

Youth in Kyrgyzstan

Bridging Tradition and Modernity

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1. Introduction

Background and research questions

Looking at young people always means looking into the future of a region as well. The members of the young generation are extremely sensitive observers of the political, economic and cultural development of their native countries, because they existentially depend on the chances for personal development. The occurrences in Arab and southern European countries demonstrate how significant the voice of the young generation has become for (political) opinion making in a country.

Keeping this in mind, we have observed that youth studies not only capture and characterise mentalities, value orientations, political preferences and future prospects of the young section of the population by means of empirical social and field research, but they also give young people a “public voice” by introducing their self-assessment, self-concept and their view of societal contexts and interdependencies to a broad public.

In no other age group can sociocultural change be detected as early and distinctly as it can among young people. Therefore, it is fascinating and illuminating to know what makes young people tick. In order to give insights into living environments of youth in Kyrgyzstan, the project “Prospects for Youth” has commissioned the present qualitative youth study in Kyrgyzstan at hand. The project that the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH implements on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic aims to build up sustainable youth work in Kyrgyzstan. The study should provide an opportunity to consider better the attitudes, wishes, needs and expectations of youth in the project and youth work. The study was conducted by the

SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH (Germany) in cooperation with the EL-PIKIR Centre of Public Opinion Study and Forecasting (Kyrgyzstan).

In the frame of this study, the following questions were to the fore:

- Which values are important to young Kyrgyz in their lives? What are their benchmarks?
(cf. Chapter 3 “Values and Principles”)
- What are they interested in? How do they spend their free time? Which leisure time preferences do they have?
(cf. Chapter 4 “Spare Time and Recreational Activities”)
- How do young people perceive the future? Which hopes, expectations, fears and concerns do they entertain? What are their plans for the future? How would they like to live?
(cf. Chapter 5 “Expectations for the Future”)
- Which factors are important for the communitisation of young Kyrgyz? In how far do they separate and differentiate themselves from others?
(cf. Chapter 6 “Family and Friends”)
- Who are their role models? Who do they look up to? Which pictures and ideals of the different genders do they have? What demands do they perceive, and how do they reflect on these normative concepts?
(cf. Chapter 7 “Role Models and Gender Identity”)
- To what extent are they interested in political and social issues/topics? What attitudes do they have towards politics? How do they perceive politicians?
(cf. Chapter 8 “Attitudes towards Politics”)

- How do young people assess religion(s) and beliefs? What influence does religion/one's set of beliefs have on everyday life?
(cf. Chapter 9 "Religious Beliefs")
- How do young people perceive gender, sexual orientation, handicapped people, homeless people, and other minorities?
(cf. Chapter 10 "Tolerance and Acceptance")
- Are they politically or socially involved? If so, why, where and how exactly do they commit themselves? Which forms or structure do young people find appealing?
(cf. Chapter 8 "Attitudes towards Politics", Chapter 11 "Youth Work")
- What does youth work mean to young people and what expectations do they have?
(cf. Chapter 11 "Youth Work")

Methodological design of the study

The current study is based upon a combination of 56 individual in-home *everyday life explorations* (lasting approximately one and a half hours each) and eight two-hour focus groups consisting of a total of 64 participants.

Individual explorations are particularly helpful to obtain deep insights into the everyday lives of the respondents and thus allow for a profound description and analysis of them – especially if they are conducted in the home environment of the young people. This provides an authentic impression of practical everyday life contexts and the inclusion of, for example, spiritual needs and practices. The interviews on hand were conducted as freely as possible, yet to make sure that all aspects of interest were covered the interviewers used a prestructured topic guide when the possibilities of spontaneous answers were exhausted or single aspects weren't mentioned and needed to be specifically addressed.

In the run-up to the interviews, all respondents were asked to fill in a "diary" headed "That's me – and that's what I like!" This "diary" served two purposes: On the one hand, it acted as a source for insights into many aspects of young people's everyday lives and, on the other hand, it helped reduce barriers or even skepticism and fears on the part of the respondents (and their parents) prior to the interview. The "diary" comprised questions that were easy to answer and which covered, for example, taste preferences or interests:

- What kind of music do you like to listen to?
- What do you like to watch on TV?
- Which movies do you like to watch (at home, at the movie theater)?
- What do you like to read?
- What do you like to eat?
- What are the coolest things on earth for you?
- Who are your role models?
- How would a day without a cell phone be?
- How would a day without a computer be?

To conclude the "diary" the respondents were asked to say something about the topic "This gives meaning to my life" and were invited to give free rein to their creativity: They could clip pictures or images from magazines, newspapers or the like, and paste them in the diary; they could draw pictures or write down terms and thoughts.

To complete the picture of the private living environment a photographer took pictures of the respective homes of the respondents (provided they consented to it). These photos constituted an important source of information relating to self-perception and the everyday life aesthetics of these young people.

All interview partners were between 14 and 24 years old, 50 per cent of them were male and 50 per cent female. The interviews took place in Bishkek and the greater Bishkek area, Karakol, Kyzyl-Suu, Naryn, Chaek, Osh and Kurshab. Particular attention was paid to achieving an even distribution of urban and rural respondents as well as to an even age and gender distribution in the chosen sample areas. As to ethnicity, 41 young Kyrgyz, eight young Uzbeks, four young Russians and three members of other ethnicities were interviewed.



All the focus groups consisted of eight participants (with at least one member of each group being of Russian or another ethnicity), and several creative techniques (e.g. collages) were applied to reveal (including subliminal) opinions and attitudes. The focus groups were conducted in Bishkek and recruited according to the following criteria:

		14 – 17 years	18 – 24 years
Male	Urban	1	1
	Informal settlements	1	1
Female	Urban	1	1
	Informal settlements	1	1

The study was executed in close cooperation with a local partner: the EL-PIKIR Centre of Public Opinion Study and Forecasting, Bishkek. All interviews and focus groups took place between October 2013 and January 2014. They were conducted by local interviewers and moderators of EL-PIKIR (native speakers of Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek) who at the outset of the study attended workshops on the techniques of individual everyday life explorations, narrative interviews and extended creativity groups including interview and focus group simulations, guided by the director and a senior researcher of the SINUS Institute.

2. Summary of the Main Findings

Within the context of the youth study, special attention was paid to differences between age groups (14–17-year-olds and 18–24-year-olds), gender and youth from urban vs. rural areas. However, there were two points which needed to be taken into account:

- It is difficult to clearly distinguish and define a “pure” urbanite or a “pure” villager in Kyrgyzstan, especially with a view to people living in Bishkek. Starting from the collapse of the Soviet Union (and especially after the events of the tulip revolution in 2005), several waves of internal migrants moved to (greater) Bishkek. So in this study the assignment to the urban or rural population was primarily based on their current place of residence. But for the determination of the urban/rural status we also drew on the qualitative findings of the everyday life interviews.

- In many of the research issues young Kyrgyz shared common values, attitudes, opinions and behavior patterns. So we refrained from describing all the surveyed aspects along all the subgroups and only reported on emerging differences.

Values and principles

To gain an understanding of young people’s mentalities, it is essential to know which values are important in their lives, what their benchmarks are, their basic orientations, their principles. In Kyrgyzstan, community-related values and values of duty and acceptance are very pronounced among young people (in general the community/collective ranks higher than the individual), yet these values are expanded by emerging needs for

Basic orientations and value universe



Particularly in rural areas

Particularly in urban areas

self-fulfillment and self-actualisation particularly in urban centres. Here, individualism/hedonism, performer and entrepreneur mentalities can be detected. In rural areas, traditional values and material security are to the fore.

There is a strong solidarity and family orientation which mirrors the need for emotional comfort and security. The support of the family (plus reliance on personal abilities) is essential for many young Kyrgyz. Education, family and health are clearly at the centre of the value universe: A good education is a long valued tradition in Kyrgyzstan and today it is believed to be necessary to gain a good job which will lead to the fulfillment of parental expectations and material goals. This is in line with the widespread definition of success: One has to define and set personal goals and achieve them by hard work, perseverance and single-mindedness. Young Kyrgyz link personal and societal goals: Work for yourself and improve the situation of the country. This recourse to one's home country is almost prototypical: Patriotism is strong among young Kyrgyz in general. They are particularly proud of the landscape, nature, language and traditions of "their country". On the other hand they are very critical and skeptical of the current political and economic system. However, most of the young Kyrgyz are never tired of emphasizing that they are willing to stay in and promote their country, that they won't shirk responsibility. This ties in with their life mottoes which point to personal performance, future orientation, and optimism at being able to cope irrespective of adverse conditions.

Spare time and recreational activities

The significance of free time and the way it is spent are important aspects in sociocultural research. So it was interesting to get to know how young Kyrgyz perceived leisure time and what they were interested in. Due to school, studies and family obligations most of the young Kyrgyz claimed that they did not have much free time, yet because of their attachment to family and their belief in the importance of education they accepted this as inevitable. Spare time activities were rather domestic (reading, listening to music, watching TV or videos). Mobile phones or smartphones played an important role in (leisure) life for most, as they helped maintain social contacts. The possession of electronic equipment like computers and laptops, however, was not as widespread and therefore remains less important in the design of leisure time. Besides, such technology is not evenly

distributed across the different parts of the country: In rural areas, possession is fairly rare. But even though the urban youth is better equipped with computers, "state-of-the-art" devices are highly aspirational for almost all Kyrgyz (to be used for educational as well as leisure time purposes). Young people's outdoor-orientation in spare time comprises activities like sports, taking a walk, meeting with friends – but with the exception of married women, whose socially ascribed role limits time for, and the scope of, leisure time design.

All in all, the research findings suggest that leisure time activities are not used for differentiation purposes. Most young Kyrgyz do not want to distinguish themselves by their leisure time design because deviation from accepted norms is not favored. For example, music is predominantly a means of relaxation, less of socio-cultural differentiation. Only small minorities perceive it as a way to demonstrate individuality – something viewed by the majority with reservation.

Expectations for the future

As mentioned above, young people's view of the future is essential – both for themselves and for their country. What hopes, expectations, fears and concerns do young Kyrgyz entertain? What are their plans for the future and how would they like to live? On the micro level, education, family and career are the cornerstones of future life plans for the vast majority of young people. Beside the omnipresent wish to marry and build a family, both girls and boys aspire to a career, with girls/women having greater dreams and expectations (prestigious job with social responsibility) than boys and men whose dreams and expectations are more down-to-earth. Attaining a higher education (which is highly aspirational) primarily means meeting parental expectations and being able to get a "good job" which provides material security for the family (typical middle class wishes). In this context, less emphasis is placed on self-development and self-fulfillment.

However, the findings of the survey show that differences regarding scope of future tasks and options are strongly age-related.

The future: associations by the 14–17-year-olds



- ▶ Not very scopious, predominantly emotionally neutral associations with the future
- ▶ Awareness of upcoming challenges in the near future, both in personal development and in educational matters, but no clear-cut plan
- ▶ Pressure of having to make “the right decisions” for one’s personal future (micro level)

The future: associations by the 18–24-year-olds



- ▶ More differentiated, deliberated associations with the future
- ▶ Long-term perspective, primacy of building a family and achieving economic success
- ▶ Self-reliance, no delegation, progress – for oneself as well as for the country (macro level)

When asked how to achieve their goals, most young Kyrgyz state that they rely on themselves and the support of their family, not on governmental structures or support programs. They don’t delegate responsibility, and many of them are convinced that the Kyrgyz youth can and will achieve progress in the future. However, perceived risks are a lack of personal financial means, corruption in all spheres of life, an education system which doesn’t attend to the needs of young people, strokes of fate and personal shortcomings. On a macro level young people often perceive a lack of perspective in Kyrgyzstan at large. The economic situation, the lack of appropriate jobs and high competition lead to young Kyrgyz wanting to work and study abroad (“brain drain”). But most of those young people are eager to return to Kyrgyzstan (“brain regain”) due to a high sense of social responsibility (especially among young urban Kyrgyz) and a very strong emotional attachment to their families and their country (particularly, but not exclusively, among the rural youth). All in all, young Kyrgyz are willing to get involved and work hard for a better future for their country.

Family and friends

To understand young people it is necessary to explore who are important attachment figures for them. Who shape their value systems, and what kind of biographical options they perceive and aim for? The findings of this study suggest that family is indispensable to young people. It is synonymous with comfort, support, love and security – a perception which is additionally strengthened by a profound lack of trust in official structures and

institutions. Family is the benchmark in life, and only a few young urbanites consider postponing starting a family for the sake of a career. Not building a family hardly seems to be an option at all. The mother in turn is the centre of the family, the contact person and the one who passes on values. The father represents the family “to the outside”. Since the perception of a young woman leaving her own family when marrying into a new family is still strong, the mother-in-law turns into the domestic respect- and sometimes fear-inspiring authority with great influence on young couples/families.

Young Kyrgyz apparently don’t contemplate a wide choice of biographical options, and especially young women fear social degradation, financial and legal insecurity in case the “family model of life” isn’t sustained (divorce, death of husband). Being part of a family is a core aspect of creating an identity.

But is family an untarnished blessing? In fact, family exercises a lot of influence on young people. It determines the expectations of how a man or a woman should behave, it imposes rules and life models in many cases and exercises control and surveillance. Due to a sense of attachment and duty, young people seldom develop or insist on individual ways of living. Many young Kyrgyz subordinate their personal ambitions to the family rationale: There is a strong urge in young people to “please” the family (especially one’s parents), even if it contradicts their own wishes.

However, there are differences in the definition and degree of influence of family. The rural youth in particular think of “family” in a broader context of kin-

ship (relatives, village, clan). Here family has a greater influence on social life than among urban youth. This includes marriage decisions, obligations to attend all family events, to contribute to family income, to express respect to all the older people in their extended family, and to support all members of a family. Especially in rural areas, family is dependent on public opinion as its microcosm, so for many young Kyrgyz, gossip and family problems are taboo topics and open complaints about negative aspects of family life are rare.

In contrast, urban families are more likely to practice a modern, more individualised way of life with less influence from the extended family (e.g. on the decision to marry or the choice of husband and wife, less dependence on the assessment of the microcosm).

