WOMEN FORGING PEACE IN THE FERGHANA VALLEY?
AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER INCLUSION IN PEACEBUILDING AND TRANSBOUNDARY WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PROJECT IN THE FERGHANA VALLEY

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Since the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), scholars have debated the possibility of war over the water and land in the Fergana Valley (sometimes referred to as the Valley)—a territory shared between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (see Figure 1). Beginning in early 2014, there have been an increasing number of small-scale violent incidents (i.e., confrontations that led to exchanges of angry words, fist fights, and stone throwing) and political tensions in the Ferghana Valley. To date, however, there has been no violent conflict in the region over water or land.

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Considering its potential for regional instability, the Ferghana Valley has been the focus of various international organizations aimed at conflict prevention, community capacity building, as well as infrastructure, research, and improvements in education. Between 2015 and 2017, five United Nations (UN) Agencies have rendered development assistance projects in the Ferghana Valley to increase women's involvement and incorporate gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding and conflict management through the Cross-border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) project.

The academic assessment of gender-inclusive transboundary water-conflict mitigation and peacebuilding in the Ferghana Valley has largely been overlooked by scholars. In this paper we conduct a discourse analysis of the Cross-border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development project as well as reports around its achievements. Specifically, we analyze blog posts, project descriptions, and visual data to explore how the gendered representation of women and their agency is depicted by international agencies that conduct projects in post-Soviet locales. In a high-stakes context where political power plays are prevalent, a clear understanding of how common solutions for community-participatory processes are developed by donor agencies and how they impact international development goals is crucial to ensuring that no one is left out. We define participatory water governance as political choices about the norms, rules, and requirements on which such choices should be based and about the kind of societal future such choices support.

This paper puts forth two major arguments. First, that water conflicts are the product of history and gendered social processes, in addition to a result of the ways community and participation are conceptualized and practiced. Therefore, in analyzing external interventions in water conflicts, it is crucial to understand how development agencies themselves conceptualize the communities in question and the roles that gender, ethnicity, age, and class play, as there is a high risk of homogenizing the general debates around women's participation in transboundary water resources management (WRM). Second, that development agencies should more critically and productively engage with gendered power relations as well as historical and contemporary contexts of the host communities. We argue that development agencies pushing forward community and participatory WRM need to pay greater attention not only to the inclusion of women, but also to the importance of history and culture. It is only then that a more adaptive, reflexive, and inclusive development reality can be envisioned and that a more nuanced understanding of community participation can be achieved. We hope that the main conclusions drawn from this paper and recommendations put forth will help development agencies strengthen their forthcoming projects by grounding them in history and local contexts and assist in creating a more inclusive language for their communications and programmatic strategies to enhance women's visibility and highlight their participatory agency.

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Figure 1. Ferghana Valley

Source: Sona Bayramova, "The Ferghana Valley."

Case study: the Ferghana Valley

Located in Central Asia, the Ferghana Valley covers over one hundred thousand square kilometers and is home to more than twelve million people from three sovereign states: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. A diversity of cultures and poly-ethnicities exist in the area, as 27% of Uzbekistan's population Uzbek population, 31% of Tajikistan's population, and 51% of Kyrgyzstan's population reside there.[1] The Isfara River, which flows through the region before joining the Syr Darya River, forms a basin with an area of 3,240 square kilometers.[2] The Isfara River, along with multiple tributaries, creates favorable conditions for irrigation agriculture in the Valley. Because of optimal climatic and riverine conditions, the Ferghana Valley accounts for 45% of the total irrigated area in the greater Isfara Basin.[3] However, beyond irrigational needs, water plays a crucial role in generating electricity due to insufficient fossil-fuel reserves in Kyrgyzstan and

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[1] Anara Musabaeva and Anara Moldosheva, *The Ferghana Valley: Current Challenges* (Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek: UNIFEM, 2005): 16, https://landwise.resourceequity.org/documents/2279

[2] " Partnerstvo zainteresovannykh storon v sovmestnoi razrabotke politiki: Sodeistvie transgranichnomu sotrudnichestvu na malykh vodorazdelakh v Tsentral'noi Azii," CAREC, Accessed September 15, 2021, https://carececo.org/main/activity/projects/partnerstvo-zainteresovannykh-storon-v-sovmestnoy-razrabotke-politiki-sodeystvie-transgranichnomu-so/.

[3] S. Frederick Starr, ed., *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

CAP **CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM**

Tajikistan.[4]Competing claims over the use of water for irrigation and hydropower coupled with contestations over land have been a central component of the conflicts in the Isfara Basin.[5]

Drivers of cross-border tensions in Ferghana Valley

Aside from competing uses of water for irrigation and hydropower, issues of land ownership and border demarcation also fuel tensions across the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. Up until 1839, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek rural dwellers lived in closely-knit communities with shared farms, pastures, markets and burial sites under one administrative unit—Turkestan—due to high agricultural productivity in the Valley.[6]However, after the annexation of Central Asia by the Soviet Union, the long-established lifestyle of nomadic and semi-nomadic populations was drastically transformed.[7]

Starting in the early 1920s, the Soviet administration began to alter the socio-spatial patterns in Central Asia to construct new republics as a union of nationalities.[8]As a result of this socio-spatial tinkering, the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, and Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republics emerged. While these new arrangements were challenged by local elites and citizens and there were some conflicts, on the whole during the Soviet regime, water, energy, and territorial issues had relatively little impact on local populations because the borders remained relatively open, the boundary lines were not strictly enforced, and the water-energy exchange was fine-tuned by the Soviet administration.[9]

Cross-border relations began to deteriorate rapidly after the collapse of the USSR, since the former domestic administrative boundaries of the Ferghana Valley changed to international boundaries.[10] Newly independent states, whose borders were once again redrawn, overlooked complex identities and ethnic settlement locations. As a consequence, numerous enclaves were created.[11] Vorukh is one of these hotly contested enclaves. Tajikistan claims that a part of Vorukh was leased

[4] Leila Zakhirova, "The International Politics of Water Security in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 10 (2013): 1994–2013.; Diana Mamatova, "Grassroots Peacebuilding: Cross-Border Cooperation in the Ferghana Valley," *CAP Fellows Paper* 202 (2018): 1–16.

[5] Aigul Arynova and Suzanne Schmeier, "Conflicts over Water and Water Infrastructure at the Tajik-Kyrgyz Border: A Looming Threat for Central Asia?" in *Water, Peace and Security: Report* (Delft, The Netherlands: IHE Delft Institute of Water Education, 2020).

[6] Madeleine Reeves, "Locating danger: *Konfliktologiia* and the search for fixity in the Ferghana valley borderlands," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 1 (2005): 67–81.; Kemel Toktomushev, "Promoting Social Cohesion and Conflict Mitigation: Understanding Conflict in the Cross-Border Areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Connections QJ* 17, no. 1 (2018): 21–41.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Kirill Nourzhanov and Christian Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013).; Christine Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation in Central Asia: Irrigation Disputes in the Ferghana Valley* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

[9] Mamatova, "Grassroots Peacebuilding."

