

WEAVING RESILIENCE

WOMEN-
ENTREPRENEURS,
AESTHETICS, AND
TRADITIONAL
CREATIVE PRACTICES
IN KYRGYZSTAN.

Elena Kolesova, UCA







“Creative class” paradigm and creative industry (orange economy)

Based on Florida’s (2002) “creative class” paradigm, ‘creatives’ are talented individuals, that can be artists, craftsmen/craftswomen, and anyone that produces artistic goods and services.

Creative industry encompasses an array of cultural creative goods and services from architectural design and performing arts to film, photography, fashion, crafts, music and video games.



Creative Industry

According to UN estimates, “the cultural and creative industries account for 3.1% of global GDP and 6.2% of employment worldwide.

The creative economy industries generate annual revenues of over \$2 trillion and account for nearly 50 million jobs worldwide.

About half of these workers are women, and these industries employ more people ages 15-29 than any other sector”

(Petrova, V. 2024).



Creative Industry in Central Asia

Fashion, design & crafts – 38%

Contemporary art – 17.5%

Television, radio, new media and digital culture –
15.5%

Advertising -13.5%

Shows & public events -12.4 %

Groundbreaking steps in the orange economy in Central Asia,
(2024).



Creative Industry in Kyrgyzstan

- Creative industries account for 1% of the country's GDP - \$US 140 million US dollars.
- About 50,000 people are employed in creative economy. The share of women is estimated at about 41%.
- The highest numbers of women are involved in the arts, entertainment and recreation sector (50%)

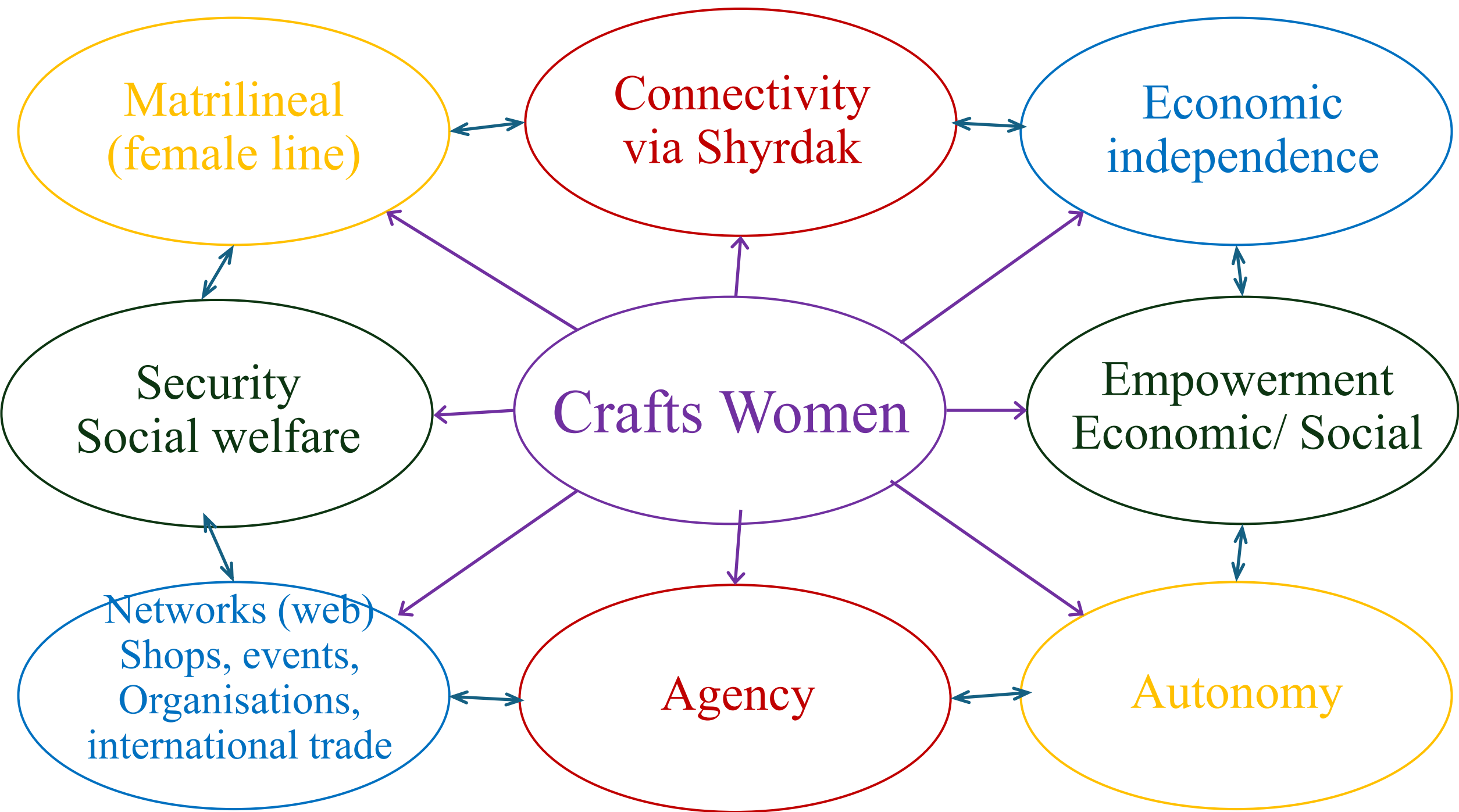
(Groundbreaking steps in the orange economy in Central Asia, 2024 & Ministry of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic).