When looking at the communitisation of young people it is important to explore the role of friends in the lives of young Kyrgyz. Here differences are mainly found between the two age groups (if there are any at all). Only the aspect of ethnicity is more tied to place of residence than to age: In most urban centres the circle of friends is multi-ethnic, whereas in rural areas young people seem to keep to themselves as far as ethnicity is concerned.

Young Kyrgyz claim that they do not have many very close friends they can really confide in and rely on emotionally. As a consequence, the topics mainly discussed with friends are seldom very intimate in nature. Sensitive subjects like love, sexuality and problems in the family are avoided. Friends mostly signify “back-up insurance” and help in insecure societal conditions – as one doesn’t expect help from “the state” or official institutions.

The time spent in peer groups is rather limited. School, studies and family matters come first. Young married women and mothers find it especially difficult to maintain their social contacts due to lack of time and socially accepted opportunities. Not surprisingly men have more social contacts as the public realm is their domain. Still, there is hardly any tradition of “just hanging out” with friends. So when looking at different forms of keeping contact beyond meeting in person, involvement in online social networks seems to be particularly popular and can substitute evening leisure time activities, especially for the younger age group and married women and mothers.

Friends: associations by the 14–17-year-olds

Friends: associations by the 18–24-year-olds



- ▶ Establishment of circle of like-minded people
- ▶ Initial finding of people to rely on, confide in and spend time with *outside the family*
- ▶ Focus on the emotional side

- ▶ Reduction of *emotional* affiliation to a few intimate friends
- ▶ Extension of the friendship concept by material/financial/economic aspects

Role models and gender identity

So who are the role models of young Kyrgyz? Who do they look up to? What images and ideals of the different genders do they have? What demands do they perceive, and how do they reflect on these normative concepts? The findings from the survey show that narrow role models prevail among young Kyrgyz which follow predominantly stereotypical gender ideals. Both genders perceive a “good woman” (“жакшы кыз”) as possessing domestic, interior values (orderly, good housekeepers, neat, kind, respectful, subordinate [as mentioned mostly in rural areas], taking care of husband and children). There is widespread acceptance among both sexes that a “good man” (“жакшы бала”) should display mostly public, exterior values (tough, yet good-hearted, honest, reliable, not brutal/violent, firm, assertive, the leader and breadwinner of the family). Nevertheless, there seems to be a slight change in role attribution of women regarding public life that require additional/different capacities than mere house-keeping and child raising qualities, i.e. there is increasing emphasis on intellectual qualities as an asset for women. Women subliminally wish for a gradual change in the authoritative male role model (increased social aptitude, aspects of equal treatment), while men in most cases accept their role unchallenged. Especially in rural areas strong hierarchies still prevail: The older stand above the younger, men above women.

The classic role model distribution in marriage is the overriding concept of life for young Kyrgyz with the man being the breadwinner and the woman fulfilling child-raising and domestic duties. Though many young girls are very ambitious, attach high importance to a good education and knowledge expansion and dream of sophisticated/prestigious/well-paid jobs with social responsibility, there is a paradigm change as soon as they are married. The wish to continue their professional career conflicts with the self-imposed as well as socially desired acceptance of the traditional roles. Reconciliation of job and family is only an intention, not a realistic strategy for young women. They seldom question the role of a mother to stay home (at least during the first years) and search for half-hearted compromise solutions like “home office” or a job which can be done at home (designing clothes, sewing, etc.). The consequence of this is an immediate loss of qualified labour in the country. Moreover, the choice of gender-specific jobs (by personal preference and/or socially defined), the economic situation of the country, as well as insufficient flanking policies, all limit the chances of young women’s

expressed desires to re-enter the labour market after the child-raising period.

In contrast, the demands on men (obligation to be the breadwinner of the family) creates a similar cv for men featuring fewer disruptions and stumbling blocks in their job biographies, but it also puts high pressure on them to perform, to live up to (personal, parental, societal) expectations and adequately provide for their family (acceptance as the main, if not single, breadwinner model).

Role attribution is, however, subject to differing degrees of change in different areas of the country. Urban youth is more open towards working mothers and accept a partly traditional role model augmented by some modern aspects: The wife should/can work as long as she can split her time between the job and taking proper care of the household and the children, because housework/child raising isn’t perceived as the duty of the father, mother-in-law or any state institution. Here, the main bread winner and secondary wage earner model is popular. The model featuring a symmetric division of work both in the professional and the private/household sphere isn’t contemplated by young people (neither male or female). Only among young urbanites does it seem possible to have two main bread winners when the children are old enough. The image of women as the main, perhaps even single, breadwinner in a family contradicts the role patterns understood by most young Kyrgyz, and at present the concept of a “mere houseman” seems socially indefensible.

Attitudes towards politics

Most young Kyrgyz describe themselves as apolitical – which is rather surprising as they voice high interest in their native country and its wellbeing. So the alleged disinterest in politics is probably due to their perception of a conflict between the theoretically positive principles of the Kyrgyz form of government (democracy) and negative experiences in everyday life which cause the perception of personal detachment (perhaps even alienation) from it. Young people see the political class as being on one side of society and the citizens on the other one. Therefore, “democracy” isn’t a project that runs by itself, but needs explanation and palpable benefits both for the country and the personal life of the young people. But in spite of their self-assessment as apolitical, young Kyrgyz still pass severe criticism on politically relevant

issues. Objections to existing circumstances and mistrust lead to them blaming corrupt and inept politicians for the perceived poor situation of the country. Corruption is considered to be omnipresent in public life. It undermines trust in authorities and the judicial system, and it is named as the one major cause for cementing (existing) social inequality and the unfair distribution of chances for social advancement.

Associations with politics



Economic policy is most important in the eyes of young people because it touches on the vital interests of the young Kyrgyz. Yet the performance of the political class is considered to be poor: Young Kyrgyz link political instability with current economic problems and claim that they have learned only to trust themselves and their talents or abilities, not the state and its institutions. This ties in with the perception of forced work migration and the call for policies bringing about an overdue economic upturn to prevent labour migration and facilitate the return of migrant labourers.

Interest in politics and specific policies is in general determined by the proximity to everyday life. Fear of violence and anarchy is widespread (often due to actual experience both on the public and private levels), and injustice is perceived in all areas of life (violation of civil rights, lower chances of women on the labour market, the educational system, the distribution of public funds, the new stratification of society). It doesn't come as a surprise that rural youth is often more "politicised" than the urban, because many perceive themselves as discriminated against in the present circumstances – and they seem to have more "idle time" as their workload is more seasonal while extracurricular activities are few.

Disenchantment with politics isn't carved in stone, though. Young people are willing to get involved if they perceive a clear and legitimate way of doing so, if they have the feeling that this involvement and the political issues in question have a (positive) impact on their personal lives and if they get the impression that their topics, perspectives, opinions and proposals for solutions are taken seriously.

Religious beliefs

Religion means moral guidance and inclusion for many of the young Kyrgyz, especially those whose perspectives on life aren't very promising (often in rural areas). The disciplinary role of religion with its focus on values (e.g. honesty, doing good, moderation) is appreciated by a majority of the young Kyrgyz.

Associations with religion



Execution of religious beliefs is situational, though. Most young Kyrgyz have a rather "relaxed" and informal approach to it. Many of them follow "the Kyrgyz way of believing" ("кыргызча") meaning that they are religious and clearly perceive Islam as part of Kyrgyz tradition and religion, but are far less strict in living it and following its set of regulations. Among these young people fear of radicalisation is spreading, and there is a clear demarcation from "Arab-fashioned" Islam particularly in urban areas. Yet a considerable number of young people strictly abide by a more fundamental interpretation of Islam and display a high propensity to "missionise" others. Particularly in rural areas and the south, but apparently in the north as well, growing (subliminal or open) reservations towards non-believers or "wrong-believers" are surfacing. So even though the majority of young people perceive and approve of freedom of choice of religion in Kyrgyzstan, and religion is considered to be a private matter, the level of acceptance of different denomina-

tions varies. There is widespread tolerance and acceptance of different established religions/religious communities, but so-called sects, as well as people converting from Islam to other religions, meet with (high) skepticism and sometimes intolerance in everyday life.

Tolerance and acceptance

Following up the attitudes of young Kyrgyz towards different religions and set of beliefs, we asked for young people's perception of and attitudes towards ethnic groups, sexual orientation, handicapped people, homeless people, and other minorities.

Young Kyrgyz attitudes towards and tolerance of people not fitting existing social norms are dependent in many cases on whether these people are perceived to be responsible for their own situation. If it is believed to be through no fault of their own, young people show a high level of empathy (e.g. with disabled persons, orphans) and willingness to help, but any voluntary deviation from the norm is treated with suspicion and considered dubious. This applies in particular to people who deviate in appearance (e.g. punks). This causes discomfort, because a different look or outer appearance is regarded as indicative of a changed or estranged "character". Outer appearance thus sustains group identity, while people deviating from the heterosexual norm give offense. The best they can expect is indifference, not acceptance, because homosexuality is perceived as an affront to both personal and societal values.

In spite of incidents in recent history, ethnicity, however, isn't believed to be a cause of discrimination. Young people see Kyrgyzstan as a country of different nations living together. However there are subliminal (and sometimes open) reservations especially in the southern border regions (due to antecedent interethnic clashes and overall tensions) as well as in the greater Bishkek area.

The perception of the scope of discrimination seems to increase with age and experience: Additional fields like gender discrimination and discrimination because of social status are issues which are predominantly mentioned by 18–24-year-olds, and in particular by urban women.

Youth work

When asked what youth work means to them and what expectations they have, young people were often at a loss for words. It is something of a blank spot on their mental map, and associations are often laboured. Most of the young people find it hard to picture the offers connected with it, and perceived measures are (in the majority of cases) connected with performance and self-improvement. Fun only plays a subordinate role. However, there are some age-related differences regarding youth work as depicted in the following chart:

Associations with tolerance



Youth work: associations by the rural youth

Youth work: associations by the urban youth



- ▶ Laboured imagination of services provided
- ▶ Predominantly connected with official authorities

- ▶ Increased emphasis on (further) education, performance and job prospects
- ▶ Perception of and preference for private/non-government providers

On an abstract level, some young people (just like representatives of other age groups) perceive youth offers such as sports programs as preventive measures against negligence and crime, and thus as support and “occupational therapy” to fill the void in the life of many disadvantaged young people, especially in rural areas.

Young people’s own social involvement is not very pronounced beyond the (extended) family or public duties like cleaning streets or one’s school. If it exists or is planned it in most cases is thought of at the local level. What are considered as highly promising are forms of engagement which make young people feel that they are taken seriously, that their competencies can make a difference, and where results can be witnessed first-hand.

But who should provide offers? As things stand, it seems that young Kyrgyz prefer a professional top-down organisation of youth offers with the rural youth relying on public programs and the urban youth favoring independent and/or private providers.

totally. If our politicians don't improve our economic situation and develop it, then our youth will develop and improve it. By improving the economy, our youth will improve other sectors as well, like education."

Female, 17 years old, suburban

"Currently, Kyrgyzstan is standing behind a lot of countries. But I think that in the future our youth will contribute a lot of things to our country, and it will dramatically develop and improve. And our future youth will not be angry or unsatisfied with many things in our country."

Female, 16 years old, suburban

Despite attaching high importance to Kyrgyz traditions and the Kyrgyz language in most cases this doesn't include chauvinistic tendencies. Young Kyrgyz instead entertain patriotic feelings: Kyrgyzstan should simply receive (due) attention in the world. In general, there is openness towards foreign countries as well as an acknowledgement of the importance of speaking foreign languages and the benefits one derives from traveling. But as will be discussed in chapter 6 on family, most young people have no desire to leave Kyrgyzstan for good. A lack of prospects, however, forces many of them at least to consider longterm employment abroad or even emigration. Many young urban Kyrgyz also plan to get an education or work experience abroad, but intend to return to Kyrgyzstan afterwards so that the country, too, can profit from their expertise. However, according to experience, many of these young people will stay abroad for a longer period of time.

"There is a Kyrgyz proverb that it is better to live in your own country than to live in a foreign country. I think that it is really better to live in your own country doing small things than living abroad and working in big jobs. In my point of view, as we were born in this country, we must live in and contribute to this country. Of course, I want to travel abroad, but I want to live in Kyrgyzstan."

Female, 17 years old, suburban

Interviewer: "After you go to America and work there, would you come back or you would stay there?"

Respondent: "Certainly, I would come back to Kyrgyzstan, to the place were I was born and where I grew up."

Female, 14 years old, urban

"Because I was born in Kyrgyzstan, I like to live in Kyrgyzstan, because all my friends, all my relatives live in Kyrgyzstan. I've dreamed about living in another country, but now I don't want to. I just want to study there and then return."

Male, 15 years old, suburban

Education, family and health are core values

From the point of view of most young people, education is constitutive: There is no doubt that *"a successful life depends on it"*. Good education will lead to good jobs, which are vital for the fulfillment of parental expectations and of personal goals. So young people are willing to set ambitious personal targets and pursue them with determination. In spite of this being a very broad (and at first glance post-materialistic) definition, most of the young people associate materialist aspects with *"reaching one's targets"*. At this point, personal and societal aims and values mingle: Personal *"success"* leads to the advancement of society and the prosperity of the country as well.

"In order to achieve success he must obtain skills, he must strive for achievement, he must set one goal and must run to it, he must work hard for it I think. When you reach the goals you set you may say you have achieved success."

Male, 17 years old, rural

"Education is a value. Our teachers always used to tell us that knowledge is the biggest value. We are studying from our childhood, we are studying maths, physics and chemistry, and all these things are important, because we are getting experience. And experience will help us in our future."

Male, 18 years old, urban

"The most important thing for me in my life is to be well educated and be a professional in my job, work for that job, and build a good future and be happy."

Female, 22 years old, suburban

Another important value mentioned is *"family"*: parents, children, husband/wife, and particularly in rural areas the extended family. Young people associate family with emotional comfort, security, love, mental and/or financial support. A detailed evaluation of the importance, function and possible drawbacks of *"family"* is discussed in a separate chapter, as is *"religion and religiousness"* (values which are predominantly mentioned in rural areas).

As a third central value, health is mentioned. Many of the young people emphasise health as a major prerequisite to attain one's goals and aims in life which in turn is – as mentioned above – an essential value itself. Again, the definition of these aims and goals is highly dependent on family expectations and the family rationale (*"we-orientation"*).

