

Intersection of Religious, Ethnic and Gender Identities in Central Asian Countries: Theoretical Framework and Practical Conflicts

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to develop and verify an integrated model for analysing how religious, ethnic, and gender identities intersect and generate social conflicts in Central Asian countries. The study employed qualitative coding, frequency analysis, and statistical testing of census data, official statistics, international reports, and academic publications from 2010 to 2025. The reported percentages refer to aggregated demographic, social, and textual indicators derived from these sources, including religious participation rates, coded thematic intersections, and education and employment statistics. The results obtained show a gender difference in regular participation in religious practices in the Kyrgyz Republic (women – 70%, men – 50%). In all three countries (Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan), a substantial portion of the population belongs to ethnic minorities. Qualitative coding of academic, official, and media texts revealed consistent intersections between the themes of “law”, “tradition”, “religious practice” and “gender roles”: at least two categories are present simultaneously in 38% of cases; in materials about *ala-kachuu* (bride capture), 55% of mentions combine legal and traditional frameworks, with a religious component added in another 27%. Frequency analysis revealed a difference between the language used in official documents and research texts: the former predominantly use formulas of equal rights, freedom of conscience and gender equality (approximately 210, 183 and 127 mentions), while the latter use lexemes of control, restrictions and vulnerability (approximately 96, 87 and 73 mentions). Statistical verification established differences between women and men in terms of completed higher education (range 15-34%). The results demonstrate that conflicts in the legal, educational, labour and public spheres arise at the points where gender, ethnic and religious parameters overlap.

Keywords: Social differences, Cultural practices, Traditional norms, Intergroup conflicts, Status of women, Freedom of conscience

1 Introduction

The intersection of religious, ethnic, and gender identities in Central Asia influences the structure of social relations and forms of collective participation, including the distribution of access to education, employment, and political representation, practices of public religiosity, and regulatory decisions in the sphere of school rules and freedom of conscience. In the context of the cultural diversity of the region, religious norms, ethnic differences and gender roles interact and intertwine, resulting in regulatory and practical conflicts over dress codes and religious symbols in schools, restrictions on public demonstrations, diverse requirements for registering religious associations, and disputes over the distribution of access to administrative and land resources. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analysis of religious, ethnic, and gender identities as intersecting factors of social conflict in Central Asia. It illustrates how legal norms, customs, religious

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practices, and gender roles overlap in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan using qualitative coding, frequency analysis, and statistical testing.

Umarov (2020) demonstrated that regional security is not limited solely to military or diplomatic parameters. That study concluded that it is the ethno-confessional dimension that determines states' susceptibility to threats and influences their ability to build cooperation in the field of security. Sharipova and Burkhanov (2021) emphasised that nation-building in the region goes beyond political and administrative practices. Their study determined that the process of constructing national identity inevitably involves the regulation of the religious sphere and the distribution of gender roles, which leads to additional social contradictions and limits real equality, understood here as equal opportunities for all. However, equal opportunities do not always lead to equal outcomes, and achieving equal outcomes may require remedial actions to address existing disparities. Yilmaz (2020) demonstrated that the prospects for the unification of Central Asian states directly depend on the recognition of ethnocultural and religious diversity. This researcher emphasised that ignoring these differences makes integration projects difficult, because it is identities, not economic indicators, that set the limits of possible regional consolidation.

A study by Terzyan (2021) demonstrates that in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities are only partially realised; there is multiple discrimination against women from minority groups based on gender, origin, and religion. These findings are relevant to the analysis of the Kyrgyz Republic, where there is increasing inequality in access to institutions for vulnerable groups with intersecting identities. The work of Rybina and Lee (2021) describes how sacred spaces in the region perform religious and socio-cultural functions; they show that the ethno-confessional content of holy places shapes long-term spatial attachment and the structure of cultural experience, strengthening identities through tourism and pilgrimage practices. The study by Krol (2021) presents the transformation of legislative institutions under authoritarian regimes in Eurasia; it shows that ethnic and religious groups have a direct and indirect influence on the mechanisms of power distribution and that the social structure sets the framework for political compromises. Arynov (2021) demonstrated that attitudes towards the European Union (EU) in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are determined by the ethno-religious context. This researcher identified two dominant interpretations: the EU is perceived either as a partner in modernisation or as a source of cultural pressure, which indicates that assessments of external actors are formed through the prism of local identities.

