiya, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, as well as Wahhabi and Salafi groups.

Code Group Network 1



It was notable that the majority of interviewees, both practising and non-practising Muslim men and women, declared that they have poor understanding of these concepts, or simply refused to give any response. Those few interviewees who

provided responses were usually protective towards Islam when it was mentioned in the context of radicalisation and extremism. Typical comments included, 'How can Islam be murderous if it calls for peace, justice and mercy?', 'People can

only be radicalised with extremist ideas by interpreting their religion wrongly,' and 'Islam is a victim of political instrumentalisation by non-Muslims'. While experts readily elaborated their views on these issues, ordinary Muslims found it difficult to explain their positions. Some associated radicalisation with men wearing beards and attending mosques, while others perceived it as extremist if Muslims pray or simply dress themselves differently from the Muslim majority. A few even linked Christian missionary activities and the arrival of different non-Abrahamic religions in Kyrgyzstan with extremism, arguing that they go beyond the limits of what is culturally acceptable.

At the same time, experts mostly adhere to the understanding that Islam as a religious system is not radical or extremist. Like adherents of any ideology, however, be it religious, cultural or political, Muslims may develop radical thoughts and commit extremist acts, claiming that they do so in the name of their religion. According to the experts, a clear terminological line should be drawn between 'radicalism', 'extremism' and 'terrorism' before analysing their relations with any religion. Radicalism is perceived as a set of opinions and actions favoured by people who seek extreme changes in a system within a short period of time. It can have both negative and positive consequences for society. The last political revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, the abolition of slavery in the United States and suffragist movements worldwide were named as examples of radical ideologies with positive outcomes. In the experts' reasoning, extremist ideologies usually involve using violent methods to advance their radical ideas and pose considerable security threats to mainstream society. Extremism is also understood to refer to the actions of those who aim to use terror to instigate fear and apprehension in the wider population. Experts claim that Kyrgyzstan is host to all of the above types of religious groups, and named Hizb-ut Tahrir, Jaishul Mahdi, Akramiya, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as examples, as well as Wahhabi and Salafi groups.

*"The term radical Islam is wrong. We need to use these words correctly. [...] Islam is against radicalism, extremism and terrorism. We only have radicalised and extremist groups like salafists and Hizb-ut Tahrir. And some Tablighis also have radical elements in their philosophy. Radicalism is when some women come and coerce others to embrace Islam. Sharia does not accept religious conversion that is achieved through coercion, fear and terror. Every man*

*and woman should come to religion willingly and out of conviction. [...] Extremism is the next stage. It takes place when, for example, people say to women, 'You should wear hijab. If you don't do this, you are against Allah's will,' and start exerting psychological pressure. If they still refuse to wear hijabs, they will say, 'You are not obeying Allah's will. Therefore you are no longer Muslim. You are kafir!' This is indeed extremist." (OS\_31\_experts: 164-166)*

*"Let us first of all define what we understand by radicalism and extremism. Radicalism is a neutral term. Every one of us can become radical in the sense that I might have radical ideas of a political, economic or other nature. Even an ordinary person might have at least one radical idea. It is natural that you have a desire to protest. For example, the Prophet Muhammad also acted radically. He changed the whole structure of society, the system. But he was never an extremist, and never supported violent methods. You see the difference? If a Muslim supports extremist or violent methods, even if he doesn't do anything wrong himself, he is considered extremist. A radicalised person is guided by radical thoughts. Perhaps he wants to change the political system in the country? All our revolutionaries were radicals. They also had extremist members! Extremists may include terrorists, who are guided by the ideology of terrorism as the main means of achieving their goal. If we carry out 'religious mapping' of our country, we will be able to see which jamaats cling to extremist ideologies, which of them simply have radical thoughts, and which groups actually commit terrorism. We have all types of jamaats." (BISH\_33\_expert: 171-174)*

## Perceived causes of female radicalisation

The research findings based on expert interviews identified three salient push factors for female radicalisation and migration to join jihadist groups:

- 1) religious indoctrination through radicalised husbands and relatives;
- 2) social injustice and discrimination in home communities;
- 3) economic hardships and experience of xenophobia during international labour migration.

With regard to the first factor, levels of religious knowledge and expertise, as well of radicalisation risk awareness, are so low among Muslim women that they are often unable to withstand any psychological onslaught from their radicalised

husbands and relatives, who effectively present the ideas of jihad as an Islamic obligation. They emphasise women's special role in the process, and the prospects for everlasting life in paradise. Indoctrinated by their male family members, women are inspired to follow them to war zones.

At the same time, however, some experts underline that women are not only victims of religious indoctrination and deceit, as described above, but also active and willing participants and contributors to extremist projects in Kyrgyzstan. Radicalised women are believed to perform two specific functions. Firstly, they are assigned the task of disseminating religious propaganda and recruitment among relatives and other women, primarily because the security forces traditionally do not consider women likely agents of terrorism and pay less attention to their public activities. They can run clandestine groups and disseminate their ideologies among other women, using banned religious literature as a basis, under the guise of home-based religious classes or hujras. Women who complete such intensive indoctrination courses run by their relatives or co-villagers tend to readily follow their husbands to war zones. Secondly, women may be considered to play a strategic role because they are seen as responsible for giving birth to and raising the next generation of indoctrinated young people, who are in turn destined to join religiously motivated extremist movements. Experts also point to the considerable increase in women's participation in extremist activities within the last decade, and explain it as a side effect of progressive Islamisation among women and their poor access to qualified religious knowledge.

*"Why? Because women are constantly searching for a reliable source of religious knowledge. But mostly people cannot get it because hujras possess little literature and mosques are not accessible to them. Where else should they get the information? Religious illiteracy and lack of access to reliable religious knowledge consequently lead to radicalisation. [...] The share of women participating in extremist activities has risen from 1% in 2005 to 20-25% today. This really scares us because the share of women who commit extremist-terrorist acts has also grown to 7-8%. In Issykkul, for example, 50% of those who participate in extremist activities are women. They involve even school-children there. Women are educators, and unfortunately their religious convictions are usually passed on to their children."*

Turning to the second factor, women who experience systematic discrimination in private and public life are believed to be vulnerable to religious indoctrination through the Internet. Divorced women from traditional patriarchal communities, and women who face public discrimination because of their religious convictions, are specifically targeted by Internet recruiters via different social networks. They promise them successful marriages and a respectful life in full compliance with the Islamic virtue of social justice. 'Enchanted' with such prospects, they fall into the terrorists' trap, and find a way to leave for a war zone.

