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**Water and food security in Central Asia :  
Women's actions for sustainable development**

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# Acronyms list

CACCC-2023: Central Asia Climate Change Conference  
CAREC: Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation  
CAWEP: Central Asia Water and Energy Programme  
CAY4W: Central Asia Youth for Water  
CMIP6: Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6  
COP: Conference of the parties  
CSTO: Collective Treaty Security Organization  
DKU: Duke Kunshan University  
DPPA: United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs  
ESCAP: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific  
EU: European Union  
FAO: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation  
GDP : Gross domestic product  
GWP: Global water partnership  
HDI : Human Development Index  
IFAD: International Fund for Agricultural Development  
IMU: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan  
JP RWEE: The Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women  
NEET: Not in Education, Employment or Training  
NDC: Nationally Determined Contribution  
NGO: Non governmental Organisations  
OSCE: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
SDG: Sustainable Development Goals  
UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund Asia Pacific  
UNDP: United Nations Development Program  
UN: United Nations  
UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund  
UNRCCA: The United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia  
USAID: United Nations Agency for International Development  
USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics  
WEDC: Women's Enterprise Development Center  
WFP : World Food Programme  
WHO: World Health Organisation  
WUA: Water User Association

## Summary note



On April 28, 2022, the consultative meeting on "Climate change with a focus on gender and water management in Central Asia" was held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The event, jointly organised by UN Women and the Tajik government's Committee for Women's and Family Affairs, was part of an initiative by UN Women's Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to foster the exchange of knowledge, innovations and best practices to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Central Asia. Its main objective was to highlight women's vulnerability to climate change, and to propose solutions to ensuring their access to resources and reappropriation of them.

All of the five states within Central Asia are under authoritarian regimes: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. These republics face various pressures and conflicts around sharing and using natural resources – in particular water, which is essential for agriculture. This sector is already affected by climate change, disrupting agricultural cycles and the availability of water resources. Forecasts indicate a drastic deterioration of the situation in the years to come. Women – who play a key role in water and food security – are particularly affected by these disruptions. Male migration, resulting from the lack of security and unemployment, leaves women in rural areas isolated and marginalised when facing the challenges of climate change. Additionally, they face pressures inherited from the Soviet system; patriarchal tradition and authoritarianism, which limit their capacity for adaptation and resilience. Although some states claim to guarantee equal rights, their oppressive system perpetuates the exclusion of women from decision-making in politics, economics and resource management. Despite representing up to 80% of the agricultural workforce, women have limited land ownership. Yet, they possess a wide range of knowledge and skills needed to mitigate the consequences of climate change, improve living conditions and participate in conflict resolution in a context of growing tensions.

This report highlights the role of women as key actors in sustainable development within Central Asian societies despite the multiple discriminations they face. It emphasises the responsibility of states in protecting and respecting women's rights, empowering them, valuing their role, and establishing training and networking opportunities. The different scenarios studied, which focus on the role of civil society, the integration of a gender perspective into climate policies and sustainable development goals, aim to formulate recommendations for governments and international organisations to support the actions of feminist, environmental, and human rights organisations in the region. These actions are essential for adapting to ongoing and future climate change.

The recommendations revolve around six lines of intervention:

1. Protect women's rights and ensure their autonomy.
2. Combat climate change by incorporating a gender perspective.
3. Foster regional dialogue to promote cooperation among all stakeholders.
4. Include women in decision-making spaces.
5. Raise awareness and educate on feminist and climate issues.
6. Strengthen the role of civil society.

# Introduction



"The effects of climate change on women will be far-reaching on a global scale, but in Central Asia they are happening twice as fast." said Guljamal Nurmammedova, regional coordinator for Central Asia and Caucasus at the Global Water Partnership<sup>1</sup>. Women are facing specific challenges in Central Asia such as the increase of natural disasters, change in agricultural cycle and lack of accessibility to natural resources. The area is facing a complex climate situation that calls for the adoption of specific measures to anticipate and prevent dangers ahead.

Central Asia is a strategic area on the international scene made up by five states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The area is very attractive to its neighbours due to mineral, energies and natural resources. Ex-members of the USSR, these countries were considered domains under the Russian sphere of influence in order to develop agriculture and industry and to prove the Russian genius through building numerous irrigation infrastructures. From 1991, Central Asian countries became republics while keeping strong relations with Russia as a political and economic ally, and the war in Ukraine showed the close economic bond despite political differences. China has also played an important part in the region's exchanges since 2013 through the Belt and Road Initiative and economic investments in the construction of transportation infrastructures. Up until the Taliban's takeover in 2021, Afghanistan was another cultural and economic partner through irrigation projects and energetic investments. Nowadays, relations between the states have stopped and economic exchanges have greatly diminished.

The management of natural resources and the exacerbation of food and water insecurity are factors in the deteriorating security situation in the area. This region, with its arid and semi-arid climate, has already suffered an ecological catastrophe under the Soviet era, known internationally as the Aral Sea ecocide orchestrated by Moscow. Although abundant in the region, water remains an extremely precious commodity for agrarian populations. Because of the way dams and irrigation infrastructure were constructed during the Soviet era, the region suffers from multiple conflicts regarding water control.

In addition, the scarcity of resources, accentuated by climate change and natural disasters, is contributing to the aggravation of intra-state tensions and instability. The lack of availability of water resources exacerbates socio-economic tensions. Dwindling water reserves can lead to conflicts between different populations as they compete for this element essential to their survival. These tensions contribute to regional fragility, further compromising the security of populations, particularly the most vulnerable.

The countries of Central Asia are all authoritarian states in which tensions are exacerbated by insecurity and economic crisis. Their regimes are characterised by weak or absent electoral pluralism, a non-independent judiciary, state-controlled elections and media, and frequent violations of civil liberties<sup>2</sup>. Turkmenistan remains the most authoritarian country in the region, with a state model that gives the president the role of head of state and government. In Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, presidents do not allow the opposition to stand for election, and practise a cult of personality. Conversely, for many years, Kyrgyzstan was considered a democratic exception in a region dominated by authoritarian regimes. Its semi-presidential system and the many international initiatives to promote democracy after independence created this reputation<sup>3</sup>. However, due to authoritarian practices<sup>3</sup> and corruption, the ruling party was overthrown following popular uprisings in 2005, enabling new democratic elections to be held.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted on June 13, 2023 with Guljamal Nurmammedova, regional coordinator for the Global Water Partnership in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

<sup>2</sup> Classement des États du monde par indice de démocratie. (2021). Atlasocio.com. Available at: <https://atlasocio.com/classements/politique/democratie/classement-etats-par-indice-de-democratie-monde.php>

<sup>3</sup> Pétric, B. (2008). Le Kirghizstan : soft power et inflation électorale. Hérodote, 129, 145-165. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3917/her.129.0145>



In such a climate, the situation of women in the Central Asian region is marked by systemic oppression that limits their rights and autonomy. During the Soviet era, women were granted a certain number of rights, however these are now restricted, despite official government rhetoric. Whether it's traditionalism, the weight of the Muslim religion or patriarchy, Central Asian societies confine them to fixed gender roles. Restricted to the domestic sphere, women take on the role of caretaker as mothers and wives<sup>4</sup>. They are also discriminated against in terms of access to education and employment. In Eurasia, 20% of young women aged between 15 and 24 are unemployed and have received no education or training, compared with 2% of men of the same age<sup>5</sup>. Finally, legal texts take little account of women's rights, and they are under-represented in all government institutions.

Another curse affecting women in this region is gender-based violence. Domestic violence, "bride napping" and femicide are frequent in the area: 50% of men consider it "normal" for a husband to hit his wife<sup>6</sup>, and 18% of women report having suffered physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner or sexual violence at the hands of a non-partner<sup>7</sup>. This violent environment is reinforced by a large number of taboos and unspoken facts, notably surrounding the hierarchical and patriarchal structure in the population. Feminist associations play a key role in raising awareness of the oppressions suffered by women and supporting them by making their living conditions visible and creating networks. However, governments tend to hinder their development by banning gatherings and limiting the freedom of organisations.

Climate change is amplifying social, political and economic pressures and women are bearing the brunt of the consequences. Traditionally responsible for the food<sup>8</sup> and water<sup>9</sup> security of their households, they play an active role in the survival of their communities and their adaptation to climate change. However they are often excluded from decision-making on water management because of the gendered division of labour. These inequalities exacerbated by climate change have serious repercussions on women's living conditions: their work remains unpaid despite a heavy hourly workload, which contributes to their marginalisation from the networks. Women currently account for 60% of people living in extreme poverty worldwide, mainly due to the lack of recognition, appreciation and remuneration of their work<sup>10</sup>. Economic insecurity and growing difficulties in accessing water and food resources are becoming increasingly important in the context of climate change.

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<sup>4</sup> « Capacité à prendre soin d'autrui » selon la définition de Carol Gilligan en 1982 dans l'ouvrage *Une Voix différente. Pour une éthique du care*. Flammarion. Champs Essais. Available at : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-2010-12-page-631.htm#no6>

<sup>5</sup> Regional Report for Eurasia. (2019). the OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index. Available at: [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f6dfa21d-en/1/2/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/f6dfa21d-en&\\_csp\\_=f990744037b57ab8751f9fe409f1dbf5&itemGO=oeed&itemContentType=book](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f6dfa21d-en/1/2/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/f6dfa21d-en&_csp_=f990744037b57ab8751f9fe409f1dbf5&itemGO=oeed&itemContentType=book)

<sup>6</sup> Anaissanchez. (2023). Journée Internationale des Droits des Femmes 2023 : assurer la protection des femmes menacées ou survivantes de violences intrafamiliales en Asie centrale. ACTED. Available at: <https://www.acted.org/fr/journee-internationale-des-droits-des-femmes-2023-assurer-la-protection-des-femmes-menacees-ou-survivantes-de-violences-intrafamiliales-en-asie-centrale/#anchor-1>

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International (2022) Eastern Europe And Central Asia: Protect Women From Violence In Crises And Beyond. Amnesty International. Available at: <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/eastern-europe-and-central-asia.-protect-women-from-violence-in-crisis-and-beyond.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> « Food security is a concept defined by the access of all individuals in a population to food of sufficient quality and quantity to satisfy their basic needs » Peyrissac, D. Pianté, L. Long, B. Triboulet, P. (2023). Sécurité alimentaire : Définition. Dictionnaire d'agroécologie. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17180/q1nb-0540>

<sup>9</sup> « Water security at household and global level means that every person has access to sufficient, safe and affordable water that increases their chances of leading a clean, healthy and productive life, while protecting and enhancing the natural environment » le Partenariat mondial de l'eau lors du deuxième Forum mondial de l'eau. (2000) . Available at: [https://www.worldwatercouncil.org/sites/default/files/World\\_Water\\_Forum\\_02/The\\_Hague\\_Declaration.pdf](https://www.worldwatercouncil.org/sites/default/files/World_Water_Forum_02/The_Hague_Declaration.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Flourens, M. (2023, April 12). La pauvreté dans le monde en 2023 : causes, conséquences et solutions. Oxfam France. Available at : <https://www.oxfamfrance.org/inegalites-et-justice-fiscale/la-pauvrete-dans-le-monde/>

Sustainable development<sup>11</sup> in Central Asia cannot be envisaged without taking into account women's role in agriculture and water supply. Governments still completely ignore women's active role and underestimate their essential contributions to decision-making processes. In this context, the implementation of Agenda 2030 is of crucial importance for promoting women's action for sustainable development in Central Asia. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global framework aimed at eliminating poverty, combating inequality and preserving the environment. Its interconnected analysis of climate, social, economic and political issues provides a holistic view of the multiple challenges and avenues for fighting and preventing climate disruption in an inclusive way.

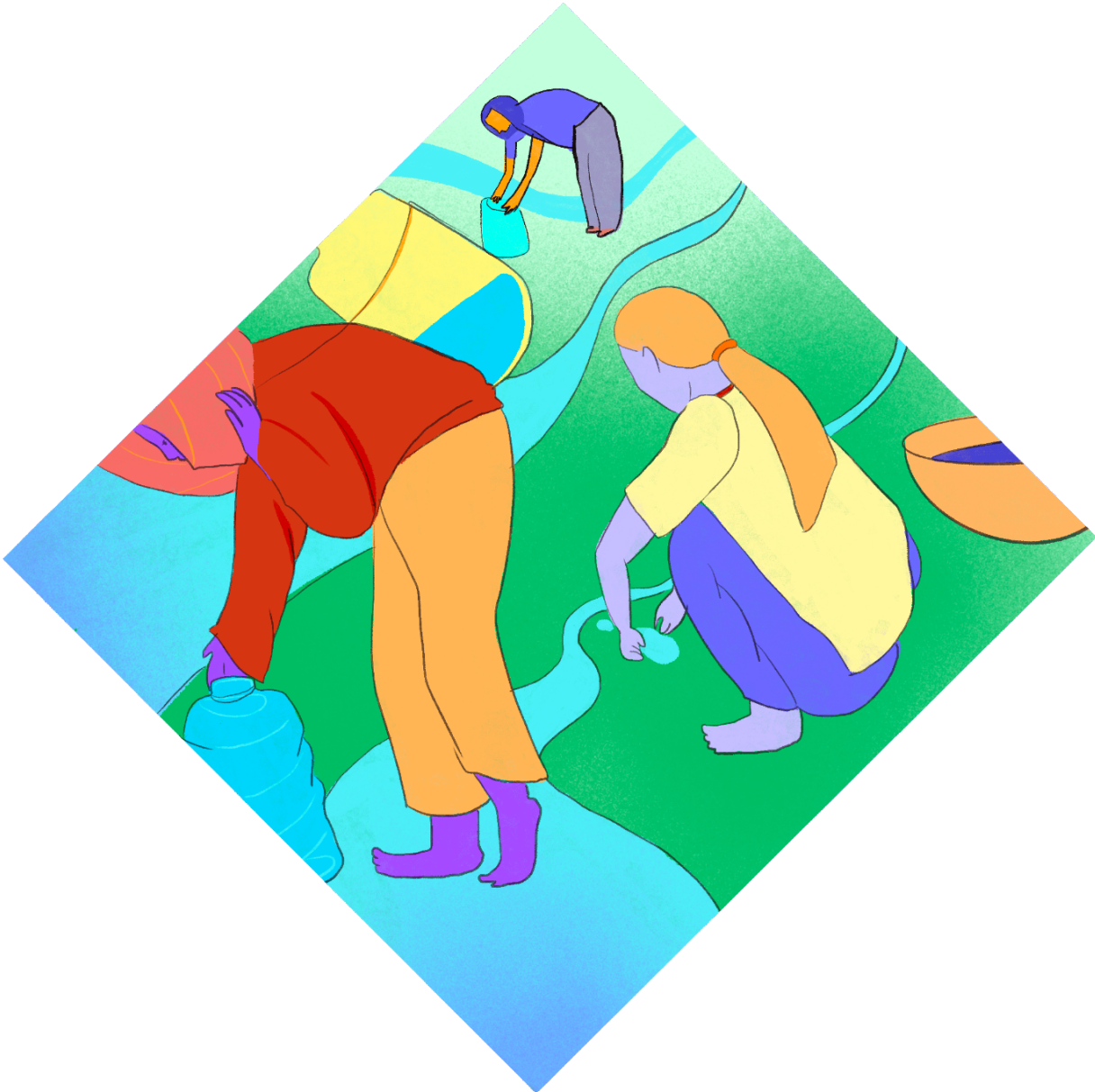
So how can the integration of a gendered perspective by Central Asian states help meet the challenges of food and water security? What does the future hold for women's inclusion and action in the fight against climate change in Central Asia? This report aims to raise the profile of Central Asian women's commitments and gender-sensitive development initiatives. It begins by outlining the impact of climate change on the region and on women's lives (I), then looks at women's actions for sustainable development (II) and finally puts forward recommendations based on the outlook for the elements studied (III).

The Institut du Genre en Géopolitique's analysis aims to support Central Asian women and highlight the relation between feminist and climate issues in the region. It is aimed at the governments of the Central Asian republics, the countries they work with, local and international civil society organisations fighting for sustainable development, and women's rights and feminist activists in the region.

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<sup>11</sup> Joly, J. (2022). 1987, Gro Harlem Brundtland écrit la définition officielle du Développement Durable. Les Horizons, Available at: <https://leshorizons.net/gro-harlem-brundtland-developpement-durable/>

**Part I - Climate change amplifies multiples tensions impacting women's rights**



## A) Geopolitics of resources in a region under pressure

Central Asia is characterised by a lack of respect for human rights and rising geopolitical tensions. Since the end of the Soviet Union, countries in the area have adopted authoritarian regimes that restrict civil and political liberties. In addition, the rise of Islam and its radicalisation has contributed to repression through strict restrictions regarding religious practices.

Rich in hydrocarbons, the region attracts the attention of Russia and China, and their rivalry regarding resource control is creating more issues. Ever since the war in Ukraine, Central Asian countries have distanced themselves from Russia politically, but economic exchanges continue. China on the other hand keeps showing itself as a reliable ally in terms of economic relations, but is facing growing difficulties.

Furthermore, inter-state tensions in relation to multiethnicity as well as water resources management are testaments to a lack of regional dialogue. Water is used in excess relative to its availability and unequally split between territories, creating deep disagreements between governments.

- *Area defined by authoritarian instability and fear of radicalisation*

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the countries of Central Asia have sunk into authoritarianism, leading to a proliferation of civil wars<sup>12</sup>. According to Freedom House, which evaluates political rights and civil liberties, none of the five Central Asian countries has exceeded a score of 27/100 in 2023<sup>13</sup>. Turkmenistan stands out by achieving a score of 2/100, placing it near the bottom of the democracies ranking, in 162nd place, close to Uzbekistan (155th) and Tajikistan (159th)<sup>14</sup>. Kazakhstan is in 128th place, while Kyrgyzstan remains the highest-ranked country in the region at 107th, although its HDI (Human Development Index) is almost equal to that of Tajikistan.

Authoritarianism takes many forms in these countries, with Turkmenistan being the most striking example of state repression and the cult of personality. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, president from 2006 to 2022, nicknamed "The Protector", had a golden statue of himself erected in the capital, rotating with the sun<sup>15</sup>. He demonstrated the extent of his control over the country by being elected President for life, Prime Minister, Minister of the Armed Forces and leader of the Democratic Party, as well as selecting his son as his successor. Recognized as one of the most closed countries in the world, Turkmenistan has been criticised by Human Rights Watch for the dubious reliability of official figures on Covid-19-related deaths and for concealing the country's economic crisis<sup>16</sup>. Intimidation, torture and exile are the government's preferred methods of suppressing any activism, while the state controls all media to maintain its grip on public opinion.

<sup>12</sup> Aubin, A., & Thual, F. (2022). L'Asie centrale, 1991-2021 : De l'indépendance aux incertitudes. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/lasie\\_centrale\\_1991-2021\\_de\\_lindependance\\_aux\\_incetitudes.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/lasie_centrale_1991-2021_de_lindependance_aux_incetitudes.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Freedom House. (s. d.). Countries and Territories. Dans Freedom House. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores?sort=asc&order=Country>

<sup>14</sup> Classement des États du monde par indice de démocratie. (2021). Atlasocio.com. Available at : <https://atlasocio.com/classements/politique/democratie/classement-etats-par-indice-de-democratie-monde.php>

<sup>15</sup> Couturier, B. (2021, May 28). Cambodge, Erythrée, Qatar, Rwanda, Turkménistan : ces régimes autocratiques dont on ne parle pas. France Culture. Available at: <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/cambodge-erythree-qatar-rwanda-turkmenistan-ces-regimes-autocratiques-dont-on-ne-parle-pas-2292919>

<sup>16</sup> Turkmenistan. (2023). Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/turkmenistan>

In other Central Asian countries, bans on demonstrations and popular gatherings are common, as are restrictions on the media, although these are less severe than in Turkmenistan. Human Rights Watch has confirmed that the Uzbek police used force against its population, resorting to grenades and arbitrary arrests in 2022<sup>17</sup>. In Tajikistan, the police use torture to control and intimidate society, and unfair trials against protesters are organized<sup>18</sup>. Yevgeniy Zhovtis, Director of Kazakhstan's International Bureau for Human Rights, stresses the importance of eliminating all legal and practical discrimination, to guarantee the application of fundamental rights and freedoms<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, one Central Asian country stands out: Kyrgyzstan. Its reputation as a democratic island persists thanks to international interventions to promote the democratic process and popular uprisings that have toppled authoritarian governments since the 1990s. The most notable of these, the Tulip Revolution in 2005, saw President Askar Akayev flee the country amid accusations of fraud<sup>20</sup>. Corruption and attacks on press freedom remain frequent, however<sup>21</sup>.

