

“The notorious achievement of the government in the number of women in senior positions is a very relative success, since the presence of a certain number of women in parliament or in the government does not reflect the real situation of gender inequality in the country, including in terms of women’s participation in politics”, noted Anar Musabaeva, an independent analyst (Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek), in an article written exclusively for the CABAR.

Throughout the history of mankind, women have been a social minority in politics, and they had to fight for their political rights. And today, in most countries of the world, men account for the majority of the political elite, although beginning with the second half of the 20th century, there is a real breakthrough worldwide, characterized by the arrival of women in power and a significant increase in the role of women in decision-making at various levels.

In our society, the debate about women in politics causes more negative reactions than the approval and support. The idea of gender equality has not yet become part of the public consciousness and, moreover, with the strengthening of religious influence, conservatism and traditionalism in society, such ideas and principles are increasingly being questioned. In the context of the degradation of moral values, the decline of education and spiritual culture, it becomes even easier to convince people that gender equality is a foreign concept and is against our culture and mentality. Similar positions generally determine the fact that participation of women in positions of power is perceived as something unnatural and wrong, because stereotypes prescribe an “ideal” woman to remain in the family and the private sphere.

Meanwhile, political power, possessing significant resources of influence, including a monopoly on the enactment of laws and the use of force, determines and controls vital functions of the whole society. Political marginalization of women, who make up at least half of the population in this sense excludes them from decision-making and leaves out of consideration many of the problems and concerns related to not only the lives of the women themselves, but also the society as a whole.

On the eve of Women’s Day, especially taking into account that 2015 is the year of parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, it is impossible to avoid the theme of women’s political representation, women’s participation in power structures and their influence on the situation with the promotion of gender equality in the country.

Is there gender equality in Kyrgyzstan at the level of decision-making? Does the presence of women in high government positions contribute to the improvement of the situation of women in the country? These issues are more relevant than ever on the eve of elections.

Gender equality and “gender insufficiency” [1]?

Kyrgyz Constitution (Article 16, paragraph 4) proclaims the equality of women and men,

which means equality of rights and freedoms and equal opportunities for their realization. A favorite argument of our politicians (especially men) is that gender equality exists in the country at an advanced level, as women are present in higher positions: 21% of members of parliament, 60% of the judges of the Supreme Court, 50% of the Office of the Ombudsman, 33% of members of the Central Election Commission and the Audit Chamber are women. In fact, over the years of independence in Kyrgyzstan, there were adopted important laws that proclaimed gender equality, introduced quotas for women's representation in parliament and municipal representative bodies, women occupy senior positions. In this sense, the situation in Kyrgyzstan does not look so bad. But if we consider the problem of women's political participation deeper, our country has nothing to boast.

Gender equality is promoted in the country yet only through the efforts of civil society and with the help of international organizations. The government is developing programs and policies without backing them up with resources. This applies, of course, not only to gender policies and programs, but the gender policy is particularly lonely, given that the state budget allocated almost no resources for the implementation of the national strategy for gender equality up to 2020, adopted by the government.

A habitual way of execution of gender projects and programs is an appeal to international donors and organizations, including for funding foreign trips of our officials to the hearing reports of our country on the implementation of the country's international commitments on gender equality. It is puzzling why officials from time to time complain that the priorities of the gender policy are formed under the significant influence of international donors and development agencies.

The commitments on gender equality, in general, are implemented by public authorities under the lash, as some annoying duties that should be somehow fulfilled, so that donors would keep giving money for other things. Using the terms of international cooperation, a political principle of ownership in respect of national policies and programs in the field of gender equality has not yet formed in Kyrgyzstan. Certainly, international assistance is needed, and it should be used effectively, but unless the government perceives seriously its own problems in ensuring gender equality and starts to allocate resources from the budget, programs or strategies are not necessary.

There are many problems in the country in the field of gender equality, including discrimination in the workplace, almost pandemic violence in the family and in society, lack of economic opportunities for women, unequal access to resources, etc. Even the notorious achievement of the government in the number of women in senior positions is a very relative success, since the presence of a certain number of women in parliament or in the government does not reflect the real situation of gender inequality in the country, including in terms of women's participation in politics.

Women in power

Except for a few people, the majority of women-members of Parliament of the existing convocation did not propose any significant legislative initiative, did not support any laws that would improve the status of women.

Sometimes there have been cases of initiation by women MPs of bills, far from progressive, that instead of protecting and promoting the rights of women, in fact, deprived women of legal personality through substituting concepts. Having such an important rostrum like Parliament, many women-MPs did everything possible, but the advancement of women. Any special solidarity with ordinary average women was not observed either, except for certain populist moments.

Now, against the backdrop of the forthcoming elections to the national parliament, politicians have become more active, including women. Some are more likely to appear on television, while others are talking about some grandiose events, someone is preparing a ground for the elections in political parties. It is natural in our country, when only before elections, politicians are beginning to fuss and do something about it, but they do it in the first place for themselves, in order to build political points for attracting its potential electorate.