*«I had a chance to study video testimonials of such women [who returned from Syria]. They say that they had a difficult and unhappy private life, and felt that they were not respected. They [the recruiters] contacted them at such a pivotal moment and made a lot of promises, which turned to ashes when they arrived there [Syria]. They felt so sorry to have been fooled, found a way out and returned home. Now they keep telling everyone not to listen to such promises and be tempted by them. It is just a recruitment strategy they use to attract women there.» (OS\_Osh (mixed)\OS\_31\_Muslim\_expert: 173 - 182)*

*"When we studied the reasons for female radicalisation, we found out that women were driven by the aspiration to live 'in a Muslim state'. The public started considering the external manifestation of their religiosity, for example hijabs, as a security threat. It is deeply irritating. They ask 'Why should my hijab be a threat to secularism, but not a mini-skirt and an open bosom?' "(BISH\_33\_expert: 133-133)*

The third push factor listed above reflects the view of experts who also believe that a significant share of Kyrgyz citizens, both men and women, who have left for war zones like Syria, were in fact not religiously indoctrinated. They were rather guided by strong socio-economic motives. Extremist recruiters specifically target the economically most vulnerable social groups, brainwash them about the social justice system in ISIS and promise large monetary rewards for military participation. Experts assert that young people participating in labour migration, who face social discrimination, injustice and xenophobia on a daily basis, are specifically vulnerable to jihadist recruitment. Lured there by false financial promises, these young recruits face only death, destruction and disillusionment in Syria. Very few manage to escape from the war zone and those that do return home are often suffering from illness, both

physical and psychological. Back in their home communities, they are largely stigmatised as terrorists, and are marginalised by society. According to experts, there are still no comprehensive state-run rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for war zone returnees and members of their families which would focus on preventing recidivism and further radicalisation among returnees, easing their re-integration into society, as well as building overall community-level resilience to violent extremism. However, according to a UN Women report on women and violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz authorities have already started supporting the rehabilitation of male and female returnees from Syria and Iraq by reaching out to them through psychologists, religious leaders and prison officials. The report also emphasizes that the wives of male travellers to ISIS who have been imprisoned upon their return to Kyrgyzstan, also need rehabilitation and treatment because due to anger, desperation and social stigmatization, they may fall an easy prey to recruitment for homegrown terror attacks and spreading radicalised ideologies among others (ibid).<sup>33</sup>

*"We shouldn't forget that many families are starving in our country. They cannot find jobs. What does a person of the age of 20-35 need? Money of course! He has to build his life, build a house, buy a car and conduct family festivities. But he cannot do it because he has no money. Then he*

*leaves for Russia or Turkey to earn money. All the doors are open there! Nobody stops them there. So they leave for Syria, both men and women. I cannot say they are guided by their religious convictions. No, we haven't reached that moment. We don't understand the meaning of Jihad. We don't even understand what Islam is. [...] What do our citizens see in Russia? Depression, discrimination, chauvinism... Skinheads. They are under constant pressure there and cannot think clearly. So they can easily fall prey to recruiters..."*  
(BISH\_31\_expert: 294-305)

In this chapter, we presented the main research findings on the Muslim group which we discussed through the lense of religious coping mechanisms, Islam's impact on gender roles and relations, and influence of religious mobility on women's social, cultural and economic capital. As a result, we advanced a new concept of female amanatization which aims to explain why patriarchal Islamic gender roles and norms are so attractive for practicing Muslim women, and how their lives qualitatively changed after they embraced Islam. We also critically discussed possible implications of this process for gender equality and women's empowerment in the long run. In conclusion, we attempted to integrate qualitative and quantitative findings on public perception of religious extremism and radicalisation, and perceived causes of female radicalisation, using the method of data source triangulation.

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<sup>33</sup> UN Women, "The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening in, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia, June 2017, p.14



*From top:*  
GSPS respondent during her evening prayer. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

GSPS respondent at one of her typical meetings with local community members. Such informal settings open up women and have them discuss own problems to then jointly find solutions. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

A large, stylized number '4' is the central graphic. The top half of the '4' is light blue, and the bottom half is a darker blue. The number is positioned on a background that is split horizontally: the top half is light blue and the bottom half is a darker blue. The text 'RESEARCH FINDINGS' and 'MINORITY RELIGIONS' is centered over the top half of the number.

RESEARCH FINDINGS  
MINORITY RELIGIONS

## 4

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

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# MINORITY RELIGIONS

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Religious proselytisation in Kyrgyzstan came along with the socio-political transformations of the early 1990s. Different experts have provided explanations for why religious proselytisation has been relatively successful in Kyrgyzstan over the past 25 years, including a relatively favourable legal environment, the post-Soviet ideological vacuum and a strong quest for a new value system to guide people through the difficult transition period (Nasriddinov et al 2014; Radford 2011; Pelkman 2007). Christian missionaries of Protestant denominations such as Evangelical Lutherans, Southern Baptists, the Mennonite Brethren and various Pentecostal churches who arrived from countries including the USA, Germany, South Korea and others were especially active. Driven by the ideology of Christian universality and the Biblical imperative to spread God's words in the world, these missionaries aimed to establish local churches that are culturally integrated, as well as self-governed and supported. The expectation is that they should continue to further evangelise the indigenous population.

To develop culturally adapted Christian doctrines, foreign missionaries implemented diverse proselytising techniques as knocking on doors or meeting with people on the street, organising children's camps and foreign language courses, as well as delivering humanitarian and development aid. Due to the government's initial laissez faire attitude towards religion, Kyrgyzstan also attracted missionaries from 'new century' religions, including the Sun Myung Moon Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Maharashi University of Management and the New Age Movement. These movements are believed to have made inroads mainly in the country's northern regions where Islam traditionally had a weaker hold and historically there has been greater local ethno-religious diversity.

However, especially since the passage of the 2009 religion law and its 2012 amendments, restrictions on "non-traditional" Muslim and Christian faith have increased, and some observers note that "discriminatory decision-making, hostility, and indifference are still a reality for many religious communities."<sup>34</sup> According to the Norwegian based

NGO Forum 18, no new Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness or Ahmadi communities have been able to register since the passage of the 2009 religion law. Under the 2009 Religion Law all unregistered exercise of freedom of religion and belief is banned.<sup>35</sup>

In our research we have tried to understand the individual contexts, processes and consequences of a person's conversion to a different religion. More specifically our questions looked into factors affecting women's personal predisposition to religious conversion, its impact on converted women's cultural, social and economic capital, and issues concerning intra-religious dialogue. Fifty-nine in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of different denominations of Protestant and Catholic Churches, 8 Orthodox Christians, 2 believers of Krishnaism, 2 followers of Buddhism, 2 of Tengrism and 4 Bahais. The ethnic background of interviewees is diverse (Russian, German, Kyrgyz and mixed). About 15 interviewees identified themselves as born and raised in one of the above minority faiths, while the rest converted to their new religion.

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34 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2017, Kyrgyzstan. <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Kyrgyzstan.2017.pdf>

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35 Mushfig Bayram, "Kyrgyzstan: State permission to exist still denied," Forum 18, 11 November 2016, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2230](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2230)

## 4.1.

# RELIGIOUS COPING AND GENDER ROLES ACROSS MINORITY RELIGIONS

According to the research conducted by Radford (2011 and 2015) on religious proselytisation in Kyrgyzstan, the social picture of an average Christian proselyte is that of a divorced woman between the ages of 26 and 40 years, with vocational or higher education, and coming from the urban or semi-urban settlements of northern Kyrgyzstan (2015: 31-33). In concurrence with this, our research data also confirm that women tend to embrace 'new' religions more readily than men because they are physiologically and socially more susceptible to a wide range of stresses, difficult life events and crises, which often result in depression, anxiety and the search for external sources of psychological support. Indeed, the majority of proselyte female interviewees pursued a similar conversion trajectory.