“My family has a tremendous influence on me, because my education and my actions are under their authority. They help me in making decisions. They give advice. That’s why my family plays such a big role in my life.”

Female, 24 years old, urban

This triad of family, health and education/professional success constitutes the small “private” set of values of young people. These aspects are also dominant when young Kyrgyz are asked to name three wishes they have in life: As a rule, they refer to the health of their family, improvements in living conditions, a prosperous future for their country and personal career options (sometimes even elusive wishes like becoming a NBA professional or the like). The rural youth often put more open emphasis on career than the urban youth which may be due to the (economic) situation in rural areas where the desire for a professional career correlates with the possibility of escaping unfavorable conditions.

More “public” or “global” values like peace, democracy, freedom of opinion, etc. are not mentioned frequently.

“First of all, health of the family. Secondly, I want everything to be fine in my life, as well for my parents. And third, I want Kyrgyzstan to be the most developed and prosperous country.”

Female, 18 years old, urban

“First of all, to build a house, then to purchase a car, raise cattle, get married, strive for a better life.”

Male, 17 years old, rural

“First – I would study what I have not studied, would become a doctor. Second – would be happy with my family, with my parents. Third – I would ask for health.”

Female, 21 years old, rural

“I would wish to keep my family together and wish them to be happy. Well, most of my people are living abroad now; I would like them to be provided with work. Well, for myself, I wish to be healthy in the future and reach all my goals.”

Male, 20 years old, rural

Aspirations to social advancement and economic success are obvious

Values like prosperity and economic success are often paraphrased: Young people instead discuss diligence, power of endurance, discipline, performance and single-mindedness which (can) lead to material prosperity and social advancement. Money is not a value in itself, but a means to an end: Most respondents wish for it so they can satisfy basic needs like housing, food, savings, etc.

This could – to some extent – be a socialist legacy as well where “money” was taboo and surplus/private property was considered to be objectionable.

Many young people claim that they would support charitable facilities like orphanages if they had enough money. Some, however, entertain more luxurious material wishes (nice house, fancy clothing, high affinity to technological gadgets like smartphone/mobile phone, tablets, computers), but in general even the wish for a “car” refers to pragmatic mobility rather than luxury cars as a marker of social status (*“In winter I would like to take my children by car, because it is so cold.”*). However, materialistic aspirations do exist. Yet, especially in rural areas they are seen as “daydreams”, and doubts prevail as to their fulfillment.

Especially in urban areas, values of duty and acceptance are augmented by individualistic and hedonistic values

As a rule, there are strong values of duty and acceptance (obedience, sense of duty, modesty, hierarchy) among young Kyrgyz. Most of them do not try “to march to a different drummer”, but remain inconspicuous. Most abide by traditional values and virtues like effort, order, cleanliness, etc. The demonisation of alcohol is symptomatic of this attitude. Drinking (especially in public) is not socially desirable as it signifies having let oneself go. It isn’t connected to “simply having fun” and celebrating. Many young people exercise personal restraint, feelings are often not shown in public, and problems are dealt with alone. Young women especially even tend to suppress anger and keep silent in order not to appear abusive or loud (role attribution: respectful, polite, calm, caring, etc.).

Still, needs for self-fulfillment and self-actualisation are also important to young people, especially in urban areas. They strive for more individualism, focus on personal needs and talents and (tentatively) wish for a detachment from societal and family expectations. Many of them also display both a distinct reliance on their personal ability to perform and a high optimism of being able to cope with all situations.

“Role model? Nobody. For me there are no such people. Of course, in childhood for every kid these are their parents. In youth it may be actors, singers, maybe friends or someone else. I came out of this age and now I am who I am, I’m an individual.”

Male, 24 years old, urban

Aspirations



Male, 14 years old, urban



"I want the inside of my house to look like this."

Female, 19 years old, rural



Female, 23 years old, urban

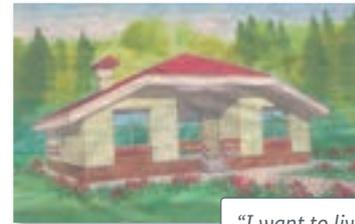


Male, 18 years old, urban



"This mobile phone is the last version of 'Samsung' company. If only I could, I would buy it for everyone in my family."

Female, 23 years old, urban



"I want to live in such a house. I like to live with family in peace and happiness, to plant flowers in the yard. I love when it's clean and beautiful around your house."

Female, 23 years old, rural



Male, 14 years old, urban



Female, 23 years old, rural

"I don't like to imitate others. I want to live on my own, I will manage, but I learn from others' mistakes."

Male, 16 years old, suburban

"I do not want to rely on anyone, I want to have my own source of income and develop further."

Female, 22 years old, urban

"Being young means having a choice, choosing something yourself instead of doing something that you are supposed to do. For example, your parents want you to do something that you are not willing to? There should be a choice."

Female, 20 years old, urban

Security is valued more highly than freedom

Freedom is discussed ambiguously by young Kyrgyz. On the one hand, some subliminally feel that they aren't really free, because "society" and particularly the family determines many things in their lives. On the other hand, many claim that unchecked freedom would lead to anarchy, that it would bring out the worst in people, and that people wouldn't be responsible any longer.

(This notion may also be imparted by the generation of parents who were socialised in Soviet times and who refer to those times as strict, yet orderly and non-anarchic.) So, the disciplining function of the family is appreciated by many young Kyrgyz – or perhaps internalised to such a degree that individualistic notions only play a subordinate role.

This ties in with the fact that in the end most of the young people claim that they "are free", yet often don't name concrete situations in which they indeed feel free. Interestingly enough, such situations that are mentioned are mostly moments or periods of solitude and privacy (being outside in nature, being at home by themselves with nobody bothering them). This again reflects the controlling function of the family.

Some of the 18–24-year-olds wish that they could turn back time and be a child again because then they felt "more free". A possible explanation for this may be that the transition from childhood to adulthood is rather abrupt as most of the adolescents don't experience a

time of “trial and error”, of a testing of their limits, and of “getting to know themselves”. It is to be suspected that a significant part of the Kyrgyz youth feel overtaxed by the expectations they are faced with as an adult (for men: providing for a family, taking on responsibility, earning enough money; for women: early pregnancies, taking on all duties in the household, possible conflicts with the mother-in-law).

Example indicative of growing individualism



“The meaning of my life – I’m not one who says: I’ll build a house, plant a tree and father a son. Yes, it’s good, but I want to work, I like to be positive, go abroad! Surely I do not forget about my parents, because they are the meaning of my life! But now I’m fond of street dance: locking, break dance. I feel free when I dance. Approximately 10% of my life I give for dancing. It’s me on photo at Issyk-Ata.”

Male, 16 years old, suburban

Principles are hard to define and mainly revolve around adopted value systems

All in all, the young people we spoke to only mention a few guiding principles in life when asked for them. If at all, these revolve around being honest, sincere, respectful or industrious, etc. They try to be a “good man” and a “good woman” – meaning to be fair, honest, respectful, decent, well-mannered, reasonable, someone who doesn’t drink alcohol or smoke (role attributions will be further discussed in chapter 7 on role models.) Respect is a central term, especially towards parents and older people in general.

“One must be humane, must be simple, well how to say it, be a good person, take many things from one’s relatives, or learn good things from your parents, not tell a lie, work honestly, make your own contribution to the state, show yourself – that is how you will become a good person.”

Male, 22 years old, urban

As for the topic of “principles”, young people often can’t think of much more than small acts of friendliness in everyday life like offering pregnant women or older people their seat on the bus. This may be due to the fact that parents exemplify values and principles to them through their lives which the children don’t question. Existing principles aren’t challenged; hardly anyone designs his or her own value system. In consequence, inquiries into values and principles are hard to answer, because they aren’t lived consciously or reflected on. They are a matter of course for people of this age, and it would be interesting to survey if and how prolonged stays abroad influence reflexivity.

Life mottos comprise perseverance, looking ahead, and optimism

Only a few of the young people explicitly express a life motto and their responses are very much alike – regardless of gender, age or place of residence. They focus on personal, straight forward performances and fulfillment of expectations, some are even slightly reminiscent of former Soviet slogans:

*“Strive forward”,
 “Forward and forward one must go”,
 “Never go back, only forward”,
 “Go ahead and don’t look back”,
 “Always go forward and never look behind”,
 “To always try my best and to never look behind”,
 “Not to be afraid of the future”.*

4. Spare Time and Recreational Activities

Free time is rare and mainly spent at home

Leisure time is rare and therefore precious for the young Kyrgyz. In many cases, school or studies and household duties fill up most of their potential free time, yet only very few complain about it. Considering the importance of education (cultural value of long standing, almost a “must” to attain higher education) and the sense of duty and attachment to one’s family (see chapter 6), this doesn’t come as a surprise. Likewise, recreational activities among young Kyrgyz are mainly indoor-oriented: listening to music (very important!), watching TV, reading or watching movies (at home, not in a cinema). When spare time is spent outside, the 14–17-year-old boys and girls and the 18–24-year-old men and unmarried women mostly engage in sports. Typical “male” sports are soccer,

boxing or wrestling, while typical female sports are volleyball and dancing. For young wives and mothers recreational activities are more or less limited to the domestic sphere. Most of them state that they have approximately one to a maximum of two hours a day to themselves which they use for reading, watching TV or sewing (the latter is not considered a “household duty”). In contrast, boys/men and younger women also spend time with their friends outside the house (e.g. taking a walk, meeting in a park, playing music together), with the boys/men spending more time with their friends than girls.

The survey at hand can’t answer the question of whether men are friends with women and vice versa against the backdrop of social acceptability, intensity of public



discourse, generational occurrence, and value change. Only one female respondent explicitly mentioned her male friends, and it is not clear if she spent free time with them without other (female) friends around.

Music is predominantly a means of relaxation, less of sociocultural differentiation

Music is very important for most young people to help them relax and have a little peace and quiet. The majority prefers Kyrgyz and Russian artists, only a few (from urban areas) mention American or “western” singers or bands. Music, however, is (in most cases) not associated with parties or clubs, even though there are clubs visited by young people in Kyrgyzstan. These locations and events are frowned upon by the majority, because they are equated with alcohol, smoking and “letting oneself go” – all things which most of the young people distance themselves from. Only very few openly admit to a moderate consumption of alcohol on special occasions

and thus a deviation from the norm of a “good man” or “good woman”. This ties in with the fact that there are small subcultural scenes (emos, punks, gothics, see the illustration on punk rock below) in the bigger cities, but most of the young people display a negative attitude towards them and “uncivilised hedonism” in general. They don’t associate youth scenes with freedom or testing and acting oneself out. Instead, they perceive them as groups of anti-social people on the fringes of society cut off from everything the collective/community offers. Not abiding by the accepted (and desirable) norm is not seen as exploring individual preferences, but as a form of estrangement, a threat to the public order. Likewise, there isn’t a “student life” (clubbing scene, specific music, art & culture, etc.). Most young Kyrgyz neither talk of nor consider alternative lifestyles. It could be hypothesised that predominantly non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups use alternative lifestyles to create an identity, especially since they are less dependent on social opinion and kinship factors.



“... punk rock is not just a music direction, punk rock is a style of life. It’s the music of freedom, protest against fake standards and stamps that society dictates. Also, punk rock is a deep philosophy. Philosophy of life and death, of ‘white and black’, of fighting with yourself. Rock is life, it’s a philosophy, it’s reality and dream, it’s happiness and despair...”

Male, Russian, 24 years old, urban



Mobile phones or smartphones are an almost indispensable part of (leisure) life

Modern communication devices like smartphones, laptops, or tablets are often perceived as the “best things in life” to own. Most of the young people already have a mobile phone – and many with internet access (smartphone) – but many young people in rural areas don’t own a computer, laptop or tablet (computers are mainly used at school/university or in “computer clubs”). As a result they are highly aspirational.

The smartphone is seldom used for research purposes at present; it is a means to access online social networks – and simply to talk. Many of the young people can’t imagine life without a mobile phone any longer, and especially young mothers feel that they would have even less contact with the outside world without it. However, some (though few) somewhat postmaterialist-oriented young women adopt a critical attitude towards mobiles and call them “time wasters”.

“When I had really left my phone at home or lost it and that was really a big problem, especially when you lose your contacts, phone numbers... such a feeling that you have been cut off and left... you drop out of social life.”

Male, 24 years old, urban

“I got so accustomed to using a mobile phone. I feel strange without mobile phone... I do use it all day.”

Female, 15 years old, urban

“Well, if I turn off my mobile phone, I can take a rest.

Therefore, when I am at home I try to turn off my mobile phone.”

Female, 23 years old, urban

5. Expectations for the Future

Education, family and career are cornerstones of future life plans for the vast majority of the young Kyrgyz

With very few exceptions, the young Kyrgyz hope to attain (further) education, to marry and have children, to choose a “proper job” and to pursue a solid career. However, there are some age-related differences as to the scope of future tasks and options.

The 14–17-year-olds have a less differentiated perception of the future than the 18–24-year-olds

All in all, the younger age group still entertains rather general ideas about the future. They have so far adopted a socially desirable model and still need to realise it in their lives.

In this group there are hardly any gender-related differences regarding future plans. Demands for a job are the exception to the rule: Here boys rather think of a well-paid job (extrinsic motivation: future responsibility of being the breadwinner of the family) and girls tend to aspire to a job with social responsibility (intrinsic motivation: to do something meaningful and psychologically rewarding). But interestingly enough both genders expect to be working in the future (details, restrictions and challenges are discussed further on in this chapter as well as in chapter 7 on role models).

Most of the young people would like to study after finishing school which again stresses the importance attributed to education, which is perceived as the key to a better life (cf. chapter 3 on values and principles). The young people are very performance-oriented, demanding a lot of themselves so that they live up to personal expectations as well as those of their family. As mentioned before, most of them do not consider

education to be a matter of self-development but as a pragmatic and necessary means to fulfill duties and enhance personal chances on the labour market. To obtain a good job (and thus to achieve one’s goals) young people perceive education as an indispensable prerequisite, yet already the 14–17-year-olds fear that this alone will not do. Most expect that due to widespread corruption any advancement will not be possible without bribing “the right people”. So enrollment, studies and choice of the right career may be essential for young people’s future, but they are (also) subject to financial circumstances and factors beyond their personal control. Besides, there is insecurity as to the quality of education they can receive at local universities which leads to an increased consideration of options to study abroad or at foreign universities in Kyrgyzstan (e.g. Manas and Ata-Turk University, American University of Central Asia): Foreign educational systems often enjoy a higher reputation than domestic ones.