Webs of significance

- According to Clifford Geertz, **"[b]elieving, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning"** (Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretations of Cultures*. Basic Book. P.5)



Saadagul Sadykova

(Kochkor village)

“In the early 1990s people struggled to find food; the economy collapsed. Plants and factories stopped working. Nothing worked. Social welfare didn’t exist. People stopped receiving salary. We had to find the way to survive.”



Sairakul Kuipulova (Kochkor village)

- “After the collapse of the Soviet Union I came to work to Altyn Kol (Golden Hands) from desperation. I was a nurse, but we stopped receiving our salaries. It was extremely hard. Nothing worked. I had to find the way to feed my family”.





Connecting via Shyrdak

“At first ten women joined our first cooperative.

Many had lost their jobs and desperately were looking for ways to feed their families. Our first financial contribution was 25 som.

We used the collected money to buy wool. In 1990s it was very hard to find wool. Chinese businessmen were buying wool in bulk as it was much more profitable for producers.

Just imagine the irony, we produce excellent wool in Kyrgyzstan but could not buy it because our people had to sell it to Chinese.”

Burulkan Tologonova, Naryn



Networks (web) shops, events, international trade

“A Swizz couple came to Kochkor in the 1990s to teach our people how to grow potatoes. Someone told me to show them my shyrdak. They loved it.

They ordered 200 narrow shyrdak the size 60 cm x 120 cm. We involved women from five northern regions including At-Bashi, Jambul, Ak Talin, Naryn and Kochkor. The Swiss people loved what we made.

This is how our Public Association of Artisans Altyn Kol was born. Soon after we were invited in Bishkek to attend exhibitions. We brought large shyrdaks and sold all of them. Soon we had another exhibition for diplomats & embassy staff. They bought shyrdaks as presents to take home.”

Sairagul Kuipulova



Empowerment Economic/ Social

“Receiving the status of *Intangible Cultural Heritage* from UNESCO helped craftswomen to feel their importance, first, as custodians of Kyrgyz national heritage.

Second, it also helped a lot in marketing crafts products.

Third, it also raised the value of arts and crafts for our politicians as these people usually don't care about our culture, they care about their own careers. However, including our traditional arts and crafts on the UNESCO List helped to elevate its importance.... elevating our traditional cultural heritage”

Dinara Chochunbaeva



Autonomy

“State does not help us. Often it is quite the opposite. Today, for example, I received a message from the government authorities asking to help our disabled. We usually help by buying food and give some *teshek* (blankets).”

My dream is to expand our workshop to 20 places. I also need to make it warmer. Without heating we can only work there for 6 months a year as the rest is simply too cold. I experienced real hardship, and I know how to find a solution. I’ll find the way.”

Nazira Moldalieva





AGENCY



Matrilineal (female line)

“When my mother was making her shyrdak, she did not use any patterns to draw clear lines. I learnt from her as I grew up. Shyrdak making skills always transfer from the old generation to the young generation.

Ala-kiyiz making was more natural to me. Mum always criticised my work that my pattern or lines are not clear.”

Nurzat Jeenbek Kyzy speaking about her mother Jambyu Karybekova



“It is true that my pattern was softer. But I prefer soft style of painting rather than graphic. Mother criticised my first work saying that it doesn’t look like shyrdak. But I continued to develop my own style.

People were coming to buy shyrdak made by my mother but were leaving with my ala-kiyiz or shyrdak. Mum was saying: “What did they found in your work?”

Nurzat Jeenbek Kyzy





Preliminary conclusions

Developing traditional arts and crafts help Kyrgyz women reinvent themselves and challenge customary gender roles/expectations, especially in rural regions.

Through the emerging networks of mutual support, women are able to connect/communicate with each other, establishing a business web which extends to international markets.

At the same time, they develop a safety net that provides social welfare/protection, that does not exist in their society.

Following Clifford Geertz, humans create the web of significance. Women are the net makers who create visible and invisible pathways - from traditional shyrdak and craft making in the private sphere to the public capitalist economy, and empower themselves through this complex process.