As a rule, this starts with a deep life crisis typically associated with loss of a spouse, their own serious sickness or that of a family member, a traumatic divorce or severe financial problems. Women in crisis are open to new social and moral support systems that have the potential to guide them through their difficulties. At this point in their lives, they encounter a new religion, carefully study and eventually embrace it. Religion provides them with a powerful coping mechanism that helps them achieve an improved psychological state, as well as giving them hope, life satisfaction and a sense of belonging to a similar minded community. Samara's long journey to embrace The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, as described below in her own words, is typical for many Kyrgyz women who have found relief from their sufferings in a new religion:

*«I have always lived in poverty. Never seen abundance in my life. My husband used to earn very little and drink a lot. I was the one who earned money. He was waiting for my salary and used to take it away from me. If I resisted, he used to beat me. I suffered so much! I couldn't take it any longer and when my children became older, they told me to leave my husband. So I did. When I landed at my parents' place with my children, I felt they were not welcome. Children do cry and need to eat, don't they? I was so mad at my parents because they didn't help me when I badly needed help and support. On top of everything else, I had a complex of health problems including a stomach ulcer, chronic bronchitis and intracranial pressure as a result of my husband's beatings. Endless headaches, polyarthritis, rheumatism! I couldn't*

*find place in that house. I was told to get married to find peace. So I married twice but didn't find any support. I divorced them both. [...] Once I was lying sick in bed groaning in pain. My son came with his wife and asked if they can pray for me. I said yes. They both started praying in front of my bed and asking God to relieve my pain. After their prayers, I felt as if a heavy stone had dropped off my shoulders! I felt so relieved, so good! I believe God put faith in my heart at this very moment. They asked me if I want to accept their religion. I said yes!» (OS\_36\_Christianity; 55-60 years old)*

An interesting fact shared by many proselytes, however, is that they do not identify themselves as religious converts. Since they had neither practised nor associated themselves with a particular religion beforehand, they did not wish to be seen as ex-Muslim or ex-Orthodox Christian converts. This very argument helps them justify their religious choice before local society, which could otherwise blame them for apostasy and betrayal of national values. The few proselytes who had indeed been born into practising Muslim or Orthodox Christian families justified their conversion on the grounds of a lack of spiritual insights, meaningfulness and satisfaction with regard to their original faith, and inability to gain clear-cut answers to their questions or even a feeling of being rejected from that spiritual community. The most frequently cited outcome of religious conversion among Christian proselytes is receiving divine love, which is believed to allow followers to find permanent and abiding harmony in life. The Christian doctrine of loving others, including co-believers and people in need, appears to be a powerful tool for mobilising the

Church community and creating a sense of belonging to a spiritual family. In order to retain and grow congregations, church leaders organise various self-help and charity activities financed by local and foreign charity donations. The interviewees broadly refute public myths about foreign missionaries offering money and material assistance to their followers to keep them motivated to stay in their church. On the contrary, they are actively encouraged to pay rectorial tithes, which are used to cover the church's current costs and one-off charity activities. Foreign church aid is usually spent on large charity projects like financial assistance to homes for the elderly and orphanages, prisons, women's crisis centres, children's summer camps and the like. Many congregations offer special programmes for women in the form of support groups for victims of domestic violence, ad-hoc teams of lawyers delivering free legal services to co-believers or assisting with the procurement of official documents from state institutions.

The female proselytes did not appear to experience particular hardships or discomfort while shifting from one value system to another. The original cultural environment generally proved to be compatible with their set of new roles. It was largely about transition from one patriarchal gender system to another, with a few interpretational differences across Christian denominations and other non-Abrahamic religions. For Christian proselytes, their gender roles are basically constructed on the axiom 'The head of every woman is a man; the head of every man is Jesus and the head of Jesus is God', according to which a woman stays at the bottom of the power hierarchy. At the same time, women and men are seen as equal before God, but fulfil different worldly functions due to their distinct physiological characteristics. Since men are considered physically stronger, more aggressive and externally oriented, their main function is to feed and protect their family. The apparently gentler nature of women means that they are assigned homebound responsibilities, such as child rearing and running the household. Although a man is expected to respect and esteem a woman as a wife and mother, and to consult with her when making decisions, she is still expected to obey his instructions. Should women encounter men's harshness, flaws or unjust attitudes, they are simply expected to endure this and seek help from God.

The Hare Krishna gender philosophy rests on the belief that women are frail, delicate and as defenceless as children, and therefore constantly need male protection. The duty of protection starts

in childhood with the father, continues with the husband and eventually transfers to grown-up male children. All women in the Krishna community are referred to as 'mothers' out of respect for their gender, and as a way to avoid seeing them as objects of sexual attraction. Therefore, Krishna devotees follow a strict gender-segregated way of living, eating and worshipping. While men are believed to advance spiritually through celibacy and non-attachment to the opposite sex, women can achieve spiritual growth through devotion and submission to their husbands. The latter should help women to be reborn in the body of a man in the next life, which is perceived as an honour and an indicator of past merits. This philosophy of reincarnation is very much similar to the Buddhist belief that women can only actually achieve enlightenment by being reborn as men. According to a Kyrgyz convert, the issue of gender (in)equality does not exist in Buddhism at all. Men and women are considered to be like the Chinese philosophical duality of 'yin and yang' (dark-bright), which symbolises how opposite forces can be interdependent, interrelated and complementary. However, it is possible for women to become monks (i.e. nuns) in Buddhism, despite the fact that they are considered a source of passion and pain, and should therefore be kept at a distance.

By comparison, the gender ideology of the Baha'i faith provides a sharp contrast to the hierarchical male-dominated gender systems described above. According to the Baha'i followers, one of its central teachings is about propagating the full spiritual and social equality of men and women, regardless of their physiological differences. This principle should be integrated in the individual, family and community domains, with a global mission to develop a new civilization where the perceived aggressive masculinity of the male is balanced by female tenderness and receptivity. Men and women are compared to the two wings of a bird. If one of the wings is shorter or weaker, the bird, which symbolises humanity, cannot fly. According to the Baha'i writings, the lack of gender equality in the world is due to the fact that women suffer from lack of adequate educational and socio-economic opportunities. To establish a cross-gender power balance and to advance towards universal prosperity, women need to be educated, encouraged to achieve excellence in science and arts, and allowed to participate in the political domain side by side with men. One of the Baha'i followers expressed her fascination with the gender equality philosophy propagated by her faith as a cornerstone for a universal balance of power:

«One of the major principles of the Baha'i teachings regards equality among races, religions and the like, which can only be reached when equality between men and women is established. This does not mean that men and women should fulfil the same functions. Of course, the main duty to financially maintain and physically protect the family rests with men, but it doesn't negate women's participation. At the same time, although women are more engaged in child rearing, men are expected to contribute there too. There is a Baha'i law saying that if you can give education to only one child, this should be your daughter, because a woman brings up a whole generation. [...] This comes from the idea that our souls are genderless, and when we die, we leave our worldly bodies behind and meet God in the form of souls. Therefore, men and women are equal,

regardless of which bodies they are born into.»  
(Bishkek\_10\_Bahai; 100-108)

In a similar vein, the Tengrists claim the existence of an a priori divine equality between men and women, which is considered to have been an intrinsic part of the Kyrgyz nomadic culture prior to the arrival of Islam. It is nature that gives and takes lives, and regulates gender specific roles among people and even animals in order to keep the balance of the universe intact. Men are known to be physically stronger, so they hunt and bring home food. Women are believed to have stronger parental instincts and greater intellect, making them better suited to raising and protecting children. Since nature pursues balance in the world, the superiority of one sex over another would be unnatural.

