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Women in independent Kyrgyzstan: from the *shuttle trade* to the *digital era*

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Fieldtrip findings



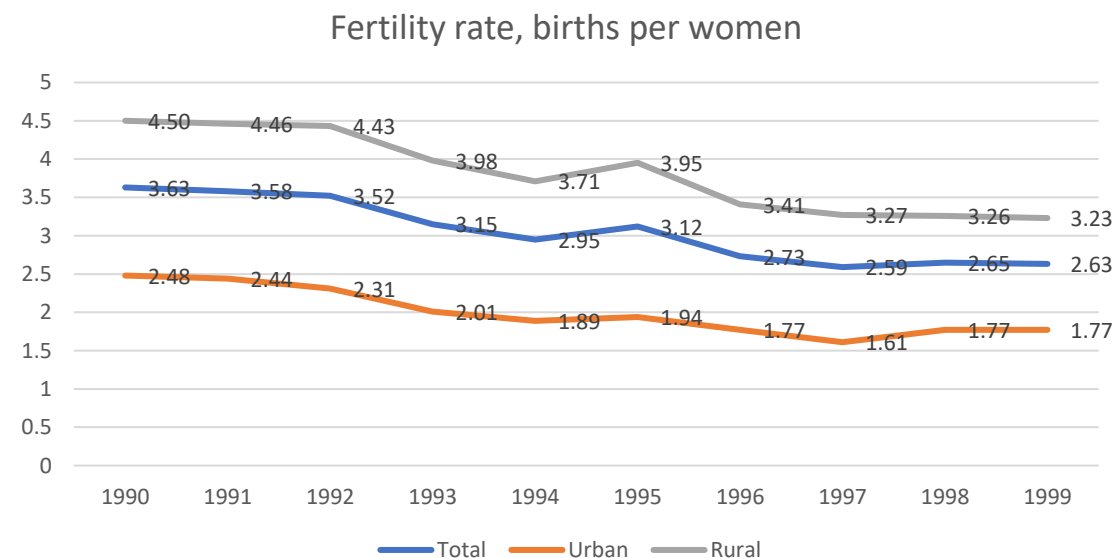
A joint research project 'Post Pandemic Societies in Inner Asia (PPIA)' involving:

- University of Oxford,
- Kagoshima University,
- University of Central Asia,
- National University of Mongolia



From poverty to the shuttle trade (1991 – 1999):

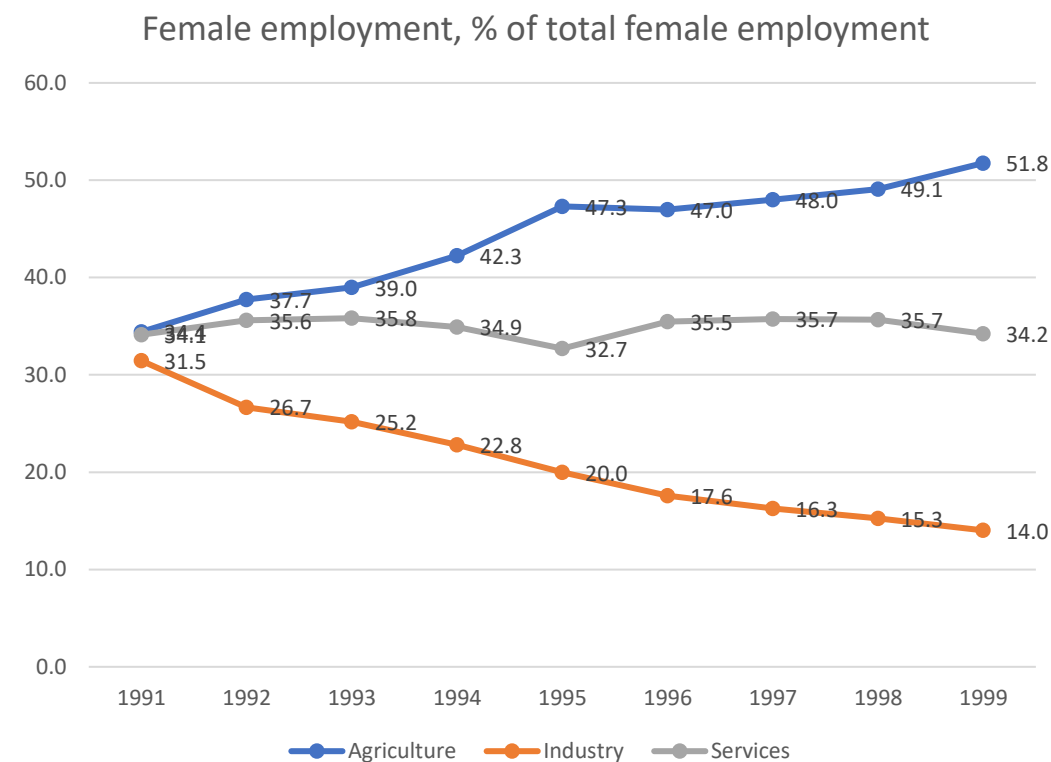
- Public well-being and official figures showed that nearly 10 percent of children were chronically hungry;
- The closure of nearly two-thirds of public kindergartens deprived many economically active women of key child welfare support that enabled them to work outside the home;
- During 1989 – 1998 the decline in population due to migration loss comprised around 9 percent or 381,000 thousand people, with 60 percent leaving for Russia and 15 percent leaving the newly formed Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS);
- After the Union's collapse and experiencing hard financial times, women of the Kyrgyz Republic started giving birth less



