

Kyrgyzstan

A community approach to combating gender-based violence

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →

Harmful practices such as forced marriage are illegal in Kyrgyzstan, yet they remain widespread. Such practices have serious consequences for the lives of young girls and their communities, as they perpetuate gender-based violence at home and in the community. UN Women joined forces with HelpAge and its local partners in 2018 to tackle forced marriage in Kyrgyzstan through a project called Across Generations and Gender Borders – Communities Combating Gender-Based Violence, funded mostly by the European Union with a budget of 840,000 euros.

The project worked with community groups and organised creative activities to bring generations together. These activities were complemented by gender equality training and capacity building, using an established Gender Action Learning System (GALS) →. The project was well-received by younger and older people alike. It gave them the opportunity to share each other's challenges, values and aspirations, by discussing issues and doing activities together.

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What problem or issue did the project address?

Despite being a criminal offence, early and forced marriage (also known as ‘bride kidnapping’) is still common in Kyrgyzstan, especially in rural areas (the legal age for marriage is 18 years). This is due to deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, pervasive gender stereotypes and harmful social norms. Fear of stigma, shame, and fear of parents and elders means that girls are unable to reject such a marriage. They often end up living in misery. Older people have significant influence over marriage arrangements, because culturally they are regarded as decision makers, and thus deserving of respect from young people. The root causes of early and forced marriage are complex. If they are to be successfully challenged, they need to be explored across the generations – both with the young people (boys and girls) who may be directly involved, and the older people who condone or support the practice without questioning its consequences. The project in Kyrgyzstan aimed to build bridges between generations and between boys and girls, men and women, to highlight the consequences of this harmful practice. Tackling it head-on involved getting older people, men and women, to reflect on their own experiences – namely, whether they themselves had been victims or perpetrators of this type of gender-based violence.

What did the project aim to do?

The project aimed to change people’s behaviour across generations and reduce the incidence of gender-based violence. It was implemented by HelpAge in partnership with UN Women and Agents of Change from 2018 to 2020.

How did the project work?

The project set up intergenerational groups in 16 communities, which served as ‘task forces’, carrying out activities to raise awareness within each community about early and forced marriage, and advocate against this harmful practice. Each group had around 14 members, with a good gender and age balance. Group members received training on how to use the UN Women Gender Action Learning System. This enabled them to become more aware of the negative impacts of forced marriage and violence on girls and young women, and the broader impacts of the harmful practice on community cohesion.

HelpAge applied an innovative intergenerational approach by bringing together young people and older people through the intergenerational groups, to promote communication and mutual learning. They worked together to address the cycle of violence, capitalising on the largely untapped resources of both age groups to inform and drive the planned behaviour change interventions in their local communities.

The intergenerational groups carried out various community outreach activities to combat gender-based violence such as training sessions, master classes (see below), public campaigns, lectures in schools, and meetings with local authorities. This kind of intergenerational communication has proved useful both for young people, who can acquire new experience and knowledge, and for older people, who begin to hear the harms that forced marriage and gender-based violence inflict.

In the master classes, older people (members of the intergenerational groups) taught younger people how to cook national dishes, how to farm, tend livestock, harvest, and make handicrafts. The classes provided an opportunity for people across the generations to learn new skills. Younger people taught older people how to use a computer, mobile phone and ATM (cashpoint), for example. Boys and girls, men and women were equally involved in all activities. They were not limited



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to activities that were traditionally viewed as male or female.

The intergenerational groups also organised fun competitions such as ‘The best father-in-law’, ‘Mothers and daughters’, ‘Fathers and sons’. Group members performed short plays illustrating the negative consequences of bride kidnapping and early marriage, presented in a simple and direct way to the audience. These activities allowed for discussions between younger people and older people outside of the usual situations (at home), where traditional social norms and power relations prevail. Instead, the activities took place in public, and allowed participants and their audiences to reflect on things in a light-hearted and fun way. For example, some of those involved in the project noted, anecdotally, that doing activities together opened the eyes of mothers-in-law who had been abusing their daughters-in-law – prompting them to ‘see’ them as individuals rather than simply a commodity (bride) brought into the family. Monitoring and evaluation of activities found that intergenerational groups also helped to prevent cases of gender-based violence in their communities.

What changes did the project achieve?

Members of the intergenerational groups noted a decrease in incidence of gender-based violence during the project, which they believed was due to raising people's awareness and informing them about criminal liability for forced marriage and other harmful practices. Some forced marriages were even averted when group members confronted the families involved and explained about the punishment for breaking the law.

The groups' activities also increased dialogue and sharing of experiences between the generations. A social worker from Adyr village explained that:

“Older people from our intergenerational group held master classes on cooking national dishes for young people. I like such a creative approach, when young people not only gain experience and skills in national crafts and traditions, but also raise awareness of the negative consequences of forced marriage. It is necessary for the residents of our village and especially schoolchildren. During master classes, older women also shared their experience of marriage and discussed family relationships.”