## 4.2.

# IMPACT OF PROSELYTISM ON WOMEN'S HUMAN CAPITAL

Most proselytes reported being outcast from their previous social networks soon after their religious conversion became public knowledge. They were at best ignored by those with whom they had close ties, and at worst openly accused of apostasy by their communities. Some of their friends tried to reason with them and talk them out of embracing a different religion, ascribing their decision to 'temporal confusion', 'self-deception' or 'a foreigners' lure', and even threatening to deny them a burial place in the local cemetery when they die. Proselytes were taught by their churches to react to such external pressures with utter patience, kindness and forgiveness in order to win back people's hearts. Indeed, with time, many people from their previous networks slowly resumed relationships with converts after being convinced that the changes in their lives were not harmful.

In place of their lost connections, however, proselyte women gained access to closely-knit social webs within their churches, and were sustained by a powerful sense of belonging, shared religious and moral values, and the need for self-protection against external stressors. This newly acquired social capital mostly outweighed the value of the lost connections in terms of the extent and quality of social interactions. It was directly convertible into three main types of 'gain': psycho-emotional, informational and financial-material. Existing church members played a crucial role in helping proselytes overcome any post-conversion depression and assisted with social integration into a church milieu by providing emotional support, religious knowledge and counselling.

Some denominations practise running mixed groups consisting of more experienced members and newcomers, in order to ease the process of integration. Churches usually offer financial or material assistance to their more needy members from their local rectorial tithes and foreign humanitarian aid, and disseminate valuable information on different domains of life including employment, study and marriage opportunities. As it is illegal to conduct proselytising activities in public spaces, it is not possible to distribute religious information materials on the streets, or to approach people with a view to discussing religious topics. Consequently, the churches must spread their religious doctrines mainly through members' private networks. Therefore, to survive and develop in a

generally hostile social environment, it is crucial for non-traditional churches to sustain the quality of intra-church relations through members' voluntary and reciprocal activity.

Protestant proselytes from predominantly rural and ethnically less diverse regions went through a more stressful post-conversion period than their urban or semi-urban peers. Due to the relatively small size of proselyte communities in their villages, and correspondingly poor support and guiding mechanisms available locally, the proselytes found their social marginalisation particularly painful. The social stigma of 'a religious traitor' or 'kafir' was extended to include their immediate family members and negatively affected the latter's social standing and prestige. People would stop inviting proselytes to cultural-religious festivities, refused to enter marriage with other members of their family, and did not allow their voices to be heard in public meetings. This was a very heavy psychological burden to carry and overcome in tightly knit rural communities. The following quotations from interviews with rural female proselytes portray how they experienced the post-conversion phase:

*«You are constantly told 'Stop it! They will not bury you when you die!' I kept answering them that even dogs get buried so that they do not smell bad. After I die my soul will leave my body. So it doesn't matter to me any longer. Don't worry about me. I will be buried somehow anyway. You should worry instead about yourself and your own path. [...] Even my siblings started hating me! My own children may have thought that I lost my mind! [...] The more they opposed me, the more trouble they experienced. My daughter, who strongly opposed me, suffered a lot during childbirth.» (OS\_25\_Jesus\_Christ)*

*«Our Bible says that our closest people will become our enemies. I cannot say that we were oppressed. No! But my close relatives rejected me: 'She has become a Baptist! Betrayed her faith!' But we still continue praying for them. They cut off relations with us, but we kept visiting them and spreading the word of God. [...] My husband's friends and relatives also rejected us saying: 'Kafir! Baptist! Heretic!« (Talas\_13\_Baptism)*

Tensions between proselytes and their local communities reach their emotional peak when a convert dies and the issue of their burial rights in the local Muslim or Orthodox Christian cemetery is raised. In both Islam and Orthodox Christianity, believers claim the necessity to have separate

graveyards out of the conviction that deceased 'infidels' might inflict a divine curse on the corpses buried in close proximity. When denying a burial place, locals also refer to the fatwa (legal opinion) issued by the first mufti of Kyrgyzstan, which outlawed the burial of non-Muslims in Islamic cemeteries. Some families, especially ethnic Kyrgyz, withhold the truth about their deceased relative's religious convictions in order to be able to bury them in their ancestral graveyard and to avoid tensions with locals. Since many Kyrgyz Christians are still of the first generation, their Muslim relatives insist on conducting funerals according to Islamic rights, and are too embarrassed to bury their deceased relatives in the 'Russian' (i.e. Christian) cemeteries. In Bishkek and Chuy, traditionally multi-confessional and ethnically diverse areas, the issue of proselyte burials does not appear to provoke social tension or faith-based confrontation. By contrast, in rural areas where the number of proselytes is still small this topic remains highly sensitive and a significant source of tension. In search of a long-term solution, some registered churches have filed a petition to have burial plots allocated to their local followers, and some are mobilising financial resources to purchase land for burial purposes. The religious experts and leaders agree that this problem has not yet reached its apogee, as many first-generation proselytes are only now middle aged. However, it could become a source of serious interfaith tension in coming years, with far-reaching consequences for social cohesion in the country.

Religious conversion seems to have little impact on the cultural and economic capital of proselytes. On the question of pursuing a secular education, the interviewees could neither name any religious restrictions, nor identify any particular encouragements to do so. Many of them chose their educational qualification according to their interests, parents' guidance and financial resources available to their families. Some had no opportunity to continue post-secondary education due to various socio-economic factors. Protestant proselytes living in urban and semi-urban areas regularly attend weekly lessons offered by their pastors at church, intensive Biblical courses organised by foreign guest pastors or an official Biblical school based in Almaty. Their rural peers draw religious knowledge from local pastors, books, and Internet lessons. In a similar vein, proselytes observed no substantial impact of their new religious convictions on their employment and career choices, or their access to and management of financial resources at home. Although no specific

restrictions on women's labour market participation or employment sector preferences are set by their religions, 'true' believers are expected to avoid working in places that host and accommodate religiously unacceptable activities like selling alcoholic beverages, gambling or performing abortions. Like many Muslim women, female Protestant proselytes often give preference to their husbands' career growth and, if necessary, sacrifice their own professional life. Women's earnings go directly into the family budget, which is accessed and managed equally by both marriage partners. Proselytes also revealed a considerable difference between their pre-and post-conversion spending habits. Money previously spent on various luxury items, alcohol and tobacco is now channelled into charity and offerings to their co-believers. The paying of tithes demonstrates their true acceptance of God, and is seen as a way of thanking him for all his blessings and asking him to bless their further earnings. It is believed that all tithes offered will come back in the form of greater blessings from unexpected and unsought sources.