Source: National Statistic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

From poverty to the shuttle trade (1991 – 1999):

- In 1991, 19.8 percent of men were employed in the industrial sector, but this had declined to 8.4 percent by 1999. Similarly, the proportion of female employees in the industrial sector in 1991 was 31.5 percent, and in 1999 this number had fallen to 14 percent;
- In 1999 more than 53 percent of men and 51 percent of women were occupied in agriculture;
- At the end of the 1990s, the agricultural sector experienced a large-scale land reform when collective farms were restructured and private ownership of land was recognized;



Source: World Bank data



From poverty to the shuttle trade (1991 – 1999):

- In the early 1990s a dramatic trade expansion occurred;
- By 1996, the number of people involved in trade activities had doubled to 159,600;
- Kyrgyzstan's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1998 (being the first former Soviet country to join), as well as its formative liberal trade regime – ensured minimal tariffs on Chinese imports as China then joined the WTO in 2001;
- It enabled not only to import Chinese commodities but facilitated re-export to neighbouring countries and this in turn led to the massive development of two bazaars, Dordoi and Kara-Suu;
- According to early rough estimations, 58 percent of sellers in Dordoi and 50 percent of sellers in Kara-Suu were women;
- In the late 1990s, the sewing industry became another source of the Kyrgyz industrial sector growth - the majority of the employed in the informal garment sector were women



From poverty to the shuttle trade (1991 – 1999):

- The so-called shuttle traders (*chelnoki*) who came to Kyrgyzstan from the neighbouring countries, mainly from Kazakhstan and Russia, were mostly women as well. Being involved into **informal shuttle trade**, women were under the risk of being exposed to any form of violation and/or robbery as at border crossing points or on the road. At the same time, this form of activity allowed them to earn money, very often being the only breadwinners in their families that might be assumed as women empowerment, however, according to some studies, for numerous women, working in the trade industry was perceived as a decline in their social status;

From poverty to the shuttle trade (1991 – 1999):

In memory of those difficulties that *chelnoki* experienced, the shuttle traders' monument was installed at the entrance of Dordoi market in 2018. The composition includes monument of a man and two women with the checkered bags, which became the symbol of shuttle trade in the 90s.

Dordoi's President, A. Salymbekov, noted that **thanks to female shuttle traders** the economy of Kyrgyzstan was out of collapse in the 90s.