The intergenerational groups also worked with local authorities, including the police, to raise their awareness of forced marriage and encourage them to do more preventive work. The media helped to expose the problem and put more pressure on officials to act. The groups also worked with community-based organisations such as Elderly/Aksakal courts and women's councils.

Activities were open to all members of the communities taking part. Some men grasped the opportunity and changed their attitude towards their children and spouse – for example, being less strict and doing some household chores, which they would not have done previously. These men realised the benefits of this change in attitude as family tensions eased somewhat, and more harmonious relationships replaced fear and resentment. As one man explained:

“Previously, I did not help my wife with the housework, and childcare was completely on her shoulders. Now we are doing everything together, and I try to help her as much as possible, especially in raising children. Previously, I did not let her go anywhere, but now I realised that this was unfair, and changed my attitude. I myself invited my wife to join the intergenerational group.”

Some men talked to neighbours and other villagers, acting as role models for changes in attitudes and behaviours. Many activities (such as talks and lectures) took place in schools with children and teachers, especially where the head of the village was an active member of the intergenerational group. Although monitoring and evaluation reported impacts on individuals and their families, it is not clear if there were changes in attitudes and behaviour more broadly, at the community or national level.

Another reported change was that young women who were members of the intergenerational groups became more confident, and some even became successful group leaders. Three young women from the intergenerational groups became deputies in local parliaments, while others have become involved in other projects run by different organisations.

What worked well?

The project applied a community-led intergenerational approach to prevent and respond to gender-based violence across the life course. It supported communication and mutual learning between generations and enabled older and younger people to challenge harmful social norms, attitudes and behaviours. The GALS approach proved effective in transforming social norms, and was an important complement to the project's more artistic and entertaining group activities. The interactions between younger and older people were based on the principle that they share and use each other's skills; this levelled off any power dynamics without creating tensions based on social hierarchies. With this sensitivity, the concept of intergenerational groups was well thought through, well-recognised and – most importantly – accepted and adopted by communities. The groups met regularly (usually monthly) and each participant had a role to play to ensure that the group ran smoothly.

At the end of the project, some intergenerational groups chose to register as community-based organisations (*jamaats*). This would give them stability and a more official status, and make them less dependent on donor funding. With other locally organised groups, these intergenerational groups continue to work to reduce gender-based violence in their communities. They are also tackling other related issues such as income-generation – for example, helping families to develop a business plan to increase their income, recognising the link between economic vulnerability and violence.



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What could be done differently?

Challenges faced by the project included the amount of time needed to set up activities, and their scheduling. It took longer to set up the groups than expected, especially during the summer, when younger people were on holiday or busy with summer jobs. By contrast, older people had a lot more free time, and this was not factored into the planning process. This type of project also takes a lot of resources to set up, and it can be difficult to find staff with the right skills and training to facilitate groups and deal with any potential behaviour issues.

It is really important, in the intergenerational approach, to establish parity in participation. In this case, the older people in the groups initially dominated, while younger people were very mindful of the norm that old people must be listened to and respected. Recruiting members for the groups and taking part in group activities takes time, and it is vital that prospective group members understand the level of commitment required of them and feel passionate about the issue the group aims to tackle. Many projects neglect the inception and setting up phases, which are critical. Likewise, the process of designating leaders – or vetting self-nominated leaders – can heavily influence the project's chances of success or failure. It takes a considerable amount of time and care to build trust among all group members, so that they feel they are a coherent unit, respecting each other.



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What can we learn from this project?

- **Shifting entrenched social norms that have negative impacts on certain groups takes time and requires ongoing dialogue between generations. By promoting interaction between generations, the project enabled older people to realise that they can benefit from hearing about younger people's views and experiences, and even encourage younger people to challenge them and bring different perspectives, while maintaining mutual respect.**
- **When younger and older people spend time together doing a range of activities (cooking, learning digital skills, etc.), this can improve relationships, understanding and mutual respect. When working across the generations, artistic forms of expression (such as acting or singing) can complement more formal means of talking about issues and sharing experiences.**
- **The project in Kyrgyzstan achieved a number of positive outcomes – not least the realisation that early and forced marriage is harmful for adolescent girls and young women but also their families and communities. It also promoted the importance of mutual learning and nurturing. The fact that some of the intergenerational groups continued after the project ended indicates that the project built a sense of community ownership through its activities. The groups that are continuing also have the option to extend their remit to tackle other issues that affect the community.**
- **Raising awareness of the law, and initiating dialogue within families and communities, can support efforts to enforce policies or laws that promote and uphold people's rights.**
- **Intergenerational groups must be set up in consultation with the local community. Ask if they want such a group, create interest in the group, and identify committed members who genuinely want to create change. Identifying one common problem or priority can unite people to work towards common solutions.**

This case study is one in a series of ten, produced in connection with HelpAge's guide, ***Bringing generations together for change*** →, published in collaboration with Restless Development and in support of the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

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