*«First of all, when I came to God, I didn't have anything except cows and sheep. Before that I lost my flat in Bishkek. My relatives took it away. Then the animals were gone too. My son needed money. Everything was gone. We had literally nothing. [...] Once I was at the service in Bishkek at the Southern Church. Do you know this church? It is in the 10th micro-rayon. No. In the 11th. We had a service and needed to sow seeds. I only had 1,000 Soms in my pocket. Nothing more. My husband asked me to buy something, but I had no other money. What should I buy if I give it? But God told me: «Give it!» So I gave it. And after three to four 3-4 months, a stranger visits us and starts paying us 16,000 Soms every month!» (CH\_09\_Christianity)*

The Protestant work ethic is clearly observable in some proselytes' attitude towards their economic participation, which is largely centred on the spirit of hard work and economic progress. The poverty of a healthy individual is considered to be a personal fault and therefore not tolerated. Every believer is religiously compelled to follow a secular profession, work hard and provide a prosperous life for his or her family. In his well-known essay collection 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' (1904-05) the German sociologist Max Weber argued that it was this very Protestant zeal for economic gain and prosperity which generated the emergence of modern capitalism and economic development in the West. This represents a sharp contrast with the economic tenets of Islam, which encourage production and even distribution of wealth, but not its accumulation and which may therefore limit Muslims' investment behaviour.

*“God wants that us to succeed in everything. He created all this so that we can have a rich life and do good deeds. This [philosophy] greatly influences our lives. If we know how we can succeed financially, we share this with our sisters and help them. Women should be taught how to be financially successful. This is divine wisdom. It is very important. [...] Many see that you are successful and rich. This is evidence that God provides to you. You go and give testimony that God has given you wisdom to run a business, or something similar. If someone achieved financial success in this way, others will say ‘why don't I succeed too?’ [...] Our church members are very hardworking and industrious. A sack of money would not fall on their heads without diligence, wisdom and divine blessing.”  
(TA\_13\_Baptist\_general: 137-156)*

### 4.3.

## SECULARISM AND ISLAM IN PROSELYTES' PERCEPTION

Research findings on the attitude of different proselyte groups towards the secular nature of Kyrgyzstan and the compatibility of its secular laws with their religious convictions revealed two different bodies of thought.

Firstly, in striking similarity with the pattern found among the Muslim group, the adherents of Protestant Christianity spoke of the superiority of the divine decrees over man-made secular laws, and their obligation to respect and obey the secular public laws provided that they do not hinder or suppress their religious freedom. If the state were to forbid them to practise fundamental aspects of their religious duties, like observing prayers, attending church or celebrating religious holidays, many would disobey and protest against such laws. However, proselytes feel blessed with a satisfactory level of religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, and dedicate prayers to the country's authorities with the hope that they will govern with justice, tolerance and wisdom. Indeed, the Protestant Churches launched a special prayer campaign, within the framework of which their followers offer daily prayers for the economic prosperity, peace and security of the country. In a similar vein, Orthodox Christians also declared their obligation to adhere to the secular laws of the country they live in, but argued in favour of the partial integration of religious concerns into state affairs so that public laws do not enter into conflict with any religious canons. The axiom regarding the Christian obligation to obey secular laws and respect those who govern them was frequently mentioned by interviewees across different denominations, with reference to the following Biblical verses:

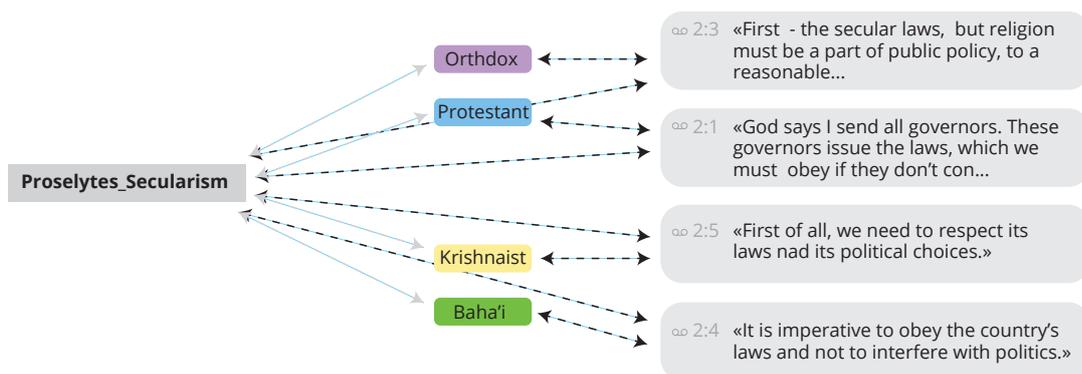
«Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.» (Romans 13:1)

«Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.»(Peter 2:17)

«Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, [...]» (Titus 3:1)

The second body of thought is largely representative of the Baha'i followers and Krishnaists, who adhere strictly to the principle of non-interference in domestic policy and a low level of public participation in politics. While Krishnaists prefer to remain quiet, keeping public visibility to a minimum and seeking accommodation with any political system that tolerates their devotional practices, the Baha'i adherents are actively discouraged from discussing political topics and criticising the authorities. Getting involved in political affairs hinders believers in their striving for moral and spiritual perfection. In the code relations network diagram below, we have tried to summarise and depict the most representative quotations found across different religious groups with regard to their followers' attitudes to secularism.

Code Group Network 2



The research data revealed that proselytes, specifically those who do not originate from the traditional Muslim environment and who have had no intensive contact to practicing Muslims before, entertain a disappointingly negative image of Islam and Muslims, noticeably based on stereotypes and prejudice. Islam is seen as a sexist and chauvinistic

religion, which oppresses women, degrading their human potential by viewing them only as housewives, and placing them under the full ownership of men. There is a common misconception that women are 'forced' to veil themselves, to give birth to as many children as their husbands and mothers-in-law demand, and to

endure their husband's physical violence and polygamy practices. It was evident that such an image was mostly predicated on hearsay and stereotyping, and not from personal experience of Muslims and their way of life. However, it was noticeable that, Orthodox Christians, ethnic Catholics and Protestant converts who have daily interaction with practising Muslims believe that Islam and their religions share many common virtues and principles, including the elevated social status of women and a respectful attitude towards parents, elders and the authorities, as well as striving for social justice, peace and tolerance towards other religions. Below are the quotations retrieved from interviews conducted with an Orthodox Christian from Osh, and Protestant, Buddhist and Tengrist proselytes from Talas and Bishkek. They share perceptions of women's status in Islam, which, on the one hand, they have acquired from personal experience and familiarisation with basic Islamic canons, while on the other, they stem from, stereotypical generalisations, unsubstantiated by fact:

*«In reality, women in Islam have the same status [as in Christianity]. Women and men go hand in hand and help each other. I even read the Quran in Russian. It says not to oppress women and to give utmost respect to them; that women are not lower than men. [...] We have Uzbek neighbours, a very nice Muslim family. [...] We are so close to each other that we have a small door in our fence through which we can visit each other at any time. It's always open! It is not a heresy. I see how this family lives. They perform prayers five times a day. [...] Once I was at their place and saw how the husband - Uzbek and the breadwinner - started helping his wife to make dough without embarrassment or anything. Then he put the pot on the oven and fried something while his wife was busy cooking something else.»*  
(OS\_44\_Orthodox\_general)