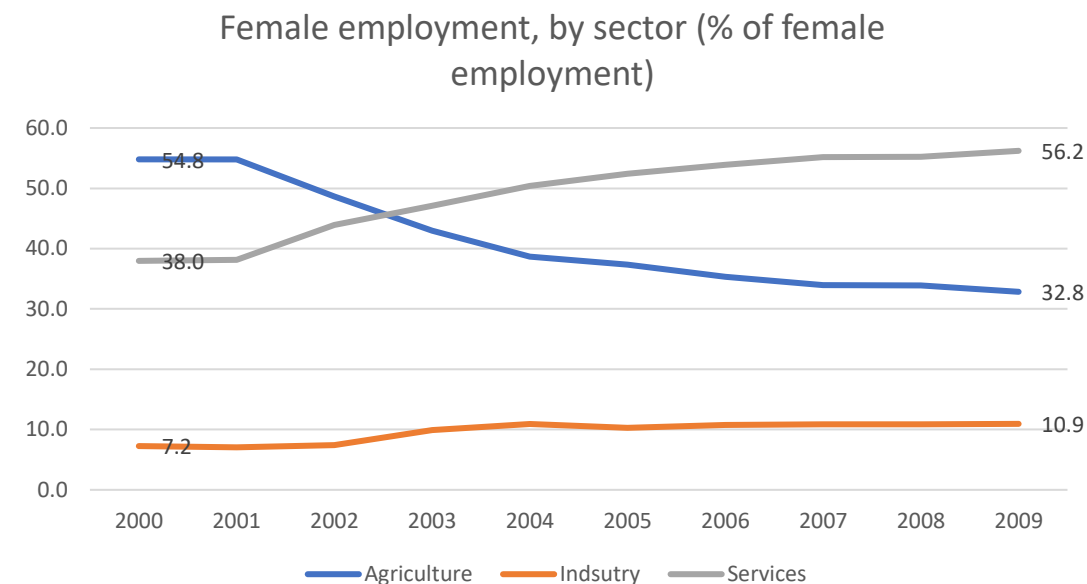


Source: IA 'Vestnik'



‘Life becomes easier’ (2000 – 2010):

- Despite the active involvement of women into the labour force in 2000s, its share had been slightly declining within the observed period and reached 43 percent in 2009;
- Involvement of women in agriculture, being the highest in 2000 (54.8 percent of female employment), gradually reduced and reached 32.8 percent in 2009. The significant proportion of women started working in the services sector, 38 percent in 2008 against 56.2 percent in 2009;

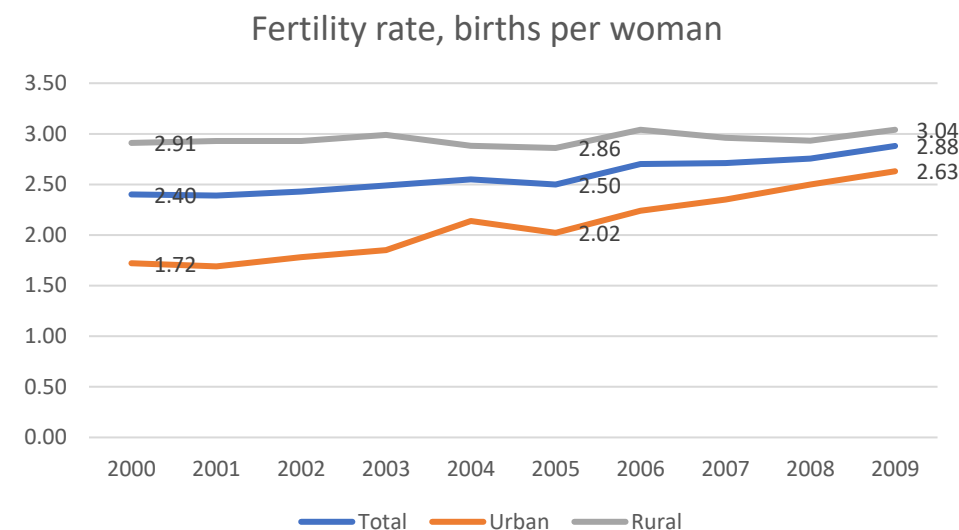


Source: World Bank



‘Life becomes easier’ (2000 – 2010):

- Along with the growth of the fertility rate, the country experienced the rise of the maternity and infant mortality that decade;
- According to WHO, the levels of maternal, infant and child mortality are the most sensitive indicators in assessing both the quality of medical services provided and the socio-economic level of development of the country;
- Almost 80 percent of maternal deaths occurred in rural areas;
- The official authorities linked the rise in infant mortality since 2004 to Kyrgyzstan's adoption of World Health Organization criteria for live births, which includes registering the deaths of infants with low birth weight and additional signs of life. And according to NSC, from 2005 to 2007, the increase in infant mortality was primarily due to the country's transition to these new criteria, as healthcare institutions worked to adapt their systems for recording newborn deaths accordingly.