Ismailbekova (2023) noted an increase in female Islamic activism in Kyrgyzstan, highlighting that women's participation in religious initiatives has become more consistent. The study demonstrated that activism is manifested not only in the spiritual sphere but also in social practices, reflecting the expansion of women's roles in public life. In another article, Ismailbekova (2022) noted that female Islamic activism contributes to the strengthening of social ties and the formation of support networks. The study concluded that through religious initiatives, women gain additional channels of inclusion in the public sphere, where religious identity becomes the basis for social interaction.

Stephan-Emmrich and Toktogulova (2023) analysed the activities of Muslim women participating in self-development programmes. Their findings showed that religious identity is increasingly combined with professional careers and education, which formed a group of women combining religious values and modern professional self-realisation. Agadjanian (2023) determined that women in Kyrgyzstan are more often involved in religious practices than men, and ethno-regional differences reinforce the picture of social heterogeneity. These results confirm the significance of the gender dimension in the study of religious identities. A study by Zholaliev and Koylu (2022) showed that religious education in Kyrgyzstan's state schools causes institutional and cultural contradictions. The study emphasised that the inclusion of elements of religious education remains a controversial issue, as there is still a need for a balance between secular and religious norms.

Kurmanbekova (2020) examined the characteristics of girls' madrasahs in Kyrgyzstan. The conclusions stated that such educational institutions shape the educational trajectories of Muslim women but remain only partially integrated into the national education system, creating tension between the religious and secular sectors. A study by Usenov (2022) noted that state policy in the religious sphere in Kyrgyzstan has contributed to the institutionalisation of several areas (such as the regulation of religious associations,

the registration of places of worship, and the oversight of religious education), but at the same time, it is accompanied by unresolved issues. The study concluded that the main challenge remains finding a balance between state control and the freedom of religious associations. This control is largely driven by the state's desire to manage religious identity as part of national identity, ensuring that religious practices align with the political goals of fostering nationalism and maintaining social stability, while avoiding the rise of religious extremism.

Botokanova (2022) found that traditional gender perceptions continue to be reproduced in Kyrgyz society. The study demonstrated that the philosophy of gender roles is entrenched in social norms and influences the perception of modern ideas of equality. A collective study by D. Osmonova et al. (2024) identified the characteristics of the religious identity of young people in Kyrgyzstan and Poland. The study noted that among Kyrgyz youth, there is a growth in religious self-identification, which is becoming a significant part of social belonging, while in Poland, religion is perceived primarily as an individual choice, with a noticeable decline in religious affiliation.

Although religion, ethnicity, and gender have all been extensively covered in earlier research, they are frequently looked at as distinct facets of social life in Central Asia. The ways in which these identities overlap in particular institutional and everyday contexts (such as law, education, employment, marriage customs, and public participation) have received less attention. The research problem is that there is still a lack of explanation regarding the mechanisms through which intersecting gender, ethnic, and religious identities lead to social conflicts in Central Asia. Additionally, studies that integrate theoretical interpretation with textual, statistical, and documentary analysis are lacking in a number of Central Asian nations. The need for a methodical model that explains how intersecting identities create and organise social conflicts in the area is thus addressed by this study.

The study aimed to develop and verify an integrated model of the intersection of religious, ethnic, and gender identities for Central Asian countries. The central research question of this study is how religious, ethnic, and gender identities intersect to shape the forms and mechanisms of social conflict in Central Asian countries. The main objectives of this study are:

- to develop an integrated theoretical framework for analysing the intersection of religious, ethnic, and gender identities;
- to identify how these intersections manifest in legal, educational, labour, and public spheres;
- to compare Kyrgyzstan with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in order to distinguish national specificities from broader regional patterns.

2 Materials and methods

The study was conducted in January-June 2025 in the Kyrgyz Republic and was mixed-methods in nature, including a comparative analysis with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to identify common and divergent trends after the Central Asian countries gained independence in 1991.