The 18–24-year-olds expect (and will work for) advancement

The older age group takes a more differentiated look at the future, expanding the “standard” model through personal tasks and aspirations.

For those who aren’t married and/or don’t have children yet, marriage and children rank first when thinking about the future. Many, too, intend to live in an extended family. Only a few women perceive their future with a partner and children alone. This means that women rather than men question some of the established patterns, but marriage and children remain undisputed.

To reach their goals, young people of this age group also count on education. As they have finished school many are now either planning to start studying, are already studying or have finished their studies and are looking for an appropriate career (salient mentality: *“As long as I study hard and put in a lot of effort, I will be able to get a job afterwards.”*). Very few have resigned and feel unable to compete.



Education and a future professional life is very important to young men and women alike – even though the prevailing role assignment of women staying at home and taking care of their children does not fit this performance orientation (cf. chapter 7 on role models). Young mothers especially are very keen to work again “in the future”, when the phase of strongly traditional partnership arrangements has relaxed. But it isn’t just the young women themselves who strive for a good education as young mothers refer to the importance of good education for their daughters in the future – in the sense of upbringing and manners as well as schooling/formal education. This may perhaps be interpreted as a protection measure stemming from the immediate personal experience of these young mothers (*“In the future I want my daughters to graduate from a school well, want them to study in a big educational institution, make them very knowledgeable.”*). But also the closer family, as well

as potential husbands, wish for an educated daughter or wife. At this point one might hypothesise that “being educated” enhances chances on the “marriage market” just as the choice of a prestigious university constitutes a “competitive edge”.

All in all, wishes for the future are rather “typical middle class”: family, social and material security, modest advancement, fulfilling one’s duties as well as the hopes others set for oneself. Girls and young women have “bigger dreams” for the future (prestigious job, social responsibility, self-improvement). The dreams of boys and men are more down-to earth (material aspects, providing for the family).

“A job I dream about? I never thought about it as being high-paid. In the first place it is pleasure and self-improvement that it should bring me, and in the second place it’s a financial question.”

Female, 22 years old, urban

“Like all girls, in my childhood I dreamed to become rich, popular, etc. When you grow up you understand that it is so childish, but the dream about fame and money still remains constant.”

Female, 20 years old, urban

“My dream job is to be a businessman, and I know that I will become a businessman and support my family.”

Male, 19 years old, urban

Career aspirations are ambitious, both among girls and boys

Typical career aspirations among both men and women are in the healthcare sector (physician, nurse, dentist) as well as in accounting, management, law and business administration. Young women also mention tailor/dressmaker, designer or teacher – professions which can either be practiced at home (e.g. by young mothers) or are typically “female professions” (taking care of, working with and educating children). Careers in the field of the arts are quite popular, too. All in all, it is rather striking how ambitious in many cases career aspirations are – considering the difficult economic situation in Kyrgyzstan and the challenges and obstacles of trying to enter or re-enter those professions (after childcare leave).

Future aspirations also include the learning of foreign languages (predominantly English, but also French, Turkish, Chinese or German), which are prerequisites for (subsequent) travel, studying or even working abroad. Preferred destinations are America (strong influence

from movies and the media, possibility of earning money, work&travel program), Russia (relatives and family may already live there which attracts young people, also to help family business), Turkey (Turkish-oriented education in Kyrgyzstan and relatively common cultural traits), European countries like France, the United Kingdom or Germany (reputation of countries and education systems) – however realistic those aspirations may be.



Corruption, fatalism and personal shortcomings pose threats to young people's aspirations for the future

Young people of both age groups have common fears regarding the future: Not being able to find a job, losing one's parents, failing to live up to parental expectations, having to live all by oneself, divorce, poverty, radicalisation (religion-related as well as societal), further strikes and uprisings, war (ethnic conflicts e.g. close to the Uzbek border). In consequence, "stability" is one of the key terms mentioned when asked what the future should bring.

In addition, corruption and nepotism at university and on the labour market are perceived as major problems endangering future ambitions. Young people claim that admission to university and grades are often dependent on paying "secret commissions" (bribes usually with a fixed tariff to get a grade or pass an exam). The students feel that they are helpless in the face of this as complaints about it seem to go unheard, and in consequence young voices for their rights are not very explicit (especially as they want to get a higher education and a diploma at all costs). As discussed in chapter 8, this adds to a perception of inequality which leads to doubts as to the fairness and likelihood of upward social mobility. Young Kyrgyz claim that changing university wouldn't improve the situation, and finding a (good) job would often be either subject to bribery or nepotism as well. Especially jobs requiring a university degree would thus be hard to attain – in addition, many employers would ask for extensive work experience which young university graduates don't have. So for many opening up their own business in the future is seen as one of a few ways to avoid corruption, bribery or excessive demands – even though they fear that "doing business" will also be subject to corruption when dealing with governmental structures.

"When we applied to college we were told: 'Look at the conditions under which you sign the contract. Everything that a student should do and not do, when to pay for tuition, everything is written there. And if you don't agree with something, you can always complain.' However, when you truly want to complain, for example about 'extra money', they say: 'Go to another college'. When you go to another college, there are the same conditions. Finally, there is nothing to choose from."

Female, 20 years old, urban

“In every institution, the administration establishes some laws. By doing that they do not let students speak up and let the president know about their opinions and the situation. You must know that it does not exist. There are laws, but there are different opinions about them.”

Female, 20 years old, urban

“In my view, officials do not give an opportunity to graduate students. When you look for a job, only people who have experience of work or some additional education and courses are needed. The funniest thing is when they write that 20-year-old people with 2–3 years of experience are needed.”

Female, 22 years old, urban

Another alternative which many young Kyrgyz consider to evade difficulties on the domestic labour market is to go abroad. It seems as if both the very low-qualified and the highly qualified plan to work abroad: The low-qualified want to escape a lack of prospects and sheer poverty, and the highly qualified perceive working abroad as

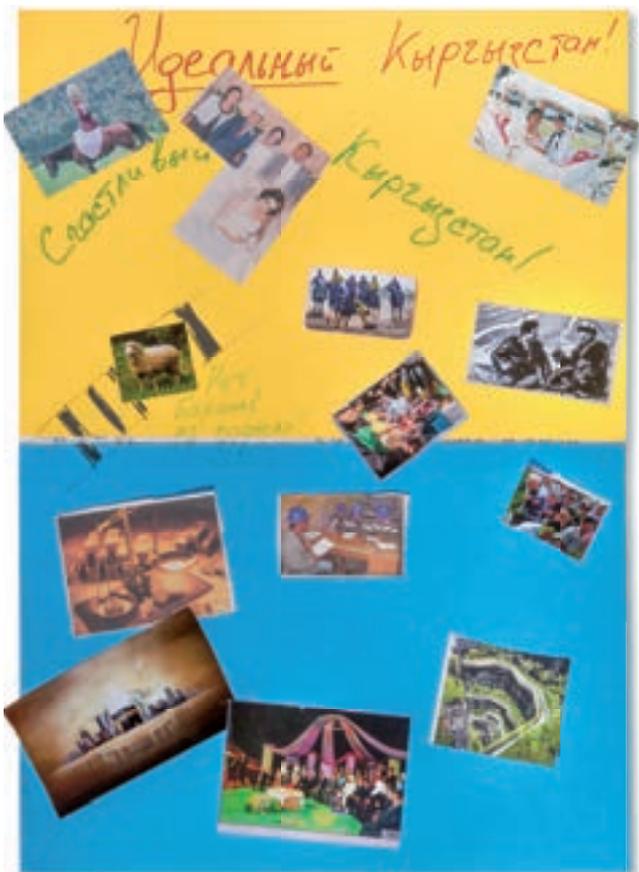
professional advancement. But the vast majority do not want to stay abroad for good. Most intend to return to contribute their share to the welfare of their home country (“brain drain” and “brain regain”).

The young Kyrgyz are willing to work hard for a better future for their country

Most young people draw a very positive picture of the future of their country. They expect (or at least hope for) an economic upswing, lower unemployment rate, better infrastructure, clean streets and a clean environment. They would like Kyrgyzstan to be renowned in the world, in a “best case scenario” to be regarded as the best country in the world (cf. patriotism in chapter 3 on values and principles). All in all, while doubts may prevail as to one’s personal future (education and job), they are not apparent regarding the future of the country.

Kyrgyzstan tomorrow

Kyrgyzstan today



Male group, 18–24 years old, urban

“good” top/left; “bad” top/right; “some aspects of the future” bottom

Young people are somewhat undecided about how Kyrgyzstan should and will achieve these goals. At present they voice severe criticism of the current societal, economic and political situation (cf. chapter 8 on politics), but they display unchecked optimism regarding the future of the country ten years down the line. And most of the young Kyrgyz believe that it, too, is their personal duty to advance the country, and that their generation can make a difference.

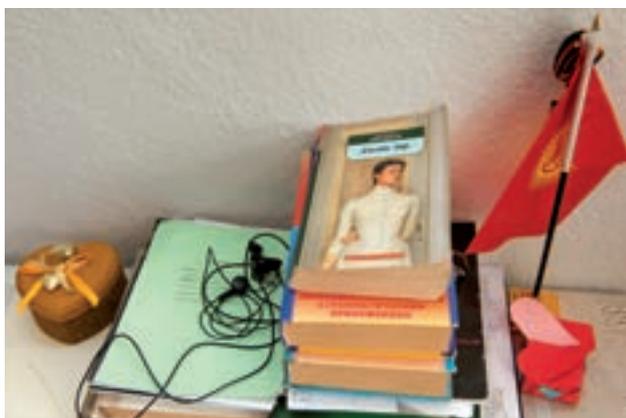
“I think the main thing is that a person should live for his motherland, wake up for it and his heart should beat for it.”

Female, 21 years old, rural

“I want to open up a factory that will produce sugar and that is how I will develop our country, giving job opportunities to other people.”

Male, 18 years old, urban

So young Kyrgyz are willing to work for it, and in their opinion the major issues to tackle are fighting corruption, boosting the economy, providing new jobs, preventing new demonstrations and uprisings – all the while still preserving Kyrgyzstan’s traditions and roots.



6. Family and Friends

Family is indispensable for young people, the integral part of life

When asked what family means to them, young people in unison emphasise the importance of and emotional bonds with their family. Family is the core institution in the life of young people and to most is synonymous with comfort, support, love, security – in short: the centre of life (*“Family is the meaning of my life”, “Family plays the main role in my life”, “Family is the main value”, “Family means happiness”*). Family is partly even stylised as something “sacred”. Others compare family with an independent country or city, seeing the family as a cosmos with its own rules and positions – which may even run contrary to societal or political circumstances and targets. Still, many young people are unable to verbalise the exact meaning and the emotions connected with family beyond one catchphrase. It seems both so omnipresent and so obvious to them that it needs no further explanation.

The exceptional importance of family is based on the perception that given an “uncertain” outer environment (cf. chapter 8 dealing with politics) only the family can be trusted and relied on. Thus, it doesn’t come as a surprise that many young people answer the question “Who or what couldn’t you live without?” by mentioning first and foremost “my family”. Many are afraid of being completely on their own because it makes them feel defenseless – and most have never lived alone yet. Living with the family represents the norm: First in one’s family of origin, then in one’s own family – which especially in rural areas often includes the extended family as well (*“The meaning of my life is given by my family. Now it is the family of my parents, later my own.”*). However, the perception of family – apart from all the positive attributes – also entails contradictions and inconsistencies, as will be discussed subsequently.

Due to a sense of attachment and duty, young people show little inclination to pursue individual ways of life

Starting a family is a benchmark for the vast majority of young people. It almost seems unthinkable not to marry and have children – especially in rural areas or among those whose families moved from rural areas to the greater Bishkek area (*“We were born for that. We actually came into this world to build a family.”*).

Only some 18–24-year-old urban individualists consider postponing starting a family. Hardly anyone considers a complete abandonment of family formations (e.g. to pursue a professional career), but all in all it seems as if urban families treat the topics of (point in time of) marriage, choice of spouse, and family collective in a somewhat more “open-ended” way than rural ones. For the 14–17-year-olds, the family of origin is the main blueprint of how they would like to shape their own family later on, and those of the 18–24-year-olds who are already married have adopted behavioral patterns from their parents in many cases. So it is not by coincidence that most of the young people consider their parents (and especially their mothers) or other members of their family like the grandparents, aunts or uncles as their main role models (cf. chapter 7).

Individualistic tendencies are rare and – as mentioned previously – especially among the 18–24-year-olds in urban areas. The majority of the young people, however, consider it very important that the *immediate* family remains united and close. They don’t intend to detach themselves from their parents even after finishing their education; there is no active demarcation, either spatially or in terms of values.

Important role models within the family

"People whom I hold up as an example are my parents, of course."

Male, 22 years old, urban

"My mom and my favorite actresses and singers."

Female, 21 years old, suburban

"First of all it's my mother because she raised me and I'm so grateful to her for that. I always hold my mother as an example."

Female, 19 years old, urban

"I hold up as an example people who are elder than me. These are teachers at school and elder uncles."

Male, 16 years old, rural

"My role models are my parents. I take an example from them. I'm trying to be responsible, honest like my dad. And hardworking like my mother."

Female, 18 years old, urban

"The person whom I hold as an example is, of course, my 'gold' mother. I want to be my husband's darling sweetheart, be a kind mother for my kids like my mother is."

Female, 21 years old, urban

"For now the person whom I hold up as an example is my mother, because my mother teaches me how to cook, to bake bread, how to wash clothes and how to communicate with people. That's why I think that person is my mother."

Female, 18 years old, rural

"I want to hold up my parents as an example, my teachers who give us knowledge. I try to be smart and well-mannered. When I grow up, I want to become a software engineer..."

Male, 16 years old, urban

"Of course, this is my mother and my mother-in-law. They both help me, teach me. I listen to them and that's why I do what they say."

Female, 23 years old, rural

"My dad is a person, whom I'd like to hold up as an example."