Authoritarianism in Central Asia is motivated by a clear objective: the control of the rise of Islam. Present before the advent of the Soviet regime, Islam is considered fundamental to the identity of the countries in Central Asia, which resumed their religious practice after gaining independence. Today, over 80% of the Central Asian population is Muslim<sup>22</sup>. According to John Schoeberlein, director of the Central Asia Program at Harvard, the lack of social reforms and government failures have led the population to turn to religion<sup>23</sup>. However, political elites fear that religion will overthrow the secular state, and any religious practice not regulated by the government is considered extremist. Its practice is therefore strictly controlled: imams are appointed by the state in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and they are government officials in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Other rules exist depending on the country, such as restrictions imposed on mosque construction and the legal age for entry. Despite this, Islamic groups exist, particularly in Uzbekistan. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), active since 1911, has carried out several attacks, mainly abroad, notably in Pakistan. Other groups, such as Hizb Ut-Tahrir, claim to be peaceful groups aiming to establish an Islamic state but paradoxically have called for violence<sup>24</sup>. However, jihad does not find significant support among the population, which has been marked by the failure of the intervention in Afghanistan and does not wish to live under Sharia law<sup>25</sup>. Uzbekistan once had strong religious ties with Afghanistan, and the two countries developed their relations culturally and economically. The Taliban's rise to power in 2021 reversed this trend, and relations were largely disrupted. Afghanistan is now perceived as

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<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International. (s. d.-d). Ouzbékistan: la situation des droits humains. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/location/europe-and-central-asia/uzbekistan/report-uzbekistan/>

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International. (s. d.-d). Tadjikistan : la situation des droits humains. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/location/europe-and-central-asia/tajikistan/report-tajikistan/>

<sup>19</sup> Amiranoff, J., Gérard, G., & Ripart, J. (2023). Au Kazakhstan et au Kirghizstan, l'épineux combat des militants LGBT+. Novastan Français. Available at: <https://novastan.org/fr/kazakhstan/au-kazakhstan-et-au-kirghizstan-lepineux-combat-des-militants-lgbt/>

<sup>20</sup> Huet, T. (2007, June 1st). Mars 2005 au Kirghizistan : « révolution des tulipes » ou alternance violente ? Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/109>

<sup>21</sup> Carcanague, S. (2017) Présidentielle au Kirghizstan : des élections faussement anecdotiques ? IRIS. Available at: <https://www.iris-france.org/101057-presidentielle-au-kirghizstan-des-elections-faussement-anecdotiques/>

<sup>22</sup> Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050 | Pew Research Center. (2023, May 31). Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Available at : <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/interactives/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/>

<sup>23</sup> Hathaway, R. (2003)The Islamization of Central Asia : Politics, Economics and Society. Wilson Center. Available at : <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-islamization-central-asia-politics-economics-and-society>

<sup>24</sup> Counter Extremism Project. (2023) Hizb ut-Tahrir: report. Counter Terrorism Project. Available at: <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/hizb-ut-tahrir/report>

<sup>25</sup> Duchesneau, A. (2019). L'islamisme en Asie centrale : une véritable menace ? Revue L'Esprit libre. Available at: <https://revuelespritlibre.org/lislamisme-en-asie-centrale-une-veritable-menace>

a threat to the security of Central Asia, where the radicalization of the population is feared due to Afghan extremist propaganda<sup>26</sup>.

The multiethnic character of the region constitutes another factor contributing to political instability and insecurity. A large number of ethnicities are present in the region, and this diversity has been the source of interethnic tensions<sup>27</sup>. The Ferghana Valley, a political crossroad between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which is home to several ethnic groups such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz, is a concrete example. In 1990, conflicts in the Kyrgyz territory of the valley between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks resulted in hundreds of deaths due to territorial rivalries fueled by tensions over resource sharing. Today, although conflicts are sporadic, they remain highly violent, as was the case in Kazakhstan in 2020 between the Dungans and Kazakhs. The fights caused the deaths of dozens of people and the displacement of thousands of others<sup>28</sup>.

- *Resource control, defining stake in regional geopolitical relations.*

The region's resources play a decisive role in the internal and external geopolitics of Central Asia, influencing the relations between countries and the actions of neighbouring powers. According to Mackinder's Heartland theory, Central Asia and Eastern Europe are pivot areas, the control of which ensures dominance over the entire Eurasian landmass<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, an influential country in this region not only has control over trade between the East and the West but also enjoys privileged access to the numerous available resources. Russia and China position themselves as powerful regional actors and seek to prevent the spread of extremism and Western ideas, oscillating between a cooperative and competitive relationship.

Historically, Russia has been the main economic partner of Central Asia. After gaining independence in 1991, the countries maintained strong ties with Russia, including through alliances such as the Eurasian Economic Union established in 2014. Russia is primarily interested in the region's mineral resources, such as Kazakh oil, which is largely exported to Russian ports. For Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, remittances from seasonal workers in Russia represent a significant portion of their GDP<sup>30</sup>. This economic dependence is accompanied by a security partnership through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The CSTO combats terrorism and extremism, allowing Russia to maintain its dominant position over the Central Asian republics and prevent the rise of movements that could threaten regional stability.

Russian influence is also felt beyond these alliances. During the United Nations General Assembly vote in March 2022, condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and calling for financial compensation for the damages caused by the war, the five Central Asian countries abstained. While Turkmenistan maintains a position of permanent neutrality, the other countries are gradually distancing themselves from Russia,

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<sup>26</sup> Sadozai, M. (2022). Asie centrale-Afghanistan : des frontières sous haute surveillance. The Conversation. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/asie-centrale-afghanistan-des-frontieres-sous-haute-surveillance-194186>

<sup>27</sup> Roy, O. (1994). Violences ethniques et conflits idéologiques en Asie centrale. Licence OpenEdition Books. Available at: <https://books.openedition.org/cedej/446?lang=fr>

<sup>28</sup> Olle-Laprune, C. et Le Genissel, R. (2020) L'Asie centrale et ses rivalités politiques. Storymaps. Available at: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/5afc1c616e8641b48476a2ea0042dbc6>

<sup>29</sup> Mackinder, H. (1904) The Geographical Pivot of History. The Royal Geographical Society. 23(4), 421–437. Available at : <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>

<sup>30</sup> Levystone, M. (2022, December 21). La Russie, hégémon indétrônable de l'Asie centrale ? Areion24.news. Available at: <https://www.areion24.news/2022/12/21/la-russie-hegemon-indetronable-de-lasie-centrale/>

expressing their disagreement through their speeches and actions<sup>31</sup>. In June 2022, Uzbekistan sent medical supplies to Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan refused Russian military manoeuvres on its territory. Kazakhstan, fearing it could become the next target of Russia, is shifting away from its multi-vector policy by officially condemning the invasion in Ukraine, thus fueling a climate of tension<sup>32</sup>. However, the countries have maintained and even increased their economic exchanges with Russia in response to European sanctions. Moscow turned to its former allies, who chose to continue energy exchanges to maintain their economic security in a difficult period. In particular, Tajikistan increased its trade with Russia's energy giant by 23% between 2021 and 2022, and Uzbekistan purchased the Russian company Gazprom in June 2023<sup>33</sup>.

Another player in the region is China, which takes advantage of political tensions to strengthen its economic influence. Since the 2010s, China has shown a growing interest in the resources of Central Asia, including Turkmen hydrocarbons, Kazakh uranium, Kyrgyz gold, and Tajik aluminium<sup>34</sup>. The Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013 has bolstered Chinese economic agreements in the region, particularly in the areas of transportation and infrastructure. For the Central Asian countries, China represents a close and stable partner, an alternative to the West, which does not always have a positive image among the local populations. China generally chooses to stay out of internal conflicts in Central Asia and prefers to prevent them without direct intervention<sup>35</sup>. However, the increasing appropriation of resources by China could pose a risk to the independence of Central Asian countries on the international stage, particularly due to China's debt strategy, which challenges their future energy sovereignty.

The relations between China and Russia in Central Asia are complex. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a strategic organisation that promotes inter-state and economic cooperation between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, allows for the reaffirmation of bilateral and regional cooperation and containment of Western ambitions<sup>36</sup>. However, differences and rivalries persist despite cooperative initiatives. China uses the SCO to strengthen its economic influence while limiting Russia's influence. However, Chinese dominance is not universally accepted, particularly in Kazakhstan, where protests, sometimes violent, have taken place against Chinese presence in recent years<sup>37</sup>.

Current tensions in Central Asia revolve around the management of water resources, a major issue that shapes inter-state relations. Although Central Asia does not suffer from water scarcity, except for Uzbekistan, which is the only country facing water stress, the management of this precious resource remains a challenge. The region has a complex hydrographic network, with rivers flowing down from

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<sup>31</sup> « Permanent neutrality is a commitment by a state not to use force except to defend its independence and territorial integrity. This commitment is recognised by the other States, which for their part undertake not to use force against it. ». Pascal, P. (2022). Les vertus de la neutralité. *Entreprendre*. Available at: <https://www.entreprendre.fr/les-vertus-de-la-neutralite/>

<sup>32</sup> Afp, C. A. (2023, May 26). Guerre en Ukraine : le Kazakhstan ne s'alliera pas avec la Russie, a assuré son gouvernement. *Capital.fr*. Available at: <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/guerre-en-ukraine-le-kazakhstan-ne-salliera-pas-avec-la-russie-a-assure-son-gouvernement-1469525>

<sup>33</sup> Lvanier. (June 2023). Le 11ème train de sanctions contre la Russie vise aussi l'Asie centrale. *Novastan Français*. Available at: [https://novastan.org/fr/europe-et-asie-centrale/le-11eme-train-de-sanctions-contre-la-russie-vise-aussi-lasie-centrale/?utm\\_source=Novastan.org+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=bfd6e90fc-NSLR+267\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_d479236523-bfd6e90fc-387444107](https://novastan.org/fr/europe-et-asie-centrale/le-11eme-train-de-sanctions-contre-la-russie-vise-aussi-lasie-centrale/?utm_source=Novastan.org+Newsletter&utm_campaign=bfd6e90fc-NSLR+267_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d479236523-bfd6e90fc-387444107)

<sup>34</sup> Le Genissel, R. et Olle-Lapru, C. (2020) L'Asie Centrale et rivalités géopolitiques Available at: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/5afc1c616e8641b48476a2ea0042dbc6>

<sup>35</sup> Balci, B., & Kasymova, E. (2011). Visions et perceptions du monde en Asie Centrale postsoviétique : éléments d'analyse. *Anatoli*, 2, 109-132. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/anatoli.530>

<sup>36</sup> Julienne, M. (2018). La Chine en Asie centrale, un nouvel acteur de sécurité en zone d'influence russe - Stratégie. Available at: <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Chine-en-Asie-centrale-un-nouvel-acteur-de-securite-en-zone-d-influence-russe.html>

<sup>37</sup> Kruglov, A., & Kruglov, A. (2020). Sinophobia simmers across Central Asia. *Asia Times*. Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2019/11/sinophobia-simmers-across-central-asia/>

mountains and dividing into large river basins. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, fed by glaciers, flow into the plains. Mountainous countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan benefit from abundant precipitation, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, located in the Aral-Caspian depression, experience an arid and desert climate. These rivers, which are crucial for the region's agriculture, provide a major water source through precipitation and glacier melt. However, their management creates tensions between countries. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, upstream, have control over these water resources, while Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, downstream, depend on these rivers without being able to control them.

The major problem that generates tensions is the overconsumption of water. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in 2019, Central Asia was among the largest consumers of water per capita, on par with the United States, the world's top consumer<sup>38</sup>. This overexploitation of water is mainly linked to agriculture, a legacy of the Soviet era when the construction of canals and large dams was considered a symbol of the technical genius of the USSR. Dams built by Tajikistan for electricity generation are a concern for Turkmenistan as they result in a decrease in river flow and reduced water supply to the country. In 2021, a conflict related to irrigation triggered clashes along the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, causing the deaths of 40 people and the displacement of 30,000 others<sup>39</sup>. Cooperation between upstream and downstream countries is necessary to ensure that each country has access to sufficient water.

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<sup>38</sup> Carte de la FAO. (2019). Water Withdrawal per inhabitant (m<sup>3</sup>/year). Available at: [PDF/MAPS/WithT.Cap\\_eng.pdf \(firebasestorage.googleapis.com\)](#)

<sup>39</sup> Helf, G. (2021). Border Clash Between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Risks Spinning Out of Control. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/05/border-clash-between-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-risks-spinning-out-control>



## B) Socio-economic situation deeply impacted by climate change

Resource management in the economic sector in Central Asia is a crucial issue in the context of climate change. Agricultural employment accounts for a significant proportion of total employment, although it is of little importance to the countries' GDP. Climate change is having a visible impact through natural disasters and irregular weather patterns that are weakening the region's development. Water supplies, essential for agriculture, are impacted by melting glaciers and snow caps as well as by over-exploitation of land. In addition, population growth is increasing pressure on available resources.

Although the countries of Central Asia have demonstrated their international commitment to combating climate change, their national environmental policies remain inconsistent. Some countries are taking concrete steps, while others are relying on old, ineffective policies, but decisions are not sufficiently effective in the face of the urgency of the situation. Persistent challenges such as the economic crisis and low awareness of sustainable development are hampering progress.

- *The importance of resource management for the economic sector*

To fully grasp the influence of climate change in Central Asian countries, it is important to understand the region's different economic models.

A large part of the population depends on agriculture, including in Kazakhstan, the most industrialised country in the region, whose economy is based on mining<sup>40</sup>. Today, 43% of the Kazakh population lives in rural areas. In downstream countries such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, agricultural employment accounts for between 33% and 15% of total employment respectively<sup>41</sup>. The situation differs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where the share of the rural population varies between 73% and 64% respectively<sup>42</sup>. Even so, according to the 2017 report by Marc Elie and Carole Ferret, research fellows at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) entitled "Verte, la steppe? Agriculture et environnement en Asie centrale", agriculture's share of GDP has fallen considerably in recent years, creating a significant gap between the sector's importance in the national economy and its agricultural demographic weight<sup>43</sup>. For example, agriculture accounts for less than 5% of GDP in Kazakhstan and only 25% in Tajikistan, the most rural country in the region.

The mountainous geographical situation of upstream countries does not allow for the development of large-scale irrigated agricultural systems such as those found in downstream countries. As Alain Cariou, senior lecturer in geography at Sorbonne University, pointed out, the upstream countries are the water resource holders and were equipped with dams during the Soviet era to supply irrigation water to the downstream countries and, secondarily, to produce hydroelectricity<sup>44</sup>. However, the distribution of water

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<sup>40</sup> Elie, M. et Ferret, C. Verte, la steppe ? Agriculture et environnement en Asie centrale. Études rurales, 2017, Verte, la steppe ? Agriculture et environnement en Asie centrale, 200, pp.64-79. Available at: <https://hal.science/hal-01820553v1/document>

<sup>41</sup> Khitakhunov, A. (2020) Agricultural Potential of Central Asian Countries. Eurasian Research Institute. Available at: <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/agricultural-potential-of-central-asian-countries/>

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>43</sup> Elie, M., & Ferret, C. (2017). Verte, la steppe ? Agriculture et environnement en Asie centrale. Études rurales, 2017, Verte, la steppe ? Agriculture et environnement en Asie centrale, 200, pp.64-79. op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Interview conducted on May 31, 2023 with Alain Cariou, lecturer in geography at Sorbonne University, specialising in regional development dynamics in Central Asia and the Middle East.

resources in the region is influenced by distinct agricultural practices. The upstream countries, whose agriculture is mainly based on self-consumption, use relatively little water and practice mainly livestock breeding and self-consumption agriculture. Downstream countries use irrigated agriculture and grow particularly water-intensive crops such as wheat in Kazakhstan and cotton, of which Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are world leaders<sup>45</sup>.

In addition, Central Asian economies rely on the export of hydrocarbons, an activity that requires the injection of large volumes of water in order to extract oil, thus increasing tensions on the use of water resources for irrigated agriculture. In this sense, persistent dependence on fossil fuels runs counter to the measures needed to protect the environment and tackle climate change.

- *Climate change consequences on the socio-economic situation*

Climate change is already having a visible impact in Central Asia, and unfortunately, these consequences are set to increase in the years to come. Various phenomena, such as tensions over water management, migration and aridity, are all undermining the region's development.

Global warming is the first major threat to resource management, with a predicted increase of 1°C by 2050<sup>46</sup>. The region's water supply depends in part on melting glaciers and snowcaps, but rising temperatures are leading to increasingly frequent flooding, mudslides and avalanches. Although the quantities of water do not yet vary significantly, they are now irregularly distributed and no longer correspond to agricultural needs. As a result, local populations are less prepared to cope<sup>47</sup>.

Central Asia is one of the few regions where drought alternates with excessive rainfall. Food supplies are severely threatened by water scarcity due to the drying up of rivers and the over-exploitation of land, as well as by intensive cotton farming<sup>48</sup>. According to Alain Cariou, "At present, water is abundant due to the accelerated melting of the cryosphere. However, the water problem will not be quantitative but temporal: water availability will be low when demand is high in summer, and vice versa from autumn to spring<sup>49</sup>." In Uzbekistan, for example, spring rainfall and irregular temperatures could reduce agricultural yields by 50% by 2050.

Population growth also contributes to climate change. Central Asian countries are characterised by low population density<sup>50</sup>: Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan each have fewer than 8 million inhabitants, while Kazakhstan is home to around 16 million citizens and Uzbekistan to 28 million, making it the most populous country in the region. However, the population of Central Asia is expected to reach 86 million by

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<sup>45</sup> Mukhitdinova, N. (2015) Rapport de l'Unesco sur la science: Asie centrale. UNESCO. Available at: [https://fr.unesco.org/sites/default/files/usr15\\_central\\_asia\\_fr.pdf](https://fr.unesco.org/sites/default/files/usr15_central_asia_fr.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> Sauques, L. (2021). Le Tadjikistan prend des mesures pour lutter contre le changement climatique. Novastan Français. Available at: <https://novastan.org/fr/environnement/le-tadjikistan-prend-des-mesures-pour-lutter-contre-le-changement-climatique/>

<sup>47</sup> Masson-Delomotte V et IPCC. (2021) Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Available at: [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Full_Report.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> Gupta, A. (2014). Central Asia: Five Key Issues. American Security Project. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05967>

<sup>49</sup> Interview conducted on May 31, 2023 with Alain Cariou, lecturer in geography at Sorbonne University, specializing in regional development dynamics in Central Asia and the Middle East.

<sup>50</sup> Dumont, G.-F. Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Lessons from the geopolitics of populations. *Géostratégiques*, 2010, 28, pp.15-34. Available at: <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00762871/document>

2040, posing a threat to access to available resources<sup>51</sup>. If population growth continues at its current rate, the quantity of water available will diminish to such an extent that water supply will represent only a quarter of current average consumption within 75 years<sup>52</sup>. These assumptions point to an increased risk of water shortages, which will ultimately affect crop yields and the ability to exploit hydrocarbons.

What's more, human activities have already led to an ecological catastrophe, the drying-up of the Aral Sea. Once one of the world's largest inland seas, the USSR's drive to irrigate the Uzbek desert has reduced the volume area of this body of water by 90%, leaving behind uncultivable salt soil<sup>53</sup>. This ecocide has deprived the population of the fishing resources that were once part of the local diet.

Climate change increases economic insecurity, due to the lack of recognition of women and their work, the scarcity of resources, their exclusion from decision-making bodies and from agricultural and water management, as well as the absence of equal land rights and patriarchal habits whereby men hold the household money as well as the land. This also affects the safety of women and girls.

- Central Asian countries' weak environmental response

In the face of climate change, effective government measures are required to ensure the accessibility and sustainable management of essential resources in the region. Although Central Asian governments are committed to tackling environmental problems at international and regional level, the situation at national level is quite different.

At international level, Central Asian countries have demonstrated their commitment to tackling climate change, through ratification of the Paris Climate Agreement between 2016 and 2020 and adoption of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In 2021, at the C5+1 diplomatic summit bringing together the five Central Asian countries and the United States, they pledged to strengthen their regional environmental cooperation and prepare for COP 26 by mobilising funds and collaborating on projects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions<sup>54</sup>.

At COP 27 in 2022, the Central Asian countries seized the opportunity to demonstrate their environmental commitment to the international community. Uzbekistan reaffirmed its commitment to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions per unit of GDP by 35% by 2030, in line with the Paris Agreement, with the introduction of a renewable energy program<sup>55</sup>. Kazakhstan took the opportunity to sign an agreement with the European Union to promote the development of sustainable energy. It presented its low-carbon strategy, which is still being implemented in the country, with the aim of achieving zero emissions by 2060<sup>56</sup>. For its part, Tajikistan's national pavilion played a major role in hosting over 20 side events, raising the

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<sup>51</sup> Dion, S. (2021, 25 mars). Gestion de l'eau en Asie centrale et dans le monde : Pas de solution sans les femmes. AMC. Available at: [https://www.international.gc.ca/country\\_news-pays\\_nouvelles/2021-03-15-germany-allemande.aspx?lang=fra](https://www.international.gc.ca/country_news-pays_nouvelles/2021-03-15-germany-allemande.aspx?lang=fra)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Drake, C. (2017, November 9 ). Il y a 50 ans, la mer d'Aral était le quatrième plus grand lac de la planète. aujourd'hui, pour la première fois depuis 600 ans, toute une partie du bassin est à sec. National Geographic. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.fr/environnement/2014/10/disparition-de-la-mer-daral-les-causes-dun-desastre-ecologique>

<sup>54</sup> The figures available on greenhouse gas emissions by country do not yet allow us to say whether the solutions mentioned are effective.

<sup>55</sup> Transcript of the speech given by the representative of Uzbekistan at COP 27, November 16 2022. Available at: [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/UZBEKISTAN\\_cop27cmp17cma4\\_HLS\\_RU.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/UZBEKISTAN_cop27cmp17cma4_HLS_RU.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> Cop 27 : Kazakhstan to adopt first low-carbon strategy. (2022, November 8). Argus Media. Available at: <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2388738-cop-27-kazakhstan-to-adopt-first-lowcarbon-strategy>

profile of its climate adaptation initiatives and attracting the attention of the international community<sup>57</sup>. Turkmenistan made no concrete pledges at the event. However, international climate organisations sent a message to the country's oil and gas companies, stressing that Turkmenistan has an opportunity to help the world limit global warming to below 1.5°C by tackling methane leakage. They warned that the country could face bad press at COP 28 if it fails to meet its targets<sup>58</sup>. At present, the failure of Turkmenistan's action suggests the worst-case scenario.