The first stage defined the theoretical framework for analysis. The methodological basis was the concept of intersectionality developed by K. Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991), which explains the intersection of gender, religious and ethnic identities, as well as approaches by R. Brubaker (Brubaker, 2011) to identity politics in the context of post-Soviet transformations after 1991. Crenshaw's intersectionality framework was adapted to the Central Asian context by focusing on the interaction of gender, ethnicity, and religion in post-Soviet societies. The analysis considered how Soviet secular legacies, Islamic revival, ethnic minority status, community structures, and traditional gender norms jointly shape access to education, employment, public participation, and legal protection in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. These theories were supplemented by regional studies: Khalid (Khalid, 2014) on Islam and gender in Central Asia and Beller-Hann and Hann (Beller-Hann & Hann, 2020) on the relationship between religion and nation, which provided analytical sensitivity to the intersection of discriminatory practices and the ability to compare the Kyrgyz Republic (KR) with neighbouring countries. These studies were selected to reconstruct the

dynamics of identities during the period of independence and provide tools for identifying the mechanisms of their transformation.

The theoretical framework included key events shaping the context in Kyrgyzstan: the ethno-religious conflict in Osh in 2010 (Solvang et al., 2010), bans on women's marches on 8 March in Bishkek (Jabbarova, 2019), and debates on wearing the hijab in schools in Jalal-Abad in 2007 (Mamaraimov, 2008). For comparison, functionally similar cases in the region were used: restrictions on women's marches in Almaty and regulation of school uniforms in Tajikistan, which clarified which conflicts are typical for Central Asia and which have local specifics (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

In the second stage, a collection of documentary and statistical materials was compiled. The basis included: the Population and Housing Census of the Kyrgyz Republic 2022 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2025); the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021), including "Women and Men of the Kyrgyz Republic"; the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 18 "On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations" (2025); the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 184 (2008); United Nations Women (United Nations Women, 2025) reports on early marriage and gender-based violence; the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) analysis of the situation of women in the labour market (UNDP, 2025); Bertelsmann Stiftung (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024); reports by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (OSCE, 2022), Freedom House (Freedom House, 2024), and the U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, 2025). For comparison, data from the Kazakhstan census (Bureau of National Statistics, 2025) and the Tajikistan census (Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2025), as well as the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV "On Religious Activities and Religious Associations" (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV, 2011) and the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739 "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" (Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739, 2011), were used. The inclusion of documents from different countries made it possible to verify the extent to which social and legal conditions in the Kyrgyz Republic reflect trends common to the region or form their own vector of development.

In the third stage, academic research was used to identify factors of conflict. The works of V. Agadjanian (Agadjanian, 2023) on gender differences in religiosity, M. Stephan-Emmrich and M. Toktogulova (Stephan-Emmrich & Toktogulova, 2023) on women's Islamic initiatives in Bishkek, Z. Zholalieva and M. Koylu (Zholalieva & Koylu, 2022) on the interaction between secular and religious education, and an article by D.A. Osmonova (D. A. Osmonova, 2018) on gender-religion conflicts in Central Asia. For regional comparison, studies on Kazakhstan were used: G. Abdiraiymova and A. Saimassayeva (Abdiraiymova & Saimassayeva, 2023) on the relationship between socio-economic inequality and religious identity; as well as studies on Tajikistan: T. Epkenhans (Epkenhans, 2016) on the transformation of Islamic practices and the role of political Islam in the conflict and post-war context of Tajikistan. These publications identified common patterns and differences, confirming the conclusion that the processes observed in the Kyrgyz Republic since 1991 are part of a broader dynamic but have unique manifestations.

MAXQDA Analytics Pro was used for coding and semantic analysis, AntConc 4.2.0 for frequency analysis of terms, and IBM SPSS Statistics 28 for statistical testing. MAXQDA was chosen to find and code recurring thematic intersections in textual materials between gender roles, tradition, religion, and law. The frequency of important lexical markers in official, scholarly, and media texts was measured using AntConc, and statistical relationships in demographic and social indicators were tested using SPSS. To ascertain whether quantifiable textual and demographic trends supported qualitative interpretations, the outputs were integrated by comparing coded thematic patterns, lexical frequencies, and statistical findings. In the comparative sections, Pearson's χ^2 ($\alpha=0.05$) and 95% confidence intervals were used to analyse differences between countries; reliability was ensured by triangulation, in which each fact was confirmed by at least two independent sources.