Male, 15 years old, rural

Close ties within the family also cause pressure for some young Kyrgyz

If there is a deviation from this norm (be it that one parent has died or the parents have moved away for work reasons, or be it that the parents are divorced), young people perceive it as a shortcoming/defect or a burden/handicap. As a consequence they often idealise the previous situation. Only a few respondents refer to problems in the family or voice the opinion that living together in such a close relationship, as well as the control exercised by the parents, can have negative aspects as well. This includes, for example, negative experiences with step-fathers and stepmothers (receiving less attention than natural children or being treated as cheap "manpower" in the household) or statements that the family is a mixed blessing: It provides support, help and protection, but also means surveillance and control. Decisions in many cases aren't taken by the individual, but by the family. For example, the influence of the family over choice of education or partner is high, though in urban areas this influence seems to be considerably weaker than in rural areas.

Family means great responsibility: Since the parents have raised their children, the children feel obliged to take care of their parents when these grow older. They

believe that they owe their parents a lot and should give something back to them. Therefore, this feeling of being indebted prevents many young people from living out individual desires or looking for "their own way". Instead, they subordinate their personal ambitions to the family rationale in order to "please" the family (especially their parents). And they aspire to prove to their parents that they have learnt their lesson of how to be a "good man" or "good woman", meaning that they have internalised the rules and gender models imposed by the family (these role and gender models will be discussed in detail in the next chapter).

The sense of indebtedness also extends to personal performance at school or university. Many young people feel obliged to perform extremely well to make their parents proud of them and not to cause "shame" (since their parents, too, depend on the opinion of relatives, their friends or even neighbors). They aim high for the sake of their parents, which means that the desire to attain a good education isn't solely based on modern values (self-development and self-actualisation), but is also rooted in meeting the (financial and status) requirements and expectations of the family. Young men especially are under considerable pressure to live up to these expectations, since it is considered their task to be the breadwinner of the family in the future.

Reproducing behavior patterns and ways of life also result from external pressure and coercion. In many families (especially in rural areas) children need to earn money early in life to contribute to the livelihood of the family. Due to a sense of duty and attachment to the family, one does not leave to pursue individual aims and wishes. As a consequence, education and chances to attain more sophisticated (and well-paid) jobs remain suboptimal, which means that for these young people history will repeat itself.

The mother is the linchpin of the family

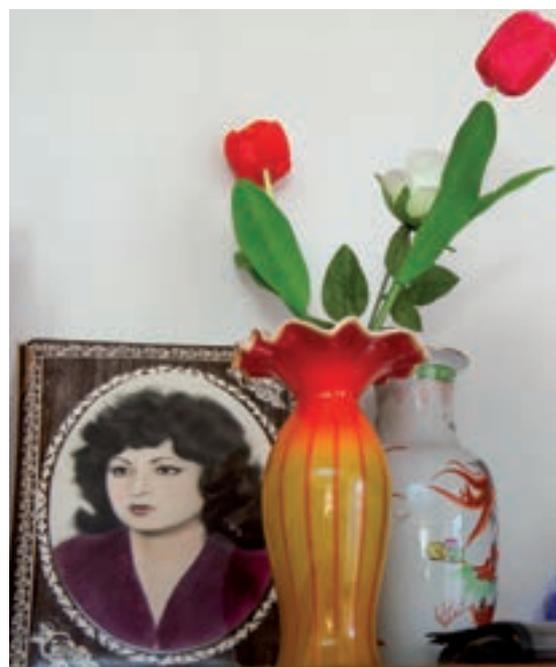
Most of the young people show a closer relationship with their mother than with their father. Both sons and daughters confide in her and she is seen as the (emotional) centre of family and the main contact person who also passes on values and sets the rules. Even though formally the father is regarded as the head of the family and its main representative in public, the mother decides on most issues concerning the upbringing of the children. The young people would like to keep close contact with her all their lives, want to take care of her and provide her with a comfortable living. Young women give a lot of consideration to what their mother-in-law will be like: They marry into a new family and are expected to “please” their husband’s mother. Mothers-in-law are sometimes feared but always respected. They have a great influence on the young couples/families, and it is perceived to be the task of the daughter-in-law to establish a good relationship with her. In case of conflict the daughter-in-law often can’t expect the support of her husband against his mother, only her own parents (and sometimes her family of origin) are mentioned as people to possibly rely on.



Gossip and family problems are taboo topics

Topics discussed in the family mostly centre around everyday life: work, studies, relatives, health and expenses. Politics and religion on the contrary are topics which are infrequently talked about (if at all), and gossip is avoided as it smacks of being uncultivated and uncouth. This may also be due to the fact that being the subject of gossip oneself is something dreaded – as it “disgraces” the family as well. Therefore, the need to distance oneself from gossip in any way is pronounced among the young Kyrgyz.

To talk about family problems with extra-familial people is also virtually a taboo. Keeping up the impression of a functioning family, even in times of a family crisis, is socially important. This is another reason why hardly any negative associations with family are mentioned. Personal problems – as to current opinions – are discussed inside the family only, since family affairs are strictly considered to be a private matter. In most cases even best friends aren’t involved. Everything should appear harmonious to the outside world. Only a very few respondents pro-actively mentioned problems that occurred in their family (e.g. the father being an alcoholic or the stepmother giving the respondent a hard time), but even they try to play it down and make it look like something one can deal with. Whether this may be due to sentiments of shame, to social desirability or a sense of obligation to the family cannot here be ascertained for sure.



Young Kyrgyz perceive only a very narrow spectrum of biographical options

Digging deeper reveals further fractures that run through the ideal-typical picture of the family. Though having a family and leading a family life represents the only imaginable way of living, many of the married women subliminally attribute negative aspects to married life as well (“marriage as a cage”, personal reduction to housework, professional aspirations cannot be fulfilled, etc.). But despite not being truly happy because they have to subordinate their wishes, most of these

young women refuse to question their role or their position: They don’t draft any alternative design for life to the familiar one (the important aspect of reconciliation of job and family and the issue of job re-entry will be discussed in chapter 7 on role models and gender identity).

In general, there are no well-considered alternative life models, no so-called “plan B”/fall-back plan developed by this “under 30s” generation in case one doesn’t marry or faces divorce. Especially the (from the point of view of many young women) quite realistic situation of being

This gives meaning to my life



Female, 23 years old, urban



“To enter to an adult life and to have a lovely husband and kids beside me so that he would be a strict father and I’d be a kind mother for them. How great it is to be one big family!”

Female, 19 years old, urban

“The meaning of my life is the health of my family.”

Female, 23 years old, suburban



divorced represents a specter, since in most cases it is linked to social degradation and financial as well as legal insecurity. Young women are critical of there being no functioning fallback system for them. And based on the opinion that a person without a family is not a “fully-fledged” person (being part of a family is a core aspect in creating identity), life as a single person per se is perceived as largely unappealing and undesirable.

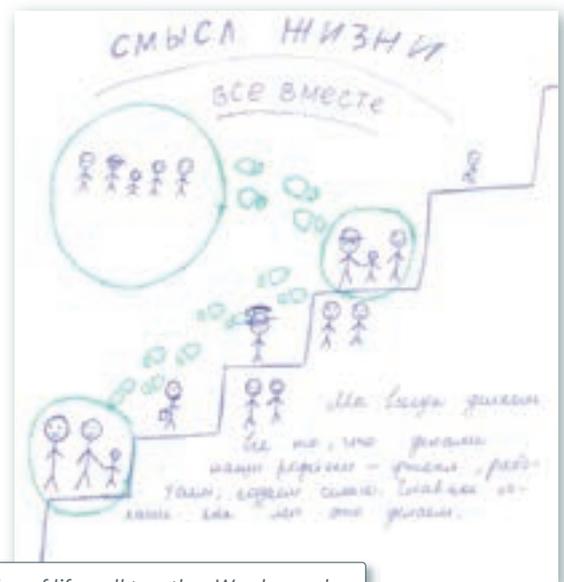
Correspondingly one may conclude that intact family structures contribute to the willingness of young people to stay in the country, because they have little ambitions

to leave the family, friends or their closer environment for a longer period of time. In this case, only to study or to travel abroad is attractive. “Brain drain” therefore doesn’t solely stem from (obvious) macrosocietal conditions like the labour market and income distribution, but also from microsocietal ones. So even though politics has a limited (direct) influence on interior family conditions, the young people’s persistent interest in staying in the country can be supported by flanking measures for families, divorced and widowed people.



“I do not know what is the essence of life for me, but I think I live because I have my family, friends, occupation and hobby.”

Male, 21 years old, urban



“The meaning of life – all together. We always do what our parents used to do – study, work, create a family. The main difference – how we do this.”

Female, 18 years old, urban



“Everything for parents. On the first place there are always parents. I’ll do everything for them. They deserve the best.”

Female, 18 years old, urban



“My family and my friends are the meaning of my life (support and communication).”

Female, 22 years old, suburban

Most friends mean “back-up insurance” and help in insecure societal conditions

Friends play an important role in the lives of the young people, yet in most cases they come in second place after the family, especially in the older age group.

Some close friends represent “like-minded people”, soul-mates with whom one shares views and interests (honesty, reliability and loyalty are regarded as core features of a true friendship). But most friends are very much seen as people one has “fun” with and who lend support if need be and when asked for. Especially in insecure societal conditions they are important for helping one get through difficult situations. However, this support is always mutual. It is taken for granted that nobody takes a one-sided advantage of a friendship for the sake of personal benefit. So there is a focus on having just a few, but important, close friends to confide in and a bigger number of “friend-acquaintances” for coping with the imponderables of daily life and to pass the time with.

Spending time in one’s peer group is not very extensive

Young people in Kyrgyzstan seldom go to the movies or “hang out” with their friends in clubs, at parties or public events. They instead meet “on the street”, take a walk in the park or join in sports together. Only a few report of traveling with friends or going out at night (predominantly urban youth or male respondents from higher social classes). Especially for young married women it is perceived as unbecoming to leave home for a long



period of time or to go out without one’s husband and children – especially at night. Here again, the urban youth in the northern part of the country seem to claim and exercise slightly more liberal views on the subject than respondents living in rural and/or southern areas. In addition, married women often state that they simply have limited time for meeting their friends, because children and household chores don’t permit devoting more time to it. But again, since family and family life is seldom questioned or criticised, young women excuse this lack of time as a “normal phenomenon not only in Kyrgyzstan, but everywhere”.

Involvement in online social networks often substitutes evening leisure time activities

Many friendships have existed since childhood while others stem from business relations. But “friends” are also found and met in online social networks (Odnoklassniki, V-contacts and Agent), mainly via mobile phone/smartphone. Here, chatting is to the fore while self-portrayal plays a rather subordinate role. Social networks are used to fight boredom (especially in the evening when the younger ones and married women stay home). But from the point of view of many young Kyrgyz they cannot replace face-to-face communication. The younger age group (14–17 years) in most cases has a larger circle of friends in social networks than the older ones. The interest in being a member of a social network declines with age – the older age group (18–24 years) claims that they mainly concentrate on only a few close, important friends with whom they keep personal contact – mostly offline. Among the rural Kyrgyz youth, these are often classmates from secondary schools who formed the first circle of friends and with whom one keeps a relationship throughout life – especially if one has not gone on to university or other advanced education programs.

In urban centres especially the circle of friends is multi-ethnic

Many of the young people have friends of different nationalities (Russian, Uzbek, Uigur, Arab, Turkish, etc.), but the majority of friends is Kyrgyz. In rural areas (with few other nationalities living there) friends tend to be exclusively Kyrgyz, while in urban centres the circle of friends is more international. Tolerance towards other ethnicities and nationalities is highest in urban areas and the north of Kyrgyzstan, slightly declining towards the south and in rural areas. Here a rather common and very interesting phenomenon surfaces – one which is also found in many other countries of the world: The fewer “foreigners” there are the greater the skepticism of the autochthonous population who tends to keep to itself.

Men have more social contacts than women

Especially women who are twenty or older often lose contact with their (original) friends. This is partly due to the fact that with marriage many of them change their place of residence, and partly caused by moving to another town to study. Often the wives of their husbands’ friends become their “new friends” (less by choice than by lack of alternatives). On the whole women anyway have less time to meet friends, since they have a dual burden of household chores and studies, or (when married) attention to the family. Men therefore tend to have more social contacts – which is not surprising since the “public realm” is their domain. In the context of keeping and developing networks of friends, young people sometimes also mention get-togethers that take place among a certain (yet expandable) number of couples/families. Everyone takes his/her turn with organizing these get-togethers and all of the others attend and pay a considerable amount of money to support the host.

Sensitive subjects like love, sexuality and problems in the family are kept under tight wraps

The main topics discussed with friends are everyday life, “What’s new?”, local & national news, school and studies, work, future aspirations, job-seeking, public life (e.g. cleanliness of the cities). Girls and women are more likely to share secrets with their best friends, while boys and men instead emphasise the aspects of support and having fun together. Especially married women reminisce about times gone by such as “those school-days”, or talk about their family and children. Sensitive topics like problems in the family or very personal sentiments are rarely shared with friends. Only some married women tell their most intimate and reliable friends about aspects like settling in the new family, the relationship to their parents and parents-in-law, respect and/or fear of their mother-in-law. Typical adolescent topics like crushes, first love, sexuality, etc. seem to be omitted. Whether these aspects aren’t mentioned in an interview situation with an unfamiliar moderator and a voice recorder documenting everything being said, whether the young people really don’t confide in anyone on these topics, or whether it is something that they are ashamed of talking about, cannot finally be decided at this point.

7. Role Models and Gender Identity

The aim of this chapter is to provide an insight into the normative concepts of men and women among young people: What images and ideals of the different genders do they have, what demands do they perceive, and how do they reflect on these normative concepts?

Narrow role models prevail among young Kyrgyz

Young men and young women share a very clear picture of what a man or a woman should be. When describing the dominant (and widely accepted) role models for men and women, they almost exclusively mention values pertaining to morals, social aptitudes/human skills, reputation, material security and education/intelligence. Political and ecological values, religiousness, cultural or artistic traits and individuation are rarely mentioned. Also, neither gender ever resorts to physical traits or hedonistic values. These seem to be either a taboo or insignificant when defining a “good man” or a “good woman”.