[10] Jaclyn Best and Jahan Taganova, "The Role of Gender in Water Conflicts" in *Resolving Water Conflicts Workbook*, eds. Lynette de Silva and Chris Maser (Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press, 2022): 123-148.

[11] Arynova and Schmeier, "Conflicts over Water and Water Infrastructure."

CAP CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

to the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, and, therefore, was never an enclave.[12] However, Kyrgyzstan argues that Vorukh *is* an enclave and bases its rationale on the productive use of the land and references documents dating to 1958–1959 and 1989.[13] Because of the heated debates between these two states, residents of extraterritorial enclaves have found it increasingly difficult to access the mainland and its surroundings, especially as the borders become more securitized.[14] As a result, the exclusion of rural dwellers from shared resources and spaces has further exacerbated tensions between Kyrgyz and Tajik communities.[15]

The role of water resources management and governance in the conflict

Here, we define water governance as the coordinating and decision-making between different stakeholders around contested waters.[16] The history of water governance in the Ferghana Valley and in Central Asia as a whole, uncovers the political and cultural origins that have led to current socio-political tensions around water resources in the region today. During Soviet reign, water governance in Central Asia was centrally regulated and was vested in water-energy exchange between upstream (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) and downstream (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan) countries. Upstream countries stored water for irrigation by downstream countries during the growing season in exchange for free fossil fuels during wintertime.[17] During the Soviet era, this system, implemented by the central government, worked relatively well as it aimed to maximize the benefits of all republics.[18]

Overnight, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the unitary system became transboundary. Water and energy resources were impacted by newly established national borders, posing challenges for optimizing water-energy exchange as well as managing national and regional resources. Consequently, five Central Asian countries signed the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Joint Management of the Use and Conservation of Water Resources of Interstate Sources to respond to their new situation in the region and preserve the Soviet-style WRM status quo.[19] However, shortly after the dissolution of the USSR, upstream riparian states experienced severe power shortages.[20] In response, upstream countries changed dam operations from irrigation to

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[12] Abdulkholiq Kholiqi and Nabijon Rahimov, "Disputable Territories as Hotbeds of Tension on the Border," *Bulletin of TSULBP*, 2015: 188–196.

[13] Arynova and Schmeier, "Conflicts over Water and Water Infrastructure."

[14] Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation*.

[15] Kemel Toktomushev, "Promoting Social Cohesion and Conflict Mitigation: Understanding Conflict in the Cross-Border Areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *University of Central Asia, Institute of Public Policy and Administration (IPPA), Working Paper* 40 (2017).

[16] Margreet Zwarteveen, et al., "Engaging with the politics of water governance," *WIREs Water* 4, no. 6 (2017), 4:e01245, doi: 10.1002/wat2.1245.

[17] Dinara Ziganshina, "International water law in Central Asia: commitments, compliance and beyond," *Journal of Water Law* 20, no. 2/3 (2009): 96–107.

[18] Lidan Guo, Haiwei Zhou, Ziqiang Xia, and Feng Huang, "Evolution, opportunity and challenges of transboundary water and energy problems in Central Asia," *SpringerPlus* 5, no. 1918 (2016): 1–11.

[19] Ziganshina, "International water law in Central Asia."

[20] Ibid.

hydropower generation. Consequently, downstream neighbors could not attain the water level they anticipated, and a dispute arose between upstream and downstream neighbors.[21]

Additionally, the deterioration and lack of maintenance of water infrastructure has further contributed to growing water scarcity at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Among the region's residents, only 29% have access to drinking water due to worn out pumps and pipelines.[22] The hydraulic infrastructure situated on disputed lands between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is in abysmal condition since both sides do not feel responsible for maintaining it and lack a willingness to invest in its repair because of the disputed ownership.[23] As a result, tensions between the two countries increase during the irrigation season. Even though cooperative events have reigned over conflictual events by a two to one ratio throughout modern history,[24] cooperative expectations in the Ferghana Valley did not match reality at both the interstate and local levels.[25]

Cross-border cooperation for sustainable peace and development

As reported by Kyrgyzstan's Border Services, between 2010 and 2013, 62 security incidents that included violent clashes occurred at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border. These recurring events have shaped the widespread perception that the Ferghana Valley is turning into a "host of crises."[26] As such, publications depict the Valley as a site of violence. Foreign governments and international aid organizations intervened to suppress conflict and promote peace, gender equality, and a just democratic transition in the region.[27] However, evaluations of interventions reveal that they have brought neither harmony to fractured communities[28] nor substantial gains toward gender equality.[29] In fact, they have inadvertently supported the strengthening of authoritarianism in the region because these international development projects were detached from the local context and were overly procedural.[30]

After a series of cross-border clashes involving the exchange of gunfire by security forces in Kyrgyz and Tajik villages in 2013, five UN Specialized Agencies—including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund

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[21] Ibid.

[22] " Partnerstvo zainteresovannykh storon v sovmestnoi razrabotke politiki: Sodeistvie transgranichnomu sotrudnichestvu na malykh vodorazdelakh v Tsentral'noi Azii," CAREC, Accessed September 15, 2021, https://carececo.org/main/activity/projects/partnerstvo-zainteresovannykh-storon-v-sovmestnoy-razrabotke-politiki-sodeystvie-transgranichnomu-so/.

[23] Toktomushev, "Promoting Social Cohesion and Conflict Mitigation."

[24] Aaron T. Wolf, Kerstin Stahl, and Marcia F. Macomber, "Conflict and cooperation within international river basins: the importance of institutional capacity," *Water Resources Update* 125, no. 2 (2003): 31–40.

[25] Toktomushev, "Promoting Social Cohesion and Conflict Mitigation."

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] John Heathershaw, *Central Asian statehood in post-colonial perspective* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate, 2010).

[29] Meghan Simpson, "Local strategies in globalizing gender politics: Women's organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2006): 9–31.

[30] Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation*.

CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

(UNICEF), United Nations Women (UN Women), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)—renewed their interest in conflict prevention in the region. Consequently, these UN and UN-related agencies launched the *Cross-border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development* project (the Project) to restore stability and security in the region. The focus of this paper is on the gender mainstreaming component of the Project, which was implemented by UN Women.

The Project was endorsed in December 2015 by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office and funded by the UN Secretary General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The SDC is a government donor organization that coordinates international development activities in Switzerland as part of the Department of Foreign Affairs.[31] The PBF is the UN's financial instrument to fund activities, actions, programs, and projects that seek to build and sustain long-lasting peace in countries at risk, affected by, or emerging from violence.[32] The Project was implemented by five UN agencies in cooperation with national counterparts in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.[33]

The overarching aim of the Project was "to increase cooperation and trust between communities in pilot Tajik-Kyrgyz village clusters to mitigate immediate risks of renewed cross-border violence" (p.1).[34] Like most community-based and participatory water projects in the Global South, the Project includes a mandatory gender component. UN Women was responsible for implementing this component through strengthening the capacity of women activists, ensuring their involvement in identifying women's rights violations, promoting dialogue, and implementing measures to prevent and resolve conflicts in border areas.[35] Specifically, UN Women ensured the implementation of output 1.4. that calls for, "enhanc[ing] cooperation and trust between cross-border communities through actively participating in the identification and implementation of cross-border initiatives."[36] To understand the implications of these projects and the ways in which women are represented by the UN agencies, we conducted a discourse analysis of multiple blogs

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[31] "International Cooperation," Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft Confederation suisse, accessed 20 October, 2021, https://www.eda.admin.ch/sdc

[32] "United Nations Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund," United Nations, accessed October 16, 2021, https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/fund.