3 Results

3.1 *Theoretical framework of intersecting identities: The experience of Kyrgyzstan in the comparative context of Central Asia*

The application of the concept of intersectionality, developed by K. Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991), has shown that in the Kyrgyz Republic, social status is shaped not by isolated characteristics but by their combination. Gender, ethnicity and religious affiliation act simultaneously, creating different conditions for access to education, employment, and political participation. The intersection of these factors revealed that women from ethnic minorities in conditions of religious conservatism face restrictions that are exacerbated when the three axes are imposed simultaneously. A comparative analysis with Kazakhstan confirmed that socio-economic inequality is exacerbated when gender and religious identity intersect. Data from Tajikistan showed that in the post-war context, religious affiliation is central in political and gender stratification (Abdiraiymova & Saimassayeva, 2023; Epkenhans, 2016).

According to the social construction theory of Berger and Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), gender roles and religious norms in Kyrgyzstan are reproduced as a result of social interactions. An analysis of practices showed that ethnocultural traditions are enshrined as religious prescriptions, while religious norms are interpreted as cultural heritage. A comparison with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan revealed that a similar mechanism of interpreting social practices forms different frameworks of legitimisation: in Kazakhstan, through the institutionalisation of “traditional values”, in Tajikistan, through the normative regulation of women’s clothing and behaviour.

The approach of R. Brubaker (Brubaker, 2011) to identity politics after 1991 showed that, in Kyrgyzstan, identities took on an institutional form after independence. Ethnicity became interrelated with the distribution of political representation, religious identity became the basis for mobilisation, and gender identity entered the sphere of normative regulation. A comparison with Kazakhstan shows that the institutionalisation of religious identity is accompanied by an emphasis on state control, while in Tajikistan, religious and gender identities are regulated primarily through legal restrictions (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2011).

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model reflecting the intersection of gender, religious and ethnic identities in Kyrgyz society and their influence on social practices, with parallels noted in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to demonstrate common and local characteristics of regional dynamics.

Figure 1 demonstrates a conceptual model based on three theoretical approaches: intersectionality by Crenshaw (1991), social construction by Berger and Luckmann (1966), and the concept of identity politics by R. Brubaker (2011). Each of the three circles represents a separate dimension of identity: gender, religion, and ethnicity. These dimensions do not exist in isolation: they constantly overlap and intersect in real life, forming key lines of social tension. Gender identity reflects the distribution of roles and access to opportunities, whether in education, political participation or the labour market. In Kyrgyz society, it is closely intertwined with religious prescriptions and cultural norms, making it an integral part of institutional and everyday practice. Religious identity sets the system of norms that regulate behaviour and collective forms of solidarity. In the post-Soviet period, its importance has increased, as religious institutions have become one of the platforms for mobilisation and self-organisation.

The primary points of intersection in the Kyrgyz and larger Central Asian context are where the same social situations are governed by legal norms, customs, religious interpretations, and gender expectations. Formal equality may clash with community norms, religiously framed morality, and inherited gender roles, as evidenced by school dress codes, women’s public participation, marriage customs like *ala-kachuu* (bride capture), and access to political or economic resources. These overlaps demonstrate that multiple identity factors interact simultaneously in institutional, cultural, and legal contexts to produce social conflicts rather than a single identity factor acting alone.