The question of whether it is possible to ensure that a greater number of women in power is accompanied by the advancement of women and the achievement of gender balance is not idle. The question arises whether the struggle to improve women's position in politics makes sense, if it does not in any way affect the improvement of the situation of most women. Activists of gender movements and gender experts often point to the fact that women's representation in the highest echelons of power in Kyrgyzstan does not hold up to 30%, as required by the quota. Referring to the findings of serious research, they argue that the societies, in which women constitute at least one-third at important positions, are more stable, and the government is social-oriented. In fact, there are examples of such countries, for example Scandinavian countries.

In fact, women in Kyrgyzstan do not get their quota in parliament. At the local level, despite the global trends of increasing women's representation in local government, there are even fewer women. According to the results of the 2012 elections in local government, women made up less than 16%. These facts of representation of women in positions of power require further action by all supporters of gender equality. Women-politicians are talking about these facts, trying to attract the female electorate.

But the problem of women's participation in politics and the impact of their participation in the advancement of women, leveling of gender differences and the promotion of gender equality is much more complicated.

Stereotypes and CHALLENGES of gender balance IN POWER structures

The problem of women's participation in decision-making does not lie in the phrase: "the more women in politics, the better". This is a too simplified stereotype, just like a stereotype

that women make policies always constructive, that women have a special spirituality and peace-loving nature, they are socially oriented and less prone to corruption.

There are amateurs and dilettantes, careerists and corrupt among both women and men in politics. The problem is the lack of adequate conditions for the arrival of women in politics, in other words, inequality of opportunity in politics.

Although in the current parliament, there is working a perfectly acceptable number of women, it is difficult to say that they are doing a good and quality work, not to mention the fact that they have little impact on reducing gender inequality in the country. Flaws of our existing political system creates the possibility of coming into the power not on the principles of fair political competition, not on the basis of merit in the community, professional or leadership skills, intellectual and personal qualities. Unfortunately, the lack of merit-based approach to promoting women in power (and, actually, men, too) does not strengthen the position of women, and on the other hand, discredits the idea of gender balance in politics.

The electorate has a very limited choice to support women, dictated by political party leaders, who are usually men. And party leaders, too, often have their pragmatic calculations on the inclusion of women in their party lists. In addition, there are many ways to “get rid” of women after the elections and even after they receive the deputy mandate. The opportunities of women’s getting in power and in big politics are associated with many difficulties. First of all, I mean the mental problems of traditional society. This is about the stereotypes about the inferiority of women in politics or their susceptibility to exclusively social policy areas. These cultural norms that feed sexism in politics and forgive men behavior that cannot be forgiven for women politicians. Due to existing stereotypes, society prefers to support the participation of men but not women in politics, women are not capable of assuming public office, think strategically and objectively address the security of the state and other serious problems.

The problem of mental stereotypes can be addressed inter alia through the development of gender awareness, especially in the academic environment, followed by promotion to the entire population. But along this way, there are many challenges as the country lacks a critical mass of researchers on gender issues, including examining the participation of women in the political process, the role of women in politics, etc. Even more important challenge is to explain to ordinary women the essence of gender equality in the language they understand.

Given that most of the gender experts do their research with the support of international organizations, the prevailing political situation hysteria about Western agents creates a risk that the existing achievements in the field of public education on gender issues may be suppressed by the efforts of a growing number of supporters of the conservative traditionalist values.

Another important issue is a problem of creating a managerial and political elite. This is definitely a common problem, and it concerns not only women, but also men. A huge factor in this context is a factor of education.

Women in our society are generally more educated than men. Both in school and in high school, female representatives learn better, get higher grades, including mathematics, physics, chemistry, drawing and other subjects that are traditionally considered “masculine”. But, paradoxically, all this potential in the future cannot be realized or realized only partially. This happens for many reasons, including because of stereotypes, cultural norms that restrict career growth of most women.

Important mechanisms for the creation of the administrative staff in such a situation might be channels of non-formal education. In the past, there were attempts to organize various schools of women’s leadership, but those efforts were fragmented and not systematic, since their resistance was largely dependent on financial support from donors. Another problematic aspect is the low impact of such informal schools in the absence of synchronous support from the state, which is not a mechanism that would combine the efforts of civil society with government programs for training women cadres. In addition, there is always the danger that any good idea in our society may become a victim of corruption.

Meritocratic approach by which women would come to power and would become Ministers and parliament deputies, could serve as a model for many women, suggesting that nothing is impossible for women to participate in politics. However, the image of a majority of today’s women politicians in all branches of government is not so positive, since there is the perception of processes of their coming to power positions as biased, corrupt, based on the availability of financial and other resources, related to regional belonging, social networking and clan ties.