[33] "Cross-Border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development," UNDP in Tajikistan, 2016, January 15, 2021, https://www.tj.undp.org/content/tajikistan/en/home/operations/projects/poverty_reduction/litaca1.html.

[34] UNDP in Tajikistan. "Cross-Border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development." Accessed March 1, 2020. https://www.tj.undp.org/content/tajikistan/en/home/operations/projects/poverty_reduction/litaca1.html.

[35] Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Orzu Ganieva, *Women's Human Insecurities Across Tajik-Kyrgyz Borders: An Assessment and Recommendations by Women Activists* (Almaty, Kazakhstan: UN Women, 2017). https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/country/tajikistan/womens%20human%20insecurities%20across%20tajikkyrgyz%20borders.pdf?la=en&vs=634.

[36] Frauke de Weijer, "Review of PBF Cross-Border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development in the Border Area of Kyrgyzstan & Tajikistan," *PeaceNexus Foundation*, 2017, https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/kyrgyzstan_tajikistan_november_2017_-_lessons_learned_of_cross-border_project.pdf.

and project descriptions posted by UN Women, which report on the activities the women were involved with to increase cross-border cooperation.

Literature review

Participatory and community approaches to water resources management

Traditional top-down approaches to policy design and implementation have lost political legitimacy in recent years and have been replaced by more deliberative, inclusive, and bottom-up processes.[37] Participatory approaches have also been widely institutionalized both in discourse and in practice within water management and development. This is primarily due to widespread international incorporation of integrated water resources management (IWRM), such as the 1992 Dublin Principles, which incentivized stakeholder engagement as a key part of water resources decision-making and planning.[38]

The renewed focus on the public, who bear the costs of conservation, and the shift towards allowing communities to regain control over their resources and improve their own well-being is dependent on structural, socio-political, and contextual drivers.[39] Various structural changes—ranging from climate change and population growth to urbanization—as well as socio-political changes—including an increasing number of citizen initiatives—have prompted water governance paradigms to evolve.[40] Conjunctural drivers such as water-related disasters, policy reforms, large water-related projects (e.g., dams), and democratic pressure have compelled decision-makers to engage directly with stakeholders to solve water problems.[41] However, such participatory approaches to WRM mostly have been used to normatively prescribe or guide the design of particular arrangements for making water decisions, for regulating water, and for creating development projects.[42] In many cases, the basis of such recipes for participatory approaches to water management lies in ideological speculations about what society or development should look like, rather than a deep empirical understanding of how water governance actually occurs.[43]

Many international organizations, which have promoted participatory approaches to water management, have focused on either a specific type of stakeholder (i.e., women, indigenous groups) or on engagement processes (i.e., design, mechanisms). In the Global South, projects that promote participatory, community-based water management have become popular among international donors and NGOs in the pursuit of sustainable development.[44]

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[37] Aziza Akhmouch and Delphine Clavreul, "Stakeholder Engagement for Inclusive Water Governance: 'Practicing What We Preach' with the OECD Water Governance Initiative," *Water* 8, no. 5 (2016): 204.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Akhmouch and Clavreul, "Stakeholder engagement."

[41] Ibid.

[42] Zwarteveen, et al., "Engaging with the politics of water governance."

[43] Ibid.

[44] Farhana Sultana, "Community and Participation in Water Resources Management: Gendering and Naturing Development Debates from Bangladesh," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34, no. 3 (2009): 346–363.

CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

Despite the popularity of these projects, several problems have been identified by scholars and practitioners of community-based WRM. Projects that see communities as homogenous can overlook complex and varied community governance systems.[45] Additionally, processes of inclusion, exclusion, negotiation, and resistance are insufficiently addressed in participatory WRM projects.[46] In other words, gender, ethnicity, class, geography, and history, as well as the relationship between society and nature, and the intersection between all of these factors play important roles in assuring the success or failure of community and participatory water management and governance. The absence of acknowledging these factors and their intersecting dynamics can lead to a lack of true representative participation of a community. Focusing solely on gender in participatory WRM can lead to a more deeply ingrained status quo that is inequitable for women (as well as other marginalized groups).[47]

In this regard, to unravel the outcomes of participatory water management in the context of the Ferghana Valley, we will examine who participates, on what basis, in what capacity, who might benefit and lose from participatory WRM projects, and what effect it might have on society.[48] We argue that participatory water governance is more concerned with promoting particular politically-inspired agendas of what transboundary water governance and peacebuilding should be rather than with an understanding of what participatory WRM actually is.

Incorporating gender into development

Early efforts to incorporate women and gender into the environment and development programs date back to the women in development (WID) approach of the 1970s. WID sought to analyze why development projects often failed to consider women and its various economic, social, and cultural impacts.[49] Next came the women, environment, and development (WED) approach, which was rooted in ecofeminist theory and aimed to understand the relationship between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature.[50] Due to the shortcomings and critiques of ecofeminism, a new approach—gender, environment, and development (GED)—emerged in the 1990s that stressed the role that gender relations play in producing and influencing access to and control over natural resources.[51] Most recently, feminist political ecology (FPE) has expanded on GED, noting that gender is one of many characteristics that lead to socially differentiated uses of natural resources negotiated through power and politics.[52]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Andrea Cornwall, "Making a Difference? Gender and Participatory Development," *Institute of Development Studies Discussion Paper* 378, 2001.

[48] Sultana, "Community and Participation."; Cornwall, "Making a Difference?"

[49] Martine, George, and Marcella Villareal. 1997. "Gender and Sustainability: Re-Assessing Linkages and Issues." Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, Working Papers Series 97.11.

[50] Rosi Braidotti, Ewa Charkiewicz, Sabine Hausler, and Saskia Wieringa, *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis* (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1994).

[51] Peter Chua, Kum-Kum Bhavnani, and John Foran, "Women, culture, development: a new paradigm for development studies?" *Ethnic and Racial studies* 23, no. 5 (2000): 820–841.

[52] Bina Agarwal, "Gender, environment, and poverty interlinks: Regional variations and temporal shifts in rural India, 1971–1991," *World Development* 25, no. 1 (1997): 23–52.