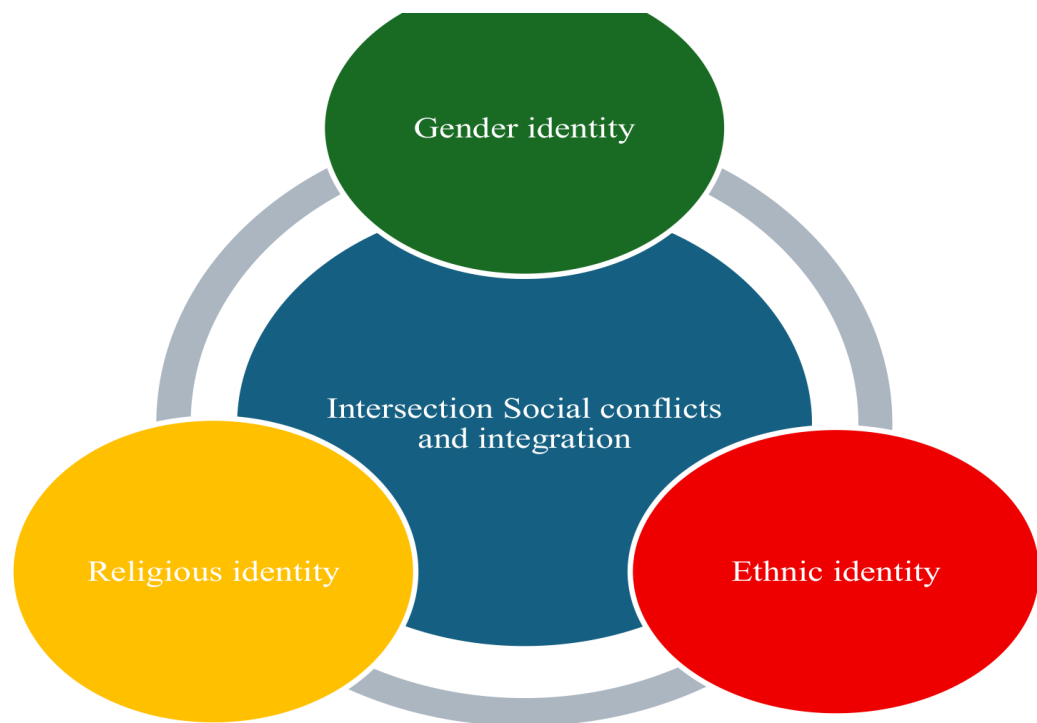


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the intersection of gender, religious and ethnic identities in Kyrgyzstan, with comparison to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

Source: compiled by the authors based on K. Crenshaw (1991), P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966), V. Agadjanian (2023), M. Stephan-Emmrich and M. Toktogulova (2023).

3.2 Intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religion in Central Asia (2007-2022)

Ethnic identity reinforces the boundaries between groups, defining membership of cultural communities. It is related to language, traditions and historical memory, and is often used as a marker in the distribution of political and social resources. The central intersection of the three circles represents a situation in which an individual or group simultaneously bears all three identities. This is what the concept of intersectionality refers to as “multiple layers of discrimination”. For example, a woman from an ethnic minority who practises Islam may face restrictions in three areas at once: based on gender, ethnicity and religious precepts (Omarova et al., 2026). This creates a unique social position that cannot be explained by any single theory.

Discussions regarding religious clothing in schools revealed that the choice of clothing for schoolgirls was subject to several interpretations. In 2007, there were reports of girls being refused entry to school for wearing the hijab in Jalal-Abad, and in 2011, the Tajik Ministry of Education introduced official restrictions on the wearing of religious clothing in schools (Mamaraïmov, 2008; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2011). In the Kyrgyz context, school uniforms were interpreted as a manifestation of religious practice, an element of ethno-cultural identity, and an indicator of compliance with gender expectations. In the educational environment, this created contradictions between the requirements of school administrations and the practices of families and communities, demonstrating the complexity of reconciling institutional and cultural-religious norms.

An example in Kyrgyz society is the 2010 Osh conflict, a violent ethnic clash between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, which resulted in significant loss of life and widespread displacement. The conflict was fuelled by a complex mix of political, economic, and ethnic tensions, with historical grievances exacerbated by the breakdown of law and order following the overthrow of the president. It showed that ethnicity, in the context of religious labelling and gender-distributed roles, creates different levels of vulnerability for the population. For women belonging to the Uzbek minority, the intersection of ethnicity, gender and religious affiliation meant limited access to protection and an increased risk of violence, as

they were caught between the violence of the conflict and the traditional gender norms that restricted their mobility and agency. The conflict highlighted the ways in which intersecting identities can compound social vulnerabilities and how marginalised groups, particularly women, suffer disproportionately during periods of ethnic violence (Spytska, 2023).

Similar intersections were also observed in other countries in the region: In Kazakhstan, socio-economic inequality within the country was exacerbated at the intersection of gender and religious identity, with rural and religiously conservative areas facing greater disadvantages than urban, secular regions. In Tajikistan in the period following the 1992-1997 civil war, the combination of ethnicity and Islamic identity had a direct impact on the position of women in society (Abdiraiymova & Saimassayeva, 2023; Epkenhans, 2016). Although Muslims make up the majority of people in Central Asia, including Tajikistan, the influence of Islamic identity extends beyond religious affiliation. It interacts with cultural customs and ethnic identification, which can impact women's responsibilities, especially in more conservative areas. Central Asia's Islamic identity is defined by regional customs and diverse interpretations of Islam, frequently impacted by historical, political, and social factors despite the lack of a notable Sunni-Shia division (Azhimov et al., 2026). This demonstrates how religion can produce many layers of identity that influence social outcomes when combined with gender and ethnicity. The inclusion of these comparisons emphasises that the model presented in the figure applies not only to the analysis of Kyrgyzstan, but also to the identification of wider regional patterns.