Another important issue related to women in politics is the lack of effective organizational models in the politics to enable the development of women as active subjects of political activity. For example, there are very limited channels of recruitment of women cadres through the institution of political parties. The existing political parties in Kyrgyzstan are quasi-parties, because they have no clear program and clear set of values and social base. Probably, it will not be a mistake to claim that more than 95% of the existing (including those existing on paper) political parties are headed by men, and male monopoly on senior positions and positions in political parties is almost unshakeable. The experience of creating women’s parties in the past proved to be unsuccessful. Women are accepted to “male” parties only because of the formal compliance with the law, creating an image of a modern political party, for reasons of the need to mobilize financial and other resources to support the campaign, to ensure organizational work with which women cope well. In other words, women are used as a resource, but their political subjectivity is of inferior importance for the leaders of the party.

Non-profit organizations, including women's NGOs, became the school of leadership for some past and present members of parliament and government officials. But if we take as a whole, the women's movement in Kyrgyzstan, despite all its visible success in promoting gender equality, it is fragmented, and it is difficult to move towards more serious consolidation. I doubt the ability of growing new women leaders from within the local women's movement. The women's movement in Kyrgyzstan, represented by NGOs and women's networks, unfortunately, is getting "older" and more and more marginalized. On the one hand, it is a problem of the women's movement itself, which has failed to provide a large influx of young people in their movement, supporting the idea of gender equality. The decreased level of education of young people and the general degradation of human potential play a major role in this. It is important to note that there is a strengthening role of religion in the socialization of the younger generation. So, women's organizations and groups become more prominent acting under the aegis of the so-called religious and traditional values.

On the other hand, the weakness of the women's movement to a certain extent is connected with the policy of the government, which does not provide support for women's organizations, even those that serve to protect the rights of women and provide social support to women and children. And during the last two years, there has been intensively formed a negative image of NGOs in public opinion as biased ideas of the West, which certainly has a negative impact on women's organizations.

Another problem hindering the development of women leaders through a 'natural' meritocratic way is gender inequality in the economy, particularly in access to material resources. It's no secret that in the Scandinavian countries, which are among the most advanced countries in the field of gender equality, the progress in improving women's political representation has been made possible thanks to the dynamic development of the market economy, combined with state regulation of the social sphere of the state. Scandinavian experience shows that the country's economic development and the related significant improvement in socio-economic status of women, the emergence of the conditions for economic emancipation of women have facilitated the entry of women into politics and public space. In Kyrgyzstan, the issues of improving economic opportunities for women were mainly aimed at vulnerable groups and for a long time have been the responsibility of international organizations that have implemented various microcredit projects, distributed seeds and trained women in various types of income-generating activities. The effectiveness and efficiency of these projects can be argued. But in this case, it is important to note that the work with vulnerable women is important, but it does not create conditions for economic emancipation of women. To enhance women's political participation and women's entry into the space of politics and decision-making, along with the development of mechanisms for the participation of women in political and non-political

institutional structures (political parties, trade unions, municipalities, federations of employers), it is also necessary to enhance the participation of women in the market to develop high-quality employment and average class. It is economic freedom and economic emancipation of women in the critical mass that will allow them to advance in politics at the national and local levels.

All the above problems are the challenge for the coming to power of new women leaders. If we analyze the current situation, we can see that on the eve of the parliamentary elections, only those women intensified their work, who are already present in high politics or have previously held high positions in the government. Therefore, it can be predicted with high probability that in the elections of 2015, we will not see a large number of new female names.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

Summarizing, we can say that the problems of women's political participation and strengthening the representation of women in senior government bodies include various aspects: improvement of legislation, control over the implementation of norms of constitutional law on gender equality at the level of decision-making in the first place by the Parliament and the General Prosecutor's Office - this is one of the important areas for change. This is all the more important that in 2014, there have been introduced changes in the law on local self-government and the status of deputies of local councils regarding the impossibility of combining the mandate of the deputy of the local council with leadership positions in municipal and state authorities. These changes have a negative impact on the representation of active and talented women in decision-making at the local level. At the rhetorical level, supporting the principles of gender equality, the government immediately creates various obstacles to increase women's political participation.

Another equally important aspect is management training, and monitoring of compliance with the law on gender equality in the field of personnel policy. Unless there are established and really working mechanisms for meritocratic advancement of women in politics, it is difficult to expect any major changes. Background factors, of course, are the issues of improving the quality of education in general, including management training at least in existing training institutions for state and municipal employees.

Implementation of laws in Kyrgyzstan is always a key challenge to the country's development, but it is even more difficult to promote gender balance in decision-making having the issues of mental attitudes in society, stereotypes, cultural norms that serve as a barrier to full participation of the women in politics.

Given the trend of increased conservative traditionalist views, it is important to understand that there is a struggle between the ways and methods of socialization of citizens, first of all, of youth. The outcome of this struggle largely determines whether Kyrgyzstan will follow a democratic way declared in laws, one of the principles of which is gender equality, or it

will support traditionalist values.

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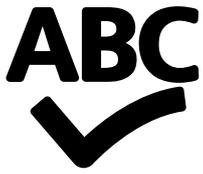
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[1] The term is borrowed from the title of the article “Gender insufficiency”

[Гендерная недостаточность] Interview with Aivazova S. Source:

<http://www.politjournal.ru/index.php?action=Articles&dirid=200&tek=5276&issue=149> ,

March 2006.



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