Development agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have attempted to follow these evolutions in the academic field. By providing assistance to integrate women into national economies through international aid programs, they improve the status of women and help the entire development process.[53] In the same vein, liberal feminists in the U.S. also began to network with women at UN agencies to push for greater recognition of women's issues on the international stage.[54]

Viewed in this light, the ability of developed countries "to shape the contexts in which problems and solutions are determined" can be viewed as a way of exercising power.[55] Since rich countries like the U.S., who fund the development institutions, have the power to shape development projects, it is important to acknowledge that interaction between the donors and recipients is also embedded in an unequal power relationship, where affluent countries have the capacity to "claim control over the direction of society's development."[56] By the late 1970s, the propagation of gendered discourses and practices of national and international actors working within Western frameworks of development, democratization, and civil society was well rooted in the field of international development.[57] During this time, in an attempt to promote women's representation and visibility, programmatic changes also spilled over into the traditionally male-dominated field of WRM.[58]

The role of women in transboundary water conflict management

While extensive research has been conducted on the links between gender and water, water and conflict, and conflict and gender, gaps remain at the intersection of gender, water, and conflict. Some literature exists on the role of women as community leaders in intra-state and local water management. In Kenya, women's informal contributions to water management, in a context in which their involvement in statutory water management committees was not culturally appropriate, contributed to a reduction in conflict and an increase in women's access to domestic water resources.[59] In a survey of women working in water diplomacy in Palestine, Lebanon, and

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[53] Irene Tinker, *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[54] Shahra Razavi and Carol Miller, "Gender Mainstreaming: A Study of Efforts by the UNDP, the World Bank and the ILO to Institutionalize Gender Issues," *UNRISD Occasional Paper*, no. 4., 1995.

[55] Karin Gwinn Wilkins, ed., *Redeveloping Communication for Social Change: Theory, Practice, and Power* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000): 198.

[56] Karin Gwinn Wilkins, "Gender, power and development," *Journal of International Communication* 4, no. 2, (1997): 102–120.

[57] Simpson, "Local strategies."

[58] Margreet Zwarteveen, "Hydrocracies, Engineers and Power: Questioning Masculinities in Water," *Engineering Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 78–94.

[59] Sarah Yerian, Monique Hennink, Leslie E. Greene, Daniel Kiptugen, Jared Buri, and Matthew C. Freeman, "The Role of Women in Water Management and Conflict Resolution in Marsabit, Kenya," *Environmental Management* 54, no. 6 (December 2014): 1320–30, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00267-014-0356-1.

CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

Jordan, Carmi, et al. (2019) conclude that there is untapped potential for women in Arab countries to add their voices and experiences to regional and transboundary hydropolitics.[60]

Most extant literature that discusses women's roles in transboundary water conflicts simply points out the omission of gender and women's issues at the transboundary scale. Earle and Bazilli[61] highlight that transboundary water governance institutions, such as River Basin Organizations (RBOs), lack an explicit gendered approach in their laws and agreements, despite international recognition of this issue. In an examination of the documentation of 51 RBOs around the world, Best[62] found that only 37% incorporated gender and/or women into their policies and projects, and only seven RBOs had gender-mainstreaming strategies. Further, in the employment of these same RBOs, women represented 32% of all positions. However, women represented just 26% of the decision-making positions, and at the highest level of decision-making power, this decreased to 19%.[63]

In the same vein of needing to address intersecting dimensions of gender, race/ethnicity, class, history, and geography when understanding the nuance surrounding community-based WRM, the same needs to be done when considering the inclusion of women at the transboundary scale of WRM. The disciplines of water management, diplomacy, and political science are traditionally, and to a large extent remain, male-dominated, as is the convergence of these three fields.[64]Additionally, the national and transboundary scales of water management have been largely associated with the domination, exploitation, and control of water resources through technocratic means.[65]These depictions of power and manipulation of water resources are and have been intrinsically linked with men and masculinity and are difficult to uncouple.

One contemporary approach to addressing gender issues in the development field, including WRM, is through gender mainstreaming, the process of inserting gender concerns into every aspect of a policy or program with the ultimate goal of achieving gender equality.[66] It is an update to older development discourses on women and gender (i.e., WID, WED, and GED) that focused on women as domestic caregivers and passive beneficiaries and were mainly focused on hygiene and health.[67]

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[60] Natasha Carmi, Mey Alsayegh, and Maysoon Zoubi, "Empowering women in water diplomacy: A basic mapping of the challenges in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan," *Journal of Hydrology* 569 (2019): 330–346.

[61] Anton Earle and Susan Bazilli, "A Gendered Critique of Transboundary Water Management," *Feminist Review* 103, no. 1 (2013): 99–119.

[62] Jaclyn P. Best, "(In)visible women: Representation and Conceptualization of Gender in Water Governance and Management," Master's Thesis, Oregon State University, 2019.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Earle, and Bazilli, "A gendered critique."; Tobias Von Lossow, "Gender in Inter-State Water Conflicts," *Peace Review* 27, no. 2 (2015): 196–201.

[65] Ibid.; François Molle, "Water, Politics and River Basin Governance: Repoliticizing Approaches to River Basin Management," *Water International* 34, no. 1 (2009): 62–70.

[66] "Gender Mainstreaming: A Global Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality & the Empowerment of Women and Girls," UN Women, accessed October 1, 2021, https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/gender-mainstreaming-strategy-for-achieving-gender-equality-and-empowerment-of-women-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3849.

[67] Susan Bazilli, "Mainstreaming Gender in the Governance of Transboundary Waters," XIVth IWRA World Water Congress, September 25-29, 2011 Porto de Galinhas / Recife, PE, Brazil, https://iwra.org/member/congress/resource/PAP00-5761.pdf.

Gender mainstreaming aims to respond to the realities and needs of *all* genders, not just women.[68] Some projects that focused on water resources governance have been made to institutionalize the equitable participation of women and men at the national and sub-national level,[69] but a lack of incorporation at the inter-state level remains.

Methods

Our reading started with an examination of the Project's description and reports. Specifically, we relied upon the use of discourse analysis with a feminist scholarly lens in order to understand how the Project depicts the role of women in peacebuilding. This specific research tool examines written, verbal, and visual texts and the ways in which the language of these texts is used to construct and attach meaning to social acts and actors.[70] Discourse analysis is a qualitative and interpretative method for analyzing discourse and drawing interpretations based on details in the material itself, contextual knowledge, and social structures.[71] Scholars such as Henry Widdowson[72] criticized discourse analysis, arguing that it is partial—lacking objectivity and scientific neutrality. However, feminist scholars such as Evelyn Fox-Keller[73,] and Sandra Harding[74] have problematized the notion of scientific neutrality, arguing that it fails to recognize that knowledge is socially and historically constructed.

A multi-dimensional approach to discourse analysis, which encapsulates gender relations, brings a critical perspective on biased social arrangements maintained through the use of language. Hence, by conducting discourse analysis on the Project and uncovering how it depicts the role of women in peacebuilding, the following study will accordingly be political and, to a certain degree, confrontational and bold in its argument.