At the regional level, the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, set up in 2001 by 11 countries, focuses on water, agriculture and sustainable development. It carries out numerous projects in areas such as the preservation of the Aral Sea and the promotion of renewable energies. The program focuses on concrete actions based on the collaborative development of effective strategies to mobilise collective efforts. These initiatives and this regional cooperation demonstrate the strong determination of the countries in the region to act in favour of the environment.

Despite these international and regional commitments, Central Asian governments are not pursuing coherent environmental policies at national level. In the words of Alain Cariou, environmental protection is perceived as "a luxury of rich countries<sup>59</sup>", while the region's poor populations are facing an economic crisis.

An examination of each state's national policies reveals different approaches between countries taking concrete action and those relying on old, ineffective policies. Tajikistan has put in place eleven separate strategies between 2003 and 2021 with 2030 targets on climate and development, including a nine-year national strategy dedicated to the role of women in the country<sup>60</sup>. Tajikistan is also showing genuine concern for the environment, and is seeking international support for the preservation of glaciers, which play an essential role in the Tajik economy.

Kazakhstan's national policies focus primarily on the use of renewable energies, with the most recent dating back to 2016<sup>61</sup>. No specific texts address other climate change issues, suggesting that the country is investing primarily for economic reasons, with no real awareness of sustainable development.

In Turkmenistan, the president, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, makes statements that contradict his climate actions. At a state council meeting in 2022, he declared: "Within the framework of achieving the UN's sustainable development goals at national level, the necessary measures are being taken in line with the interests of current and future generations<sup>62</sup>". Yet the country has no concrete reforms in place to combat climate change, with the exception of a national strategy drawn up in 2012<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Committee on Environmental Protection presented outcomes of the first Tajikistan Pavilion, organized on the sidelines of the 27th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change | United Nations Development Programme. (2022). UNDP. Available at:

<https://www.undp.org/tajikistan/press-releases/committee-environmental-protection-presented-outcomes-first-tajikistan-pavilion-organized-sidelines-27th-conference-parties>

<sup>58</sup> Fielding, N. (2023). Turkmenistan could turn to be Cop 28's big methane win. Argus. Available at:

<https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2445837-turkmenistan-could-turn-to-be-cop-28s-big-methane-win>

<sup>59</sup> Interview conducted on May 31 2023 with Alain Cariou, senior lecturer at the Sorbonne University Geography Department in Paris, specialising in regional development dynamics in Central Asia and the Middle East.

<sup>60</sup> Tajikistan - Climate Change Laws of the World. (s. d.). Available at: <https://www.climate-laws.org/geographies/tajikistan>

<sup>61</sup> Kazakhstan - Climate Change Laws of the World. (s. d.). Available at: <https://www.climate-laws.org/geographies/kazakhstan>

<sup>62</sup> President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov delivered a keynote speech at the Dovlet Maslahaty. News Central Asia (2022). Available at: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2022/09/24/president-of-turkmenistan-serdar-berdimuhamedov-delivered-a-keynote-speech-at-he-dovlet-maslahaty/>

<sup>63</sup> Turkmenistan - Climate Change Laws of the World. (s. d.). Available at: <https://www.climate-laws.org/geographies/turkmenistan>

In Kyrgyzstan, several laws concerning ecology are in force, although they were last updated before 2010. However, the country has set itself a number of objectives, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, and has a national development strategy that includes the expansion of green spaces as a key element in the fight against climate change. The country has also adopted several decrees on sustainable development, advocating the integration of ecological thinking into policy-making<sup>64</sup>.

Finally, Uzbekistan is focusing on renewable energies and green spaces, although it has not adopted any recent laws that genuinely promote ecological and environmental protection<sup>65</sup>. Unlike the other four countries, it does not have a ministry specifically responsible for climate or the environment, but only a ministry of agriculture and water resources.

The gap between official declarations and national measures demonstrates that ecological issues are not perceived as priorities by most of these governments. At this rate, policy implementation is still too slow to mitigate and adapt to the consequences of climate change, or to support affected populations.

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<sup>64</sup> Bouhassira, E. (2023). COP27 and Its Outcomes for Kyrgyzstan. State of the Planet. Available at: <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2023/02/02/cop27-and-its-outcomes-for-kyrgyzstan/>

<sup>65</sup> Uzbekistan - Climate Change Laws of the World. (s. d.). Available at: <https://www.climate-laws.org/geographies/uzbekistan>

### C) Women's place in Central Asian societies

Central Asian women face many challenges when it comes to their rights. Although treaties and laws exist to protect women, traditions and family heritage limit their freedoms, leading to violence such as premature marriage and domestic abuse. In the face of these alarming situations, the authorities and public institutions fail to provide adequate protection. No country in the region has a ministry dedicated to women's rights. What's more, policies promoting gender equality tend to view women solely in their role as mother, wife or victim.

In response to these problems, feminist movements are emerging and women are mobilising to denounce discrimination and demand their rights. Through social networks, they are fighting against street harassment, domestic violence and parity in government. Unfortunately, in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, these movements are virtually non-existent due to government bans.

At the same time, women in the region, particularly rural women, are in a situation of heightened vulnerability due to climate change. They are more exposed to gender-based violence due to the gendered and unequal division of labour and male control over decision-making. As a result, their capacity for adaptation, mobility and resilience in the face of the consequences of climate change is dangerously limited.

- *Women's rights policies : Invisibilization of discriminations against women*

According to Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law in Kazakhstan, "According to some research, it is going to take more than 100 years to reach gender equality in Kazakhstan<sup>66</sup>." Women's rights in Central Asia are a complex issue, due to the coexistence of treaties, laws and projects designed to protect them, as well as traditions and family heritage that limit their freedoms. Women are often perceived solely in the role of mother and wife, and they continue to be defined in relation to men in national texts.

Two key documents were adopted by all Central Asian countries to guarantee women's rights between 1993 and 1998. Firstly, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted on May 6 1979, defines the various forms of discrimination against women and requires each signatory country to condemn them. The convention also calls for equality between women and men to be enshrined in national constitutions. Article 14 places particular emphasis on the issue of inclusion<sup>67</sup>. Secondly, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted on September 15 1995, acts as an agenda for women's emancipation and a guide to equality.

Despite the inclusion of gender equality in their constitutions, no Central Asian country has a ministry specifically dedicated to women's rights, with the exception of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Social Affairs and Population Development. In the other countries, a state committee deals with women's rights, linked to family and children's affairs. This lack of representation symbolises the gap between government rhetoric and action, just as it does for environmental issues.

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<sup>66</sup> Interview conducted on 28 June 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>67</sup> OHCHR. (s. d.). Convention sur l'élimination de toutes les formes de discrimination à l'égard des femmes. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/fr/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

Since 2016, Kazakhstan has implemented the 2030 Concept on Gender and Family Policy, which aims to promote a comprehensive approach to gender mainstreaming in policy documents at all levels of decision-making and implementation<sup>68</sup>. The main aim of this concept is to ensure the representation of women in all sectors and to encourage female entrepreneurship<sup>69</sup>. However, Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy explained that this policy had changed its name, and was previously dedicated solely to women. She adds, "Gender equality strategy changed for the name of family policy, but family issues always convey traditional values where women should serve as mother and daughters only. Family issues and gender equality issues are two completely different things contrary to what the government thinks<sup>70</sup>." Some notable progress can be highlighted, such as the abolition in 2021 of the list of professions forbidden to women<sup>71</sup>. However, this document focuses on the principles of family responsibility, thus limiting the evolution of women's rights to a family framework rather than considering women as individuals. What's more, this progress was followed by a backlash, as in 2017, Kazakhstan weakened protections for women victims of domestic violence, while decriminalising the act of "intentional infliction of minor injury<sup>72</sup>" as well as "battery<sup>73</sup>".

Uzbekistan is showing positive progress with plans such as the Uzbekistan Development Strategy 2017-2021 and the State Targeted Fund for the Support of Women in 2022. These measures aim to support women and promote their participation in government and employment in the public and private sectors<sup>74</sup>. The issue of violence is officially a government priority, as demonstrated by the inclusion of domestic violence in the penal code, representing significant progress<sup>75</sup>. However, the pressure of tradition limits effective protection for women, encouraging them to prioritise reconciliation with their families rather than their own safety.

Kyrgyzstan, considered a leading country in terms of women's rights, has since 2010 set up Aksakal Courts, which are traditional extra-judicial public bodies<sup>76</sup>. Unfortunately, these courts are run solely by elderly men who perpetuate the discrimination of customary laws, i.e. a set of usages considered obligatory by communities, without being enshrined in law. What's more, the court has no power to provide support to victims or convict aggressors.

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<sup>68</sup> National Commission for Women's Affairs and Family and Demographic Policy. (2018). The Comprehensive Review Of The Beijing Declaration And Platform For Action (1995) Implementation Progress. Un Women. Available at: [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Kazakhstan\\_en.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Kazakhstan_en.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> FaO. (2016). The Concept Of Family And Gender Policy In Kazakhstan Until 2030. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/lex-faoc192054/>

<sup>70</sup> Interview conducted on 28 June 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>71</sup> OHCHR. (2022). A l'issue de l'examen du rapport du Kazakhstan, le Comité pour l'élimination de la discrimination raciale recommande au pays de reconnaître les tensions ethniques existantes. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/fr/news/2022/04/experts-committee-elimination-racial-discrimination-commend-school-enrolment>

<sup>72</sup> Khitarishvili T. (s. d.). *Gender inequalities in labour markets in Central Asia*. UNDP. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/eurasia/Gender-inequalities-in-labour-markets-in-Central-Asia.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> Amnesty International. (2022, December 14). Eastern Europe and Central Asia : Lack of protection against domestic violence exacerbated by crises and 'traditional values' – new report. Amnesty International. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/eastern-europe-and-central-asia-lack-of-protection-against-domestic-violence-exacerbated-by-crises-and-traditional-values-new-report/>

<sup>74</sup> Women's Rights. (Sd-A). National Center For Human Rights Of The Republic Of Uzbekistan. Available at: <https://pravacheloveka.uz/en/menu/prava-zhenschin#:~:text=Uzbekistan%20was%20one%20of%20the,Discrimination%20and%20other%20international%20instruments>

<sup>75</sup> Amnesty International. (2023). Ouzbékistan. Le Parlement adopte enfin une loi pénalisant la violence domestique. Amnesty International. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2023/04/uzbekistan-parliament-passes-long-overdue-legislation-criminalizing-domestic-violence/#:~:text=Le%206%20avril%2C%20le%205%20C3%A9nat,les%20femmes%20et%20les%20enfants>

<sup>76</sup> Akisheva, A. (2021). Women's Rights in the New Kyrgyz Constitution : Formalizing a 'tradition' of suppression. Verfassungsblog. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17176/20210416-221159-0>

In contrast to the limited progress made in some countries, other Central Asian countries appear to be regressing when it comes to women's rights. Turkmenistan has banned women from sitting in the front passenger seat of cars and arbitrarily closed women's health institutes. What's more, the authorities recently unveiled a law passed in 2015 that bans abortion after the first 5 weeks of pregnancy, amounting to a de facto ban, undermining women's freedom to control their bodies<sup>77</sup>. Furthermore, according to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the country's official statements are not backed up by reliable figures<sup>78</sup>.

Finally, in Tajikistan, the law adopted in 2005 on guarantees of equal rights and opportunities for women and men is not yet fully effective. No measures have been taken to combat discrimination in the workplace, and gender-based violence is not recognized<sup>79</sup>.

- *Patriarchal societies facing the difficult rise of feminist movements*

Patriarchy in Central Asia forces women to conform to the roles imposed on them. This reality is amplified by three mechanisms of discrimination identified by Marshall University professor Anara Tabyshalieva in her book *Revival of Traditions in Post-Soviet Central Asia: patriarchal traditions, the Soviet ideal and perceptions of the West*<sup>80</sup>. Despite this, feminist voices and women's movements are becoming increasingly vocal in the region. Perpetuated traditions reinforce the patriarchal heritage, leading to violent practices against women. The institution of marriage plays a key role in patriarchal domination. Premature marriages are used as a strategy to reconcile families and preserve honour, but at the expense of women's freedom, security, education and professional integration. "Bride theft", polygamy and unofficial religious marriages also increase women's vulnerability, making them dependent on their husbands. This situation is particularly precarious when their husbands leave to work abroad or file for divorce, leaving them without financial means<sup>81</sup>. In this respect, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have customary laws restricting women's right to file for divorce.

Although the USSR encouraged women's emancipation and participation in the economy, it also increased their workload by encouraging them to have children alongside their jobs<sup>82</sup>. In addition, the Soviet era enabled a policy of women's liberation, but also instituted a strict division of labour between the sexes. The

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<sup>77</sup> Amnesty International. (s. d.-e). Turkménistan : la situation des droits humains. Available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/fr/location/europe-and-central-asia/turkmenistan/report-turkmenistan/#:~:text=Le%20Turkm%C3%A9nistan%20n'a%20pas,a%20C3%A9t%C3%A9%20de%20fait%20interdit>

<sup>78</sup> Cedaw : Le Comité Déploire Le Manque De Données Précises Sur La Situation Des Femmes Au Turkménistan. Un Press. (2006). Available at:

<https://press.un.org/fr/2006/FEM1558.doc.htm#:~:text=La%20Constitution%20du%20Turkm%C3%A9nistan%20garantit,%C3%A0%20l'%C3%A9gard%20des%20femmes>

<sup>79</sup> Turakhanova, D. (2021, May 16). Low women's political participation in Tajikistan : Will the anti-discrimination law be a solution ? - The Foreign Policy Centre. The Foreign Policy Centre. Available at:

<https://fpc.org.uk/low-womens-political-participation-in-tajikistan-will-the-anti-discrimination-law-be-a-solution/>

<sup>80</sup> Tabyshalieva, A. 2000. « Revival of Traditions in Post-Soviet Central Asia. » Making the transition work for women in Europe and Central Asia, edited by Marina Lazreg, 51–57. World Bank Discussion Paper No 411. Washington, DC. Available at: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=mRv5cyuwqp8C&oi=fnd&pg=PP5&dq=Tabyshalieva,+A.+2000.+%E2%80%9CRevival+of+Traditions+in+Post-Soviet+Central+Asia.%E2%80%9D+Making+the+transition+work+for+women+in+Europe+and+Central+Asia.+edited+by+Marina+Lazreg.+51%E2%80%9357.+World+Bank+Discussion+Paper+No+411.+Washington,+DC.&ots=bT9ASsVEx3&sig=7qVwFF1jB6KFysXW0SU83O7cwzY&redir\\_esc=v#v=onepage&q=west&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=mRv5cyuwqp8C&oi=fnd&pg=PP5&dq=Tabyshalieva,+A.+2000.+%E2%80%9CRevival+of+Traditions+in+Post-Soviet+Central+Asia.%E2%80%9D+Making+the+transition+work+for+women+in+Europe+and+Central+Asia.+edited+by+Marina+Lazreg.+51%E2%80%9357.+World+Bank+Discussion+Paper+No+411.+Washington,+DC.&ots=bT9ASsVEx3&sig=7qVwFF1jB6KFysXW0SU83O7cwzY&redir_esc=v#v=onepage&q=west&f=false)

<sup>81</sup> Yerekesheva, L. (2021). Youth of Central Asia, challenges for peacebuilding: a comprehensive research review. Unesco. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380326.locale=en>

<sup>82</sup> Ismailbekova, A. (2022, June 16). Women, Kinship, and Property in Central Asia - Voices On Central Asia. Available at: <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/women-kinship-and-property-in-central-asia/>



Feminine exhibition in Kyrgyzstan goes against the idea that the Soviet era could be considered a period of liberation for women, qualifying it instead as a period of exploitation of women. Today, Russian influence still plays a role in the perception of feminism, as the Russian media, which has a strong presence in the region, often portrays feminism in a negative light and emphasises its detrimental effects on Russian women. In addition, Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy testified, "Traditional views are also perpetuated through anti-gender activists, supported by the Russian government<sup>83</sup>".

Independence brought a return of Islam and the emergence of nationalism, which fostered conservative and traditionalist ideas. At the same time, Western influence propagated ideas that often presented women as objects of consumption, far removed from the values of the region. As a result, Central Asian women find themselves caught in a triple trap.

Public authorities and institutions also contribute to the problem by failing to provide adequate protection and assistance to women who are victims of violence. Police often encourage reconciliation in cases of violence, and sentences handed down by the courts are not systematically proportionate to the crime committed. Moreover, the small number of professionals in the fields of psychology, social work and law is another obstacle to the effective protection and support of victims of violence<sup>84</sup>. No country has put in place a comprehensive legal framework on violence against women, despite the prevalence of domestic violence. The lack of consideration for this problem means that such violence is widespread and accepted, with 21% of women declaring that it can be tolerated, and 17% of women testifying that they have experienced it in their lifetime<sup>85</sup>.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, violence against women and girls increased, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In 2020, the Kyrgyz Ministry of the Interior recorded 8,577 cases of domestic violence<sup>86</sup>. But this would represent only a tiny fraction of the problem, since many women do not lodge complaints against their spouses because of traditional values and economic dependence on them. A survey carried out in Uzbekistan in 2021 shows that 42% of women who suffer domestic violence tolerate it because they fear they won't be able to support their children alone<sup>87</sup>.

The increase in violence against women in recent years has been accompanied by a rise in women's suicide rates, up to 50% higher in Uzbekistan between 2019 and 2020, being mostly due to conflicts between women and their husbands and/or mothers-in-law, according to the Uzbek Ministry of Family Support and Mahalla<sup>88</sup>.

In response to these problems, movements denouncing governmental and social discrimination have developed and are gaining increasing ground. The first women's rights movements of the early 1990s didn't consider themselves feminists, but they received a great deal of media criticism. Feminism was often perceived as radical, marginal and Western, because in theory, women have the same rights as men,

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<sup>83</sup> Interview conducted on June 28 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>84</sup> Kazakhstan : Protect Women's Rights. (2021, December 10). Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/10/kazakhstan-protect-womens-rights>

<sup>85</sup> SIGI (2019). *SIGI 2019 Regional Report Eurasia - Highlights*. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/Brochure\\_SIGI\\_EURASIA\\_DEF.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/Brochure_SIGI_EURASIA_DEF.pdf)

<sup>86</sup> Saida N, Dzardanova S. (2022, June 16). *Central Asia's Shadow Pandemic : Violence Against Women*. The Diplomat. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/central-asias-shadow-pandemic-violence-against-women/>

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

guaranteed by international treaties<sup>89</sup>. According to a 2016 study, 84.8% of young people aged between 14 and 29 surveyed thought that women had enough rights, only 32% considered that men and women should have the same responsibilities<sup>90</sup>. However, more and more women are mobilising to make their voices heard, with the exception of Turkmenistan where oppression towards the population is more severe and violent. Feminist mobilizations and demonstrations took place in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for the first time on March 8, 2021, with the participation of feminist associations such as Bishkek Feminist Movement, Feminita, KazFem, Fempoint and FemAgora, who also contributed to the Generation Equality Forum, a major event for international feminist cooperation.

In Kazakhstan, activism can develop without fear of government repression. Firstly, it is not perceived as a threat, and secondly, the country is less Islamized than the rest of Central Asia. What's more, relatively easy access to cyberspace enables feminist groups to communicate, inform themselves and develop. The KazFem movement, one of the country's oldest and largest, has relied on social networks since its creation in 2015. It is also considered one of the most radical, with its aims to eradicate the system of oppression against women and educate people about feminist issues<sup>91</sup>. Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy explains their demands: "Kazakh Feminist are requesting the criminalization of domestic violence and sexual harassment, parity in government and participation of women in politics<sup>92</sup>." While the Kazakh government appears to be open to the idea of promoting women's rights, Yevgeniy Zhovtis explains that resistance persists within society when it comes to domestic violence<sup>93</sup>. This resistance is often rooted in family traditions and in the taboo surrounding these issues, which are considered private and separate from political issues.. However, we must take into account the government's techniques for controlling feminist movements, as Tatiana Chernobil, human right lawyer, explains: "The government is careful not to outright ban women's marches. They engage in a form of censorship without directly banning or stopping the marches. They avoid openly stating it, but find various ways to prevent the marches from happening. They might use reports from concerned citizens or groups to justify their actions, making it appear as if it's not the government's decision, but rather the concerns of citizens<sup>94</sup>."

Government inertia in Kyrgyzstan has prompted a mobilisation of feminist movements. In particular, the lack of response to domestic violence was denounced, prompting women to come together. Their mobilisation helped to raise awareness of the issue, leading in particular to the adoption of the 2017 law, which prohibits practices that perpetuate sexist discrimination. Unfortunately, violence against women continues to rise at an alarming rate. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it increased by 65% in Kyrgyzstan<sup>95</sup>. This situation has led to a radicalization of feminist demands, in reaction to the injustice and failure of the judicial system to protect victims, as well as the lack of representation of women in political institutions<sup>96</sup>. Meerim Nurlanbekova, founder of the Fille Village project in Kyrgyzstan, explains: "Take the recent case of a

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<sup>89</sup> Shakirova, S. (2008) Women's Movement And Feminism In Central Asia: From A Not Comforting Forecast To Efficient Strategies. Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise Available at: [https://Globalstudies.Trinity.Duke.Edu/Sites/Globalstudies.Trinity.Duke.Edu/Files/File-Attachments/V2d2\\_svetlana.Pdf](https://Globalstudies.Trinity.Duke.Edu/Sites/Globalstudies.Trinity.Duke.Edu/Files/File-Attachments/V2d2_svetlana.Pdf)

<sup>90</sup> Yerekhesheva, L. (2021). Youth of Central Asia, challenges for peacebuilding: a comprehensive research review. Unesco. op.cit.