When talking about a good character (both of men and women) almost all respondents (regardless of age, gender or place of residence) strongly oppose “bad habits” like drinking or smoking. Considering the fact that there are many clubs, bars, discos or comparable entertainment places in Kyrgyzstan where alcohol and cigarettes aren’t banned, the question arises (as already mentioned in the paragraphs dealing with leisure time activities) who is the clientele the respondents seem to distance themselves from, and to what extent do religious beliefs, social desirability or environmental influences account for this.

Predominantly stereotypical gender ideals are increasingly extended by additional competencies

Role distributions are quite unambiguous: Most boys and girls have a rather stereotypical-affirmative ideal when it comes to the gender images both of men (assertive, leadership qualities, financially successful) and of women (kind, caring, domestic, subordinate). If there are differences in evaluation it is mainly due to the place of residence and less to the different age groups and genders: In urban centres in the northern parts of the country the dominant role models and gender identities are subject to (however slow) modification. Especially (but not exclusively) in urban areas and among the older female youth, the stereotypical male ideal is extended by social aptitudes and the female ideal by intellectual qualities. Flexible, multi-dimensional and critical role models are hardly ever mentioned: Neither boys or girls describe a flexible male ideal geared to equality of treatment or with a critical attitude towards stereotypical male norms, or a female ideal based on a career-oriented woman with leadership qualities and a critical attitude towards stereotypical female “motherly” norms.

Both genders largely agree how a “good woman” should be: kind, domestic and smart

Overall, a “good woman” is attributed with the following qualities (voiced both by male and female respondents) which can be divided into three main fields/categories:

- On the “soft emotional side”, a woman should be kind, respectful, tender, polite, affectionate, friendly, humane, simple, friendly, understanding.
- On a “domestic level”, a woman is expected to be orderly, conscientious, neat, a good housekeeper, taking good care of husband and children.

- On the “intellectual side”, especially (but not exclusively) for young people in urban centres a woman should be clever, educated and intelligent.

The emphasis clearly lies on aspects linked to the role of being the centre of the family and this ties in with what has been said about the position and function of the mother before. Both the male and the female respondents expect a “good woman” to have and love children and be good with them. In accordance with the established hierarchies, she is responsible for a nice, pleasant, orderly family life; she should be respectful and understanding towards her husband, her parents and her parents-in-law. In case of conflict, she is the mediator between father and children. Especially in rural areas and in the south, a woman is perceived as “subordinate” to men, and should always put her children and husband before herself. It is the task of a woman to adapt to the new family of her husband. Housework/child raising is the duty of the young mother/wife, not of her husband, mother-in-law or of state institutions. It is common sense among young Kyrgyz that good mothers don’t leave the care of their children to others in order to get a job or send them to kindergarten early (implications: no proper education, not a proper wife and mother, an uncaring mother). The effects of the fact that marriage often means that women withdraw from public life will be discussed later in this chapter. But it is interesting to note that it is not only men who are ideally attributed with intellectual qualities. There seems to be a change towards a more active role of women in public life which requires additional/different capacities than mere house-keeping and child raising. Besides, some of the young Kyrgyz women mention leading female figures (like Roza Otunbaeva) who occupy prominent positions in public life as personal role models.

Widespread acceptance among both sexes that a “good man” is the tough, yet good-hearted leader representing his family in public and seeing to their (material) welfare

The characteristics of a “good man” are more on the “tough side” and more public/exterior-oriented: firm, assertive, hardy, decisive, courageous, hard, restrained, brave, principled, wise, influential and (self-)confident. Unquestionably the man is the “go-getter”, in charge of “public affairs” and the (main) breadwinner. A typical male concept is that of someone who is “*strong and good at everything*”. Here also “family-oriented” attributes are mentioned: responsible, protective, serious, disciplined

and honest. Men are expected to be true to their word, to provide and stand up for the family, be good to their wives and children, and refrain from violence. It is to be suspected that violence isn’t an uncommon feature in families as there is a reason why both male and female respondents from all parts of the country mention aspects like “*should not be brutal*”, “*should not lose his bearing*”, “*shouldn’t be nervous*”, “*shouldn’t be a tyrant and yell at others*”. It is interesting to see, however, that neither young men or women expect that the family orientation of the father should include taking a substantial role in child-raising and housekeeping duties, as these are the duties of a mother (i.e. daughter-in-law) – which in turn interferes with women’s re-entry into the workplace.

Along with the expectation of supporting and being the “head of the family”, a man is not expected to delegate (and thus lose) this power to a woman: Most respondents (and particularly the male ones) state that the father should possess the ability to lead. Here the perception prevails that a man’s opinion should be the one that counts in the end since the man is ultimately responsible for a family’s welfare. In case the father isn’t living with the family (due to work, death or because he has left the family) the oldest son is called upon to assume responsibility. The youngest son is supposed to stay with his parents when they grow old and take care of them – even after he marries.

By analogy with the above-mentioned wish that a “good woman” should also be clever, educated and intelligent (and given the claim that a man should “never stand below his wife”), a “good man”, too, is required to be well-educated and curious, with a thirst for knowledge – which again is a necessity for acquiring a good job and being able to provide for a family.

However, subliminal critical attitudes seem to slowly emerge, especially among young urbans, which indicates a certain distance from purely traditional role patterns: This is seen when young women mention that they want to live only with their husband and children, when they wish for an independent career, and when some young men find it difficult to reconcile their desire to live a “modern individualistic life” with fulfilling their accepted traditional role expectations.

Women subliminally wish for a “voluntary softening” of the authoritative male role model, while men hardly question it

Especially among younger respondents and in rural areas, there is a strong acceptance of hierarchies: The elder people stand above the younger, and men above women (e.g. the husband can forbid his wife to continue her education, to work, to keep company with certain people, etc.). Many girls in rural areas complain about this but they won't do anything actively to bring about a change. Women in urban centres perceive their own position on a less unequal footing, yet even these women widely adhere to the perception of the above-mentioned character differences between men and women. Keeping this socially accepted position of men in mind, it doesn't come as a surprise that many women picture the ideal of a “good man” as someone who is both “good at home and at work”, who behaves well and is good with other people. Here the obvious, but not naturally fulfilled, wish for a harmonious, untroubled private life seems to be the inspiration for the character projection.

Among the vast majority of boys and young men, however, the prototypical role of men isn't questioned – even if it may prove difficult to live up to such gender-attached expectations. There is no reflection on, or raising of, the topic that many of the norms may be unworkable. But also female youth doesn't really challenge the effects which these narrow male ideals have on boys.

“I'd like to do all that duties that every man in this world does... To graduate university and become a famous dentist in order to justify my parents' hopes. To buy a car for my mother and to cure my relatives' and other citizens' dental problems. This way to serve my people. Also to build a house as in this picture and first of all, invite my mother to my house. To marry a good, smart girl with the blessing of my mother. To create my own family and have kids and provide for them.”

Male, 17 years old, urban

Role attributions are less strict when it comes to young unmarried people and their participation in household chores

In the phase between being a child and a (married) grown-up, the role expectations of the two genders don't seem to differ a lot when it comes to participating in household chores. All young people still living at home are obligated to do their share. The distribution of these chores is mainly, but not exclusively, assigned by the mother, and they pursue them without question. The younger age group (14–17 years) in particular never complains about too much work and too little free time. Doing one's duty for the family overrides personal preferences. The amount of chores aren't strictly divided up according to gender until the young people are grown up or married as then the young wives or adult daughters take on more chores (or in the case of the daughters-in-law most of them).

The classic role model distribution in marriage is the overriding concept of life

The projections of the future as to partnership and family are exclusively heteronormative, i.e. all respondents act on the assumption that they will have a heterosexual partner.

The partnership and family model almost all of the young people aspire to is that of a family with children. As mentioned in chapter 6 on family and friends, only a few young urbans openly consider postponing starting a family and only an exiguous minority considers life as a single person. Being in a steady partnership without being married seems to be practiced but is rarely talked about.

Statements as to task sharing in families are very much in line with the classic role model distribution. Both among young men and women, a family model in which the man is the sole breadwinner of the family is still going strong – sometimes it is desired as a permanent solution, but in the majority of cases it is aspired to for the time young children should to be taken care of by the mother (approximately 3 to 10 years). During this time, neither women or men expect the father to partake in household chores or child-raising duties, at least not substantially. The main bread winner and secondary wage earner model is accepted, both as a temporary and a permanent solution, when the children “are out of the woods”. However, this does not fundamentally change

the expectations concerning the involvement of the father when it comes to household and child-raising duties. This remains in the first place the task of the mother. The model featuring a symmetrical division of work both in the professional and the private/household sphere isn't contemplated by the young people (neither male or female). Only among young urbans does it seem possible to have two main bread winners when the children are old enough, when they have built their own families and moved out of the house – or when a young female (e.g. older daughter or daughter-in-law) is taking on the household duties.

The widely accepted female role distributions and the aspired designs for life often contradict each other

These dominant, family-oriented life designs have tremendous consequences particularly for young girls. They aim high when asked about future ambitions. Almost all want to get a good education and most would like to study. The command of foreign languages (mostly English) is mentioned as a particularly important goal. These girls dream of sophisticated, prestigious and well-paid jobs, often with social responsibility. However, this wish for a career conflicts with their role distribution in a family. Thus as soon as the girls grow older, their dreams and ideas of the future become “more realistic” and smaller. And as soon as they are married they face a paradigm change, often combined with a great emotional dilemma: Though they would like to continue their education and/or their professional career, they submit their ambitions to a (self-imposed as well as socially desired) acceptance of the traditional role model. The vast majority of the female respondents do not question the role of a mother to stay home at least during the first years of their child's infancy – thus turning into them a “modern women in old role patterns”. The common wish to get married and have a family is accompanied by only vague ideas of reconciling job and family. The unmarried girls picture a compromise solution during that time: “home office” or a job which can be carried out at home (designing clothes, sewing, etc.). Many of the married female respondents have studied and/or worked but stopped now or have switched to correspondence classes with distance universities, because family life and studies/work couldn't be reconciled after all. And though they claim that they are happy to have attained the highly important benchmark of having a family, still almost all of them express the desire to start working (again) as soon as their children are “old enough”. Only a few are

completely happy with their situation as a housewife and wouldn't change it.

“As we are girls, we are future mothers. We must have our families and also get our chosen job. For example, in the future I will pay attention to my kids and my work. When my kid is at small age, I will give him good upbringing. And when my kid gets older, I will continue working.”

Female, 17 years old, suburban

Reconciliation of job and family is only an intention, not a realistic strategy for young women

The cvs of many younger women resemble each other: school, studies, marriage and children (which often leads to the discontinuation of their studies), possibly correspondence courses – and then (when the children are old enough) difficulties on the labour market trying to find an appropriate job. All in all, the generation of today's mothers-in-law seems to consist of slightly more working women, especially in urban centres. This may perhaps be due to their socialisation during “Soviet” times and a continuous job biography, but it is definitely supported by the fact that when a daughter-in-law does the household chores these older women needn't stay at home to fulfill “classic female duties”.

Still, the vast majority of girls and women agree that – given the above-mentioned reservations – a woman can and should work during marriage. Whether this can be achieved in reality is another story. The withdrawal from public life and being cut off from developments in the professional sphere during the child-raising period leads to considerable disadvantages on the job market. However, the young women don't raise this issue and don't seem to be familiar with (concrete) strategies regarding how to find and use opportunities for their desired job re-entry after taking their time out to raise children – so that if need be (divorce, death of the husband) they, too, could earn a living for the family and themselves. In fact, these young girls and women never question the role of men as the main breadwinner of a family with children, and it remains the undisputed domain of men. The image of women as the main, perhaps even only, breadwinner in a family seems to be alien to most young Kyrgyz women.

Choice of gender-specific jobs limits the chances of young women on the labour market

Though women officially can (and do) study and train for any job, there are classic, prototypical careers for women: nurse, doctor, teacher, lawyer, accountant – careers which many of the respondents in fact want to pursue. And there are “unwritten laws” about what is inappropriate for a woman to do (“*When I studied at school I wanted to enter the Police Academy. Now I have a family and it is not proper to work there. Therefore, I want to be a teacher or nurse.*”). This, too, limits the chances of mothers trying to return to professional life, since on the one hand the scope of jobs deemed appropriate is limited and on the other hand competition is extremely high when trying to attain one of the jobs available in those fields. In contrast, men seem to face fewer restrictions when it comes to career options.

Obligation to be the breadwinner of the family causes a linear vita of men

With the widely accepted role of men to provide for the family, the cv of boys and men is very clear-cut and predictable, and it has fewer “stumbling blocks” than that of girls. Most men/boys try to get a sound education because they need to get a good job to earn enough money so that the wife “*doesn’t have to work*” (internalised acceptance of single/main breadwinner model). Here, the combination of self-actualisation with materialistic aspects of education – as mentioned before – becomes particularly apparent. So for men, it is school, studies, work, marriage and children, no interruption of the professional career if not due to labour market conditions or personal health. There is hardly any preset limitation in choice of profession, but – as discussed in the previous chapters – the family rationale that sees young men expected to earn a living for their families right from the start, may at times exclude personal aspirations for a particular job.

“Being a family man for me is a big happiness, but at the same time it is very responsible, because I’ll marry someone’s daughter. I must take care of her, provide for her and try not to make her cry, I need to please her parents.”

Male, 22 years old, urban

“Women can work, but if the husband is working, there is no need for the woman to work.”

Male, 17 years old, suburban

The opinion of the boys and men diverge as to the issue of women working or not. Most male respondents don’t oppose women getting a good education and a good job per se, but only approximately half of the respondents are in favor of working mothers – and this only when the children are old enough (age range between three and ten years). All in all, urban youth is more open towards working mothers, but even they accept the common opinion that a mother first and foremost must take care of the children. So among them it comes down to a partly traditional role model with some modern aspects: The wife should/can work as long as she can split her time between job and taking proper care of the household and the children (woman as secondary wage earner). Hardly any man could visualise his wife being the main breadwinner of the family – even if the husband is unemployed or incapacitated for work (severe problems in reconciling this with the self-esteem and self-concept as a man), and the concept of a “mere houseman” seems socially indefensible. Still, given the current conditions on the labour market and the economic situation of many families, the options for a strictly classic role model are narrowing, and it remains to be seen whether the role of women as (even primary) bread winners will be strengthened.