Text analysis

As was highlighted earlier, discourse analysis requires the analysis of texts; this not only involves commentary on the content, but also on its form and organization. Text analysis can provide insight

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[68] Smita Mishra Panda, "Mainstreaming Gender in Water Management: A Critical View," *Gender, Technology and Development* 11, no. 3 (January 2007): 321–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/097185240701100302.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

[71] Amy Luo, "What Is Discourse Analysis?" Scribbr, August 23, 2019, revised June 19, 2020, accessed January 15, 2021, https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/discourse-analysis/.

[72] Henry G. Widdowson, "Discourse analysis: a critical view," *Language and literature* 4, no. 3 (1995): 157–172.

[73] Keller, Evelyn Fox. 1994. "The Paradox of Scientific Subjectivity." In Rethinking Objectivity, edited by Alan Megill, 182–200. Durham: Duke University Press; Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen E. Longino, eds. *Feminism and science*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[74] Sandra G. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

CAP CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

about what is included in a text; however, what is absent is often just as significant.[75] If text is a choice, then what is included and what is omitted is a way to exercise power over the production of the discourse. Therefore, text should be examined in terms of co-presence and co-absence as well as in terms of the interaction of these constitutive processes.

The units of analysis for this research project include texts, photographs, project descriptions, and UN gender policies and strategies, which were collected from the UNDP and UN Women's websites. Central Asian and Western scholarly articles, which provide insight into the context of the Ferghana Valley, were gathered through scholarly databases (e.g., JSTOR, EBSCOhost). Most of the texts in this analysis constitute a primary source, with the exception of the external evaluation and scholarly literature, which explains policies concerning women and gender in the development sector.

Based on these insights, we inspected whose voices were present and absent in the texts. The following questions guided our analysis:

- How does the UN describe women in the Ferghana Valley?
- How does the UN categorize or describe women in general?
- Are women of different ages and nationalities mentioned in the texts?
- Are women's voices present (or absent) in the text?
- Are men part of the project?
- Are men mentioned in the texts?
- What is the role of men?

While answering the above questions, we also considered the tone of the texts and whether the passive or active voice was used in relation to women. Condescending tone and passive voice can indicate that the authors of the text are looking down and/or marginalizing women. The use of the passive voice towards women may be indicative of stripping them of agency; it also suggests that women are being looked at as passive.

Results and Discussion

Homogenizing women

It is not uncommon for funders from the Global North to impose their own norms, values, and priorities explicitly or implicitly toward areas of development that they deem important.[76] These priorities often shift towards development areas that are currently popular,[77] and gender mainstreaming is presently at the heart of the global development agenda. Therefore, it is not surprising that the blog posts covering the achievements of the Project in relation to gender mainstreaming reveal a parochial focus on women.

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[75] Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

[76] John Degnbol-Martinussen and Poul Engberg-Pedersen, *Aid: Understanding International Development Cooperation* (New York: Zed Books, 2003).
[77] Ibid.

In the development sector, it is not an uncommon practice to portray women as a homogeneous group, suffering because of their marginal social position vis a vis men[78]. The discourse analysis of the blog posts revealed that this practice was endemic to UN Women's communication style when it pertained to the Ferghana valley as well. Thus, there is a narrow focus on certain demographics of women.

The discourse analysis revealed that of six blog posts, three portrayed middle-aged and elderly women. For instance, a blog post written by UN Women (2017) states "Kurbanova, 49, is a schoolteacher from the village of Ak-Tatyr, now part of Kyrgyzstan, and Avezova, 51, is a doctor living on the other side of the border, in the village of Chorku, which is in Tajikistan." While it might be tactful for UN Women to involve educated and older women because these women were more politically empowered and accustomed to playing a greater role in economic, social, and political arenas[79], such peculiar conceptualization of gender and gender mainstreaming, in our view, is deeply troublesome as it leads us to question whether gender and gender mainstreaming is deployed as a tactical maneuver. At the same time such gender mainstreaming strategy also raises further questions if such conceptions of gender and deployment of gender mainstreaming is purposefully used to mask forms of inequity and exclusion.[80] Indeed, while grouping all women together might make gender mainstreaming easier for development agencies, it completely sidelines the fact that gender intersects with class, age, education, and ethnic boundaries, and unaddressed inequities that overlie with these additional identity categorizations will likely persist.

Compared to older women, younger women of the post-Soviet and transitional era, born between 1968 and 1990, have embraced more traditional and cultural gender roles, which confine them to the responsibilities of the household.[81] On the basis of the blog posts, we understand that women in the younger age group of 25–39 were not included within the "women mediators" category. When younger women were included in the Project, it was usually under the umbrella of "adolescence and youth,"[82] which excludes people aged 25–39 since the UN, for statistical purposes, defines "youth" as persons between the ages of 15–24 years old. Earlier studies defined women aged 35–40 as a "lost generation" because they were politically disenfranchised and, unlike

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[78] Arora-Jonsson, Seema. "Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change." *Global environmental change* 21, no. 2 (2011): 744-751.

[79] "Women Forge Peace along the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border," UN Women (blog), February 2, 2017, accessed 15 January 2020, https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/2/feature-women-forge-peace-along-the-kyrgyz-tajik-border.

[80] Cornwall, "Making a Difference?"

[81] Richa Dhanju, "Water and Women's Empowerment in the Ferghana Valley: Agency of Older Women from Soviet Era in Contemporary Rural Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan," *UCLA: Center for the Study of Women* (2008), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2hp521v6.

[82] "United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO)/ Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) IRF Revised Project Document," United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, 2017, https://www.undp.org/content/dam/unct/kyrgyzstan/docs/General/UNPBF_Kyrgyzstan_IRF-%20ProDoc-Cross-border%20Cooperation%20for%20Sustainable%20Peace%20and%20Development%20between%20Kyrgyzstan%20and%20Tajikistan.pdf.

CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

previous generations of women, were not supported either by the Soviet government or by the newly independent states when it came to community involvement.[83] Of the six analyzed blog posts, only two highlighted children under the age of 18, and only one included women of the "lost generation". We argue that this path dependency in conceptualizing women limited the Project's effectiveness as Soviet and pre-Soviet models of behavior continue to shape implementors' responses to new challenges.[84]

In ethnically diverse and historically colonized regions, such as the Ferghana Valley, overlooking these dynamics may not only omit power relations among women with respect to authority and power, but may also neglect gender mainstreaming efforts, as gender mainstreaming invokes the notion of inclusion of *all* women's abilities to make decisions, voice opinions, and be heard.[85] In the Ferghana Valley, women are situated differently from one another in a variety of ways. "Female solidarity" can be less rallying since women pursue different desires, connections, and needs. For instance, emancipated and politically active older women can be abusive towards their daughters-in-law by reinforcing their positions of powerlessness within the family and undermining their rights to make independent decisions.[86] In particular, daughters-in-law are expected to do the household chores once undertaken by their mothers-in-law and other female members of the household without receiving any support.[87] As a result, when it comes to engagement in civic developmental projects, younger women are unable to participate or raise their voices on salient issues in their community because they have been busy with household chores and therefore had little to no time to formulate opinions on the issues.[88]

An ethnographic documentation of women's answers to their perceptions about their lives, their beliefs, and their participation on small water committees in their villages in the Ferghana Valley highlights that younger women are laden with household responsibilities and have lost the opportunity to act as leaders in their communities.[89] Contrary to the myth of female solidarity, older women may act as agents of the patriarchal system by participating in forced marriages, encouraging their sons to bride kidnapping, and urging their sons to discipline their wives through violence.[90] In this regard, a person's class, age, marital status, education level, and household

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[83] Dhanju, "Water and Women's Empowerment."