*«I heard that in the Muslim faith, a woman cannot even sit at the table, just offering tea, some type of a secondary family member. As people say: «You are like scum without a right to speak». We have nothing of this kind here.»* (TA\_13\_Baptist\_general)

*«Again unlike Islam... I just want to say a bad word here. May I? [laughs]. Islam is the religion [...], which includes a great deal of sexism and male chauvinism.»* (BISH\_15\_Buddhist\_general)

*«Islam prohibits women watching television and attending gatherings. Only sit at home and raise your children. She is not even allowed to study.»*  
(BISH\_39\_Tengrian\_general)

Comparing the above assertions with the insights into Islamic gender roles and Muslim women's human capital elaborated in our earlier chapter, it can be suggested that perception of Islam among followers of other religions in Kyrgyzstan has a tendency to be unhelpfully negative. The discourse focuses on the perceived victimisation of Muslim women and the demonisation of Islam, which is seen as an oppressor of women's basic human rights. To justify their standpoint, critics usually refer to horrifying showcases of religious extremism presented in the mass media and spread by word of mouth. In the view of many proselytes, the normative identity construction 'To be Kyrgyz or Uzbek equals being Muslim' is still intact, even though they actively challenge this dialectic when justifying their own religious conversion. Negative behavioural patterns existing in non-proselyte families, such as domestic violence, bride kidnapping, abuse of daughters-in-law and seizure of women's earnings by in-laws or husbands, are quickly attributed to Islam, notwithstanding the fact that Islamic laws consider such practices as 'pagan' and outlaw them. It is also the case, however, that such negative attitudes towards Islam can emerge as a result of social ostracism and religious discrimination on the part of proselytes' Muslim neighbours.

In this section we have explored the specific contexts under which women decided to convert to or embrace a new religion, how their religious conversion was perceived by their social environment, and how they managed to carve out their own religious pathes. We analysed the impact of religious conversion on women's social, cultural and economic capital, and their understanding of gender roles and relations from the perspective of different religions and faiths considered as minority in Kyrgyzstan. We examined the attitude of different minority religious groups towards secularism in Kyrgyzstan and the compatibility of Kyrgyz laws with their religious convictions. The section also revealed how adherents of different minority religions perceived Islam and women's position in Islam, and compared this with the attitudes of Muslims towards 'new' religions.

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# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The 1990's social transformations deeply influenced Kyrgyzstan's religious landscape, after the Soviet secular ideology had seriously depleted its spiritual capital. The boom in the Kyrgyz religious market reached its peak in the early 2000s, when different Islamic, Protestant and non-Abrahamic denominations were particularly successful at capturing people's hearts. Within the framework of the current report, we applied a micro-meso-macro frame analysis to understand the impact of Kyrgyzstan women's increasing religiosity on their individual lives, on community social cohesion and sustainable peace in the country. As a result, we conclude that:

*Women's growing religiosity contributes significantly to the (re)construction, internalisation and reproduction of gendered habitus, which in turn consolidates patriarchal gender relations and male domination in the public-private domain. While religion can have a noticeably pacifying or calming effect on women's individual lives, and therefore contributes to peace at the micro household level, growing religious diversity poses a number of challenges to social cohesion and sustainable peace in the country and to the advancement of gender equality and women's rights. This situation is constantly evolving and highly dependent on context.*

As a result of the present study and our observations, we advance a new concept of female amanatization to describe how women are turning to religion as a coping mechanism and its effect on overall gender equality. Through amanatization women justify their willingness to place themselves under men's direct financial, physical and moral guardianship as a way to avoid domestic violence, abuse and the triple burden of raising children, running households and making a living. For practicing women, life in a family that follows religious teachings, offers them a means to secure more respect, dignity and care, even though they have to give up certain liberties. By accepting the terms of amanatization, women restrict themselves in physical mobility (need for mahram), in educational and professional choices (female apt professions and female dominated employment sectors), and career development (men's careers have priority), among other issues. Religious women not only voluntarily build their own gendered habitus – a predisposition which structures male and female behaviors, decisions and opportunities - but also internalise and reproduce it. By doing so they unwittingly promulgate women's unequal access to resources and opportunities, and contribute to male-dominated power relations between the sexes.

If we look deeper into the actual factors pushing women to accept their amanatization, we find women's lack of systematic protection from domestic violence and abuse, their quest for peace at home, more dignity and respect from their husbands and in-laws, as well as a relative relief from the burden of reproductive, productive and domestic roles. Therefore, female amanatization has a two-sided effect: positive on women's immediate life satisfaction and negative on overall gender equality and women's empowerment.

We summarise below the main thematic findings of the research, and conclude with a set of programmatic recommendations aimed at tackling the highlighted problems and challenges.

## Religious coping:

- Notably, most of the practising Muslim, Christian and non-Christian female believers pursued a similar conversion trajectory. Critical life events like the death of a family member, serious illness, experience of a catastrophic event and divorce push women to search for a strong reference system that could provide spiritual support, clear life guidance and an explanation of the transcendent meaning of life.

- Women are considered important agents for spreading the word of God across different religions because, in contrast with men, they do their utmost to bring their husbands, children, parents and siblings to their faith, with the strategic purpose of establishing such an environment where men and women acknowledge each other's divine ordained rights and responsibilities. The religious family codes empower women to re-negotiate their family roles and position with their husbands, and insist on a respectful attitude free from domestic violence, abuse and oppression. Religion has brought about 'peace and understanding at home', 'inner wellbeing

and life satisfaction' and 'respect from their husbands and in-laws'.

- Paradoxically, by seeding their faith in their own families, women consciously accept a more patriarchal model of intra-family gender relations and, in the case of Muslim women, voluntarily renounce certain liberties mainly related to their physical mobility and economic participation. Gender equality is not understood as a state of equal access for men and women to resources and opportunities across all sectors of society, but as a state of equality of souls in front of God. In the worldly life, however, men are household heads, providers for and protectors of their families, while women are responsible for childbirth, child rearing and running households.

- The proportion of women among proselytes is considerably bigger than that of men. This is explained by the increased vulnerability of women to external shocks and stressors, and their poor access to alternative coping mechanisms and resources. Most proselytes do not identify themselves as religious converts since they had not previously adhered to a particular religion. They also challenge the normative identity construction that 'to be Kyrgyz/Uzbek equals being Muslim' and seek the restoration of the non-Islamic historical roots of 'Kyrgyz-ness'.

#### Women's human capital:

- Religion tends to transform women's social capital. Women's interpersonal networks undergo structural change as their religiosity increases. In the pursuit of greater piety and the rejection of 'condemned' practices, they cease attending social events that involve drinking alcohol, gossiping and socialising with non-related men. Mostly this leads to women's estrangement and alienation from their previous non-religious networks. Women who took on the Christian faith tended to be actively cut off by their close relations, and blamed for apostasy and treachery to the Kyrgyz nation and the ancestral religion. Proselytes and their families from rural areas in particular suffered from organised social marginalisation and pervasive stigmatisation as 'kafirs', which negatively affected their social standing and prestige. However, the proselyte communities often efficiently replace and, in some cases, even improve upon, the lost connections in terms of the extent and quality of their new social interactions. This newly acquired social capital is directly convertible into

psycho-emotional, informational and financial-material gains. For certain churches, it is crucial to sustain the quality of intra-church networks in order to survive and develop in a hostile social environment. Among Muslims, intra-religious social networks can turn into a Muslim sisterhood bound by mutual trust and reciprocity.