The bans on women's marches in Bishkek in 2019-2021 demonstrated that gender initiatives in the public sphere were accompanied by religious and ethnocultural interpretations (OSCE, 2022). Participants in the marches were promoting women's rights protection, gender equality, and acknowledging women's contributions to society. These demands included the right to bodily autonomy, equal access to work and education, and stricter legislation against domestic abuse. This movement, which combined international feminist goals with the realities of Kyrgyz culture, was formed by the local sociocultural setting despite having its roots in global feminist ideas of gender equality and women's rights. The participants in the marches were simultaneously identified as women, as representatives of certain communities, and as actors whose actions were interpreted through the prism of religious and cultural norms. In official discourse, participation was defined as a political action, in religious interpretations as a violation of moral norms, and in cultural and community practices as transgressing traditional gender roles. This produced uneven consequences: for some participants, participation meant greater access to the public sphere, while for others it meant increased social pressure from their communities. Similar disputes were recorded in Kazakhstan, where feminist marches in Almaty were restricted in 2020-2022 (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

Figure 2 shows a timeline of key events from 2007 to 2022 that had a significant impact on the formation and transformation of gender, religious, and ethnic identities in Kyrgyzstan, with parallels noted in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to identify regional patterns.

Figure 2 captures three events that influenced social processes in Kyrgyzstan between 2007 and 2019. In 2007, discussions about religious clothing in schools were accompanied by different interpretations of schoolgirls' choices: Some viewed it as a manifestation of religious practice, others as part of cultural identity, and still others as an indicator of compliance with gender expectations. The 2010 Osh conflict demonstrated that ethnicity, combined with religious labelling and traditional role distribution, had different consequences for different population groups; women from the Uzbek minority faced limited access to protection due to the combination of ethnicity, gender and religious identity. The bans on women's marches in Bishkek in 2019 were accompanied by an interpretation of the participants' actions through several dimensions: they were identified as women, as representatives of specific communities, and as actors whose actions were assessed in terms of religious "modesty" and cultural "decency". These cases demonstrate that social processes in Kyrgyzstan developed under the simultaneous influence of gender, religious and ethnic factors.

These events show how social dynamics and personal experiences in Central Asia are shaped by the junction of gender, ethnicity, and religion. The complicated ways in which these overlapping identities result in varying degrees of vulnerability, social involvement, and access to resources are illustrated by the 2010 Osh dispute, the prohibitions on women's marches, and the discussions around religious attire in schools. These examples demonstrate the applicability of the study's theoretical framework, which emphasises