8. Attitudes towards Politics

At least at first glance, and according to their own statements, politics doesn't seem to be a top issue among young Kyrgyz: Many of them claim that they are neither interested nor well versed in it. Also, they seldom talk about it with their family or friends. Only some of them spontaneously name political topics or individual politicians, or claim that they follow the coverage of politics or keep up with political discussions.

Though most young Kyrgyz call themselves "apolitical", they still make severe criticisms on politically relevant issues

When probing deeper, many of the young people do associate many subjects/aspects with politics and make broad and highly critical remarks on them. Their apparent "lack of involvement" stems from the fact that only a few of the young people trust politics. On the contrary, many do not feel that they have their proper share in a "democracy", and they perceive citizens and politicians as standing on different sides (disengagement/decou-

pling of "we citizens" and "those politicians"). Generally speaking, young people don't consider anything initiated by politicians as being very efficient in improving their personal everyday lives, and civic culture is affected by many stereotypes such as it is "useless to get involved because of corruption, clan politics and regionalism".

"Democracy" isn't a project that runs by itself

Young Kyrgyz find it difficult to deliberate about the term "democracy". It is considered "a good concept/idea" by most of them, but rather hard to bring to life – and even harder to visualise as properly implemented. As seen in the associations, there is a conflict between theoretically positive principles with negative experiences in everyday life thus causing the perception of personal detachment (perhaps even alienation) from "democracy". This perception is reinforced by some parents (socialised in Soviet times) who take a critical view of democracy by comparing the "old orderly times" with the "new disorderly ones".

Associations with democracy

Fighting for justice, laws and rules *Parliament* Everyone in for himself
Unfair elections The people
A motion without stopping *Laws that only exist on paper*
Freedom of speech *Politics*
Religious freedom People unaware of their rights
Freedom of assembly **Riots** **Stratification**
Freedom for youth *Less equality*
 Independence from other countries

This can be demonstrated by the aspect of the “freedom of assembly”, a perceived element of democracy: Young people do believe that demonstrations and strikes are one of the few ways citizens can make their position clear to politicians and public authorities, but they still perceive this kind of expression of opinion and protest as “*highly critical*”. From experience they know that demonstrations and strikes may become violent, and they strongly disapprove of rowdiness. In fact, most young people would refrain from taking part in a demonstration because they fear violence. Besides, they doubt that things will profoundly change by making use of this democratic right. As a consequence, some voice a preference for “*a more peaceful solution than demonstrations*” and for electing a representative who approaches politics with the permission of the citizens. Still, the deep distrust of public authorities leads to the general assessment that they can’t expect anything of the state. Young people say that to get ahead in life they have learnt only to trust in personal abilities and in their family. Thus, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the experience of two revolutions, feelings of civic powerlessness prevail among young Kyrgyz. The fear of anarchy and violence as well as the sentiment of having a corrupt, inept political class in some cases even prompts a call for semi-authoritarian structures, for “*democracy lite*”: A strong, competent politician who “*shows the way*” and enforces/ pushes improvement (“*A man who would improve the town is needed, someone who says ‘That must be done,’ and then it’s done.*”).

Young Kyrgyz blame politicians for the poor economic situation of the country

When asked about the current situation in Kyrgyzstan, the country’s youth is worried about a list of issues (which emphasises their concern and love for their country as well as their subliminal interest in politics), politicians in particular are considered to be a major problem, if not the main one. Young Kyrgyz strongly connect politicians with corruption, bribery, and nepotism. They perceive them as people who think of their own personal benefit, not of the benefit of the country. Instead of working for the common good, they line their own pockets.

“Generally, politicians have to help people. It is their duty, their responsibility. But in fact they do no help at all, they just swear at each other and that’s it.”

Male, 23 years old, urban

“As for the politicians, I want to tell them that they should learn how to think about helping the nation and loving the country instead of thinking only about themselves.”

Female, 20 years old, urban

Many of the young people go as far as to claim that the politicians are the ones to blame for the poor economic situation of the country. As an example, young people state that Kyrgyzstan possesses many natural resources that could substantially improve its economic situation. But the politicians would sell “their” resources and land to foreign investors thus not letting the public benefit (often mentioned: the Kumtor mine). As a consequence, quite a few demand the dismissal of all disreputable politicians and a “renewal” of the entire political class.

“I want to tell our politicians that in truth they are uneducated and cannot operate the country in respect of economic growth. They say such uneducated statements and sign contracts on conditions that may simply bring our country to decay.”

Female, 20 years old, urban

Expectations of a good politician are high, and the majority of the current ones fall short of these expectations. The corresponding disappointment leads to the wish for changes in personnel or in some cases for an assertive “leader” who will take charge of the country’s wellbeing (especially among young people in rural areas). The “ideal politician” is one who looks after the citizens and the country, who deeply cares about Kyrgyzstan, who is honest, strong, stands by his promises, and is fair and cooperative (cf. perception of a “good man” in chapter 7 as well as the search for religious leaders and role models in chapter 9). Most of the young people would also appreciate direct communication (e.g. public forums) and to know that their concerns as well as they themselves are taken seriously by the political class. But at present many of them don’t perceive such offers or attitudes.

Corruption is omnipresent in public life

Young people perceive corruption as a comprehensive problem: in politics, in the area of education, economy, on the labour market and in the healthcare sector (some report personal experiences when the quality and speed of treatment in hospital was dependent on paying “extra fees”). But most fatally, young people severely distrust the judicial system and the legal authorities

because of the perceived corruption and bias of the executives (police, prosecutors, judges, ombudsmen, etc.). The guiding principle of “All people are equal before the law” may be a belief of the state in Kyrgyzstan, but it eludes the power of the imagination of young people. This can be illustrated by the widespread criticism of the predominant atmosphere of “lawlessness”: Contraventions against, and violations of, the law are perceived as common behavior, punishment or acquittal as largely subject to personal contacts or financial background. Young people believe that corruption (at least at present) can’t be curtailed or eliminated because a) people aren’t aware of their rights or don’t dare to enforce them, and b) because the salary of state and public sector employees is so low that they feel the need to supplement their income by accepting bribe money. The bottom line is that young Kyrgyz perceive corruption to be the one major cause of cementing (existing) social inequality and the unfair distribution of chances for social advancement: Corruption makes life even easier for those who are already well-to-do, while those without means find it hard to “buy themselves into a better life”.

“In Kyrgyzstan everything is decided by money, not knowledge or talent.”

Female, 20 years old, urban

“Corruption is everywhere, and there is no way without it. If you don’t give money, then you are not a person.”

Female, 18 years old, urban

“I saw a policeman standing on the road and stopping cars and taking money. I went up to that policeman and asked where his car was, and if he could show me his identification documents. The policeman answered that he was on duty, but he did not show any identification documents. After that the policeman asked me to leave, and I said: I am a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic, and it is my right to get information. He showed me the car with ordinary numbers and one person came out of that car, showed me his identification documents, and he was a member of the crime detection department. And he told me to go away before he did something bad to me. I think this situation is a violation of constitutional rights, isn’t it?”

Male, 19 years old, urban

“I have been to Western Europe and the USA, I saw life there. For example, in UK young people can leave their home and start an independent life, looking for a job. It is not like in our country where you can find a job only if you have good connections and money. There, it is not like that: Everything depends on your goals and skills.”

Male, 20 years old, urban

Economic policy is the most important in the eyes of young people

All in all, the focus of demands and interests is the country’s economic policy – which doesn’t come as a surprise considering the career ambitions and the wish for material security and financial advancement of young people. Most of them explicitly see potential for an economic upswing in their country and perceive political instability as a major reason for the current economical problems (e.g. high unemployment rate, lack of qualified jobs, weak infrastructure) – and hence as a threat to their own expectations and needs. Young people in particular find it hard to seize their place and then hold their ground on the labour market. Work migration, e.g. to Russia and Kazakhstan, is therefore (as discussed in the previous chapters) a means of avoiding poverty or enhancing qualifications. But young people clearly expect that politics and politicians create an economic and social environment which in the first place prevents labour migration and facilitates the return of migrant labourers.

“Anyways, it is necessary to support youth, because right now many of them cannot build a family, because there is not enough money. They study and do not have much time. And later they will have to look for a job abroad. Government should support them somehow. It is obvious that support should not come from government only, but it is not a small factor. Then the government says that our demographic level is low and it needs to be raised. Yes, it is, but who will do something about it?”

Female, 20 years old, urban

Labour market policies promote traditional role models

As discussed in chapter 7 on role models, the chances for young mothers to return to the labour market are tough and strategies for achieving this are not elaborated. So, especially in the group of the 18–24-year-old married women, subliminal dissatisfaction spreads. In urban areas young women also complain about another issue of gender inequality on the labour market: They miss having equal pay for equal work in some institutions/companies. Though they “only” see it as a manifestation of injustice and don’t debate the consequences this has on their position in partnership models, experience from research in other countries shows that gender-related income distribution has a major influence on role allocations and supports classic main breadwinner

and secondary wage earner models even among equally qualified partners.

Interest in politics and specific policies is determined by its proximity to everyday life

It is interesting to see that certain aspects of politics (such as foreign affairs) are discussed but are of subordinate importance. The less informed the young people are with regard to political issues, the more simplified their perceptions and images of them: Many young Kyrgyz aren't used to looking at things from a comprehensive, superordinated perspective and therefore relate to these issues through the filter of their immediate environment and experiences. The focus of young peoples' attention when considering "politics" is on issues and aspects which directly influence or can be experienced in their everyday lives. For example, there is great interest in anything associated with "(social) justice":

- They call for improvements in the education system, because the current one isn't considered "fair" (e.g. criticism that access to higher education and grades are partly dependent on contacts and money; accusations that there is better education in urban areas than in rural ones; perception of poorly equipped schools; lack of kindergardens to support mothers' re-entry into the workforce).
- They also demand equal distribution of public funds between urban and rural areas to develop the country and to open up equal opportunities for the population. So it doesn't come as a surprise that rural youth is often more "politicised" than urban youth, because there are vital issues at stake for them.
- The infrastructure is criticised as well: bad, often unpaved roads; partially running water in rural areas; overcrowded public transportation (if at all); dirty streets and dirty towns.
- Most young people perceive the treatment of the socially disadvantaged as "unfair", too: Handicapped people, unemployed, divorced or widowed women as well as orphans don't receive "due" support.
- As mentioned above, women experience gender-related "unfair treatment" on the labour market.
- All in all, young Kyrgyz are sensitive to what they perceive as the new stratification of society: In their opinion, there used to be a more even distribution of money and income, but nowadays the rich always get richer and the poor get poorer. Most of the young people attribute this to the mismanagement of politics, but some blame it more fundamentally on "democracy" itself.



Disenchantment with politics isn't carved in stone

As mentioned in chapter 5 on expectations for the future, young people feel responsible for helping build the country and improve the economic situation. But quite a few also feel called upon to take responsibility, share and obtain power in political issues. They have the feeling that they could make a difference there, too – in spite of their alleged disinterest in politics (both a conceptual contradiction and an expression of insecurity and disillusionment). The degree of political organisation is very low, however. Hardly any young people are members of a political party. But quite a few young Kyrgyz express their interest in a “youth party” (i.e. a party which represents the interests of young people). Some of them would even consider joining it (*“Well, if there were organisations that raise youth issues, take care of youth, show a way for youth in the future, I would join them.”*).

Generally speaking, it is important to note that at present young people don't perceive any clear and legitimate way to get involved in politics since they believe it to be “occupied” by the older generation, with clans or group leaders mobilizing both financial and human resources. Recruitment of young people to parties seems rare and rather random. Offers like having a youth parliament seem to go widely unnoticed.

But if young people have the feeling that political issues are having impact on their personal lives, and if they also have the feeling that their topics, perspectives, opinions and proposals for solutions are taken seriously, mobilisation potential does indeed exist.

9. Religious Beliefs

Religion means moral guidance and inclusion for many of the young Kyrgyz

Most young Kyrgyz believe in Allah/God, and only a few avoid talking about their religious beliefs – some for insecurity reasons, others because they consider it to be too private a matter, while non-believers may fear social disapproval. But they also state that they believe and follow religious traditions (like celebrating certain holidays) without being explicitly “religious”. Still, for many life without any reference to religion is inconceivable. Faith is an important element of everyday life, because in their opinion people would change for the worse without it. Irreligiousness/atheism is often equated with anarchy (a *bête noire* for this generation of young people) and is assumed to lead to crime and lawlessness. Besides, religion and faith provide backing, orientation, structure and social embeddedness. This opinion is particularly pronounced among young people from rural areas. Especially in the group of the rural 14–17-year-olds

the feeling of being “included” through religion is very important as they want to be accepted in a community. In case of poverty and/or lack of prospects, i.e. if the general standard of living isn’t satisfying, religion is a means of finding peace of mind, help, recognition, respect, identification and self-affirmation. All in all, religion has a disciplining effect for many young Kyrgyz: It teaches them not to drink, not to smoke, not to lie, not to steal – in short: to behave well. (*“Without religion? I think it isn’t possible, I think religion disciplines a person.”*)

Still, religion isn’t a topic which is widely discussed with family or friends. This is partly due to the fact that it is a matter of course, but fundamentally religion is perceived as a private matter, a personal affair followed voluntarily without pressure from one’s immediate environment. In fact, in many cases not all members of a family adhere to religious rules in the same way.



Enacting of religious beliefs is situational

Prayers are said irregularly by most young people. Many state that they predominantly pray in difficult situations when they ask for support and help. And there is a distinct gender-related difference: It is mainly boys who, for example, go to the mosque on Friday and who pray on a more regular basis (mainly in the mornings and evenings). Girls seem to be less involved. Still, many of the young Kyrgyz apparently only have a superficial knowledge of religion and religious sets of regulations. Some read the Qur'an or the Bible, but most claim to have heard about religion through oral tradition. Tradition in general plays an important role, and religion has its place in the lives of young Kyrgyz as part of their tradition, predominantly in the form of a "popular" version of Islam (Islam = main denomination in Kyrgyzstan). Only a few mention Islamic law as something they strictly abide by in everyday life, and some young urbans again take up a critical stance against religion and see it as a means of manipulation and control.