Source: NSC KR



‘Life becomes easier’ (2000 – 2010):

- Since the 2000s, the migration outflow took another shape. If earlier people were leaving Kyrgyzstan for permanent residential, then these times people moved for labour migration to earn money and come back;
- Money sent by migrants to their relatives in Kyrgyzstan caused the unemployment and poverty rates reduction – thus, during 2000-2006 the value of money receipts as result of labour migration was so large that it exceeded foreign investments;
- Almost 40 percent of Kyrgyz migrants in Russian Federation were women in 2019;
- Migrant women work primarily in the service sector, catering, textiles, and as domestic workers. The majority of them work in the informal employment sector for more than 10 hours a day and have limited access to social protection services;
- Women from Central Asia were found to be the most vulnerable group: they endure the worst living conditions and face major problems in terms of gaining access to medical services, yet they send home the largest portion of their salaries as remittance



‘Life becomes easier’ (2000 – 2010):

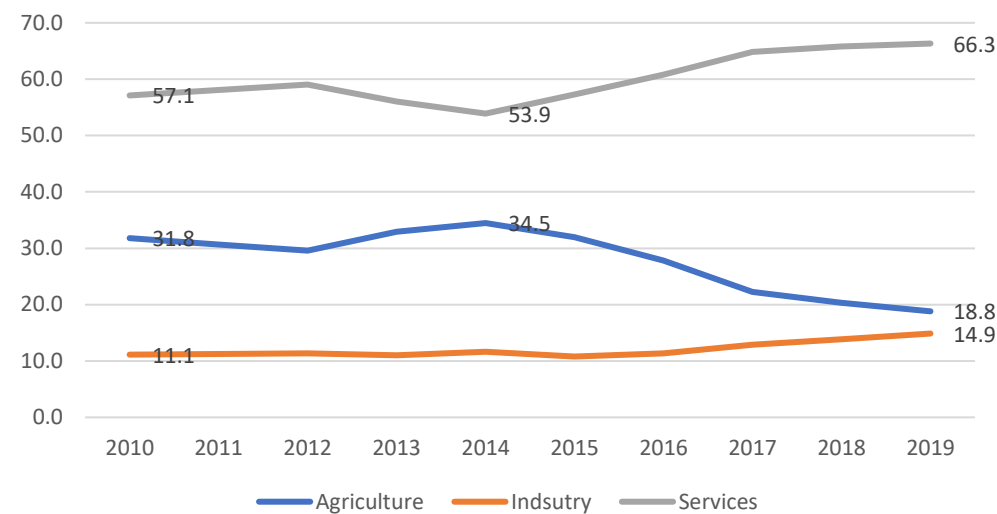
- Challenges that women meet in Kyrgyzstan create an incentive to migrate. Rural women meet obstacles in equal access to land ownership, financial capital, equipment, microfinance, they have lower level of knowledge in agriculture, and all these limit women’ productivity in agriculture.
- Urban women migrate because of better employment opportunities and higher payment for their labour abroad. Some reports state that rural and urban women try to escape from gendered vulnerabilities at home, including forced marriage, domestic violence, bride kidnapping.
- One of the main reasons of migrants’ return are pressure from family to return, job loss, COVID-19 restrictions, and its impact on local economy;
- Some studies mention that psychological stress and health issues are the main difficulties experienced by returning migrants. Especially, this matters women as communities characterize unmarried female migrants as less attractive candidates for marriage;
- At the same time, migration can have a positive effect on divorced women via opening economic possibility to separate their household from the extended parental household.