<sup>91</sup> Mihr, A. & Sorbello, P. & Weiffen, B. (2023) Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia. OSCE. Available at: <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/60171/978-3-031-16659-4.pdf?sequence=1#page=221>

<sup>92</sup> Interview conducted on June 28 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>93</sup> Interview conducted on May 26 2023 with Yevgeniy Zhovtis, Founder of the Kazakhstan Human Rights Office.

<sup>94</sup> Interview conducted on June 29 2023 with Tatiana Chernobil, a human rights lawyer and independent consultant based in Almaty, Kazakhstan. She is an expert member of the Kazakhstan NGO Coalition against Torture and a mentor on the Soros-Kazakhstan Foundation's training courses for young human rights defenders.

<sup>95</sup> Saida N, Dzardanova S. (2022, June 16). *Central Asia's Shadow Pandemic : Violence Against Women*. The Diplomat. op. cit.

<sup>96</sup> Рысбекова, Г. (2020, July 1st). Why Care About Feminism in Kyrgyzstan ? CABAR.asia. Available at: <https://cabar.asia/en/why-care-about-feminism-in-kyrgyzstan>

13-year-old girl who was raped by three men. Two of them were police officers. The case caused a huge outcry. What happened to the case? Almost nothing. We, the women and girls of Kyrgyzstan, are trying to use social media, to create movements, to take part in demonstrations. But nothing changes<sup>97</sup>."

The situation is different in other Central Asian countries, where feminist activism is virtually non-existent. Tajik women face the persistent power of patriarchy in society, where the mere mention of feminism is met with numerous social and professional obstacles, as well as significant cyber-bullying. Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy affirms that "99% of the subjects of cyberbullying are women<sup>98</sup>". Despite the efforts of NGOs in the country, feminism is perceived as a threat to established traditions<sup>99</sup>. Women's Rights Day has thus been renamed "Mother's Day", relegating women to their role within the family and denying their status as individuals<sup>100</sup>.

In Uzbekistan, the first signs of feminist movements emerged in 2021 following the assault and harassment of a young woman, which provoked intense reactions on social networks and prompted public outcry. Previously stigmatized, the term "feminism" was considered to run counter to Uzbek values, while the media often indulged in sexist mockery and insults towards feminists<sup>101</sup>. Nevertheless, the government has made a shift from inaction to recognition of women's rights, introducing laws against violence and paving the way for the possible development of feminist movements in the country.

In contrast, there is no feminist movement in Turkmenistan, where women are not considered equal to men in any aspect of society. The country's isolation from the rest of the world prevents the influence of neighbouring countries and the spread of feminist ideas. No feminist marches have taken place to date. The severity of the economic crisis, unemployment and lack of access to education also contribute to relegating the gender issue to the background. However, Turkmenistan's younger generation is more sensitive to gender issues<sup>102</sup>.

Feminist issues are particularly attractive to the younger generation in Central Asia. According to Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, founder and strategic director of the feminist association FemAgora: "As young activists, our role is not only about being the future; we are the present. Our youth is not just about creativity; we have life experiences and knowledge. Unfortunately, as young activists, we face challenges in being heard and taken seriously. While efforts are made to engage youth in forums and decision-making processes, there is often tokenization and a lack of meaningful inclusion<sup>103</sup>." Young women use social networks to spread knowledge, build relationships and break taboos. This is how the political group "Girl Activists of Kyrgyzstan" was born in 2013, aspiring to a life different from that lived by their mothers<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup> Talant, B. (2022, July 29). Central Asian Women Fight For Their Rights Through Social Media. RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-women-fighting-for-rights-through-social-media/31965097.html>

<sup>98</sup> Interview conducted on June 28 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>99</sup> Cabar.Asia. (2022, October 5). You can't talk about feminism in Tajikistan ? - CABAR.asia. Available at: <https://cabar.asia/en/you-can-t-talk-about-feminism-in-tajikistan>

<sup>100</sup> Bayou, C. (2022, February 22). Féminisme en Asie centrale : de plus en plus de voix s'élèvent - REGARD SUR L'EST. Available at: <https://regard-est.com/feminisme-en-asie-centrale-de-plus-en-plus-de-voix-selevent>

<sup>101</sup> Nadirak. (2021). Uzbekistan : when women demand to have a voice. Novastan English. Available at: <https://novastan.org/en/uzbekistan/uzbekistan-when-women-demand-a-voice/>

<sup>102</sup> Kepderi, A. (2022, March 9). « Be quiet, woman ! Your day is on March 8 » : How is International Women's Day celebrated in Turkmenistan ? Global Voices. Available at: <https://globalvoices.org/2022/03/08/be-quiet-woman-your-day-is-on-march-8-how-is-is-international-womens-day-celebrated-in-turkmenistan/>

<sup>103</sup> Interview conducted on 29 June 2023 with Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, founder and strategic director of the feminist association FemAgora in Kazakhstan.

<sup>104</sup> Darmency, D. (2016, August 30). Etre jeune et féministe au Kirghizistan. TV5MONDE - Informations. Available at: <https://information.tv5monde.com/terriennes/etre-jeune-et-feministe-au-kirghizistan-25262>

Youth groups also played a key role in the consultation of Central Asian civil societies in preparation for the Generation Equality Forum in 2020. This consultation recommended the creation of a discussion platform for all feminist youth movements in Central Asia, which has not been created since<sup>105</sup>.

Feminist movements in Central Asia have found a convergence with ecofeminism, which is developing in the region. Ecofeminism considers that gender and sexual minorities, as well as women, suffer the same forms of patriarchal oppression as nature exploited by men. Environmental problems are seen as social problems. The unsustainable use of natural resources and women's unpaid work are interconnected. Ecofeminism proves to be an essential perspective for an inclusive ecology that takes gender dimensions into account. It links women's rights and the fight against climate change through a program for an SDG-conscious society that supports individuals affected by the consequences of climate change. A Tajik feminist platform called Femcommunity, created in 2022, promotes meetings and exchanges between Central Asian feminists. It has raised awareness of climate issues and promoted actions aimed at contributing to sustainable development. On the other hand, Jannat Rakhimova, a feminist and eco-activist from Uzbekistan, integrates the gender dimension into her association for sustainable development. As a journalist and event organiser, she seeks to establish links between feminist and climate issues. Founded in 1997, her association, Ekolog.uz, offers training on sustainable development issues in schools. This intersectional approach enables more effective action, taking into account the vulnerabilities of all groups<sup>106</sup>.

- *Gender-based violences and vulnerabilities increased by climate change*

The critical situation in Central Asia due to climate change affects the whole population, but has a strong impact on poor and rural populations, of which women make up a majority. It should be noted that women are affected differently within the same country, and their vulnerability varies from region to region. Women who live in rural areas and take on household responsibilities have a double workload, and find themselves in difficult situations when faced with the consequences of climate disruption. Tajikistan, which suffers particularly from the economic migration of men, places an even heavier workload on rural women. Thus, the vulnerability of women in Central Asia to climate change stems not from their intrinsic weakness, but from the unequal allocation of socio-economic roles.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, "climate change and biodiversity loss aggravate all types of violence against women and girls, which are exacerbated by discriminatory legal systems and governance structures and unequal distribution of power<sup>107</sup>". Climate change amplifies the risk of gender-based and sexual violence against women, and their role in managing food and water resources exposes them to a range of specific risks. During water collection trips, sometimes made at night, women and girls are exposed to the risk of assault and sexual violence<sup>108</sup>. This gender-based violence is partly used by men to assert their control over natural resources. Its aim is to reaffirm the imbalance of power between men and women, in order to violently dissuade women from defending their

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<sup>105</sup> Djanaeva, O. et al (2021). Feminists want a system change in Central Asia. UN Women. Available at: <https://www.wecf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CA-policy-brief-26-Mar-1.pdf>

<sup>106</sup> CAN EECCA. (2022, October 25). CAN EECCA Workshop on Ecofeminism [Vidéo]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awMcuY182HQ>

<sup>107</sup> UN DPPA (2022, November). Weathering Two Storms : Gender and Climate in Peace and Security. Available at: <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Weathering%20Two%20Storms%20-%20Gender%20and%20Climate%20in%20Peace%20and%20Security.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> IUCN (2020). *Gender-based violence and the environment*. Available at: <https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-brief/gender-based-violence-and-environment>

rights and contributing to and benefiting from a safe environment<sup>109</sup>. This violence is particularly aimed at women involved in environmental protection or resource management.

Climate change is contributing to an increase in the number of child marriages, affecting young girls in particular. In the context of water stress, floods and food insecurity, some families choose to marry off their daughters at a very young age in exchange for food or livestock. Every year, thousands of girls are married off before the age of 18 in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan<sup>110</sup>. In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, just over 5% of women will marry before the age of 18 in 2021<sup>111</sup>. All the Central Asian republics, with the exception of Turkmenistan, still allow marriage before the age of 18<sup>112</sup>.

In addition, women face numerous economic, social and political obstacles that limit their ability to adapt to climate change. They are more likely to be placed in insecure or overcrowded spaces after a natural disaster, as they rarely own land or property, making them more vulnerable to violence. The results of a 2014 assessment of the humanitarian situation in Tajikistan revealed that the most vulnerable households during floods were those headed by women (widows, divorcees or wives of migrants), those made up of single, elderly people or those with more than 13 members<sup>113</sup>. Their traditional role in the household often keeps them close to their families, limiting their mobility. As a result, they are less able to take refuge and anticipate the consequences of a natural disaster. According to the French High Council for Equality between Women and Men, the risk of death from natural disasters is 14 times higher for women and children worldwide, particularly if they belong to the poorest communities<sup>114</sup>.

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<sup>109</sup> Castañeda Camey, Itza, Laura Sabater, Cate Owren, and A. Emmett Boyer. 2020. Gender-Based Violence and Environment Linkages. Ed. Jamie Wen. Gland: International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Available at: <https://genderandsecurity.org/projects-resources/research/gender-based-violence-and-environment-linkages>

<sup>110</sup> UNFPA (2014). *Child marriage in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: regional overview*. Available at: [https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage\\_27072015\\_web.pdf](https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage_27072015_web.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Pesando, L. & Batyra, E. (2021) Trends in child marriage and new evidence on the selective impact of changes in age-at-marriage laws on early marriage. SSM Population Health. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352827321000860?via%3Dihub>

<sup>112</sup> OCDE (2019). *Chapter 3 : Discrimination in the family*. In : Social Institutions and Gender Index, SIGI 2019 Regional Report for EurasiaHome. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/60bb29a4-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/60bb29a4-en>

<sup>113</sup> Gender and disaster risk reduction in Europe and Central Asia Workshop Guide for Facilitators. (2018). UN Women & PNUD. Available at: <https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2018/Gender%20and%20disaster%20risk%20reduction%20in%20Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia%20%20Workshop%20guide%20English.pdf>

<sup>114</sup> Tous Ensemble pour le Climat (2015, September). *Les Femmes, actrices de la lutte contre le dérèglement climatique*. Available at: [https://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/plaidoyer\\_femmes\\_et\\_climat.pdf](https://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/plaidoyer_femmes_et_climat.pdf)

# Part II - Women's actions for sustainable development



## A) Water security, responsibility attributed to women

Women are at the heart of water resource management in Central Asian countries. They collect water for their families, which is necessary for domestic tasks such as hygiene and nutrition, and also make a significant contribution to irrigated agriculture and livestock breeding, activities vital to the region's rural economy. What's more, their experience and knowledge of water management are undeniable assets in the face of climate change.

Despite their major involvement, women and girls face a number of challenges. Their limited access to drinking water and proper sanitation puts their health and safety at risk. Water management activities, although physically demanding and time-consuming, are not remunerated, which hampers their economic autonomy and impedes their access to education. Furthermore, the predominance of men in water-related decision-making bodies contributes to the marginalisation of women. Despite some progress, they are still restricted by obstacles such as lack of technical training, exclusion from meetings and decision-making, and limited opportunities to establish water supply contracts. Gender stereotypes persist and limit their involvement in water negotiations in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, because of their understanding of the specific needs of different groups within communities, their integration into water management is crucial to the success of development policies and programs. In addition, water initiatives that include women in the decision-making process tend to be more sustainable and equitable.

- Women against water issues

According to Abdullaeva Uguloi, one of the 13 women in charge of water user associations in Tajikistan, 90% of water problems affect women<sup>115</sup>. Water is required for domestic use, cooking and family hygiene. When water is scarce, it's the women who bear the burden of finding water for the whole family. Alain Cariou also explains that irrigation is a male affair, while water supply and domestic use are reserved for women<sup>116</sup>. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimate that women are responsible for the chore of collecting water in 8 out of 10 households worldwide without running water<sup>117</sup>. This particularly difficult task is physically demanding, as women sometimes have to carry jerry cans weighing up to 18 kilos over long distances, causing back and health problems<sup>118</sup>.

Beyond these dangers, water collection by women is also time-consuming; women around the world collectively spend 200 million hours a day collecting water<sup>119</sup>. This represents unpaid work, preventing them from engaging in other activities to earn a decent living, and thus affecting their economic autonomy. In addition, Alain Cariou asserts that "in the face of water shortages, supplying water becomes more difficult and takes longer. This chore falls on women and girls, who don't go to school. Girls' education is

<sup>115</sup> Tous Ensemble pour le Climat (2015, September). *Les Femmes, actrices de la lutte contre le dérèglement climatique*. Op.cit.

<sup>116</sup> Interview conducted on May 31 2023 with Alain Cariou, senior lecturer in geography at Sorbonne University, specialising in regional development dynamics in Central Asia and the Middle East.

<sup>117</sup> Dion, S. (2021, March 25). *Gestion de l'eau en Asie centrale et dans le monde : Pas de solution sans les femmes*. AMC. Available at: [https://www.international.gc.ca/country\\_news-pays\\_nouvelles/2021-03-15-germany-allemanne.aspx?lang=fra](https://www.international.gc.ca/country_news-pays_nouvelles/2021-03-15-germany-allemanne.aspx?lang=fra)

<sup>118</sup> Concern Worldwide (2022). *5 reasons why water is a women's issue*. Available at: <https://www.concern.net/news/water-is-a-womens-issue>

<sup>119</sup> Water.org. (s.d.). *Women And Water - A Woman's Crisis*. Available at: <https://water.org/our-impact/water-crisis/womens-crisis/>

degraded<sup>120</sup>. So, for young girls in Central Asia, the time spent collecting water is one of the factors keeping them away from the education enjoyed by boys their age.

The health of women and girls and the development of sustainable communities depend on access to water, sanitation and hygiene, all of which are indispensable. Water stress, a critical situation where demand for water exceeds available resources, particularly affects women's health<sup>121</sup>. According to the UN, "when a territory withdraws 25% or more of its renewable freshwater resources, it is considered to be under water stress<sup>122</sup>". Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are currently classified as being at high risk of water shortage, i.e. using 40% to 80% of their renewable water resources respectively, while the other countries in the region are categorised as being at medium risk, i.e. using between 20% to 40%<sup>123</sup>.

The phenomenon of water stress creates menstrual problems; women and girls are unable to take part in social activities, go to school or work during their menstrual period because they do not have sufficient access to sanitary facilities<sup>124</sup>. In Kyrgyzstan, 8% of women aged between 15 and 49 have no private place to wash and change their sanitary protection<sup>125</sup>. Insufficient access to private sanitary facilities is also a source of shame or physical discomfort due to cultural norms forcing women to hide when going to the toilet outside their homes at dawn or after dark<sup>126</sup>. Forced to go to the bathroom outside or to share facilities with men, the risk of aggression against women increases. In most cases, sanitary facilities are unsuited to women's specific needs, as they are built by men for men.

Women's limited or non-existent access to drinking water for sanitation and hygiene puts communities as a whole at risk; they become more vulnerable to communicable diseases such as cholera, typhoid fever and hepatitis A and E<sup>127</sup>. In Kyrgyzstan, 122,800 inhabitants were reportedly affected by water-related illnesses in 2005. Furthermore, studies carried out in the Central Asian region claim that improved water sanitation could reduce diarrhoeal diseases by 32% to 37%<sup>128</sup>. This would have a direct impact on women, who are responsible for the well-being of the community and the home.

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<sup>120</sup> Interview conducted on May 31 2023 with Alain Cariou, senior lecturer in geography at Sorbonne University, specialising in regional development dynamics in Central Asia and the Middle East.

<sup>121</sup> Macé, M. (2021). *Qu'est-ce que le stress hydrique ? Comment y répondre ?* Centre d'information sur l'eau. Available at: <https://www.cieau.com/eau-transition-ecologique/enjeux/quest-ce-que-le-stress-hydrique-comment-y-repondre/>

<sup>122</sup> Gaudiaut, T. (2022, March 21). *Pénurie d'eau : les pays qui seront les plus affectés à l'horizon 2040*. Statista Infographies. Available at: <https://fr.statista.com/infographie/27079/penurie-eau-projections-niveau-de-stress-hydrique-par-pays-dans-le-monde/>

<sup>123</sup> Gaudiaut, T. (2021, March 22). *Le monde face au risque de pénurie d'eau*. Statista Infographies. Available at: <https://fr.statista.com/infographie/24480/pays-risque-de-penurie-eau-niveau-de-stress-hydrique/>

<sup>124</sup> Flabat, E. (2022, August 4). *La santé et l'hygiène menstruelles encore inaccessibles pour de nombreuses personnes*. UNICEF. Available at: <https://www.unicef.fr/article/la-sante-et-lhygiene-menstruelles-demeurent-encore-inaccessibles-pour-de-nombreuses/>

<sup>125</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2021). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, 2000-2020*. Available at: <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/jmp-2021-wash-households.pdf>

<sup>126</sup> UNDESA (s.d.) *Gender and water*. International Decade for Action « Water for Life » 2005-2015. Available at: <https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/gender.shtml>

<sup>127</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) (2022). *Drinking water*. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>

<sup>128</sup> Bekturganov, Z., Tussupova, K., Berndtsson, R., Sharapatova, N., Zhulasheva, M., & Zhanasova, M. (2016). *Water Related Health Problems in Central Asia - A Review*. MDPI. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/w8060219>



- Water Management: women's key skills

"If there's no water in the house, the woman has to fetch it. She has to bathe the children, cook and look after the family," explains Abdullaeva Uguloi<sup>129</sup>. Responsible for finding and transporting the water used to irrigate vegetable gardens and water livestock, women and girls remain at the heart of water management for agrarian and livestock farming, the main sources of economic income for rural communities in Central Asia. As irrigated and rain-fed farmers, women's tasks in the economically productive use of water through fishing, farming and livestock activities are invisible. According to traditional gender roles, these activities are seen as an extension of their family responsibilities, and therefore less recognized or valued than similar work performed by their male counterparts outside the home.

It is mainly up to women to find solutions to the problems associated with water and food stress. In rural Kyrgyzstan, Shakhodat Teshebayeva, a farmer and her family's sole breadwinner, has seen her work made virtually impossible by water shortages<sup>130</sup>. The onus is on the women to walk longer and longer to fetch water, as the water source dwindles. So, in 2017, Shakhodat Teshebayeva set up a women's self-help group to advocate for equal access to water resources within their community. She began attending meetings of the village water users' association, while passing on her advice on water management with women from different regions facing the same issues. Concurrently, UN Women facilitated the creation of 14 other women's self-help groups in southern Kyrgyzstan, counting up to 170 members in 2019. This has made it possible to secure the water transport process for women by negotiating a daytime supply at flexible times for women farmers, training women and including them in decisions related to water resource management.

If women are the main players in water management, their role is crucial because of their expertise on the subject. Their experience and informal work in collecting water, its domestic use and their involvement in agriculture have enabled women to accumulate considerable knowledge regarding this resource. They have mastered not only the quality and reliability of water, but also the best methods for storing, using and purifying it<sup>131</sup>. Furthermore, as caregivers for children and the elderly, and thanks to their knowledge of how the lack of sufficient, safe water can affect the most vulnerable in society, women have a better understanding of the water stress situation facing Central Asia<sup>132</sup>.

The inclusion of women is essential to ensure the success of water resource development policies and programmes in the region, from which women have been excluded until now. Water projects that do not take women into account in water management are less effective and less sustainable<sup>133</sup>. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), of the 44 water projects implemented in Asia and Africa,

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<sup>129</sup> First, F. (2018, December 3). *Why Women are Key for Water Management in Tajikistan*. First Farming. Available at: <https://farmingfirst.org/2018/07/why-women-are-key-for-water-management-in-tajikistan/>

<sup>130</sup> UN Women - Europe and Central Asia (2019, March 4). *Women in rural Kyrgyzstan bring change through water, technology and better infrastructure*. Available at: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/03/feature-story-women-in-rural-kyrgyzstan-bring-change-through-water-and-infrastructure>

<sup>131</sup> The World Bank (2021, January 20). *Promoting Women's Participation in Water Resource Management in Central Asia*. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/01/20/promoting-womens-participation-in-water-resource-management-in-central-asia>

<sup>132</sup> OSCE (s.d.). *Women, water and security*. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/176671>

<sup>133</sup> Trivedi, A. (s. d.). *Women Are the Secret Weapon for Better Water Management*. World Resources Institute. Available at: <https://www.wri.org/insights/women-are-secret-weapon-better-water-management>

those developed by mixed groups are more sustainable. Researchers have also shown that women share natural and food resources more equitably than men, particularly in times of scarcity<sup>134</sup>.