[84] Jenniver Sehring, "Path Dependencies and Institutional Bricolage in Post-Soviet Water Governance," *Water Alternatives* 2, no. 1 (2009): 61–81.

[85] Arun Agrawal and Clark C. Gibson, "The Role of Community in Natural Resource Conservation," in *Communities and the Environment: Ethnicity, Gender, and the State in Community-Based Conservation*, eds. Arun Agrawal and Clark C. Gibson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 1-31.; Sultana, "Community and Participation."

[86] Saltanat Childress, "'Plates and Dishes Smash; Married Couples Clash': Cultural and Social Barriers to Help-seeking among Women Domestic Violence Survivors in Kyrgyzstan," *Violence Against Women* 24, no. 7 (2018): 775–797.; Reconciled to Violence: State Failure to Stop Domestic Abuse and Abduction of Women in Kyrgyzstan," *Human Rights Watch* 18, no. 9(D) (September 2006), retrieved from https://goo.gl/EHsqwh.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Dhanju, "Water and Women's Empowerment."

[89] Ibid.

[90] Cynthia Werner, "Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 2 (2009): 314–331.; Childress, "'Plates and Dishes Smash."

relationships can have a profound impact on their inclusion or exclusion from public life.[91] When gender mainstreaming solutions are developed in a context where younger women have no voice or power, this tendency becomes even further pronounced. It is against this background that we conclude that UN Women's efforts to promote women's participation in peacebuilding and cross-border cooperation have limited credibility.

The lack of critical engagement with the past and the failure to fully contextualize issues and dynamics around women's emancipation and gender equality in the Ferghana Valley led to the reinforcement of existing power imbalances in the community and the strengthening of older, privileged women's dominance over other less-advantaged younger women. To ensure equity and efficiency of the Project and enhance a feeling of shared ownership, UN Women should strive for inclusion of women of *all* echelons as "women mediators" on an equitable basis. Leveling the playing field for all women should be the central tenet of the Project.

Instead of attempting to introduce behavioral change through the elderly women seasoned under Soviet rule, UN Women should have adapted the Project to the habits of the people they wanted to serve. This means molding the Project in such a way that it would implement activities to accommodate the lifestyles of both young and elderly women. Addressing the lack of women's involvement in transboundary water resource conflict mitigation will require "working *with* the community, rather than *on* it."[92] This means that implementing agencies must listen to communities and understand what they need, what they want to do, and how they want to be helped. Only then can solutions occur. This also means eliminating the notion that the Global North (as represented by donors and implementing agency staff) possesses the answers to the problems of the Global South. In other words, moving from the model of working *in* communities to working *with* communities and supporting work by women for communities.

Engaging men

The term "gender-inclusive participatory development" often equates to issues pertaining to women only.[93] In many instances, women and men are equally consulted, yet only the interests and concerns of the women are addressed in participatory development projects.[94] This approach to understanding gender can shape how development projects and policies are designed and implemented. In a similar vein, our discourse analysis reveals that UN Women's communication around the Project's achievements largely failed to recognize the roles of men, especially elderly men.

The role of older men in gender mainstreaming is not explicitly mentioned either in the revised project description or in the blog posts, despite the fact that gender mainstreaming seeks to incorporate the contributions, priorities, and needs of both women *and* men. By addressing women's issues as something that exists independent of social relationships, UN Women produced a policy that undermined the importance of men and women's interdependence.

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[91] Sultana, "Community and Participation."

[92] Steve Davis, *Undercurrents: Channeling Outrage to Spark Practical Activism* (United Kingdom: Wiley, 2020).

[93] Cornwall, "Making a Difference?"

[94] Ibid.

CENTRAL ASIA
PROGRAM

In Central Asian culture, men, and in particular elderly men, have historically held positions of authority and power within their communities. They have also played an important role in community life.[95] Even today, elderly men remain the embodiment of traditional authority within Central Asian society, possessing considerable influence on social organization and decision-making processes.[96] Given their respected status, role, and position, UN Women could have used elder men as mediums for endorsing their projects, as a way to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the community, and as promotors of the role of women and girls in community development and transboundary peacekeeping. In fact, the *mahalla*—councils of citizens, which provide a space for traditionally male and female heads of households to discuss and address local problems and conflicts—could have served as a means of a bottom-up development approach.[97] Separating women from their social kinship and seeing women's issues as standalone can result in unsustainable attempts at gender mainstreaming and may alienate women from their community and result in a backlash among men.[98] Prior to proposing solutions to systemic challenges, development sector professionals should engage with local communities and use local knowledges to inform their work.

The inclusion of elder men could help promote women and girls' agency in social and political life and shift narratives from women being confined to the home to women being active agents of peacebuilding. However, the ideals of participatory resources management in development, "too often fall away in the face of institutional expectations and procedures [...] or prejudice."[99] To effectively address gender issues, the Project must purposefully include men, who could proactively support and promote women's empowerment. The Project's reports and communications should highlight the role of men alongside women, otherwise, the reproduction of "women only" narratives limits policy-making and implementation on the ground and risks producing opposing results as changes in norms and behaviors are tasks for society as a whole.

Seeing like a donor

Since gender mainstreaming was integral to the PBF's 2014–2016 Business Plan, the Project put special emphasis on the promotion of gender equality, women's empowerment, and participation in cross-border peacebuilding. Similarly, a condition of the SDC funding was to improve the capacity of cross-border communities to mitigate the conflict.[100] To meet donors' requirements, each implementing UN Agency ensured the inclusion of "gender mainstreaming and integrating women into outputs, in addition to specific standalone activities for women's empowerment and participation" (p. 15).[101] First, it should be noted that the usage of the verb to "empower" in relation to women assumes that UN Women has the authority to give them power - as if the women of the Ferghana Valley didn't have the right until UN Women decided to give it to them." Second, this quote also provides evidence that gender mainstreaming is not treated as a *priority issue*, but rather considered as an ad hoc topic to be included in the outputs and standalone activities of the

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[95] Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation*.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Simpson, "Local Strategies."

[98] Cornwall, "Making a Difference?"

[99] Ibid.

[100] "IRF Revised Project Document."

[101] Ibid.

Project. Ensuring women's participation in peacebuilding efforts and water resources management requires cultivation of trust and engagement; it cannot happen via a one-off activity.