Modern era: digital technologies (2010 – 2019):

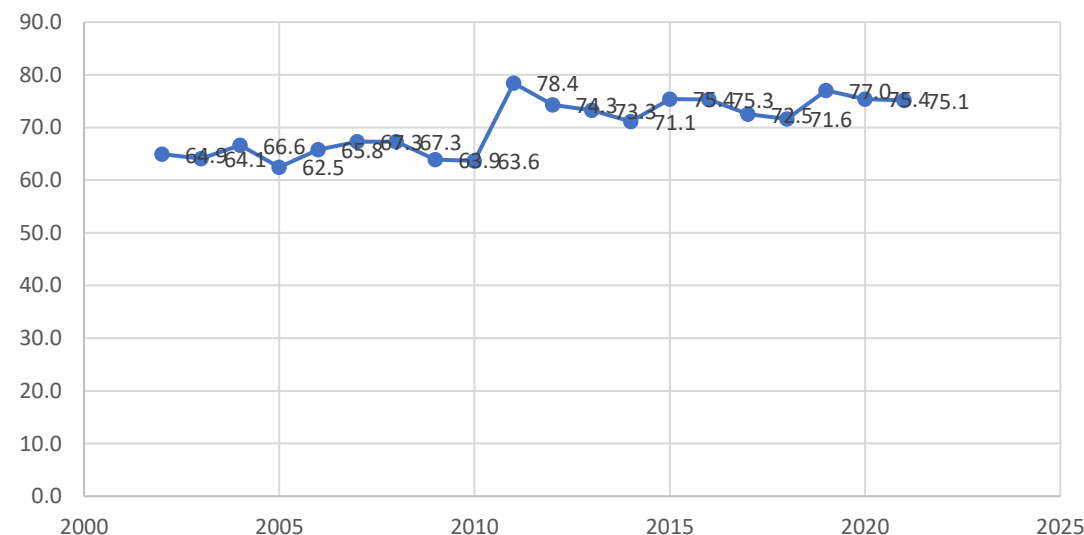
- This period was marked by the growth of informal economy – it composed 23.6 percent of country's GDP and around 71.8 percent of labour market was employed in the informal market;
- The main sectors representing informality were trade and services, construction, processing industry, and trade and logistics;
- Female labour force continued to shrink during 2010-2019, with reaching its minimum point at 41.9 percent in 2017 and 2019.
- At the same time, the steady prevalence of female employment in services, comparing to agriculture and industry, has established and it achieved 66.3 percent in 2019, versus 18.8 percent in agriculture and 14.9 percent in industry.

Female employment, by sector (% of female employment)