Many young Kyrgyz follow "the Kyrgyz way of believing"

If young Kyrgyz claim to be religious, there is a division into two different kinds of this "religiousness":

- On the one hand, there are Kyrgyz Muslims who call themselves religious, but expressly distance themselves from "Arab Islam". They clearly perceive Islam as part of Kyrgyz tradition and religion, but they are far less strict in living it and following regulations. They instead practice in their own "Kyrgyz" way – meaning that they don't pray five times a day, and women mostly don't wear the hijab, let alone a burka. Many of them wear typically loose Kyrgyz clothing and a headscarf when married, but they clearly state that there is no need to enshroud themselves. They claim that a "pure soul" doesn't need extensive coverage (for them, certain garments are not equated with "better behavior"). Many of the religious Kyrgyz (as well as those who are "just believers") are even highly critical of the perceived "Arab Islamic tendencies". They feel that strict obedience to namaz/salat, long beards or specific dress codes are part of a "foreign", non-Kyrgyz culture and are opposed, for instance, to the hijab because it puts undue pressure on other women. Some even perceive women wearing it as just wanting a fashionable detail or a means to signal their "marriage intention". To these young people,

"Arab Islam" is a latent threat to their culture, identity and way of life.

"I would also pay attention to clothes in order not to be guilty in front of God, but I don't think it is right to wear paranja, where women are wrapped with a cape, I don't think that is correct. I have seen such women a lot, those who completely cover themselves. That must be a cause for concern. And those bearded men, I'm afraid of them."

Female, 21 years old, rural

"If your soul is clean, your body is not important. If you are clear of soul, you don't have to cover yourself."

Female, 18 years old, rural

"I met a woman who is also very religious and she was not dressed in all this. But she was so, you know, I felt that she believed sincerely. And she said: 'It is not necessary to fully cover yourself.' She said that you showed your love to God, but not, well, not in this way, not by covering up, but by your actions and good deeds. She told me. And it is her words that I remember and therefore I do not welcome that they, well, walk around in hijabs."

Female, 24 years old, suburban

"We don't live in a place where people are religion-addicted. They don't allow women to get education and they make them marry, but it's not like that here. Every person is allowed to know everything."

Female, 21 years old, rural

- On the other hand, there are growing numbers of very religious young Kyrgyz (particularly in rural regions and the south, but gaining ground in the northern areas as well) who increasingly orientate themselves towards a more fundamental interpretation of Islam. They do namaz/salat and abide by strict religious regulations. The building of new mosques and a change in dress code are expressly welcomed by them. Some of these religious young Kyrgyz strongly believe that Islam is the only true religion and they have strong reservations (up to aversions) towards atheists and other religions. They believe that it is their duty to convince other people to convert to Islam and/or to practice it "properly".

"Because in Islam, everything is written in Shariah, how we should live. And it would be great if we all lived according to Shariah. It is said that if you live according to Shariah, you will get into paradise."

Male, 16 years old, rural

"Honestly, I have a bad attitude to other religions. Because I think that there are a lot of wrong things in other religions."

Male, 16 years old, urban

“But I think, generally that before, a long time ago, before humanity was created it appeared – I mean the Islam religion. Only after that, after the Islam religion was created, I think that other religions were created. Then everyone’s language was different, and as the language is different everyone adjusted religion to himself: Some by praying to the cow, some by praying to the stone, some to the candle... I think that they are not doing it right...”

Male, 18 years old, rural

Young people acknowledge freedom of choice of religion, yet the level of acceptance varies

All in all, there is widespread tolerance and acceptance of different established religions/religious communities in Kyrgyzstan among young Kyrgyz (especially towards the Russian Orthodox Church). However, most of the young people have a very skeptical attitude towards what they call “sects” (free churches, Baptists, etc.). Especially in

rural areas and in the south, growing (subliminal or open) reservations towards non-believers or “wrong-believers” are surfacing. They are seen as people who pose a threat to Muslim traditions and codes of behavior/ethics/morals. And the influence of the local imams shouldn’t be underestimated here: Particularly in the urban areas, they seem to practice a rather open and tolerant view on religious beliefs. But given the economic situation and social structure of other areas, a more exclusive and radical tone concerning religion (especially if voiced by respectable persons like imams) meets with interest, attention and approval, and shapes behavioral patterns and attitudes. With the help of foreign missionaries Islam has started to fill the vacuum which emerged in the wake of the Soviet collapse and its secular movement.

Most young Kyrgyz, however, perceive (and approve of) freedom of choice of religion. They believe that there is no repression in Kyrgyzstan in this regard, and many

Religion belongs to both sides



“The good side of Kyrgyzstan”

10. Tolerance and Acceptance

People will meet with acceptance and respect, if they don't fit existing social norms through no fault of their own

Most of the young people display high empathy with disabled people or orphans and perceive it as a social as well as personal responsibility to help them. There seems to be a strong tradition of charity and solidarity, especially when the situation of “disadvantaged people” is seen to exist through no fault of their own. This, for example, distinguishes attitudes towards disabled people from that of homeless ones: Here, assessments and attitudes among the young people are ambivalent, if not disapproving. Many of the younger Kyrgyz perceive that the homeless are (at least partly) responsible for their situation thus reducing sympathy and readiness to help on the part of the young people. The aspect of belonging to the “deserving poor” appears to be a decisive factor for receiving attention and support. However, particularly in urban areas, young Kyrgyz seem to be more compassionate. Whether this is due to more frequent “concrete” encounters with homeless people or to awareness of the plurality of causes as to why people become homeless can only be speculated about.

But all in all, many young Kyrgyz link “tolerance” with “respect” rather than with “compassion”: “Respect” means that both sides are on a level playing field, with the “acceptor” not having to feel humble and inferior, whereas “compassion” indicates hierarchy, and simple goodwill on the part of the “donor”.

From most young Kyrgyz' point of view, ethnicity doesn't justify discrimination

Tolerance of other ethnicities is widespread among young Kyrgyz – even though “bad traits” like drinking and smoking as well as disrespect for one's parents or older people is subliminally associated with other ethnicities than “Kyrgyz” – especially Slavic. It is interesting to note at this point that some young Kyrgyz don't attribute “ethnicity” solely to different nations, but to belonging to the native Kyrgyz speaking population, the Russian speaking Kyrgyz population, or the urban or the rural population as well – with slight prejudices on all sides.

The younger age group appears the least biased; especially the 14–17-year-old girls entertain a notion of a multi-ethnic society, while all others perceive it as different “nations” living together. However, there are few reports of discrimination based on ethnicity among young people. Still, in the border region between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan latent reservations and negative attitudes towards Kyrgyz Uzbeks can be detected – and is spreading to the greater Bishkek region because of “inner migration” by young Kyrgyz and their families respectively. And again, as described in chapter 6 on friends, the less immediate experience and acquaintance with “foreigners” some young people have, the more probable it is that there is uneasiness and a tendency to keep themselves to themselves.

“If all live together, there is no harm, because they learn each other's culture, there will be different social experiences. After they get friends with each other, they may come to his place, to their place. This is a good thing. For example, if Russians and Kyrgyz become friends, if Kyrgyz go to Russia, knowing their language, they will feel free. And in Kyrgyzstan, Russians won't be strangers.”

Female, 22 years old, urban

“Every person has the same rights as others. It is not right to divide people by nations, like Uzbek or Russians. For example, we need to have the same attitude towards all nationalities. There are a lot of different nationalities living in Kyrgyzstan. And we should not infringe their rights. We must have the same attitude towards everybody.”

Female, 17 years old, suburban

“I think it would be better if only one Kyrgyz nation lived in one country, for example right now there are increasing numbers of Turkish people in our city. I don’t like that. They have different thoughts, different views.”

Moderator: “Mmm, for example, what if they had the same thoughts? Try to imagine it. For example in Bishkek, right now there are many nationalities living along with each other. Why don’t you like that?”

Respondent: “I don’t know, somehow these are my views. I haven’t seen them from close up.”

Female, 23 years old, rural

In the context of tolerance and discrimination, particularly the 18–24-year-old women in urban areas recognise discrimination because of gender: Be it from personal experience, or from an analysis of society, these women complain that men have more opportunities than women in society, that women aren’t “tolerated” (= not equally accepted) as they should be (e.g. preferential treatment of male students at school and university, of men on the labour market, etc.). And the older age group (male as well as female) also criticise discrimination on the basis of social status.

Outer appearances are identity sustaining

Tolerance, however, has its limits for young people in Kyrgyzstan. People deviating because of their aesthetic appearance (e.g. punks, people with dyed hair, etc.) cause discomfort. A changed look/outer appearance is linked to an estranged “character” (cf. chapter 4 on spare time and recreational activities). *“They [the punks] not only change their appearance, they also are the same inside.”* And it again ties in with the assumption that predominantly other (Slavic) ethnicities choose to demonstrate individuality and to “be different”, “be seen” and “be heard” this way – which in turn reinforces unease among those young Kyrgyz who feel “indigenous” and raises sensitive questions about citizenship and who is a “real Kyrgyz”.

Homosexuality is perceived as an affront to both personal and societal values

People deviating from the heterosexual norm meet with outright rejection. The vast majority of young people perceive homosexuality as something “unnatural”, a “societal illness” and a threat to the institution of the “family”. At best homosexual people can expect indifference, but not tolerance (except from a few urban girls). Most young Kyrgyz don’t want to have anything to do with “those people”. They strongly oppose homosexual relationships or the adoption of children by homosexual couples. Besides, it is interesting to note that homosexuality is associated in most cases with gays, not with lesbians, and that men feel even more offended (or their role and code of behavior questioned) by it than women do. But again, responses show that any preoccupation with the topic homosexuality is rather superficial – it seems to be “taboo” like most aspects concerning love and sexuality.

“I think that the marriage must be only a man with a woman, everything else undermines the institution of the family, the institution of normal development in general. This is not progress, this is regression, i.e. degradation of man.”

Male, 20 years old, urban

“I think people with a homosexual orientation are a reason for diseases and gender violation.”

Male, 19 years old, urban

11. Youth Work

“Youth work” is something of a blank spot on the map, and perceived measures are often connected with performance and self-improvement

For most young Kyrgyz, “youth work” isn’t a term they are familiar with. In fact, there seems to be no common definition, no exact idea as to its concept, content and intention (cf. associations with the labour market or juvenile labour, which also may be due to the Russian or Kyrgyz translation of the term). When paraphrased as “offers for young people”, a wide range of unspecific topics, aspects and activities is associated with it:

- Language courses, computer classes, further education
- Job training, employment service
- Sporting events, sports programs, sports clubs
- Internet clubs
- School parliament

Many of the perceived offers and possibilities are connected with drills and performance. There is a distinct qualification and personal benefit orientation; one aims to increase personal knowledge, to attain a competitive edge, to enhance chances on the job market. As a consequence, young people would, for example, welcome travel abroad sponsored by the Ministry of Education – which stresses the aforementioned importance of self-optimisation and education for young Kyrgyz.

Young women in particular are willing to get involved at the local level

Some of the young people are also interested in community- or common welfare-oriented programs (altruistically motivated). The longer the occupation with the topic of “youth work” and “offers for young people” respectively, the more precise the conceptions become

particularly of young women: To work for those in need, to raise funds, to act as an example, to get the ball rolling. Social engagement is exercised predominantly in one’s closer environment, though: in the neighborhood, at school, in the community (e.g. the old Soviet tradition of *субботник* or the Kyrgyz tradition called “ashar”). This local involvement features a high degree of female solidarity and team building. Projects which are most promising in inducing young people to become committed are those which make them feel that they are taken seriously, that their competencies can make a difference, and where results can be witnessed first-hand.

Fun only plays a subordinate role in the perception of youth work

It is interesting to see, however, that youth work, or offers for young people, are seldom associated with fun. Only “sports” seem to have entertaining and fun qualities, but again there are utilitarian aspects involved as well. Young people call for higher investment in sports to train young athletes so that they can compete on an international level – hoping to improve the awareness of their country in the world that way. Besides, especially in rural areas the lack of prospects, financial means and leisure facilities are perceived as causing problems like crime and negligence. Youth offers like sports programs are therefore considered to be preventive measures, support and “occupational therapy” (but still aren’t accepted as a sufficient substitute for the lack of adequate governmental youth policies).

“Many children would not play in the streets if we opened a big sports club for them to play there – and if it was always open, because children turn away when they see that it’s closed.”

Male, 17 years old, rural

“I would like them to devote more time and finance for sport, to different institutions, so that the young people would have some activities to be involved in and some of them... young people have a desire to do something, but they don’t have money for these additional activities. That is why some curriculum activities should be organised for free, so our youth would be occupied instead of walking around the streets.”

Male, 17 years old, urban

Young Kyrgyz seem to prefer a professional top-down organisation of youth offers

Most offers that are mentioned or wished for are top-down ones, i.e. with predefined structures, responsibilities, authorities and contents. Young Kyrgyz rarely imagine or call for a peer-to-peer approach. Logically consistent, the perceived providers of these offers are state institutions, non-government organisations/ national and international organisations, religious organisations, older private or business people. However, the basic mistrust towards domestic public institutions is transferred to youth work as well. That is why many of the young people would prefer private or foreign providers (Chinese and Arab centres are mentioned as offering, for example, interesting language classes). In this context, it is interesting to note that, for example, anti-American attitudes on a political level (cf. military bases) do not exclude pro-American attitudes as far as

youth offers are concerned (this means that youth offers would not be rejected per se on the grounds of political affiliation). Still, many young Kyrgyz (have to) pay attention to costs and therefore would also make use of public arrangements or local initiatives (organised and financed in one’s neighborhood). An increasing number of young Kyrgyz also perceive and welcome offers with a religious background or funding, especially in rural areas.

Information as to existing youth programs seems to trail off unheard

As mentioned before, the awareness of such offers is rather low. In fact, most young people perceive there to be only limited offers or no offers at all in Kyrgyzstan. If measures are known about they are often met with approval, but all in all, information as to youth work doesn’t seem to come across. Sources of information are rare, and most young people only have a vague idea where to look for to obtain information: internet, announcements, friends, radio, TV, possibly youth centres, billboards, advertisement, etc. Again, especially the youth from rural areas (also when moving to the city) are particularly disadvantaged in terms of seeking appropriate sources. Due to language barriers and online “habitus” they often miss out on “the right” social media and online platforms and therefore quote “personal connections” as the main source for such information.



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In cooperation with the

Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic

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