- Whereas religious conversion to non-Islamic faiths appears to have little impact on proselytes' cultural and economic capital, Islam left deep imprints on Muslim women's lives. Islam considers it imperative that women and men have equal access to both religious and secular professional education. Although the prevailing majority of practising and veiled Muslim inter viewees attained post-secondary vocational or higher education, they reported an acute shortage of accessible certified religious educational establishments near their living places. In light of this, many revert back to former methods of organising religious education for women: clandestine study circles or home-based schools run by female instructors without formal qualifications or certification. This generates public concern, suspicion and fear about the sources of literature, teaching methodologies and ideological indoctrination employed in such schools. Specifically, it is generally believed that informal religious circles, which are outside official control, may be breeding grounds for extremist ideas and Muslim women's radicalization.

- Muslim women's access to and participation in the employment market are regulated by the axioms 'the right to work outside the home should be approved by the husband', 'the husband's career development has priority over his wife's', 'women should take up female appropriate professions that limit contact with men' and 'women's earnings are entirely at their own disposal'. At the same time, different religions teach women to use their financial resources sparingly, to avoid lavish spending on life-cycle celebrations and to invest any resultant spare capital in charitable causes and religious taxes, for the sake of attaining divine blessings.

- Women's public participation appears to be little influenced by religion. Believers across different faiths continue attending community gatherings and discussions, and vote in elections as before. Only Baha'i followers are strongly encouraged to minimise their participation in politics and political debates. In the case of Muslim women, their participation in community-level public and political life is generally tolerated and encouraged in the realms of charity,

children's and women's affairs and public morale. Should their engagement go beyond the local context, however, they are automatically considered to be exposing themselves to harm which can jeopardise their moral chastity and health, as well as their families' integrity.

#### Perception of religious radicalisation:

- The concepts of 'religious radicalisation' and 'religious extremism' are generally poorly understood among ordinary practising and non-practising Muslim believers, who found it difficult to explain them. They provided defensive answers like 'how can Islam be murderous if it calls for peace, justice and mercy?', 'people can only be radicalised with extremist ideas by interpreting their religion wrongly' or 'Islam is a victim of political instrumentalisation by non-Muslims'.

- Experts understood more clearly that Islam is neither radical nor extremist. Like adherents of any ideology, be it religious, cultural or political, Muslims may develop radical thoughts and commit extremist acts in its name. According to them, radicalism is a set of beliefs and actions of people who seek extreme systemic change over a short period of time. It can have both negative and positive consequences for society. Supporters of extremist ideologies often advocate the use of violent methods to impose their radical ideas, and pose considerable security threats to mainstream society. Extremism is also understood to refer to the actions of those who defend the use of terror to instigate fear and apprehension in the wider population.

- The research findings identified three salient push factors for female radicalisation and migration to join jihadist groups: 1) religious indoctrination through radicalised husbands and relatives; 2) social injustice and discrimination in home communities; 3) economic hardship and xenophobia experienced during international labour migration.

- Muslim women are both victims of, and active participants in, violent extremism. Those women who accept to follow violent extremists groups, tend to do so because they often have a low level of religious expertise and knowledge, poor awareness of the risks of violent extremism, and are unable to resist their radicalised husbands and relatives' psychological pressure. They are made to believe

that violent jihad is an Islamic obligation, women have a special role in building the Caliphate, and there is everlasting life in paradise. Indoctrinated by their male family members, women are inspired to follow them to war zones.

- Experts indicate that during the past decade the number of women taking part in extremist activities has increased, and explain it as a side effect of the progressive Islamisation of women and their poor access to qualified religious knowledge. Radicalised women are believed to perform two specific functions: the dissemination of religious propaganda and recruitment of other women, and raising the next generation of indoctrinated young people.

- Women who experience systematic discrimination in public and private life are vulnerable to religious indoctrination through the Internet. Divorced women from traditional patriarchal communities and women who face public discrimination because of their religious convictions are specifically targeted by Internet recruiters via different social networks. They are promised successful marriages and a respectful life in full compliance with the Islamic virtue of social justice.

- Some experts believe there is a direct link between religious radicalisation and international labour migration, although we found no evidence from this research to support or refute this claim. According to experts, the young people involved in labour migration, who face social discrimination, injustice and xenophobia on a daily basis, are specifically vulnerable to jihadist recruitment.

#### Impact on social cohesion and peace:

- As indicated above, religiously justified gendered habitus contributes to the consolidation of patriarchal gender relations and male domination in the public-private domain. Muslim women's (at least partially) self-imposed restrictions on access to different types of capital, resources and opportunities push them down to a systematically inferior status, which is in turn justified and supported by religiously elaborated discourse. Women's inferior status may further negatively affect their public, economic and political participation, and curtail their decision-making capacity in conflict, post-conflict and relatively peaceful times. Women's participation in all areas of peace building and development is likely to decrease.

Consequently women-specific security concerns, socioeconomic needs and equal access to different government and non-government services are not adequately addressed, which can in turn diminish the durability of countrywide peace.

- Veiled Muslims and proselyte women face systematic bias and discrimination in the labour market, especially during the hiring process. Hijabi Muslims are often requested to remove their head-scarves in deference to a corporate dress code. The hijab's removal may even be set as a condition for successful employment. Proselyte women are also forced to leave their jobs due to administrative demands. Such a negative attitude towards religious symbols and convictions is explained by a) public fear of a general growth in religious belief and fundamentalism; b) the public interpretation of the hijab as a symbol of women's oppression and rejection of gender equality; c) international security discourse associated with Islamic extremism and terrorism. Exclusion of veiled Muslims and proselyte women from productive labour market participation may lead to continuing feelings of resentment, bitterness and, in certain cases, radical tendencies.

- At the household level, however, religion appears to play a significant role in pacifying relations resulting in harmony, respect and tolerance between spouses, intergenerational respect, and reduced domestic violence against women and children. In the light of chronic poverty in many families, women tend to endure economic hardships with considerable patience and perseverance. Cutting down expenses on lavish family celebrations saves financial resources. Female believers typically feel much more satisfied with their private lives, empowered with spiritual blessings, and liberated from constant family tensions.

- Latent tensions between proselytes and their immediate communities tend to surface in the form of religious intolerance, involving verbal and psychological violence. Specifically, such confrontations take place when the issue of proselytes' burial rights in ancestral cemeteries is raised. Muslims and Orthodox Christians claim their rights to retain these burial territories exclusively for their co-believers out of the conviction that 'infidels' might inflict divine curses on other corpses. This issue has not yet been adequately discussed and addressed on the political level, and adherents of non-traditional

religions have not yet been assigned separate burial plots. With the aging of proselyte communities, this will gradually become a critical issue, with the potential to provoke interfaith conflicts and encourage enduring anti-proselyte sentiments. It should also be noted that the present generation of proselytes will most likely pass their religious tradition on to their children, who might well continue practising their parents' faith. This indicates that the current policy of inaction and disregard for this as yet not particularly prominent source of conflict is counter-productive and a long-term risk.