Source: World Bank

The ratio of women's wages in relation to men's

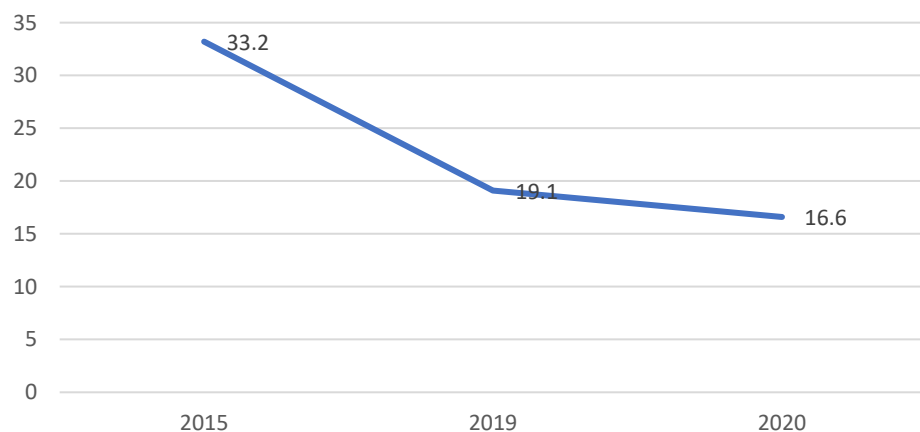


Source: National Statistic Committee

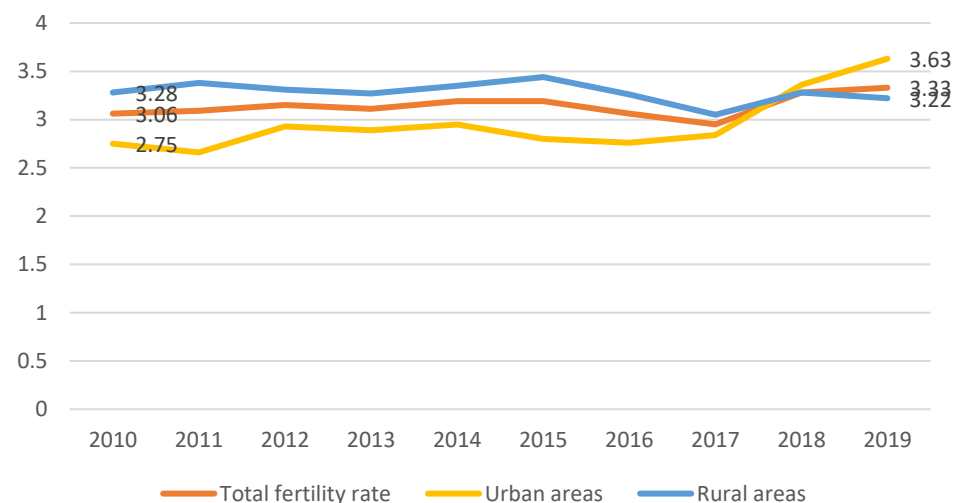
Modern era: digital technologies (2010 – 2019):

- Higher fertility rate in urban areas might be explained by high level of internal migration from rural areas to urban ones, mostly Bishkek and Osh cities;
- According to some estimations, internal migrants make up 35 percent of Bishkek's population, and most of them live in informal settlements;
- The proportion of births with an interpregnancy interval of less than two years was more than 32 percent

Share of women of reproductive age using
contraceptives, %



Fertility rate



Source: National Statistic Committee



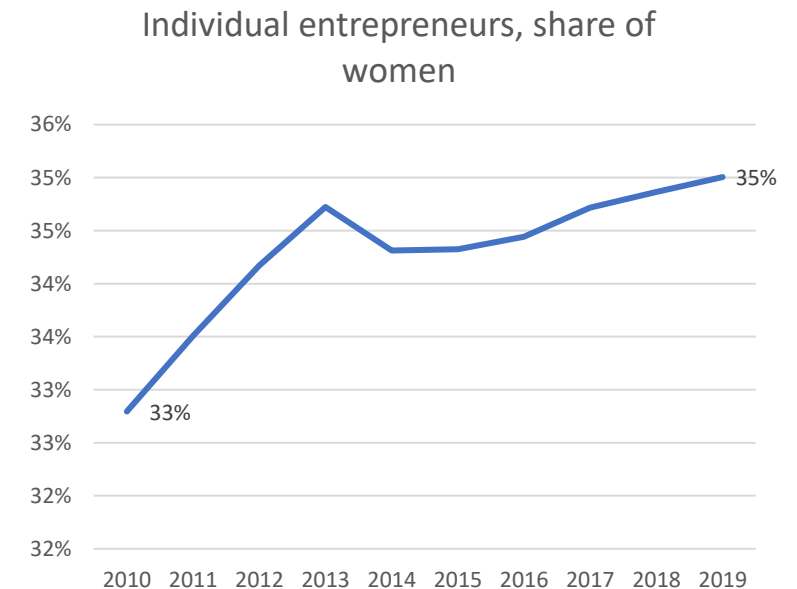
Modern era: digital technologies (2010 – 2019):

- Since 2016-2017, women in Kyrgyzstan started utilizing digital tools for promoting their small businesses, opening Internet-shops selling clothes, toys for children, and other household and motherhood accessories imported mostly from China, Turkey, and Russia;
- More often, these businesses women opened during their maternity leaves, when they were taking care of newborns. Frequently, they started it from ordering goods for their own children using such platforms as Alibaba, Wildberries and others, and, at the same time, ordering additional items that were put up for sale either on their own accounts or newly opened social media pages;
- Firstly, it was practiced on the local forum, called Diesel Forum (<https://diesel.elcat.kg/>), when people could communicate on different topics due to separate sub-forums, posted ads and searched for specific information;
- After Instagram, Facebook and Tik-Tok platforms gained popularity among local citizens, especially in urban areas, ads on sales of goods moved there;
- By 2020 the audience of the social network Instagram in Kyrgyzstan has exceeded 2 million people of them 48 percent were female users.