Our findings further suggest that UN Women has taken up the language of "gender mainstreaming," "target groups," "trainings," and "participation" to appeal to donors and secure funds. For instance, the UN Women's blog states that, "*28 women* were successfully *trained* to *participate* in and collaborate on various cross-border issues, including disputes over shared natural resources" (emphasis added).[102] First, this quote indicates that UN Women attempts to accommodate the PBF's priorities and utilize the language that donors prefer for the purposes of collecting funding and to justify how it is meeting targets on gender mainstreaming. Second, UN Women uses this discursive/linguistic tactic because the funds are contingent on increased upward accountability[103] and the pressure to implement programs that are likely to be seen as "successful."[104] Hence, it is not surprising that in many instances the transfer of funds from the donor to the implementing agency involves the transformation of women from 'victims' into 'heroines' and successful peace-keepers[105].

The ability of implementing agencies to work efficiently and to reach the most relevant segments of their communities is hindered by the need to ensure that funding is well spent. A loss of funding could result in program cuts, which in turn has a negative effect not only on the beneficiaries of the Project, but also on local staff. With these consequences in mind, it is easy to understand why UN Women strives to meet donor demands, even if they are contrary to the needs of the beneficiaries.

Furthermore, the conceptualization and implementation of women's participation is problematic. Typically, participation refers to "the involvement of individuals and groups in the design, implementation and evaluation of a project or plan" (p. 3).[106] However, in the case of the Project, women's participation appears to be distilled to that of involvement in the implementation phase only. For instance, although the Revised Project Document submitted to the PBF reports that the Project mainstreamed women "through all community activities to ensure their part in the decision-making process," it does not describe which specific decisions these women were able to make, nor what authority women were given (p. 6).[107] In fact, the evaluation of the Project and the submitted Revised Project Document does not include women's voices or highlight their inputs to the evaluation of the first phase of the project. In this regard, women's involvement in transboundary water conflict mitigation can be interpreted as an instrumental approach to align the Project's goals with global development priorities and donors' requirements. UN Women

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[102] UN Women blog, "Women Forge Peace."

[103] Tina Wallace, Lisa Bornstein, and Jennifer Chapman, *The Aid Chain: Coercion and Commitment in Development NGOs* (United Kingdom: Practical Action Publishing, 2007).

[104] Karen Rauh, "NGOs, Foreign Donors, and Organizational Processes: Passive NGO Recipients or Strategic Actors?" *McGill Sociological Review* 1 (2010): 29–45.

[105] Davids, Tine, and Francien Van Driel. "Globalisation and the need for a 'Gender Lens': A discussion of dichotomies and orthodoxies with particular reference to the 'Feminisation of Poverty'." In *The International Handbook of Gender and Poverty*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2010.

[106] Akhmouch and Clavreul, "Stakeholder engagement."

[107] "IRF Revised Project Document."

CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

appears to rely more on "expert" knowledge to dictate the course of the Project and interventions rather than listening to local women and acting on their wisdom.

Such an instructional approach to gender inclusion is also exemplified in the independent *Regional Evaluation of UN Women's contribution to UN system coordination on gender equality and the empowerment of women in Europe and Central Asia*.[108] The findings of the evaluation state that, "5 percent of UN-managed funds in support of peacebuilding are dedicated to projects whose principal objective [...] is to address women's specific needs, advance gender equality, or empower women. This applies to funds provided by the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF)" (p. 59).[109] As a result, it is not surprising that in the Revised Project Document submitted to the PBF, where the UN agencies involved in the project wrote that the new phase of the project will, "focus on most strategic interventions [...] streamlining certain activities within new outputs (e.g., mainstreaming gender and youth activities through outputs).[...] By doing this, the phase even further improves the value-for-money in terms of achieving peacebuilding dividends" (p. 7).[110] This logic also highlights that for the implementing UN agencies, the true beneficiaries are not the people of cross-border communities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but rather the donors themselves. The job of implementing agencies is to keep donors satisfied in order to get the next grant. In addition, these prescriptive conditions on which activities focus are often derived from ideologically motivated speculation that development interventions should gear towards financial optimization rather than from a deep empirical understanding of how society functions and how water governance occurs in transboundary contexts of the Global South.[111] In this sense, the integration of the gender component into the Project likely happened due to the need for financial investment and an obligation to meet donor requirements rather than genuine commitment of the host communities.[112]

The above quote from PBSO also suggests that UN Women is more interested in gauging women's participation rather than evaluating the outcomes of the Project, including the continued roles, engagement, and leadership of women in the communities. Indeed, the interest of donors to favor programs with results that can be easily quantified was also highlighted by similar studies.[113] While quantification is important, we argue that training 28 women should not be used as a sole indicator of success. UN Women needs to utilize outcome indicators such as women's level of engagement and leadership attainment within the projects. In addition to quantitative metrics, success can also be measured through qualitative methods including gender-specific focus group discussions led by facilitators of the same gender, which make women more comfortable discussing topics, including the support or opposition to their new leadership roles in the community.

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[108] *Coordinating for Gender Equality Results: Regional Evaluation of UN Women's Contribution to UN System Coordination on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Europe and Central Asia* (Istanbul: UN Women, August 2016), https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2016/08/coorgenderequalresults-eca-web.pdf?la=en&vs=4654.

[109] Ibid.

[110] "IRF Revised Project Document."

[111] Zwarteveen, "Hydrocracies, Engineers and Power."

[112] Best, "(In)visible Women."

[113] Marc Lindenberg and Coralie Bryant, *Going Global: Transforming Relief and Development NGOs* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2001).

Undeniably, while having stand-alone activities in relation to women's participation are a valuable starting point for gender mainstreaming and increasing women's representation, it is essential to "promote normative changes in women's participation in the WRM and engage women and other vulnerable groups in the whole water value chain" (p.15).[114] The inclusion of gender in the whole water value chain means: (1) acknowledging that women are not just "beneficiaries" or "end-users," but instead engaging them in gender-responsive WRM and peacebuilding initiatives; (2) ensuring that gender concerns are integrated throughout *all project areas*, connecting water and gender to other relevant policy areas; (3) understanding the cultural contexts and ensuring women have a voice and influence over decisions; (5) equitably involving women of different ages, races/ethnicities/nationalities, classes, and religions; and (6) designing developmental projects from the ground up to integrate gender issues throughout the entire process, not only as an add-on output or activity.

The implementation of gender mainstreaming and discourse around gender participatory development in the Ferghana Valley appears to be tokenistic rather than responsive to the local context and concerns of women they claim to represent. This can be attributed to the fact that UN Women was subject to formal pressure to adopt donor-driven goals and requirements. Because gender mainstreaming comes as part of the funding package, UN Women discursively approaches gender inclusion in decision-making, peacekeeping, and empowerment as a "technical" fix or a "one-off" exercise rather than a systematic and more committed approach to gender mainstreaming. Therefore, inadequate conceptualization of gender as *women* and further, homogenizing women, not only undermines the tenants of gender participatory development, but also leads to inadequately integrating a gendered perspective into the project. UN Women[115] reached similar conclusions:

> [...]to date the 15 per cent target allocation for gender equality in PBF-funded projects was not met in all cases and that overall some projects had insufficiently integrated a gender perspective. This shortcoming appears to be largely due to capacity gaps both within UN entities and the PBF Secretariat in addressing gender equality in their projects.