- An exceedingly negative image of Islam prevails among proselytes of other faiths who have little interpersonal contact with practising Muslims. Islam is largely seen as sexist and chauvinistic, oppressing women, degrading their human potential by forcing them to remain at home, and viewing them simply as men's property. By contrast, believers who have extensive contact with Muslim families, and whose church leaders regularly preach about other religions and call for respect towards them during sermons, find more similarities than differences with Islamic traditions.

- Multi-spectrum religious revivalism in Kyrgyzstan does not challenge the secular nature of the state as long as the authorities do not interfere with religious affairs and impose serious restrictions on private religious practices. In all holy scripts, believers are required to express obedience to and respect for the authorities which in turn should govern justly. However, if the state were to introduce prohibitive laws that would impede the free and open practice of fundamental principles of their religion, many would disobey and protest against such legislation.

Based on the findings of our research, we advance the following general recommendations to help ensure that women who are increasingly attracted by religion are able to deepen their faith without sacrificing their access to rights, decision-making and economic empowerment. Religion may help strengthen gender equality and inclusive peace building, but much more needs to be done to encourage religious education, dialogue and freedoms to make this possible. Below are general recommendations made to Kyrgyzstan authorities, which we recommend that the UN system and other international actors support:

**- Reduce the attractiveness and negative affect of female amanatization:**

*a) Considering that female amanatization is mainly caused by women's quest for protection against different types of violence and abuse, it is strongly recommended to put into practice and enforce the existing laws criminalizing the physical, psychological, economic and other types of violence against women.*

*b) To reduce the negative affect of female amanatization on long-term gender equality and female empowerment, we also recommend that key local, national and international actors in the field of gender and gender equality include practicing Muslim women as a special target group to encourage them a) to study in fields that are often male dominated such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics, entrepreneurship and management; b) to pursue professional careers in these areas (through career counselling, adult education, apprenticeships, financial support mechanisms); c) To participate more actively at all levels of public life (grassroots activities, local authorities, government, parliament). Additionally, awareness raising campaigns should be undertaken among parents, teachers and youth against gender-stereotypical attitudes towards educational and employment choices, career development and earnings.*

**- Ensure access to certified religious knowledge for women:**

Given that Muslim women are in acute need of easily accessible and certified sources of Islamic knowledge, it is highly recommended that the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan and the State Commission on Religion consider opportunities to organise Islamic classes for women based on the existing Islamic educational infrastructure, which itself could be expanded and improved to ensure higher quality religious education.<sup>36</sup> This is a strategically important step to mitigate the risks of women's conversion to extremist and radicalised ideologies, and to decrease market demand for clandestine home-based religious education.

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<sup>36</sup> The Kyrgyzstan State Commission on Religious Affairs has begun a program of testing and training registered imams to strengthen their capacities. UN Women, "The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening in, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia, June 2017, p.13

**- Access to public places of worship:**

In acknowledgment of the fact that many practising Muslim women are economically active and work outside their home, and face a strong challenge in combining work with the religious duty of prayer, it is strongly suggested that already existing prayer houses and mosques should be made accessible to women and adapted to their needs. This would considerably motivate Muslim women to participate in the employment market without fear of missing prayer times, which as this research shows is one of the stress factors preventing them from taking up employment.

**- Inclusion in the Spiritual Administration of Muslims:**

Unlike female believers of other religions, Muslim women, especially from rural areas, completely lack forums where they can get religious advice concerning different aspects of integrating Islam into their lives (specificities of prayer, ablution, hygiene, spousal relations, dealing with tensions in the family etc.), share their opinions in religious discussion, and in doing so consider themselves fully integrated members of their Muslim community. Such forums can be created through re-opening of the women's department of the Spiritual Administration, which would defend Muslim women's civic rights, provide legal advice and support in case of discrimination based on religious convictions, represent their interests during public discussion and debates, and deal with women's access to religious knowledge inter alia.

**- Improved public image of Islam:**

To improve Islam's public image and reduce stigmatisation of veiled Muslim women, we suggest that religious scholars regularly organise open door days in mosques, Islamic centres, and educational facilities for women, and host public lectures about the true position of women in Islam, their socio-political rights and men's divinely ordained obligation to honour them and treat them with respect. In acknowledgement of their opinion-shaping power, mass media outlets should be strongly encouraged to be sensitive and unbiased while covering religion-related topics, with a view to avoiding further arousing of Islamophobic sentiments, as well as irrational and unreasoned fear of Protestant proselytism.

**- Inter-faith dialogue:**

It is important to foster inter-faith dialogue among all the existing faiths in Kyrgyzstan, in order to

reduce the risk of inter-religious tension, intolerance and persecution, specifically in the light of atrocities against Protestant converts. The dialogue could start with the preaching of sermons about other religions, their principle canons, intersections with other faiths and the need for mutual respect. These could be organised by religious clerics for their respective congregations (mullahs, pastors, priests etc.) and special attention should be made to ensure that women take part in this awareness raising and dialogue. It is increasingly important for Muslims to acknowledge that Kyrgyzstan is a multi-confessional country, with guaranteed freedom of conscience for everyone, and that 'new' religions have already become a part of the Kyrgyz reality.

**- Protection of Proselytes' burial rights:**

The government of the Kyrgyz Republic should recognise the presence of latent inter-faith tensions which have the potential to grow into serious confrontations between Muslims and proselytes of other faiths on the matter of the latter's right for dignified burial spots. If religious communities wish to retain the right to be buried together with their fellow believers, the government should respect this wish and allocate special, easily accessible land plots for the applicant communities. Information campaigns should take place in inter-faith communities to raise awareness of the local population with regard to legal guarantees of religious freedom for all, their inviolability and legal accountability for religious hate crimes and associated attitudes.

**- Freedom of conscience and religious practice guaranteed:**

Religious revivalism and diversity does not challenge the secular nature of the state as long as it respects the individual's full freedom of religious choice and practice. The government is therefore encouraged to continue to protect the constitutional right to freedom of religion, to consider reforms of the 2009 Religion Law registration requirements to make it easier for groups to gain legal status, and to avoid new legal amendments or policies which may foster biased and discriminatory attitudes towards 'non-traditional' religions.

**- Prevention of violent extremism, and rehabilitation and re-integration programme for male and female returnees from war zones:**

The Kyrgyz government, in cooperation with the Muftiyat, national and international actors with relevant expertise, is strongly recommended to develop comprehensive prevention of violent extremism (PVE) programs which include women, as well as rehabilitation and re-integration projects for Syria returnees focusing on a) preventing their recidivism and further radicalisation; b) easing their socio-economic re-integration; and c) building overall community-level resistance to religious indoctrination and violent extremism. Such a programme should also provide special treatment and rehabilitation services to the wives of war zone returnees, who have been convicted and imprisoned in Kyrgyzstan, with a view to prevent these women's further recruitment for homegrown terror activities and dissemination of radicalized ideologies among others.

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