Modern era: health outcomes, digital technologies (2010 – 2019):

- Thus, some women were able to develop their online-shops and open full-fledged stores, as working on themselves allows women to devote their time to combine all their roles: mothers, wives, daughters-in-law, and businesswomen.
- By 2019 the share of female individual entrepreneurs reached 35 percent, growing by 2 points since 2010. The small growth is conditioned by the situation that very few owners of online shops registered their businesses officially.
- The development of 'digital era' boosted during the COVID-19 pandemic and allowed to many women to switch some of their offline type of activities into online mode. For some women the work in social media platforms completely replaced the office work, and even new professions such as copywriters, SMM, influencers appeared.

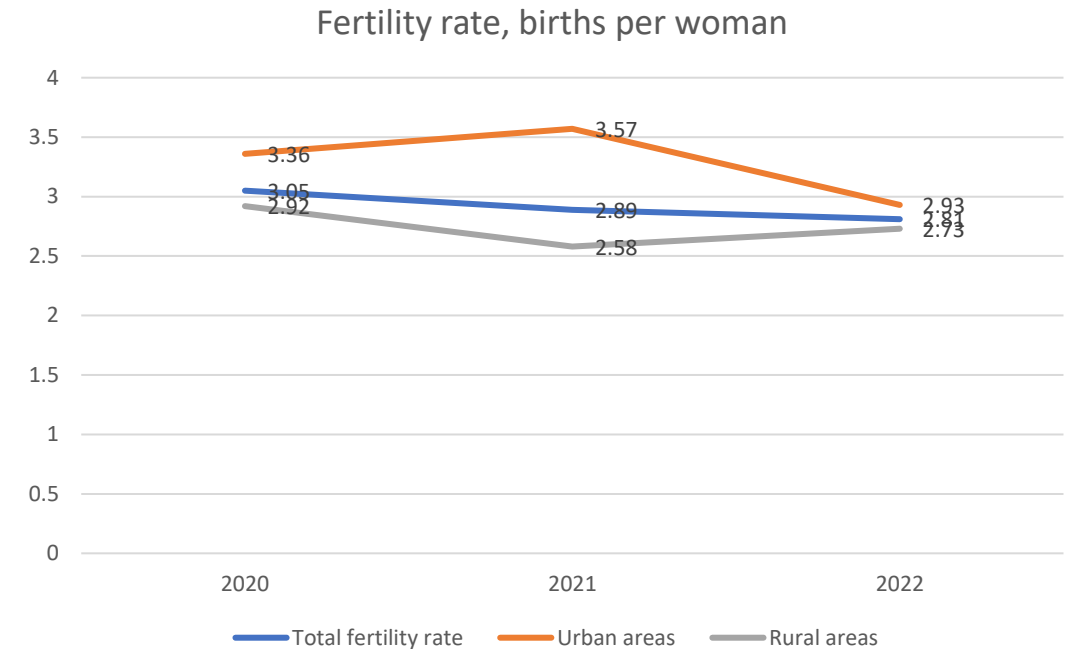


Source: National Statistic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic



The impact of COVID-19 (2020 – present):

- Gender-based violence/Violence against women;
- Household chores burden;
- Online schooling



Source: National Statistic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic



Digital technologies

- Rural women became more active in social media:
 - sale of bakery, fruits and vegetables
 - Digital skills (SMM, copywriting)
 - Digital tourism product promotion
- Active participation in online educational programs (acceleration programs etc.);
- Kyrgyz-speaking psychologists are in high-demand for women in regions



Conclusion

The evolution of women's roles in Kyrgyzstan from 1990 to 2024 reflects a complex interplay of historical, social, and economic factors. The transformation of family structures, the changing dynamics of work and labour participation, and the shifting social norms have all contributed to shaping the experiences of women in Kyrgyz society. While progress has been made in certain areas, such as women's increased involvement in entrepreneurial endeavors and improvements in access to technologies and digital skills, persistent challenges remain.



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Thank you for your attention!

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