To make a difference in gender mainstreaming and implementing participatory WRM in the Ferghana Valley, UN Women first needs to reconceptualize "gender mainstreaming" as a tool to directly tackle the issues of oppressive gender relations, power/powerlessness as well as voice/voicelessness, which lie at the heart of participatory development.[116]

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[114] "Gender and IWRM," Global Water Partnership, July 28, 2021, https://www.gwp.org/en/sdg6support/gender/.

[115] *Coordinating for Gender Equality Results: Regional Evaluation of UN Women's Contribution to UN System Coordination on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Europe and Central Asia* (Istanbul: UN Women, 2016), https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2016/08/coorgenderequalresults-eca-web.pdf?la=en&vs=4654.

[116] Cornwall, "Making a Difference?"

CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

Conclusion

Over the last three decades, the Ferghana Valley has been marred by multiple regime changes, shifts in political boundaries, as well as cultural and societal upheavals. Control, access, and management of the transboundary water resources in the Valley have been an aggravating factor for ongoing conflict in the region. However, many scholars and development practitioners have argued that water resources can be a catalyst for peace.[117] In order to test this, many development agencies have incorporated water conflict resolution into programs addressing larger political conflicts. In this paper, we have focused on the processes and practices of peacebuilding and WRM through a gendered lens, guided by discourse analysis of the Cross-border Cooperation for Sustainable Peace and Development Project.

Questions about gender inclusion in the Project in the Ferghana Valley led to inquiries into the distribution of voice, of responsibilities, and of authority on the basis of gender in society. We uncovered the fact that not all women's voices were equally valued or even included, especially those of younger generations. Examining discourse about the Project and tracing the distributions of voice and authority revealed how identities and social categories may (re-)produce and even exacerbate social hierarchies of power, even when new water governance and development arrangements are purported to challenge these same hierarchies. The choices or agency that some actors (i.e., elder women and men) exercise compared with others with less agency and power (i.e., young women and girls) stems from historically produced norms that are bound with deeply ingrained social identities and established power structures.[118]

Often, funding agencies from the Global North create project objectives that are based on disparate operating environments than where they will be implemented in, resulting in projects that are not appropriate for the cultures to which they will be put in place.[119] Our analysis underscores that gender mainstreaming in the Project is a product of rigid requirements set by donors, which do not necessarily fit well with the context of the Ferghana Valley.

A gender mainstreaming conditionality attached to the funding necessitated further inquiries regarding how gender is conceptualized and further incorporated into community participatory WRM, peacebuilding, and development projects in the Ferghana Valley. This prompted analysis on how gender-based WRM assumptions carry the marks of their origins (i.e., Global North) and how they clash with knowledge about how people in the Ferghana Valley live (i.e., Global South). Therefore, to avoid such discrepancies, it is vital to ground the development project in the local context and history from the outset and develop shared understandings of knowledge. This may shift the discourse about gender-mainstreaming solutions from traditional programmatic responses toward more systemic approaches, which can address the root causes of social problems at a community level. However, our analysis revealed that the conditional financial support from the PBF took priority over tackling the embedded characteristics of gender dynamics in the region. Ultimately, UN Women's gender mainstreaming strategies have not been achieved through critical engagement with the past, but rather through PBF's technocratic requirement.

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[117] Shira B. Yoffe and Aaron T. Wolf, "Water, Conflict and Cooperation: Geographical Perspectives," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 12, no. 2 (1999): 197–213.

[118] Zwarteveen, et al., "Engaging with the politics of water governance."

[119] Lindenberg and Bryant, *Going Global*.

We argue that equitable gender participation to "enhance cooperation and trust between cross-border communities" in Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan does not represent a truly bottom-up approach; rather, it continues to represent a top-down approach with a neo-colonial vestige that is being imposed by external funders (i.e., PBF) within which the so-called "stakeholders from local communities" are being made to participate by implementing partners. Online blog posts and project proposals are rife with references to "women'' as a unitary subject and as beneficiaries of aid and assistance. By homogenizing women, UN Women failed to recognize the extent to which one demographic of women (i.e., elder, educated women) could take control of the public arena and the implications for the exclusion of other voices. Local implementing agencies, therefore, must listen to local people's experiences in order to learn which demographics of women have been systematically left behind, and then to work with marginalized populations to adapt the strategies which will help to improve their lives and provide pathways for their involvement in decision-making. Without in-depth research into the local context, UN Women created a situation in which elder and educated women represented all women in the peacebuilding process. Through this, they failed to represent the needs, issues, and concerns of other groups of women and girls. Although we come to these conclusions on the basis of discourse analysis, we acknowledge that this is only a partial picture of a larger system and infrastructure. To have a more in-depth understanding, future research should include field interviews with men and women in the Ferghana Valley, as well as with UN and donor organizational personnel.

We further argue that the Project serves as a band-aid with its current approach to gender mainstreaming. It does not address root causes and approaches to peacebuilding in a systemic matter. Perhaps this is due to the fact that community participatory development efforts have focused more on addressing technical rather than social and political issues[120] as well as donor-driven pressures to achieve non-confrontational, rapid results with some evidence that local people were involved. This is not to suggest that the Project is ill-intentioned. On the contrary, UN Women is among the few organizations that is at the forefront of implementing gender inclusion programs in the Ferghana Valley and a champion for securing funds for such initiatives. However, the discursive flaws of the Project are primarily in relation to the implementers' failure to understand the local context and the needs of beneficiaries (i.e., women and girls) on the ground. Realizing equitable outcome and systemic change therefore requires shifting power from donors and development sector practitioners, who usually do not represent the population whom their programmatic decisions affect, to the impacted communities and beneficiaries.

Though it may be a stretch to suggest that this project alone would end violence in this region, in 2020, tensions between Ak-Sai village in Kyrgyzstan and Voruh village in Tajikistan resulted in the evacuation of 250 residents, mostly women and children.[121] Meanwhile, men stayed behind to protect their land and participate in community meetings, where they discussed how to resolve the conflict over management of the water resources. As a result, inadequate examination of the interrelated facets of social identities that affect gender roles and social relations resulted in a disjuncture between the Project's paper-based plans, aims, activities, and indicators, and the day-to-day realities of the target population. In a broader sense too, the Project appears to have been

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[120] Sultana, "Community and Participation."

[121] "Evakuirovannye v zdanie shkoly posle konflikta na granitse grazhdane vernulis domoi," *Radio Azatlyk*, January 12, 2020, retrieved from https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30372861.html.

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a one-off endeavor, aimed at benefiting a small cross-border region with a discrete population that had no sustainable or broad-based impact. In the same vein, the inclusion of gender can be interpreted as an add-on for the purpose of injecting funds into the project. Without an attempt to initiate a systemic change or trigger an adoption of "community participation," "gender mainstreaming," and "IWRM" principles at the system level (generally by governments), many of these promising innovative solutions will eventually wither.