- Persistent exclusion from water management decisions

Despite women's role in water management, men hold the majority of irrigation rights and are responsible for organising and planning water projects. They dominate village water user associations, for example. While women's knowledge remains specific and necessary to the communities, the latter do not perceive the importance of their contribution to water management issues. The tasks performed by women and girls are part of an informal structure, keeping them out of the various decision-making and organisation processes for water resources. Yet including women in water management is an essential factor in empowerment.

In Tajikistan, women farm managers face a number of obstacles resulting from their lack of participation in decision-making bodies. Following independence, the country's water management system underwent a number of changes, as large collective farms were subdivided into small independent farms known as *dehkans*. In 2012, with the help of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the country introduced village water user associations (WUAs)<sup>135</sup>. These associations, unevenly distributed across Central Asia, enable water users to discuss their water practices, share information, forge links and form support networks. WUAs are involved in allocating water, maintaining technical facilities and collecting financial charges<sup>136</sup>. Although these networks are based on a participatory, horizontal approach, women are largely excluded, thus hindering the success of water management. And yet, NGOs and international organisations insist on the importance of women's participation in WUAs and water management committees for greater success in dealing with water issues<sup>137</sup>.

In 2012, 98% of *dehkans* were headed by men, a figure reduced to 75% in 2018<sup>138</sup>. Although this number shows progress in the inclusion of women in managerial positions, there are still many barriers to gender equality around water resources. In the case of the *dehkans*, the women at the head of the farms do not have the necessary technical training, as they have always been excluded from it by the patriarchal system. What's more, they are 3% less likely than men to attend WUA meetings, so their opinions are not included in decisions or the irrigation schedule<sup>139</sup>. They also suffer from 11% fewer opportunities to sign water supply contracts, risking district offices budgeting less water than necessary for their communities<sup>140</sup>. Women are 9% less likely than men to pay dues to WUAs; this means less money is spent on vital maintenance or repair work on the irrigation canals used on their farms<sup>141</sup>.

Largely excluded from water negotiations in Central Asia, gender stereotypes regarding their participation in decision-making are a barrier to their access to joint committees on irrigation issues. Integration also

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<sup>134</sup> Lecoutere, E., D'Exelle, B., & Van Campenhout, B. (2015). *Sharing Common Resources in Patriarchal and Status-Based Societies : Evidence from Tanzania*. Feminist Economics. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1024274>

<sup>135</sup> First, F. (2018, December 3). *Why Women are Key for Water Management in Tajikistan*. First Farming. op.cit.

<sup>136</sup> Zinzani, A. (2015, December 22). *The Reconfiguration of Participatory Irrigation Management in Water Users Associations. Evidence from Uzbekistan & Kazakhstan*. Dans Cahiers d'Asie centrale. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/3142#tocto1n2>

<sup>137</sup> World Bank Group. (2021). Promoting Women's Participation in Water Resource Management in Central Asia. *World Bank*. Op.cit.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Balasubramanya, S.(2018). Women will be key to tackling water worries in Central Asia. Asia Times. Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2018/07/women-will-be-key-to-tackling-water-worries-in-central-asia/>

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

depends on where they live. Women from isolated areas are generally not integrated into networks, unlike those living in more densely populated agricultural regions with a greater demand for water.

Transboundary water governance is a particularly masculinized field, linked to engineering and diplomacy<sup>142</sup>. Women are often under-represented, particularly in decision-making bodies. Thus, local water management laws and organisations in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan hardly reflect a gender-based approach, although the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) affirms the importance of including women in transboundary water management structures in the region<sup>143</sup>.

Initiatives aimed at further integrating women into water management do exist, such as the one carried out by the OSCE with the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia in July 2015, to integrate a gendered perspective into water management<sup>144</sup>. One of the aims of this action is to highlight the knowledge acquired by women in the water sector and the needs of local communities, in order to achieve greater parity within water management bodies. Nevertheless, these projects remain marginal. Beyond the involvement of women, these initiatives bring decision-makers and users closer together, while improving the transparency of decisions and limiting the risk of corruption.

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<sup>142</sup> Central Asia Knowledge Network. (2020, September 1st). *Gender and transboundary water governance in Central Asia* [Video]. YouTube. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1z\\_DG9NGY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1z_DG9NGY)

<sup>143</sup> OSCE (2022). *Women in Water Management in Central Asia : Transboundary water resources*. ZOİ Environment Network. Available at: [https://zoinet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/OSCE-transbw-fs\\_EN.pdf](https://zoinet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/OSCE-transbw-fs_EN.pdf)

<sup>144</sup> OSCE (s.d.). *Women, water and security*. Op. cit.

## B) Food security : multiple stakes for women

Food security, based on universal access to sufficient quality food to meet basic needs, is a major issue in Central Asia. This issue is all the more important as it is linked to the efficient management of water and land resources, and must take account of climate change. What's more, the rising cost of imported food and increasing poverty have intensified food insecurity.

Women are at the heart of this problem, ensuring the subsistence of their families. They play a crucial role in local agriculture, which is a source of income and food for the household. However, they face a range of obstacles, including regulations limiting their professional activity and unpredictable weather conditions. Despite these obstacles, they show considerable resilience in seeking solutions to improve their quality of life and preserve their agricultural production.

However, their marginalisation and limited access to land ownership, agricultural support services and electricity are slowing down their economic autonomy. To guarantee food security in Central Asia, it is imperative to pay particular attention to gender equality and equitable access to resources.

- *Understanding the necessary interdependency between water resources and land resources for food security*

According to the FAO, the number of people suffering from severe food insecurity in Central Asia rose from 1.3 million to 2.5 million between 2014 and 2017<sup>145</sup>. Particularly worrying in the rural areas of southern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this phenomenon has worsened in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, with soaring prices for imported foodstuffs on which the Central Asian republics depend, and rising poverty. Any drop in food supplies therefore represents a threat to food security in these countries<sup>146</sup>.

According to the definition adopted by the FAO at the 1996 World Food Summit, "food security is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life<sup>147</sup>". Food security can be undermined by several factors, such as population growth, lack of infrastructure, food prices, low incomes and climate change. In 2021, there will be 116.3 million food-insecure people in Europe and Central Asia, 25.5 million more than in 2019<sup>148</sup>.

Climate change is increasing food insecurity because of dwindling water resources, making it more difficult to find food in Central Asia, because most of it is produced by irrigated farming. According to researchers, the link between food security, water and land (known as the "Water-Land-Food nexus" or "WLF nexus<sup>149</sup>")

<sup>145</sup> Meyer K., Issakhoyev R., Kiktenko L., Kushanova A. (2019). *Regional institutional arrangements advancing water, energy and food security in Central Asia*. IUCN. Available at: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2019-045-En.pdf>

<sup>146</sup> Jungbluth, F., & Zorya, S. (2023, June 19). Ensuring food security in Europe and Central Asia, now and in the future. World Bank Blogs. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/europeandcentralasia/ensuring-food-security-europe-and-central-asia-now-and-future>

<sup>147</sup> Géoconfluences ENS de Lyon. (2022, January). *Sécurité alimentaire, insécurité et vulnérabilité alimentaire*. Available at: <http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/glossaire/securite-alimentaire>

<sup>148</sup> FAO (2023, March 14). *Un nouveau rapport des Nations Unies axé sur la sécurité alimentaire et la nutrition en Europe et en Asie centrale donne des pistes pour rendre l'alimentation plus abordable et plus durable*. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/new-un-report-focuses-on-food-security-and-nutrition-in-europe-and-central-asia-points-way-towards-more-affordable-and-sustainable-diets/fr#:~:text=Quelque%20116%2C3%20millions%20de,plus%20en%20seulement%20deux%20ans.>

<sup>149</sup> The "WLF nexus" or "Water-Land-Food nexus" refers to the link between water, land and food. It highlights the interdependence between these three elements, which are closely linked, in order to achieve sustainable use of natural resources.

represents a major risk for the global economy<sup>150</sup>. These resources, which are essential to socio-economic development, are interdependent in the production of sufficient and sustainable food. To guarantee food security in the countries of Central Asia, it is essential that water and land management be considered in an integrated and effective way.

According to estimates for Europe and Central Asia in 2021, food insecurity affects women more (12.5%) than men (10.3%). According to Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, "87% of people living below the poverty line in Kazakhstan are women<sup>151</sup>". Yet women are responsible for finding solutions to ensure that everyone has access to food. Traditionally responsible for the nutritional status of children and the whole family, they spend their extra income on food and health care.

- *The evolution of women's place in agriculture*

Women are key players in land management because of their role in agriculture in Central Asia. Their contribution to agriculture is equal to or greater than that of men<sup>152</sup>. According to the World Bank, in 2021, the proportion of women employed in agriculture was 13% in Kazakhstan, 19% in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, 24% in Uzbekistan and 60% in Tajikistan<sup>153</sup>. However, the context is not favourable to women's employment, since laws prevent women from entering professions considered dangerous, considerably limiting their employment opportunities. In Tajikistan, female participation in the agricultural sector is partly possible because it is seen as compatible with raising children<sup>154</sup>. In Uzbekistan, only 17.5% of senior managers in companies and public administrations are women, and there are fewer female students than male students in schools training for jobs in agriculture and industry<sup>155</sup>.

With climate change, traditional food sources are becoming scarcer, more expensive and more unpredictable, reducing women's incomes. Moreover, when there is a food shortage, their health deteriorates more rapidly than that of men. When they can no longer provide for their families through farming, they are forced to sell their livestock, which reduces their food resources and emergency stocks in case of difficulties<sup>156</sup>. Despite these challenges, women are showing their adaptability. In Kyrgyzstan, when the region was hit by a heatwave in 2015, women adapted their crops by replacing apricots with other products such as potatoes or cabbage, even though the substitution options are limited<sup>157</sup>.

In Tajikistan, agriculture is the country's main development sector. Yet the country is failing to modernise its farming systems, with one in eight men leaving the countryside to find work elsewhere and send remittances to their families back home. This leaves women to manage the needs of the household and the

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<sup>150</sup> Tantoh, H.B., McKay, T.J.M., Donkor, F. E., Simatele, M. D. (2021). *Gender Roles, Implications for Water, Land, and Food Security in a Changing Climate: A Systematic Review*. Front. Sustain. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2021.707835/full>

<sup>151</sup> Interview conducted on June 28 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>152</sup> Liamzon, C. Arevalo, A. Naungayan, M. Women's Land Rights in Asia. (2015). Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development. Available at: [https://hlnr.org.in/documents/Womens\\_Land\\_Rights\\_in\\_Asia\\_Land\\_Watch\\_Asia.pdf](https://hlnr.org.in/documents/Womens_Land_Rights_in_Asia_Land_Watch_Asia.pdf)

<sup>153</sup> The World Bank. Employment in agriculture, female (% of female employment) (modeled ILO estimate). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.FE.ZS>

<sup>154</sup> Lambrecht I., Mahrt K., (2022, December). *Gendered farm work, off-farm employment, and decision-making power: quantitative evidence from Tajikistan*. IFPRI. Available at: <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/utills/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/136488/filename/136698.pdf>

<sup>155</sup> Slim, A. (2020, December 29). *Les défis des femmes ouzbèkes*. Regard sur l'Est. Available at: <https://regard-est.com/les-defis-des-femmes-ouzbekes>

<sup>156</sup> Standal, K., Daloz, A.S., Kim, E. (2023). A Gendered Approach to Understanding Climate Change Impacts in Rural Kyrgyzstan. SpringerBriefs in Climate Studies. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29831-8\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29831-8_10)

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

farm, where they take on more activities and make decisions relating to crop maintenance, land preparation, harvesting and processing in the kitchen<sup>158</sup>.

This economic migration is a survival strategy for populations living in precarious conditions, with 74% of people living below the poverty line in Tajikistan<sup>159</sup>. However, these funds are not used to improve farming practices or encourage innovation, which considerably weakens pastoral communities<sup>160</sup>. In Uzbekistan, nearly one million labour migrants were registered in 2016, affecting almost half of households<sup>161</sup>. As a result, the significant shortage of agricultural labour forces women to provide a large proportion of their work on crops belonging to the family. This work is informal because women do it as family members rather than as agricultural employees, limiting their earnings<sup>162</sup>. According to Nozilakhon Mukhamedova and Kai Wegerich, researchers on gender and resource management in Central Asia, the rural exodus of men from Tajikistan is leading to an increase in women's participation in agro-cultural value chains<sup>163</sup>. The Asian Development Bank claims that women in Tajikistan work 30% more than men, with 9.6 hours a day of paid and unpaid work, compared with 7.4 hours for men<sup>164</sup>. According to Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, "Every day, Kazakh women spend 4.5 hours on unpaid work, but this problem is not taken seriously by the government<sup>165</sup>."

Like Shakhodat Teshebayeva, a Kyrgyz farmer and her family's sole income earner, women in rural areas are improving their quality of life and work by training, networking and sharing advice to cope with the water shortages that affect their farming<sup>166</sup>. Women farm workers, who often put in 8 to 10 hours of physical labour a day in the fields, are also organising themselves to work together to cope with the dwindling natural resources in the context of climate change. They are learning to manage agricultural production, despite the lack of dedicated training, by discussing among themselves their spending on investments to increase or maintain their harvest levels.

However, the majority of farm management remains in the hands of the men who stayed in the village, leaving the physical work of harvesting to the women<sup>167</sup>. According to Alain Cariou, "even when men migrate to work, it's always another man who takes their place<sup>168</sup>". Despite the increase in the number of

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<sup>158</sup> Buisson M.-C., MacDonald K., Saikia P., Balasubramanya S., Aslamy S., Horbuluk T. (2016, May). *Impact of water users associations on water and land productivity, equity and food security in Tajikistan*. op. cit.

<sup>159</sup> Revert, A. (2022). Au Tadjikistan, le Geres s'engage pour plus de résilience et de meilleures conditions de vie auprès des communautés rurales. Geres. Available at: <https://www.geres.eu/s-informer/l-actualite-des-projets/nouveau-projet-tadjikistan-populations-rurales-securite-alimentaire/>

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Yekesheva, L. (2021). Youth of Central Asia, challenges for peacebuilding: a comprehensive research review. Unesco. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380326.locale=en>

<sup>162</sup> FAO (2021, November). *Europe and Central Asia Gender Newsletter*. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/cb7872en/cb7872en.pdf>

<sup>163</sup> Lambrecht I., Mahrt K., (2022, December). *Gendered farm work, off-farm employment, and decision-making power: quantitative evidence from Tajikistan*. op. cit.

<sup>164</sup> ReliefWeb (2023, March 14). *Europe and Central Asia Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2022 [EN/RU]*. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/europe-and-central-asia-regional-overview-food-security-and-nutrition-2022-enru>

<sup>165</sup> Interview conducted on June 28 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>166</sup> ONU Femmes (2019, March 4). *Les femmes des zones rurales au Kirghizistan améliorent leur qualité de vie en disposant d'eau, de technologies et de meilleures infrastructures*. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/fr/news/stories/2019/3/feature-story-women-in-rural-kyrgyzstan-bring-change-through-water-and-infrastructure>

<sup>167</sup> Agrilinks (2018, June 18). *What Does Male Out-Migration Mean for Women in Tajikistan's Agriculture ?* Available at: <https://agrilinks.org/post/what-does-male-out-migration-mean-women-tajikistans-agriculture>

<sup>168</sup> Interview conducted on 31 May 2023 with Alain Cariou, senior lecturer at the Sorbonne University Geography Department in Paris, specialising in regional development dynamics in Central Asia and the Middle East.

women in the agrarian sector, in Tajikistan 80% of the owners of agricultural plots are men, and 81% of the plots are subject to men's decisions<sup>169</sup>.

- Persisting challenge of restricted access to arable land ownership

Central Asia is characterised by a gendered division of labour, whereby men are responsible for the so-called "most capital-intensive" tasks<sup>170</sup>. Women's participation in agriculture takes place in a particular post-Soviet context which has maintained gendered control over resources, although their emancipation was encouraged during the Soviet era. Since then, the rise of traditionalism and conservative values have conditioned women to the role of carer and provider, limiting their mobility by confining them to the care of the family and the home, and likewise limiting their demands for the right to work and own property.

In Kyrgyzstan, on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul, women carry out agricultural work in order to feed themselves and generate income for their families. Women play an important role in livestock farming, an activity that is practised by both men and women, but which is generally considered to be male-dominated. However, the lack of recognition of women's contribution compromises their situation, as their work is not socially valued. They work alongside the men, whose role is often to transport the goods, and this compromises the smooth running of the sale of goods harvested by the women. They set up purchasing conditions that force the women to obtain only a small share of the real market value of their products<sup>171</sup>.

In addition, in order to feed their families, women have to take care of agricultural activities. In the Naryn region, in central Kyrgyzstan, there are few opportunities for non-agricultural work, and households are often poor. The professional migration of part of the community leaves the most vulnerable behind<sup>172</sup>. In addition, the region's electricity supply is antiquated and prone to breakdown. Residents are therefore obliged to use traditional energy sources, wood and coal, resources to which access is socially differentiated because it involves physical effort, financial constraints and transport. Poor women therefore find themselves marginalised and their households particularly hard hit by this lack of energy for food or heating. As a result, the lack of electricity is an obstacle to the empowerment of women, whose role is to ensure household food security.

In addition, they have unequal access to agricultural support services compared with their male counterparts. This greatly affects their agricultural productivity, the diversification of their activities and therefore their economic independence, sometimes even forcing women landowners to give up their land<sup>173</sup>. While land ownership is a source of capital, financial and food security, and a means of owning resources, women face many obstacles to land ownership. There are fewer women managers of agricultural land, and the quality and size of the land available to them is lower. Poor access to land also means less access to water resources, leading to less productive farming practices and greatly affecting the standard of living of women on these farms. In Uzbekistan, this is a legacy of agrarian reform and the distribution of land use rights, during which all-girl families received less land than all-boy families. In societies where customary law prevails, although national laws do not openly discriminate against women in terms of land

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<sup>169</sup> Lambrecht I., Mahrt K., (2022, December 23). *In Tajikistan, women contribute significantly to agriculture, but does agricultural work contribute significantly to women's agency?* IFPRI. Available at : <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/tajikistan-women-contribute-significantly-agriculture-does-agricultural-work-contribute>

<sup>170</sup> ReliefWeb (2023, March 14). *Europe and Central Asia Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2022 [EN/RU]*. op. cit.

<sup>171</sup> Standal, K., Daloz, A. S., & Kim, E. (2023). *A Gendered Approach to Understanding Climate Change Impacts in Rural Kyrgyzstan*. Dans SpringerBriefs in climate studies (p. 123-134). Springer International Publishing. op.cit.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Liamzon, C. Arevalo, A. Naungayan, M. Women's Land Rights in Asia. (2015). Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development. op. cit.

ownership, their application in reality is quite different. Women have less legal recourse and less access to information than men. Property titles are also issued in the name of the head of the family, who is predominantly male<sup>174</sup>. In Kazakhstan, although the 2009 Law on Public Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men deals with various issues relating to women's rights, it does not mention land ownership issues. As a result, by 2016, women had received only 12.6% of the shares in privatised agricultural companies in the country<sup>175</sup>.

They are unable to help maintain the livelihoods of their households, or to develop their micro and small agricultural businesses, because obtaining credit without collateral is impossible. In 2019, only 5% of women entrepreneurs in Central Asia reported having borrowed money for business purposes<sup>176</sup>. While all Central Asian countries have removed legal barriers to women's access to bank accounts, the difficulties of transferring property to women after men have migrated and the informality of women's employment prevent them from obtaining credit without collateral.

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<sup>174</sup> Stanley V., Lamb T., De Martino S. (2013, January). *Property Rights for Women in the ECA Region Results from Recent World Bank Projects*. The World Bank. Available at:

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/844001468326186871/pdf/750280BRIOREPL00AES0Note0100PUBLIC0.pdf>

<sup>175</sup> Hayward D. (2022). *Kazakhstan - Contexte et gouvernance foncière*. Land Portal. Available at: <https://landportal.org/fr/book/narratives/2022/kazakhstan#:~:text=Droits%20fonciers%20des%20femmes&text=Les%20femmes%20occupent%20une%20position,que%20dans%20les%20zones%20rurales.>

<sup>176</sup> SIGI (2019). *SIGI 2019 Regional Report Eurasia - Highlights*. op. cit.



### C) Consequences of a lack of gender perspective from policy-makers

In Central Asia, women face difficulties in managing natural resources, largely due to a lack of education and training as a result of their traditional role confined to the home and domestic tasks. In addition, women who do not participate in the labour market, and who perform only unrecognised and unpaid domestic work, have fewer opportunities to improve their skills and are excluded from the economic and political spheres. What's more, gender stereotypes steer their career choices towards the humanities rather than the scientific and technical sectors.

Whether in politics or in the management of natural resources, women are generally excluded from decision-making structures, and the laws and reforms in force in Central Asian countries do not take their particular needs into account.

Women are under-represented in politics, with the result that their perspectives are not taken into account in the development of policies, including environmental policies. Regional climate strategies do not adequately address women's specific vulnerabilities to natural disasters and climate change. Although some countries have introduced quotas to encourage women's participation, true gender equality remains a distant goal.

