



ARAKET PROJECT IN KYRGYZSTAN REDUCES VULNERABILITIES OF RESIDENTS IN HAZARDOUS SETTLEMENTS

KEY FACTS

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The project ARAKET: For a Better Life in New Settlements in Kyrgyzstan of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) aims at contributing to the improvement of residents' livelihood in eleven new settlements around Bishkek and Osh cities in Kyrgyzstan. During the project's first phase, the GFA team on behalf of SDC is particularly striving for outputs in the improvement of job and income opportunities for women in these areas.

The new settlements emerged in the early 2000s due to land squatting amid the political and social upheaval following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Driven by poverty and unemployment in rural areas, thousands of internal migrants relocated to the cities of Bishkek and Osh. This led to a surge in unauthorized and at times hazardous residential areas. Hence, the new settlements have become home to some of the most vulnerable population groups in newly independent Kyrgyzstan. Studies conducted during the project's inception phase found residents there facing numerous hardships such as the lack of legal housing documentation, access to school and health services, or clean drinking water facilities (*studies conducted at the inception phase of Araket project*).

In the media, settlements around Bishkek are frequently depicted as sources of socio-economic and environmental issues, while the ones in Osh were rarely mentioned. Most media coverage before 2023 concentrated on property and land disputes and their contribution to smog levels. The portrayals often highlight residents as extremely impoverished, struggling to afford amenities.

Positive narratives from these settlements are rarely told. Yet, studies conducted by the Araket project and lessons learned from the first year of implementation reveal fresh insights and success stories, many of which relate to the entrepreneurial spirit of women in these areas.

These findings highlight a vibrant social and economic landscape, painting a more positive picture that suggests the new settlements could be revitalizing life in Bishkek and Osh cities with a potential to drive positive change.

For example, a study among 290 women who participated in 2023 activities discovered that most of them have completed secondary education and a significant number hold higher education degrees in teaching, accounting, management, and business. Yet, many have not worked in their professions, often due to family responsibilities. Half of the surveyed women were employed, mostly in the private sector. Seamstress turned out to be a common occupation as it allows women to care for their children and households while earning an income. Self-employment in fashion, retail, and healthcare is also common. The study further showed that the more educated the women are, the higher their employment rates. Women expressed interest in improving their skills in fields such as sewing, accounting, entrepreneurship, IT, culinary arts, and social media marketing.

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In order to better understand the business perspective, GFA partners surveyed 450 businesses in and around the respective settlements. Even though the areas in Osh were generally perceived as more traditional and patriarchal, research found that women not only play an active part in the workforce but that businesses value them for their responsibility and diligence. Most companies are small, utilizing personal connections and online platforms for recruitment. But the survey showed that businesses are growing, especially in and around new settlements in Bishkek, where female-led teams are expanding and hiring.

Women in the new settlements play a significant economic role, especially in the education, clothing, tourism, and healthcare sectors. Almost half of the surveyed businesses were led by women who also tended to employ other women.

GFA experts together with their local partners took up these findings in 2023 and empowered women through skills training related to financial literacy, job searching techniques, and the basics of entrepreneurship. The project team demonstrated its commitment to promoting gender equality through events that facilitated discussions between women and their male family members. Masterclass sessions emphasized soft skills crucial for economic collaboration and positive family dynamics. Women also gained insights from successful entrepreneurs at events such as the National Forum on Women's Entrepreneurship Development and the Araket project's Annual Workshop on Women's Entrepreneurship. Business tours and collaboration with research centres helped map businesses interested in potential partnerships to advance women's employment opportunities.

In 2024, the project team's priority is to support women with start-up grants to establish new businesses or expand existing ones, with a special emphasis on early childhood development (ECD) centres. The centres will ease the dilemma for many women who so far have to prioritize childcare over work or income-generating activities. MSDSP KG, an implementing partner, conducted a series of trainings on entrepreneurship basics and establishing and running ECD Centres. In March, 17 women completed the training and passed the pre-assessment competition for start-up grants. Four women from the new settlements in Osh City and seven from Bishkek were selected for start-up support. Their projects range from ECD and education centres to sewing workshops as well as cleaning and cooking services. These women will next receive three months of mentorship and start-up grants, and GFA anticipates tangible results from these businesses by the end of 2024.

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