- *Barriers to education and professional challenges: the sidelining of women in resource management*

These obstacles faced by women in the management of natural resources stem from a systemic problem of lack of education for young girls, who are encouraged to stay at home and do domestic work from an early age. Education levels are lower in rural areas, and in the Central Asian region women are more likely than men to be unemployed, without education or training, known as NEET<sup>177</sup>. In 2015, 22.7% of young women in Central Asia were NEET, compared with 7.5% of young men<sup>178</sup>. Yet sustainable farming practices require a great deal of knowledge, as well as access to training and information. In some Central Asian countries, the gap between women and men in terms of employment and training is particularly marked. In Kyrgyzstan, 30% of women have no training or education and are not employed, compared with only 12% of men<sup>179</sup>. In Tajikistan, the gap is larger, with 52% of women compared to 30% of men<sup>180</sup>. Kazakhstan stands out as the country with the lowest female NEET rate: 11% of women are unemployed and have not received any training<sup>181</sup>. By not participating in the labour market and not acquiring professional experience, NEET women find themselves in a situation of social and economic vulnerability. Because they are not employed, they do not invest in developing their skills and have fewer opportunities to improve their future employability. This situation makes them more likely to be excluded by discriminatory social institutions that limit women's participation in the economic and public sphere. Cholpon Aitakhunova, regional coordinator for Central Asia and Afghanistan of Central Asia Youth for Water (CAY4W) and researcher on water, climate and security issues in Central Asia at the Collective Leadership Institute, explains that: "The way women and

<sup>177</sup> NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) is an acronym used to describe a person who is not in education, employment or vocational training.

<sup>178</sup> OCDE (2019). *Chapter 2 : The development cost of discriminatory social institutions*. In : Social Institutions and Gender Index, SIGI 2019 Regional Report for EurasiaHome. Available at : [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f6dfa21d-en/1/2/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/f6dfa21d-en&\\_csp\\_=f990744037b57ab8751f9fe409f1dbf5&itemGO=oeed&itemContentType=book](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f6dfa21d-en/1/2/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/f6dfa21d-en&_csp_=f990744037b57ab8751f9fe409f1dbf5&itemGO=oeed&itemContentType=book)

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

their roles are perceived, their education, early marriages due to the traditional worldview in the region, and the image that they should be content with performing domestic tasks, being wives and looking after children are all factors making them opt for domestic tasks rather than further education<sup>182</sup>."

Education also reflects discrimination and patriarchal legacies, from the earliest age. Girls face unequal opportunities and freedoms. The sciences are perceived through a prism of gender stereotypes, where the so-called "hard" sciences are seen as masculine and serious, while the so-called "soft" sciences are seen as feminine and less socially credible<sup>183</sup>. This discriminatory distinction affects the ambitions of both women and men. Tajik MP Gulnora Amirshoeva describes how this discriminatory distinction affects the ambitions of young women and men: "Young women want to get an education, be free, succeed in life and have a career. Young men, on the other hand, think that they will remain masters of the world and impose their rules and ideas on women. But these rules and ideas run counter to contemporary trends and are a step towards obscurantism<sup>184</sup>".

In addition, the gender segregation of higher education discourages young girls from studying. Families and teachers do little to encourage them to pursue higher education, preferring to steer them towards a more traditional domestic role. Young girls also have very few female role models with qualifications, which often discourages them from going to university. Kazakhstan is an exception, with the majority of graduates being women. However, they are not equally represented in positions of responsibility, as Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy explains: "60% of Bachelor's degree holders are women, 65% of master's degree holders are women. Women are more educated, but where are they? Why only 18% of parliament deputies are women<sup>185</sup> ?" Despite the level of education of some women and the progress made, they are not integrated into the world of work, and their knowledge and expertise are not recognised. When they do choose to study, young women tend to opt for courses in the social sciences or journalism, rather than technology, science and engineering<sup>186</sup>.

Women students often dread the transition to the world of work, where their employability is hampered by patriarchal norms and low wages that cannot support their families. Women earn up to 30% less than their male colleagues in Kyrgyzstan<sup>187</sup>. The discriminatory norms prevalent in Central Asia discourage women from seeking paid employment. According to the OECD, in 2014 in Uzbekistan, 28% of the population felt that it was not acceptable for a woman to work outside the home<sup>188</sup>. If women have less access to education and training from an early age, the phenomenon of male migration forces them to stay at home to look after the family. They have fewer opportunities to join women's groups or resource management groups, and therefore to be part of networks, to learn and understand the evolution of harvesting

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<sup>182</sup> Interview conducted on June 08, 2023 with Cholpon Aitakhunova, regional coordinator for Central Asia and Afghanistan of Central Asia Youth for Water (CAY4W) and researcher on water, climate and security issues in Central Asia at the Collective Leadership Institute.

<sup>183</sup> Suyarkulova, M. (2019). A view from the margins : alienation and accountability in Central Asian studies. openDemocracy. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/view-margins-alienation-and-accountability-central-asian-studies/>

<sup>184</sup> Asiaplus, Delrieu, A. B., & Durot, L. (2021). Pourquoi les femmes d'Asie centrale commencent à se dévêtir. Novastan Français. Available at: <https://novastan.org/fr/societe-et-culture/pourquoi-les-femmes-dasie-centrale-commencent-a-se-devetir/>

<sup>185</sup> Interview conducted on June 28, 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>186</sup> OCDE (2019). *Chapter 2 : The development cost of discriminatory social institutions*. In : Social Institutions and Gender Index, SIGI 2019 Regional Report for EurasiaHome. op. cit.

<sup>187</sup> It should be noted that the example of Kyrgyzstan is used because the figures are available and relevant, but the situation is probably more difficult in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, despite the absence of data to confirm this.

<sup>188</sup> OCDE (2019). *Chapter 2 : The development cost of discriminatory social institutions*. In : Social Institutions and Gender Index, SIGI 2019 Regional Report for EurasiaHome. op. cit.

techniques and the development of technology<sup>189</sup>. Marriage is another tradition that contributes to the decline in girls' education. Tatiana Chernobil says: "Women usually have paid maternity leave, and there's a continuing and strengthening tendency that women choose to stay at home rather than go back to university<sup>190</sup>."

These phenomena help to exclude them from the introduction of new technologies for managing natural resources. In this sense, although the women of Central Asia have a great deal of knowledge based on their experiences and the knowledge passed on between them within the communities, their skills in using the technologies that have been introduced are limited. What's more, these technologies were created by men to deal with water shortages, and are difficult for women to handle. This is the case with certain water pumps whose handles are not within reach of women, and which they have difficulty manoeuvring due to a lack of physical strength, for example. What's more, when these technologies stop working, women can rarely do anything about it because they have not been trained to repair them<sup>191</sup>.

- *The lack of inclusion of women : a persisting challenge in politics*

In all the countries in the region, women are under-represented in government bodies, positions of responsibility and legislative assemblies. This partly explains the lack of a gendered perspective in legislation, as political decision-makers are predominantly male, resulting in a lack of female input into policy-making, particularly in response to the consequences of climate change. Despite warnings from NGOs and international organisations about the importance of better integrating women into the exploitation of resources, the countries of Central Asia have not set up aid or support programmes for women and girls, maintaining their economic dependence and invisibility.

In Kyrgyzstan, although there was a woman president named Roza Otunbayeva from 2010 to 2011, the trend since the 1990s shows that there are fewer and fewer women in government, most of whom hold positions of little responsibility<sup>192</sup>. In Tajikistan, the figures show that, since 2011, each president has appointed just two or three women to important government posts; there have only been around twenty women in government in ten years, most of them as deputy prime minister or minister of health, education, finance or justice.

In Tajikistan, the 1995 target of 30% representation of women in political life is still a long way from being achieved by 2021<sup>193</sup>. The country has not succeeded in creating an environment conducive to improving women's political participation and decision-making, and has not put in place specific measures, either legislative or practical, to remedy this situation.

As far as Kazakhstan is concerned, Tatiana Chernobil testifies to the lack of continuity in the government's inclusion policies: "In the political sphere, the parliament requires parties running for seats to have at least

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<sup>189</sup> Agrilinks (2018, June 18). *What Does Male Out-Migration Mean for Women in Tajikistan's Agriculture ?* op. cit.

<sup>190</sup> Interview conducted on June 29, 2023 with Tatiana Chernobil, a human rights lawyer and independent consultant based in Almaty, Kazakhstan. She is an expert member of the Kazakhstan NGO Coalition against Torture and a mentor on the Soros-Kazakhstan Foundation's training courses for young human rights defenders.

<sup>191</sup> Buisson M.-C., MacDonald K., Saikia P., Balasubramanya S., Aslany S., Horbulyk T. (2016, May). *Impact of water users associations on water and land productivity, equity and food security in Tajikistan*. op. cit.

<sup>192</sup> Alexei, V., Wystup, C., & Jerome, E. (2023). *Kirghizstan : l'inégalité hommes-femmes en question*. Novastan Français. Available at: <https://novastan.org/fr/kirghizstan/kirghizstan-linegalite-hommes-femmes-en-question/>

<sup>193</sup> Turakhanova D. (2021, May 16). *Low women's political participation in Tajikistan : Will the anti-discrimination law be a solution ?* The Foreign Policy Centre. op. cit.

30% women representation. However, this requirement does not extend beyond the elections, as parties can choose whomever they want for the parliament once they win. Currently, there are approximately 17% women in the parliament, and it is essential to assess the representation of women in higher-ranking positions<sup>194</sup>."

By 2020, the seats in Uzbekistan's legislative chamber were occupied by 33% women, in line with the quota policy, set at 30%, to bring more parity into politics<sup>195</sup>. In Kazakhstan, although it has also been enshrined in the Constitution since 2020 that a minimum of 30% of the total number of people on a party list must be women and people under the age of 29, women accounted for just 18% of those elected to the House of Representatives in 2023<sup>196</sup>.

Some Central Asian countries have adopted quota systems to promote gender equality and women's representation in parliament. While this has led to a slight increase, there is still a long way to go. In Kazakhstan, by 2022, 27.4% of members of parliament will be women, and in Turkmenistan only 25.9%<sup>197</sup>.

- *Central Asian countries's different climate policies: how are gender issues taken into account ?*

None of the aforementioned treaties and legislation on women's rights specifically addresses climate change from a gender perspective. This reflects the lack of recognition and obscuration of women's essential contribution to sustainable development and resource management, as well as insufficient consideration of their vulnerability to these changes. However, governments sometimes implement programmes with a gender dimension, although this is often secondary when it is mentioned.

The UN Women's report on Tajikistan highlights a gap in climate change adaptation strategies, which do not take sufficient account of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and men in the face of these disruptions<sup>198</sup>. Nevertheless, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy for 2019-2030 emphasises the crucial role of women as an indispensable asset in preventing these risks, thus seeking to recognise them beyond their status as victims.

In Kazakhstan, the Transition to a Green Economy Model project, launched in 2015 by the EU and UNDP, aims to implement sustainable initiatives in various sectors, including agriculture and renewable resources<sup>199</sup>. Particular attention is paid to the specific needs of rural women in the implementation of this project. However, it is still difficult to assess the results due to the lack of information on implementation and objectives. On the other hand, in 2017, in collaboration with UN Women, the Ministry of Economy implemented the project "Assistance in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and implementing

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<sup>194</sup> Interview conducted on June 29, 2023 with Tatiana Chernobil, a human rights lawyer and independent consultant based in Almaty, Kazakhstan. She is an expert member of the Kazakhstan NGO Coalition against Torture and a mentor on the Soros-Kazakhstan Foundation's training courses for young human rights defenders.

<sup>195</sup> International IDEA. (s.d.). *Gender Quotas Database*. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/297/35>

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> UNDP (2022, December 29) *Women in politics : where do we stand ?* Available at: <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/publications/women-politics-where-do-we-stand>

<sup>198</sup> National Review of the Republic of Tajikistan on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. (2020). UN Women. Available at: [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Tajikistan\\_English.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Tajikistan_English.pdf)

<sup>199</sup> United Nations Environment Programme. (2020). Keeping Kazakhstan on the Path to a Green Economy. UNEP. Available at: <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/keeping-kazakhstan-path-green-economy>

commitments in the field of promoting gender equality in Kazakhstan". The aim of this project is to develop training modules for civil servants and to integrate a gender perspective into the State's planning system and budget programmes<sup>200</sup>. This initiative has led to the implementation of a gender budgeting integration plan since 2018, enabling an increase in funds dedicated to achieving gender equality<sup>201</sup>.

In Uzbekistan, the government pays little attention to climate issues, and its strategy for transition to a green economy for the period 2019-2030, considered to be its most concrete sustainable development policy, makes no mention of women<sup>202</sup>. The Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, which has been in place since 1991, works to implement government policies concerning women and participates in several United Nations events, such as the "Central Asia Forum: Common Past and Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity", or the Uzbekistan Eco-forum. However, the attention paid to gender issues often remains secondary, and the government does not take any concrete measures in this respect, despite the mobilisation of NGOs such as UN Women.

Turkmenistan's climate policy takes no account of gender considerations, the only one being the 2012 national strategy on climate change, which makes no mention of women<sup>203</sup>.

Kyrgyzstan stands out from its neighbours in making considerable efforts to integrate women into sustainable development. The country recognises the inequalities involved in managing climate change, by identifying gender-specific vulnerabilities. Both the 2018 Climate Resilience Programme and the 2018-2040 National Development Strategy pay particular attention to the inclusion of women in Kyrgyz policy<sup>204</sup>. Measures such as coordination with NGOs and the private sector, as well as the structuring of institutions to integrate the gender dimension into policies, are seen as key elements of government action<sup>205</sup>. However, recent amendments to the law on NGOs, which could lead to the closure of almost all human rights organisations, seem to indicate that women's rights are neither guaranteed nor a priority for the country<sup>206</sup>.

Another intergovernmental initiative worth highlighting is the Women's Dialogue. Created in 2020 by members of Central Asian governments in collaboration with the United Nations, it is the first regional structure of its kind. The Dialogue serves as a regional platform to strengthen the role of women in political, economic and social life, and to support cooperation between and the contribution of women in the region.

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<sup>200</sup> National Commission for Women's Affairs and Family And Demographic Policy. (2018). The Comprehensive Review Of The Beijing Declaration And Platform For Action (1995) Implementation Progress. Un Women. op. cit.

<sup>201</sup> National planning and budgeting. (s. d.). UN Women – Europe and Central Asia. Available at: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/kazakhstan/national-planning-and-budgeting>

<sup>202</sup> Décision Du Président De La République D'Ouzbékistan Sur L'Approbation De La Stratégie De Transition De La République D'Ouzbékistan Vers Une Économie « Verte » Pour 2019-2030. (2019). Climate Policy Radar. Available at: [https://cdn.climatepolicyradar.org/navigator/UZB/2019/strategy-on-the-transition-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-to-a-green-economy-2019-2030\\_d5b1510b211c038847910fbcfb75e215.pdf](https://cdn.climatepolicyradar.org/navigator/UZB/2019/strategy-on-the-transition-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-to-a-green-economy-2019-2030_d5b1510b211c038847910fbcfb75e215.pdf)

<sup>203</sup> National Climate Change Strategy Of Turkmenistan. (2012). Climate Policy radar. Available at: [https://www.climate-laws.org/document/national-strategy-on-climate-change\\_ae1c?q=Turkm%C3%A9nistan](https://www.climate-laws.org/document/national-strategy-on-climate-change_ae1c?q=Turkm%C3%A9nistan)

<sup>204</sup> National Development Strategy Of The Kyrgyz Republic For 2018-2040 (2018). Climate Policy Radar. Available at: [https://cdn.climatepolicyradar.org/navigator/KGZ/2021/national-development-strategy-of-the-kyrgyz-republic-for-2018-2040\\_396697fc7f530c667a87d96f7ae21cf4.pdf](https://cdn.climatepolicyradar.org/navigator/KGZ/2021/national-development-strategy-of-the-kyrgyz-republic-for-2018-2040_396697fc7f530c667a87d96f7ae21cf4.pdf)

<sup>205</sup> Climate Investment Programme Operational Framework for Managing and Accessing Climate Finance in the Kyrgyz Republic. (2018). Climate Policy Radar. Available at: [https://cdn.climatepolicyradar.org/navigator/KGZ/2018/climate-investment-programme-operational-framework-for-managing-and-accessing-climate-finance-in-the-kyrgyz-republic\\_9940cbfd0be66a84b445f8b7341b0a5c.pdf](https://cdn.climatepolicyradar.org/navigator/KGZ/2018/climate-investment-programme-operational-framework-for-managing-and-accessing-climate-finance-in-the-kyrgyz-republic_9940cbfd0be66a84b445f8b7341b0a5c.pdf)

<sup>206</sup> Kalykov, M. (2023). Plusieurs organisations internationales ont demandé au Jogorku Kenesh de retirer le projet de loi « dangereux » sur les « agents étrangers ». KLOOP.KG - Nouvelles du Kirghizstan. Available at: <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/06/12/ryad-mezhdunarodnyh-organizatsij-prizvali-zhogorku-kenesh-otozvat-opasnyj-zakonoproekt-ob-i-noagentah/>

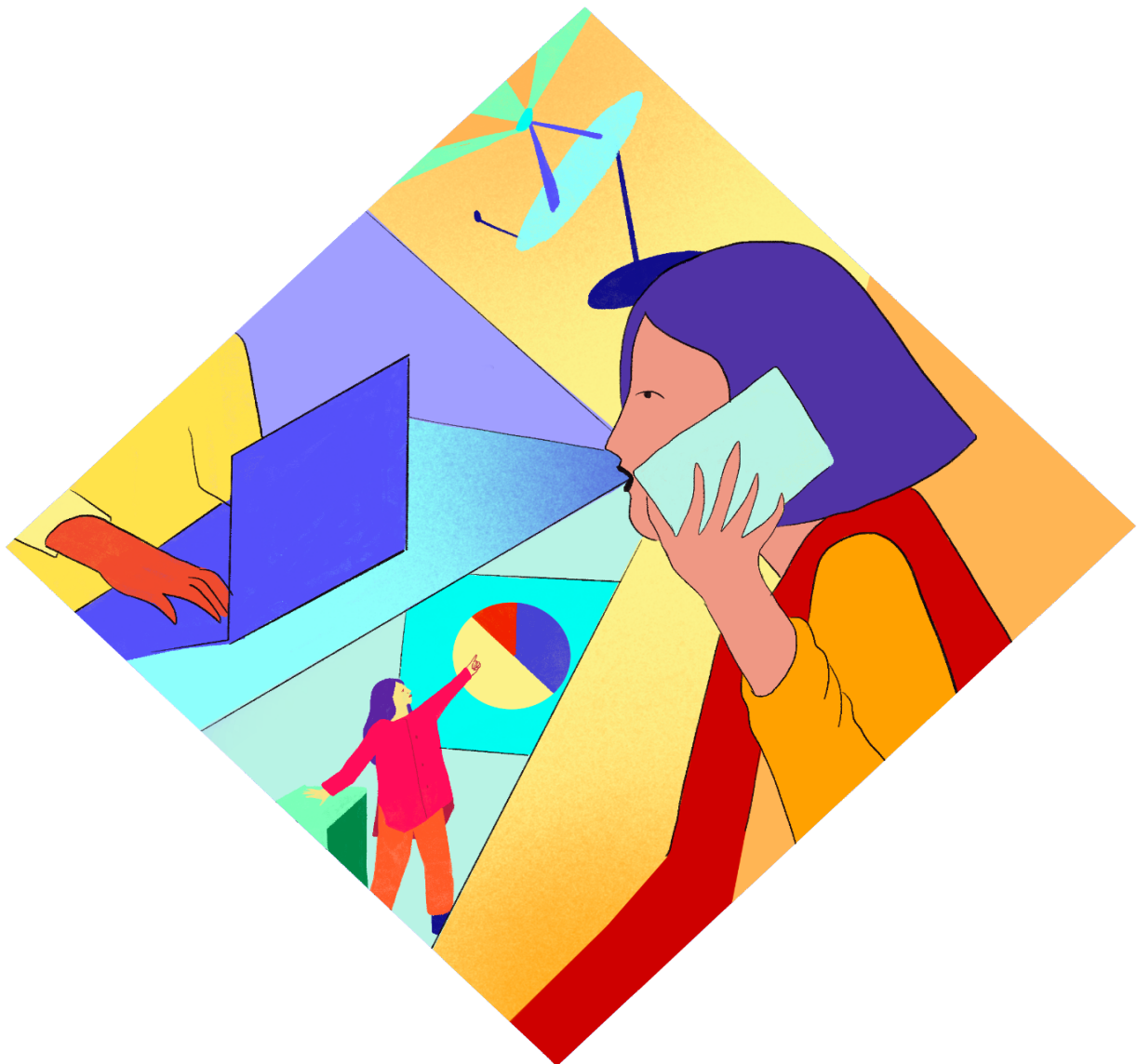
Since its creation, the Dialogue has organised numerous events with the participation of political representatives from each country, and governments are directly involved in discussions on the inclusion and training of women. Particular attention has been paid to climate change issues at events in 2022, such as the Women and Water Forum, the 4th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Women's Forum, the 14th Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament of the Member States of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and a regional workshop for girls from Central Asian countries<sup>207</sup>.

Gender mainstreaming is thus developing in a positive way in Central Asian climate policies, although the slowness and difficulty of putting political projects into practice are ill-adapted to the ecological situation and the living conditions of women, which continue to deteriorate.

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<sup>207</sup> The Dialogue of Women of Central Asia : Empowering women in Central Asia | United Nations Development Programme. (2023). UNDP. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/turkmenistan/publications/dialogue-women-central-asia-empowering-women-central-asia>

## Part III - What perspectives for women in a context of multiple crises ?



## A) Responsibility of Central Asian states for the inclusion and empowerment of women

The Central Asian states must work to promote women's rights and gender equality. To this end, it is essential that they promote the elimination of gender-based violence and guarantee women's access to education, health and justice. Local governments must adopt robust regulations and develop specific policies to protect women's rights.

It is also essential to involve women in decision-making processes and to value their role in the management of natural resources, particularly in agriculture and water management. Agricultural and water policies must recognise and highlight the role of women in ensuring food security and resilience in the face of climate change.

Finally, it is crucial to work with women's civil society networks and organisations, to encourage women's participation in decision-making bodies and to raise public awareness of the importance of gender equality and environmental conservation, which are closely linked.

- *How to guarantee women's rights in Central Asia?*

Promoting the rights of women and girls, eliminating inequalities between women and men and decreasing socio-economic vulnerability are central to the development of egalitarian societies in the region. To achieve this, it is essential to empower women and remove them as far as possible from their situation of dependence, which is the result of traditional patriarchal society. The governments of Central Asian countries must ensure that women are legally protected against gender-based violence. They must also improve girls' and women's access to health and education services, social protection and justice. Guljamal Nurmuhammedova says: "Governments can do a lot, but to do that they need to understand the issues in the way that NGOs do<sup>208</sup>." By creating safer living conditions for women, these measures would also promote sustainable and inclusive development in response to climate change.

In June 2023, a promising initiative was launched, bringing together civil society organisations and the governments of all the countries in Central Asia. Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova explained: "Recently, the regional program in Central Asia launched an alliance against gender-based violence, with the participation of governments and civil society from five countries, including Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstani government continued to support this alliance, indicating their dedication<sup>209</sup>." This type of action helps to encourage governments to invest in women's rights and their protection, and should be multiplied.

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<sup>208</sup> Interview conducted on June 13 2023 with Guljamal Nurmuhammedova, Global Water Partnership regional coordinator for Central Asia and the Caucasus.

<sup>209</sup> Interview conducted on June 29 2023 with Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, founder and strategic director of the feminist association FemAgora in Kazakhstan.



- > Establish a legal framework that respects rights, aims to prevent gender-based violence and punishes it with effective, proportionate and dissuasive penalties, and offers protection to survivors of violence.
- > Criminalise all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, rape, marital rape, female genital mutilation and sexual harassment in schools, public spaces and online.
- > Establish protection and assistance measures for victims of domestic violence.
- > Eliminate legal exceptions, such as judicial and parental consent, authorising the marriage of girls, and provide for penalties for anyone who encourages the marriage of minors and forced marriage through abduction.
- > Establish specific policies and ministerial bodies for women, separate from those dedicated to the family, in order to take into account the specific needs and issues of women as a distinct group.
- > Ensure that statutory rights take precedence over customary laws, so that legal commitments to equality for women and girls are respected.
- > Remove customary and/or traditional laws that encourage conciliation and mediation at all stages of the legal divorce process, as well as those that regard it as socially undesirable.
- > Guarantee the independence of the judicial system and ensure the application of measures to protect women through dedicated equality commissions.
- > Consider sexual and reproductive health services to be essential and accessible to all, including abortion.

- *The need to integrate women into decision-making processes*

Women are more active in promoting human security and understanding situations in order to achieve a shared vision and implement effective solutions<sup>210</sup>. Including women in local, community, formal and informal decision-making processes and mechanisms relating to natural resources allows us to benefit from their knowledge, and to take account of their specific needs so that solutions can be put in place that are suitable for everyone. In addition, empowering and integrating women is an important strategy for improving children's nutritional outcomes and ensuring food security<sup>211</sup>. Finally, and most importantly, it contributes to their emancipation by giving them the opportunity to contribute to the choices that concern them and to the visibility of their roles in society.

Although women participate in women's networks, these are managed by communities and do not always enable women to be included in decision-making bodies. It is therefore essential that government and decision-making bodies support these networks in order to include women participating in bodies such as

<sup>210</sup> Onyejekwe, C. (2005). *Les femmes, la guerre, la consolidation de la paix et la reconstruction*. *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 184, 301-307. Available at: <https://doi-org.proxy.sciencespobordeaux.fr/10.3917/riss.184.0301>

<sup>211</sup> Onah, M. N. (2021). Women's empowerment and child nutrition in South-Central Asia; how important is socioeconomic status? *SSM-Population Health*, 13, 100718. Available at: <https://dppa.un.org/fr/women-peace-and-security>

the WUAs and to promote the inclusion of women in general. Initiatives already exist, such as the Women's Forum Kurak association, created in 2012, which brings together Kyrgyz women from different fields, or the network of civil society organisations from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan created in 2015 and working to protect the rights of women and girls.

The region can draw inspiration from projects such as the UNDP Mali project, set up in Mali and Niger in 2020, to strengthen the political and economic position of women<sup>212</sup>. It has led to a number of improvements, including the active involvement of women in official and unofficial governance structures, the empowerment of women in cross-border communities through economic recovery initiatives that take into account the sustainable management of natural resources, and the development of community resilience in the face of environmental shocks that can lead to internal or cross-border conflicts.

**> Supporting and working with women's networks and civil society organisations on climate, water and food security. By promoting a gender and climate perspective, these collaborations will help to develop solutions and initiatives that are essential to achieving the sustainable development objectives in the region.**

**> Institutionalise women's participation in decision-making processes, putting an end to gender-specific roles and gender stereotypes associated with women's activities.**

**> Establish parity quotas to ensure that women participate in decision-making bodies in a sustainable and consistent way.**

**> Raise awareness, through campaigns aimed at the general public, of the essential role played by women in political and decision-making bodies and in the economy.**

- *For inclusive agricultural and water policies*

The current situation in the countries of Central Asia suggests that the region will have to cope with increased climate disruption. It is essential that the agricultural policies of Central Asian countries recognise and promote the role of women as the architects of water and food security. Their expertise in agriculture, water management and the preservation of natural resources is crucial to ensuring the resilience of communities in the face of environmental challenges. By strengthening their contribution, more effective and inclusive strategies can be put in place to preserve ecosystems, improve agricultural productivity and ensure equitable access to vital resources, while promoting long-term sustainable development. According to Guljamal Nurmammedova, "If we are talking about economics, we need to inform women's communities about adaptive practices, obtaining optional extra income, advanced techniques like greenhouses and water-saving techniques. We need to get people in charge of the economy to understand the importance of water-related issues (it is good to let them know and understand the cost of actions and non-actions)<sup>213</sup>"

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<sup>212</sup> UNDP Mali (s.d.). *Femmes et gestion de conflits liés aux ressources naturelles - Approche basée sur l'implication des femmes et la résilience aux effets des changements climatiques pour la réduction des conflits communautaires et transfrontaliers liés aux ressources naturelles*. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/fr/mali/projects/femmes-et-gestion-des-conflits-lies-aux-ressources-naturelles-approche-basee-sur-limplication-des-femmes-et-la-resilience-aux-effets>

<sup>213</sup> Interview conducted on June 13 2023 with Guljamal Nurmammedova, Global Water Partnership regional coordinator for Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In order to develop effective climate policies, it is necessary for governments' climate discourse to go beyond a simple consideration of green energy and adopt a holistic and inclusive approach to the prevention of climate change. Collaboration with the EU on climate programmes offers an opportunity to promote gender equality in the workplace. During COP 27, the EU and Kazakhstan established a strategic partnership to ensure a secure and sustainable supply of raw materials<sup>214</sup>. The establishment of this collaboration is at the origin of a European initiative to motivate a gender perspective in their agreements, and to encourage Kazakhstan to develop its climate policy beyond green energies alone. On the other hand, the initiative of Geres, a climate action NGO, which has been working in Tajikistan with the support of the European Union since April 2022 on a 5-year project, is part of an approach that includes several interconnected issues<sup>215</sup>. Their actions in the country are aimed at improving the population's access to sustainable food and drinking water. The organisation offers sustainable energy solutions by providing access to water in settlements in the Rasht Valley, relocating families affected by natural disasters and setting up passive solar greenhouses.

- > Eliminate discriminatory laws and legal loopholes that still exist with regard to women's rights at work.**
- > Guarantee women's land rights in order to combat discriminatory traditions and practices of patrilineal inheritance and unequal division of land.**
- > Raise awareness among community leaders of the importance of women's role in the management of natural resources in order to reinforce the impact of the actions adopted by governments in this area.**
- > Encourage the management of agricultural property by women by providing them with the legal support and training they need.**
- > Recognise the workload created by the feminisation of agriculture and pay women commensurate with their work.**
- > Integrate feminist and climate issues at institutional level by setting up awareness-raising campaigns on gender equality in line with the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW and the Paris Agreements.**
- > Include state committees on gender equality in climate decision-making.**
- > Encourage equal sharing of domestic and caring responsibilities within the household by reorganising the roles of women and men on an equal basis.**
- > Establish microfinance and subsidy initiatives specifically designed to support women engaged in agricultural work and natural resource management.**

<sup>214</sup> Romano, V. (2022, November 9). Un « partenariat stratégique » entre UE et Kazakhstan sur l'hydrogène vert et les matières premières. [www.euractiv.fr](https://www.euractiv.fr/section/energie-climat/news/un-partenariat-strategique-entre-ue-et-kazakhstan-sur-lhydrogene-vert-et-les-matieres-premieres/). Available at: <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/energie-climat/news/un-partenariat-strategique-entre-ue-et-kazakhstan-sur-lhydrogene-vert-et-les-matieres-premieres/>

<sup>215</sup> Geres (2022, June 9). Au Tadjikistan, le Geres s'engage pour plus de résilience et de meilleures conditions de vie auprès des communautés rurales. op.cit.

## B) The importance of promoting education and training for girls and women

Numerous international, regional and local initiatives are being implemented to ensure the education and empowerment of girls and women in Central Asia. Agricultural and awareness-raising programmes have been set up to increase women's knowledge of renewable energy, nutritional agriculture and land rights. Training courses and leadership camps for young girls are also organised to encourage sustainable entrepreneurship and improve their professional skills. In response to the digital divide, which is a major challenge for women and girls in the region, local initiatives are being put in place to facilitate women's access to digital technologies and training. In addition, local NGOs are actively combating gender-based violence. These measures underline the importance of women's education in tackling regional challenges and promoting gender equality.

The establishment of support and sharing networks is also essential for the development of human capital in the region. Various organisations facilitate exchanges between local associations and support inclusive projects designed to boost the competitiveness and independence of rural women.

- International, regional and local training initiatives

According to Cholpon Aitakhunova, "Giving girls and young women an education would affect all the challenges facing the region. The more education and autonomy we give women, the more self-confidence it gives them. An educated woman will also raise her daughters differently in terms of education<sup>216</sup>". So the training given to women and girls in natural resource management and green entrepreneurship is a key factor in empowerment and emancipation. Investing in the professionalisation of women and in their education would help to advance the 2030 agenda in the Central Asian region.

In 2017, USAID developed agricultural programmes aimed at raising women's awareness of their land rights, improving their knowledge of nutritional agriculture<sup>217</sup> and thus enabling women to gain economic autonomy and benefit from assistance and mentoring in order to create and/or develop their small businesses<sup>218</sup>. In November 2021, the UNDP set up a regional training camp for girls in Uzbekistan with the aim of extending and strengthening the leadership capacities of young women, so that they can play a greater part in public and social life<sup>219</sup>. Open to 30 participants from the five Central Asian countries, the programme aimed to promote girls' sustainable entrepreneurial spirit and develop their professional skills.

With a view to empowering Central Asian women, in 2022, the OSCE emphasized their potential as agents of change at the local and national levels to foster efficient and sustainable energy systems through apprenticeship programmes and internships for young women, as well as roundtables, workshops and experiences at major renewable energy facilities in the region<sup>220</sup>. Finally, in April 2023, the OSCE and the German University of Kazakhstan (DKU) organized a five-day training course on renewable energy for

<sup>216</sup> Interview conducted on June 08, 2023 with Cholpon Aitakhunova, regional coordinator for Central Asia and Afghanistan of Central Asia Youth for Water (CAY4W) and researcher on water, climate and security issues in Central Asia at the Collective Leadership Institute.

<sup>217</sup> Nutritional agriculture is a food-based approach to agricultural development. It places nutrient-rich foods and dietary diversity at the heart of the fight against malnutrition.

<sup>218</sup> USAID (s.d.). *Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality | Fact Sheet | Central Asia*. Available at: <https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional/fact-sheets/womens-empowerment-and-gender-equality>

<sup>219</sup> UNDP Uzbekistan (2021, November 10). *Central Asian girls build capacity for leadership and gender equality*. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/uzbekistan/press-releases/central-asian-girls-build-capacity-leadership-and-gender-equality>

<sup>220</sup> OSCE (2022). *Empowering Young Central Asian Women in the Energy Transition*. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/occea/524055>

Central Asian women aged between 18 and 35<sup>221</sup>. The participants can acquire new knowledge about green energy technologies, renewable energies and energy efficiency, through courses and a practical visit to a renewable energy installation in Kazakhstan. It is also an opportunity for these young women to broaden their career opportunities by interacting with industry experts and potential employers.

International and governmental organisations are not the only ones working to empower and educate women. Various local NGOs, such as Bishkek Feminist Initiatives<sup>222</sup> in Kyrgyzstan and ACTED<sup>223</sup> in Uzbekistan, are setting up training courses, awareness campaigns and economic independence measures to promote women's emancipation and combat gender-based violence in Central Asia. Although there are fewer of these initiatives, they are still important and of great benefit to women in the region.

Due to a lack of resources, local organisations are not always able to fund long-term programmes. International organisations can, however, take action by supporting them directly or by helping them to obtain government funding to strengthen their capacities<sup>224</sup>.

- > **Support the education of girls and women to ensure their contribution to the advent of egalitarian societies and to the actions needed to meet current challenges, including climate change.**
  
- > **Encourage and support national and local initiatives by international solidarity organisations.**
  
- > **Developing targeted training courses in renewable energy and natural resource management for young women in Central Asia, and enabling them to meet professionals in these sectors, as well as potential mentors and employers.**
  
- > **Promote internships and on-the-job learning experiences so that women can acquire practical and technological knowledge of natural and renewable resources.**

The digital divide also puts women and girls at a particular disadvantage in Central Asia. According to the UN, digital technology is an essential tool for transforming education, improving governance and increasing inclusion and economic opportunities for women<sup>225</sup>. It gives women and girls access to information, career opportunities and new economic resources. In response to this, local initiatives led by NGOs have emerged, such as "Technovation Kazakhstan", created in 2016 for girls aged 10 to 18 to encourage them to become innovation agents providing solutions to their communities' problems through technology and entrepreneurship<sup>226</sup>.

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<sup>221</sup> OSCE (s.d.). *Call for Applications: training course for young Central Asian women in renewable energy*. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/537128>

<sup>222</sup> Bishkek Feminists Initiatives. (s.d.). *Women Platform*. Available at: <https://womenplatform.net/organization/bishkek-feminists-initiatives/>

<sup>223</sup> ACTED. (2023, June 5). *Ouzbékistan - ACTED*. Available at: <https://www.acted.org/fr/pays/ouzbekistan/>

<sup>224</sup> Interview conducted on June 13, 2023 with Guljamal Nurmammedova, Global Water Partnership regional coordinator for Central Asia and the Caucasus.

<sup>225</sup> Blazhevskaya, V. (2022). *Amid challenges hope emerges in Central Asia*. United Nations Sustainable Development. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2022/07/amid-challenges-hope-emerges-in-central-asia/>

<sup>226</sup> Yerekesheva, L. (2021). *Youth of Central Asia, challenges for peacebuilding : a comprehensive research review*. UNESCO. op.cit.

In Central Asia, a number of women working for sustainable change have taken action to defend climate justice and feminism. This is the case of Ainura Sagyn, a young Kyrgyz woman, ecofeminist and computer software engineer. She created the Tazar application, linking waste producers with recyclers and educating consumers about waste management in the country. 65% of the app's users are unemployed women who sell their sorted waste for points that they can exchange for cash<sup>227</sup>.

In 2021, with the help of UN Women, the government of Kazakhstan opened 17 Women's Entrepreneurship Development Centres (WEDC) to promote greater access to technological tools<sup>228</sup>. These centres offer courses in social media marketing and business, the use of electronic tools, as well as financing and access to professional networks. By May 2023, these networks in Kazakhstan had benefited 9,000 women<sup>229</sup>.

However, governments do not always facilitate access to communications networks. Since 2022, Turkmenistan's new dictator, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, has also been further restricting Internet access, which was already limited in many regions, while denying the accusations. Today, he wants to create a national digital network, while distancing himself from the international scene. In this context, civil society is excluded and has no opportunity to exercise its power.

**> Assurer un accès libre aux réseaux sociaux et au cyberspace dans toute la région.**

**> Garantir l'accès des filles et des femmes aux technologies et des formations pour réduire la fracture numérique et favoriser leur autonomisation.**

**> Fournir aux femmes des services financiers élémentaires et favoriser leurs activités professionnelles et intégration dans des domaines jusqu'alors dominés par des hommes, afin de garantir leur autonomisation économique.**

- *Creating and linking support and exchange networks*

In Central Asia, networks have been set up to link and support water users, farmers and young people. These organisations enable their members to follow awareness-raising campaigns, strengthen regional links and interpersonal exchanges, as well as promoting their financial independence. Cholpon Aitakhunova, explains the aim of the Central Asia Youth for Water network created in 2019: "We are carrying out a number of actions, all related to awareness-raising, education and engaging in dialogue, including intergenerational dialogue, to try to connect young experts with older experts<sup>230</sup>." These organisations are therefore essential because they contribute to the development of human capital in the region by enabling women and young people to help each other, to empower themselves and to evolve by being surrounded.

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<sup>227</sup> ONU Femmes (2022, March 11). *Cinq jeunes femmes en première ligne de l'action climatique à travers l'Europe et en Asie centrale*. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/fr/nouvelles/reportage/2022/03/cinq-jeunes-femmes-en-premiere-ligne-de-laction-climatique-a-travers-leurope-et-en-asie-centrale>

<sup>228</sup> UN Women (2023, May 19). *Supporting women's entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan*. Available at: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/05/supporting-womens-entrepreneurship-in-kazakhstan>

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Interview conducted on June 08, 2023 with Cholpon Aitakhunova, regional coordinator for Central Asia and Afghanistan of Central Asia Youth for Water (CAY4W) and researcher on water, climate and security issues in Central Asia at the Collective Leadership Institute.

In Tajikistan, Uguloy Abdullaeva was one of the first women to head a local water users' association. She has educated her community and collected a large number of fees in her WUA<sup>231</sup>. Already respected locally for her work to ensure a safe water supply, she was appointed District Leader in March 2020 to defend women's rights as water users and within WUAs. The aim is to encourage women's participation in self-help networks and water management. For Uguloy Abdullaeva, "Here's the secret: let women lead"<sup>232</sup>.

Given the need to develop support and exchange networks for women, the NGO Global Water Partnership (GWP), set up in 1996, is dedicated to training and improving water management throughout the world, including Central Asia. Guljamal Nurmuhamedova points out that the NGO facilitates exchanges between local associations and supports inclusive projects that promote training for women and give them access to techniques that enhance their competitiveness and autonomy. She adds: "As a partnership network, we are efficient in moderation of dialogues between state authorities, business sector and civil society to achieve mutual understanding and develop appropriate solutions for problems of regional, national and local concerns"<sup>233</sup>.

In several countries, the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Women and the World Food Programme (WFP) have worked together to set up the Programme on Accelerated Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment<sup>234</sup> (JP RWEE). Its aim is to ensure the economic security, rights and resilience of women living in rural areas, in line with the 2030 Agenda. The programme also aims to improve the status of rural women so that they become economically autonomous by focusing on improving food security, increasing income and economic autonomy, strengthening women's participation and leadership in rural institutions, and gender equality in politics<sup>235</sup>. Implemented between 2014 and 2021 in Kyrgyzstan and resulting in higher incomes for rural women, improved livelihoods and food security, and more rural women taking leadership positions in their communities, a project of this kind could be continued and implemented in other Central Asian countries.

- > **Ensure the participation of Central Asian girls and women in existing resource management networks, such as water user associations, in decision-making and management bodies.**
  
- > **Encourage the creation of regional and local women's resource management networks.**
  
- > **Set up programmes initiated by local and regional NGOs, and supported where necessary by international organisations, along the lines of the JP RWEE, to work towards the empowerment and security of rural girls and women in Central Asia.**

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<sup>231</sup> UN Women (2020, October 14). *Uguloy Abdullaeva: Want water in Tajikistan? Let women lead!* Available at: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/uguloy-abdullaeva-want-water-in-tajikistan-let-women-lead>

<sup>232</sup> UN Women (2020, October 14). *Uguloy Abdullaeva: Want water in Tajikistan? Let women lead!* Op.cit.

<sup>233</sup> Interview conducted on June 13, 2023 with Guljamal Nurmuhammedova, Global Water Partnership regional coordinator for Central Asia and the Caucasus.

<sup>234</sup> IFAD (s.d.). *Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women*. Available at: <https://beta.ifad.org/en/web/guest/jprwee>

<sup>235</sup> FAO, IFAD, UN Women (2021, November 22). *Final evaluation of the Kyrgyzstan Joint UN Women/ FAO/ IFAD/ WFP. Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women*. Available at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000134204/download/>

### C) The future of Central Asia: three key factors in building an egalitarian society

In the face of future climate change, it is essential to act in favour of a society that is inclusive, egalitarian and respectful of the objectives of sustainable development.

Given the authoritarian context that limits freedom of expression and restricts the activities of NGOs, it is important to protect civil society, which plays a crucial role in establishing and consolidating democracy and protecting human rights. This means providing financial and technical support to civil society organisations, promoting their political participation and putting pressure on governments to put an end to violent repression. We need to ensure that their voices are heard in decision-making bodies concerning the environment and natural resources in order to drive forward initiatives at all levels.

In addition, the region is likely to experience an intensification of conflicts over natural resources, increasing the insecurity of Central Asian women and girls. It is therefore imperative to involve women in peace processes, to value their active role and to develop policies tailored to their needs.

In this context, the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs offer a framework for action to tackle these multiple regional challenges. To meet the region's energy, climate and social challenges, stronger regional cooperation is essential.

- *Protecting Central Asian civil society*

The authoritarian environment in Central Asian countries limits freedom of expression, restricts the activities of NGOs and puts pressure on activists and human rights defenders. The media are closely monitored and controlled, limiting the dissemination of independent information and hindering the work of civil society organisations<sup>236</sup>. It is essential to protect the rights of civil society and promote individual freedoms, including freedom of expression and association. Civil society plays its part not only in establishing democracy but also in consolidating it by monitoring, overseeing and limiting the exercise of power by the state and holding it to account. In South Korea, the mobilisation of a civil society coalition brought the government to its knees and forced it to establish a democracy in 1987, before being officially recognised as a third political power in 1997<sup>237</sup>. Resolving climate problems will not be possible without including civil society, which acts as close as possible to the communities concerned, understands the need to adopt a gender perspective in order to adapt to climate change, and helps to nurture a diversity of viewpoints on the subject. It must therefore be able to express itself freely and have access to digital space.

Protecting civil society is crucial to guaranteeing fundamental rights, promoting gender equality and meeting the challenges of climate change. This is the necessary starting point for feminist ecological policy thinking. Feminist and climate justice struggles led by civil society organizations promote a cross-cutting approach that is sensitive to the experiences of those affected. According to Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy "90% of civic activists are women in Kazakhstan and cover all topics: women's issues of course, but also support for Ukraine, the fight against corruption, violence against children, animal rights and many other issues [...]" Every country should have at least ten NGOs dedicated to women's rights in order to cover all topics and be

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<sup>236</sup> Ecollet. (2023). In Tajikistan repression continues. Novastan English. Available at: <https://novastan.org/en/tajikistan/in-tajikistan-repression-continues/>

<sup>237</sup> Bunbongkarn, S. (2004). The Role Of Civil Society In Democratic Consolidation In Asia. Available at: [https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/PDFs/Edited%20Volumes/GrowthGovernance\\_files/Pub\\_Growth%20Governance/Pub\\_GrowthGovernancech10.pdf](https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/PDFs/Edited%20Volumes/GrowthGovernance_files/Pub_Growth%20Governance/Pub_GrowthGovernancech10.pdf)



productive<sup>238</sup>." Protecting and encouraging their political participation for a sustainable and equitable climate future therefore seems imperative. It's all about including civil society and NGOs in political decision-making, to think about the intersectionality of social issues. They enable vulnerable people to be taken into account, and those likely to provide an effective and sustainable solution to the issues to be brought to the fore.

However, they face obstacles such as lack of funding, social stigmatisation and restrictive measures imposed by governments. As Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova explains: "Structural changes required by international conventions and agreements can be costly, making it challenging for governments to afford necessary transformations. Hence, development issues and programs often rely on foreign funding agencies<sup>239</sup>." Financial and technical support for NGOs therefore helps to strengthen their capacities and their actions on the ground. We also need to think in terms of their plurality and ensure the development of organisations specialising in the various issues in order to provide the most appropriate response. International organisations therefore need to work as closely as possible with civil society organisations to gain a better understanding of the specific challenges facing the region and adapt their aid to the needs of the local population.

In addition, regional and international solidarity is essential to protect Central Asian civil society. Governments and members of the international community must actively support efforts to promote the rights of civil society, strengthen protection mechanisms for activists and human rights defenders, and encourage an environment conducive to freedom of expression and association. We need to support grouping and alliance initiatives and guarantee a space for inter-regional dialogue. Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova addresses the difficulties of cooperation between players: "I recommend working directly with activists and organisations in Central Asia, travelling in the region and interacting with them to understand their realities. It is essential to move beyond the Western-centric perspective that dominates discussions on development. To support organisations in the region, it is important to have an intersectional analysis and to avoid imposing agendas on movements. NGOs from outside Central Asia should also strive to be allies in solidarity rather than representatives of communities to which they do not belong<sup>240</sup>".

**> Promoting the development of civil society organisations to advance women's rights.**

**> Facilitate the participation of civil society in political decision-making and include them in negotiations, soliciting their expertise and promoting a multi-sectoral approach.**

**> Provide financial and legal support for the creation of NGOs to encourage their diversity.**

**> Put pressure on governments in the region to end the violent repression of Central Asian civil society through international campaigns.**

**> Strengthen the protection of activists, which involves policies to guarantee their safety, but also**

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<sup>238</sup> Interview conducted on June 28, 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, professor of law at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

<sup>239</sup> Interview conducted on June 29 2023 with Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, founder and strategic director of the feminist association FemAgora in Kazakhstan.

<sup>240</sup> Interview conducted on June 29 2023 with Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, founder and strategic director of the feminist association FemAgora in Kazakhstan.

**monitoring and responding to human rights abuses.**

**> Strengthen international cooperation with Central Asia to promote all human rights organisations through funding, the creation of training programmes, the exchange of expertise, joint funding and strategic partnerships at local level.**

**> Promote dialogue between local and international NGOs in order to adapt the support model to the specific situation of the region.**

- *The exacerbation of conflicts over natural resources: what perspective on gender ?*

While forecasts predict a risk of +1.0°C in Central Asia by 2050, models from phase 6 of the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project (CMIP6) predict a warming of up to 5.3°C in Kyrgyzstan<sup>241</sup>. What's more, according to the World Bank, if population growth continues at the rate of 1.5% per year, water supplies could account for only a quarter of current average consumption by 2100<sup>242</sup>. Already affected by conflicts and tensions linked to natural resources, such as the clashes along the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over irrigation in 2021, the region must prepare for an increase and intensification of such clashes, aggravated by climate disruption and shortages of water and food resources. Security is a twofold issue for women: they need to be protected from conflict and climate change, but they also need to take action to promote sustainable development in the region, in order to maintain security in their countries. It is therefore vital to take action in areas affected by the dual imperative of security and climate.

The Central Asian region faces the risk of states exploiting the precariousness of the population to maintain the economic dependence of individuals in order to strengthen their control. One of their means of action is to make access to essential public services such as health, education or housing conditional on loyalty to the government. Insecurity and poverty can also be exploited by armed groups opposed to the regimes in power, or by totalitarian regimes. By offering people promises of security, social justice or economic stability through populist rhetoric, these armed groups fuel their troops and gain influence. Once in power, authoritarian and repressive policies could be adopted. This scenario is conceivable in a region where conflict, climate change and poverty are weakening the population. In Afghanistan, the Taliban have consolidated their power by exploiting the devastating consequences of drought, climate change and growing food insecurity, which have left the country in ruins. By paying their fighters 5 to 10 dollars a day, they encourage farmers, who are paid 1 dollar a day, to join them<sup>243</sup>. In Central Asia, signs such as the clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the disappearance or dwindling of water sources such as the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea could be factors in aggravated tensions. For Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, the future of feminism lies in taking these issues into account: "I see the future of feminism in Central Asia tied to the intersection of climate emergency response and conflict resolution, particularly due to the Russian

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<sup>241</sup> Standal, K., Daloz, A.S., Kim, E. (2023). A Gendered Approach to Understanding Climate Change Impacts in Rural Kyrgyzstan. SpringerBriefs in Climate Studies. op.cit

<sup>242</sup> Dion, S. (2021, March 25). *Gestion de l'eau en Asie centrale et dans le monde : Pas de solution sans les femmes*. AMC. op. cit.

<sup>243</sup> Lacroux, M. (2021, September 4). *Conflit : Afghanistan : comment les talibans ont tiré parti du changement climatique*. Libération. Available at: [https://www.liberation.fr/environnement/climat/afghanistan-comment-les-talibans-ont-tire-parti-du-changement-climatique-20210905\\_JIOJ3E4IAVFG5MROX3G5E5O344/](https://www.liberation.fr/environnement/climat/afghanistan-comment-les-talibans-ont-tire-parti-du-changement-climatique-20210905_JIOJ3E4IAVFG5MROX3G5E5O344/)

military and Chinese structural violence in the region. The region's proximity to those countries makes these issues significant<sup>244</sup>."

In addition, climate change is causing massive population displacement, making them more easily recruited groups because of their vulnerability. According to World Bank estimates, by 2050, there will be nearly five million climate migrants in Central Asia, which is likely to exacerbate their precarious situation, while fuelling new conflicts in the region<sup>245</sup>. This was the case after the 1992 earthquake in Kyrgyzstan and the flooding in Kazakhstan in March 2005, which caused major population displacements<sup>246</sup>. With climate change and natural disasters set to progress rapidly, it is important to anticipate the risks and protect the most vulnerable populations.

From this perspective, it is essential to be aware of the importance of involving women in conflict prevention and resolution. It has been proven that, because of their role within communities, involving women in peace processes mobilises the entire social fabric and makes peace agreements more effective and lasting: this increases the chances of a lasting peace by 35%<sup>247</sup>. Including women and their perspectives ensures that gender equality issues are taken into account, as well as a greater diversity of priorities linked to the foundations of democracies that guarantee human rights and the development of society as a whole. In addition, their responsibilities for resource management and the water and food security of their families and communities give them a significant role in maintaining peace in the region.

In view of the possible tensions in the Central Asian region, and the known facts about the place of women in society and in the management of resources, the Women, Peace and Security Agenda needs to be completed. Adopted by Resolution 1325 in 2000, this agenda aims to promote the role of women in conflict management and peace building. It is based on the recognition that women and girls are the main victims of armed conflict, and that they must be included as actors in the processes of peace and sustainable security. Since 2010, a number of states have adopted national action plans to implement Resolution 1325, but none of the Central Asian states have done so. Yet encouraging women's participation in conflict management in the region is imperative.

In addition, all the resolutions that make up this Agenda do not mention the problems of climate change and the impact that these have on women. In 2022, the United Nations Department of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding (DPPA) published a practice note on the impact of climate change on mediation and peace processes. This document presents an initial intersectional outline, identifying the links between women, peace and security and climate change, and proposing approaches that take account of these intersections when analysing conflicts, public policies and conflict prevention strategies<sup>248</sup>. Central Asia should be able to benefit from dialogues set up by the UN, such as the one organised in April 2022 between the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on climate, peace and security, in order to exchange opportunities

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<sup>244</sup> Interview conducted on June 29 2023 with Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, founder and strategic director of the feminist association FemAgora in Kazakhstan.

<sup>245</sup> Voegele, J. (2023, June 7). Des millions de personnes déplacées : l'incidence du changement climatique sur les migrations internes. Banque mondiale | Blogs. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/fr/voices/des-millions-de-personnes-deplacees-lincidence-du-changement-climatique-sur-les-migrations>

<sup>246</sup> Revert, A. (2022). Au Tadjikistan, le Geres s'engage pour plus de résilience et de meilleures conditions de vie auprès des communautés rurales. Geres. op.cit.

<sup>247</sup> Barsa, M. & Holt-Ivry, O. & Muehlenbeck, A. (2016). Inclusive Ceasefires: Women, gender, and a sustainable end to violence. Inclusive Security. Available at: <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Inclusive-Ceasefires-ISA-paper-Final-3.10.2016.pdf>

<sup>248</sup> UN DPPA (2022, November). *Weathering Two Storms : Gender and Climate in Peace and Security*. op. cit.

for positive climate action to promote peace in the region<sup>249</sup>. This has also led to the organisation of a regional conference on the subject in 2023.

Although international and local organisations are beginning to take an interest in the link between gender, climate and security, these initiatives are still limited in scope in a region where climate disruption will exacerbate existing tensions over resource management.

- > **Adopt the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, and present their national action plan for its implementation.**
- > **Recognise and value the active role of women as actors in the management, prevention and resolution of conflicts, while avoiding victimising them and dispossessing them of their role.**
- > **Collaborate with women leaders in agricultural and water management and local NGOs to develop practical solutions adapted to regional and situational contexts.**
- > **Recognise that gender equality is an essential element in maintaining peace and security within and between states.**
- > **Initiate regional discussions on prevention and adaptation to climate change in order to prevent future conflicts.**

- *Sustainable development goals and emerging awareness: a potential to be exploited*

In Central Asia, various local, national and regional organisations, as well as governments, are gradually taking on board the issues of climate change and the rights of women and girls. Despite the signing of international agreements and the implementation of national water management strategies, non-compliance with these agreements remains a major problem<sup>250</sup>. This situation highlights the need to find sustainable and balanced solutions for water management in Central Asia, in order to prevent future conflicts and guarantee equitable access to this essential resource. This issue is all the more urgent given that a study by the University of Pennsylvania in 2022 predicts that by 2060, the Amu Darya will see its water supply capacity fall by 119%, leading to a shortage of drinking water throughout the region<sup>251</sup>. Various initiatives and dialogues have therefore emerged in recent years, the first steps towards a cross-sectoral approach integrating gender and climate. Guljamal Nurmuhammedova explains: "At basin level, there is the Chu-Talas Water Commission that promotes bilateral co-operation between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and aims to improve access to information by involving stakeholders in the process of river management and by promoting activities for the protection of water ecosystems. Being established in 2005 this commission is always referred to as a success story and ideal model for Central Asia. It operates through the Secretariat presented by KZ and KG teams of experts, both headed by females. For sure, this factor is a significant driver for the Commission's efficiency and success. Also, the efficiency of the Commission's work is largely

<sup>249</sup> UN DPPA (2023). *Factsheet : Climate, Peace and Security*. Available at: [https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/climate\\_peace\\_and\\_security.pdf](https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/climate_peace_and_security.pdf)

<sup>250</sup> Bayou, C. (2019, November 5). L'eau en Asie centrale : un dialogue difficile. REGARD SUR L'EST. Available at: <https://regard-est.com/leau-en-asie-centrale-un-dialogue-difficile>

<sup>251</sup> LaJeunesse, S. (s. d.). Irreversible declines in freshwater storage projected in parts of Asia by 2060. Penn State University. Available at: <https://www.psu.edu/news/earth-and-mineral-sciences/story/irreversible-declines-freshwater-storage-projected-parts-asia-2060/>

dependent on a common vision and understanding of challenges that are important for synergy of authorities/power of governmental institutions, interests of business communities and flexibility & capacity of NGOs<sup>252</sup>”.

The last Women's Dialogue was held in 2022, under the chairmanship of Turkmenistan, on the theme of climate change. This dialogue created a regional platform for exchange, the promotion of gender equality and sustainable solutions for the empowerment of women, the preservation of peace and regional stability. In 2022, this event reaffirmed the role of women in the fight against climate change and the degradation of air and natural resources. The heads of state also discussed the importance of women in achieving the 2030 Agenda MDGs, by guaranteeing equality between women and men and increasing women's participation in public life and in decision-making in the political, economic and social spheres. While this initiative seems to be continuing in Central Asia, with Kazakhstan taking the lead on technology in 2023, such approaches in relation to the SDGs should be encouraged and developed.

In May 2023, the Fifth Central Asian Climate Change Conference (CACCC-2023) was held in Tajikistan, bringing together representatives of the ministries of economic development, environmental protection and ecology, water, agriculture, energy, hydrometeorological services and other line ministries of the Central Asian countries, as well as international organisations, multilateral development banks, young leaders, civil society organisations, environmental services and the private sector, international organisations, multilateral development banks, young leaders, civil society organisations, water and energy utilities and business representatives<sup>253</sup>. The gathering provided an opportunity for a multi-stakeholder discussion on climate mitigation and adaptation measures, as well as possible initiatives to achieve multi-sectoral climate resilience. Participants also learned about the progress and institutional arrangements for implementing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and sectoral strategies at local and national levels, as well as the platforms available for regional cooperation on climate issues<sup>254</sup>. The conference also aims to support national governments and other stakeholders in their coordinated preparations for and participation in COP 28. Finally, this event aims to facilitate the establishment of a community of professionals who will share their knowledge and work together to implement environmental initiatives and projects in Central Asia.

Multi-stakeholder and regional cooperation is required to achieve the SDGs set out in the 2030 Agenda. With Central Asia facing problems of food security, economic inequality, gender inequality and access to clean and safe water, the Agenda is of great importance to the region. It is therefore essential that the countries of Central Asia integrate the 2030 Agenda SDGs into their national strategies and take advantage of the global framework provided by the 17 SDGs to address the region's specific development challenges. Their implementation would enable Central Asia to make significant progress towards a more sustainable and egalitarian future.

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<sup>252</sup> Interview conducted on June 13, 2023 with Guljamal Nurmuhammedova, Global Water Partnership regional coordinator for Central Asia and the Caucasus.

<sup>253</sup> CAREC (s.d.). *Central Asia Climate Change Conference (CACCC 2023)*. Available at: <https://centralasiacclimateportal.org/events/central-asia-climate-change-conference-caccc-2023-2/>

<sup>254</sup> SDGs are at the heart of achieving the long-term objectives of the Paris Agreement. These are the efforts made by each country to reduce its national greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change.

- > **Strengthen regional and cross-border cooperation to address common challenges related to water, energy, the environment and border management.**
- > **Coordinate national and international efforts by building strong partnerships with international organisations, donors and other countries to benefit from expertise, funding and best practice.**
- > **Integrate the SDGs into national development policies and all government decisions and actions to protect natural resources, particularly water, forests and ecosystems.**
- > **Strengthen institutional and technical capacity to effectively implement the SDGs, with a focus on data collection, monitoring and evaluation.**
- > **Advancing the 2030 Agenda by supporting innovative approaches to women's leadership, policy development and civil society development in Central Asia.**
- > **Educate and raise awareness among citizens about the SDGs, emphasising the importance of sustainability, equality, social justice and environmental protection.**
- > **Facilitate the active participation of civil society, the private sector and local communities in the planning, implementation and monitoring of initiatives related to the SDGs.**

# Conclusion



The situation in Central Asia is alarming because of a lack of respect for women's rights, precarious water and food security, a lack of recognition and remuneration for women's essential role in preserving resources, intensifying resource-related tensions and a lack of commitment by the region's countries to sustainable development goals. In addition, the geopolitical context is worrying, marked by tensions between authoritarian states and growing mistrust of Afghanistan, China and Russia. Insecurity, coupled with the economic crisis and climate disruption, can be used as an instrument to reinforce authoritarianism or encourage violence.

In this context, women play an essential role in the current dynamics due to their roles in the water and food security of their communities, possessing specific knowledge of resource management and being at the heart of resource preservation processes. However, they are particularly affected by the consequences of climate change, due to traditional and patriarchal social norms, the increase in gender-based violence and the lack of interest on the part of governments in adopting a gendered perspective to these challenges. In addition, women and girls generally have limited access to education and new technologies, which excludes them from economic and political opportunities, preventing them from taking an active part in resource management decisions. Their land rights are also restricted, and they are excluded from decision-making processes relating to resource management and policy.

It is imperative that Central Asian countries integrate a gender perspective into their sustainable development projects, as well as into peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts. The Central Asian republics must combat systemic gender inequalities and the continuum of violence against women and girls. Training promotes women's competitiveness and their inclusion in decision-making as actors. To achieve this, it must become accessible, inclusive and adapted to women's needs. Management and exchange networks on environmental issues help to combat isolation and promote sustainable, efficient and holistic development. Governments, non-governmental organisations and international players must intervene urgently to prevent the catastrophic climate scenarios that could unfold in the region if contemporary trends are not rectified. It is essential to create a regional dialogue to foster cooperation between the various players at all levels. By building on the actions of women, activists and civil society for sustainable development, we can build a just and sustainable future for Central Asia.



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### Interviews

Interview conducted on May 26, 2023 with Evgueni Jovtis, founder of the Bureau of Human Rights in Kazakhstan.

Interview conducted on May 31, 2023 with Alain Cariou, lecturer in geography at Sorbonne University, specializing in regional development dynamics in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Interview conducted on June 8, 2023 with Cholpon Aitakhunova, regional coordinator for Central Asia and Afghanistan at the Central Asia Youth for Water (CAY4W) and a researcher on water, climate, and security issues in Central Asia at the Collective Leadership Institute.

Interview conducted on June 13, 2023 with Guljamal Nurmuhammedova, regional coordinator for the Global Water Partnership in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Interview conducted on June 28, 2023 with Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, law professor at Narxoz University, feminist and ecofeminist activist.

Interview conducted on June 29, 2023 with Leyla Zuleikha Makhmudova, founder and strategic director of the feminist association FemAgora in Kazakhstan.

Interview conducted on June 29, 2023 with Tatiana Chernobil, human rights lawyer and independent consultant in Almaty, Kazakhstan. She is an expert member of the Coalition of NGOs in Kazakhstan against Torture and serves as a mentor in the training courses of the Soros-Kazakhstan Foundation for young human rights defenders

### Videos

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