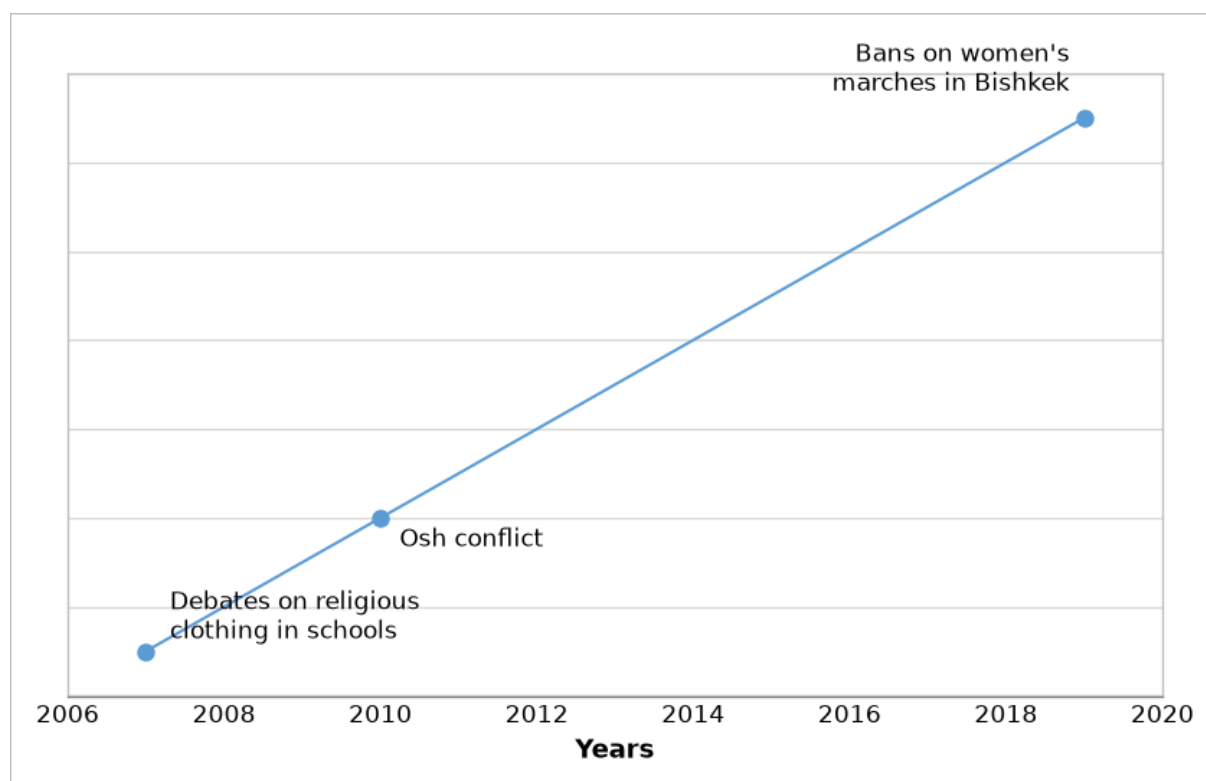


Figure 2: Chronology of events that influenced the formation and transformation of gender, religious and ethnic identities in Kyrgyzstan (2007-2022)

Source: compiled by the authors based on Solvang et al. (2010), OSCE (2022), Freedom House (2024), U.S. Department of State (2025).

how the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religion produce particular obstacles that disproportionately impact marginalised groups, underscoring the necessity of investigating these intersecting identities in social settings. The framework proves valuable in explaining the persistent inequalities and the role of cultural, religious, and gender norms in shaping these outcomes across Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan.

3.3 Documentary and statistical database for the analysis of social contradictions

The 2022 census of the Kyrgyz Republic (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2025) recorded that the ethnic composition of the country is predominantly Kyrgyz (about 73%), Uzbek (14%) and Russian (6%), with the remainder consisting of Dungans, Uyghurs, Tajiks and other minorities. This structure determines the uneven distribution of resources and access to institutions, which is reflected in regional differences between the north and south of the country. The compilation *Women and Men of the Kyrgyz Republic* (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021) showed that women make up 57% of the employed population, but their share in political representation does not exceed 20%. In the education system, women account for about 52% of higher education graduates, while less than 15% of managers in government structures are women. These indicators highlight a gap between the level of education and actual access to positions of power.

The 2021 census of the Republic of Kazakhstan revealed similar disparities: Kazakhs are approximately 70% of the population, Russians – 15%, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, Tatars and other minorities less than 10% each (Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2025). In terms of employment, women make up about 49% of the workforce, but their share in political representation is about 20%. The 2020 census of the Republic of Tajikistan (Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2025) recorded that Tajiks make up 84% of the population, Uzbeks 13%, and women account for

about 45% of the workforce, with less than 17% in political structures. These data compare the ethnic and gender gaps in Kyrgyzstan with those in other countries in the region.

These Central Asian republics have greater rates of female labour force participation than many other Muslim-majority nations. This is largely a legacy of the Soviet system, which supported gender equality and women's employment. The Soviet government's programmes promoted women's participation in both private and public domains, resulting in notable advancements in female work and education. But with the fall of the Soviet Union, religion has become more important in Central Asia, and the resurrection of Islamic identity is frequently linked to the region's cultural and national renewal (Chukhanov & Kairbekov, 2024; Zholmukhan et al., 2024). This shift has influenced gender roles, with religious and traditional norms sometimes limiting women's rights, particularly in rural areas. The junction of these identities is more complicated than it was under the Soviet secular system due to the growing importance of religious identification in addition to ethnicity and gender. As a result, changing religious and cultural standards that intersect with their ethnic identities may have an impact on women's participation in politics and the workforce, in addition to state regulations.

Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 18 (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 18, 2025) established the legal status of religious communities, the vast majority of which (over 90%) represent Sunni Islam. Smaller groups such as Orthodox Christians, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses face restrictions on registration and activities. Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 184 (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 184, 2008) formally established equal rights, but statistics on employment and political participation indicate a discrepancy between regulatory provisions and actual practice. Specifically, women and ethnic minorities, despite legal guarantees, are underrepresented in both the workforce and political structures, with lower access to leadership positions and economic opportunities compared to their male or majority counterparts.

Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV, 2011) established strict registration procedures, limiting the activities of religious minorities. In Tajikistan, Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739 "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" (Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739, 2011) imposed significant restrictions on Islamic associations and banned religious activities in state schools. These regulatory differences show that Kyrgyzstan is formally more liberal in freedom of conscience but in practice faces similar restrictions to its neighbouring countries, especially when it comes to the practical barriers faced by religious minorities. However, the unequal results in terms of political and employment representation (where women, religious minorities, and other marginalised groups are underrepresented) do not always indicate overt discrimination (Kobroń-Gąsiorowska, 2026). These results may also be explained by variations in the average human capital of different groups. For example, members of religious minorities may have less education, which may have an impact on their representation in politics and the workforce (Podoprigora et al., 2019). Therefore, in addition to outright discriminatory actions, differences in human capital, such as educational achievement, can contribute to these inequities.

Reports by the United Nations Women (United Nations Women, 2025) have recorded that more than 13% of girls are married before reaching the age of 18, and the practice of *ala-kachuu* (a traditional and often coercive form of bride kidnapping) remains at a level of up to 20% of marriages in some rural areas. The level of gender-based violence remains high: More than 30% of women have experienced physical or psychological violence in the family at least once in their lives (Altynbekova et al., 2026). These data show that legal guarantees do not provide sufficient protection against traditional practices. UNDP analysis shows that the employment rate for women (ages 18-65) is 57%, but they are concentrated in low-paid sectors (education, health care, social services), while in industry and construction, the share of women does not exceed 20% (UNDP, 2025). This creates persistent economic segregation based on gender.

In Kazakhstan, according to UNDP data, women account for about 48% of the workforce, but they are concentrated in the service sector, and the level of women's political participation, specifically representation in parliament, remains below 25% (UNDP, 2025). In Tajikistan, United Nations Women (United Nations Women, 2025) has reported that up to 15% of marriages involve minors, and the practice of religious marriages without state registration remains widespread.

The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) Kyrgyzstan report (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024) noted a

discrepancy between formally enshrined principles of equality and actual restrictions. The gender equality index was rated at 4.3 out of a possible 10 points, indicating structural barriers to the realisation of rights. Reports by the OSCE (OSCE, 2022) described ongoing episodes of ethnic tension in the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan, where conflicts between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are accompanied by discrimination in access to land and administrative resources. Freedom House (Freedom House, 2024) classified Kyrgyzstan as a “partly free country” where restrictions on freedom of assembly have been recorded, and the U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, 2025) highlighted cases of pressure on religious minorities and restrictions on freedom of religion. According to the BTI Kazakhstan Report, the gender equality index was 4.7 points, which is slightly higher than the Kyrgyz Republic’s figures, but similar barriers for women in accessing power were recorded (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). In the BTI Tajikistan Report, the equality index was lower at 3.9 points, reflecting more stringent institutional restrictions (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Freedom House (Freedom House, 2024) classified Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as “not free countries” where freedoms of assembly and religion are more severely restricted than in the Kyrgyz Republic. Table 1 presents the main documentary, statistical and regulatory sources, as well as their analytical significance for the analysis of ethnic, gender and religious processes in Kyrgyzstan, comparing them with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Table 1 reflects the body of documentary sources that can be used to analyse social contradictions in Kyrgyzstan in comparison with neighbouring countries in Central Asia. Demographic data, including population censuses, confirm the multi-ethnic nature of society: in Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz ethnic group predominates, with significant Uzbek and Russian minorities; in Kazakhstan, statistics indicate greater diversity, with large Russian, Uzbek and Uyghur communities; while in Tajikistan, the population is characterised by high ethno-confessional homogeneity. A comparative analysis of these data traced how the ethnic factor is incorporated into the system of identities in different ways depending on the structure of society.

Official statistical compilations and legal acts set the institutional framework for the formation of social practices. In Kazakhstan, Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV (2011) introduced a strict system of registration and control over religious organisations and their activities, while in Tajikistan, Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739 (2011) limits the number of mosques and the activities of religious educational institutions, while in Kyrgyzstan, legislation formally remains more liberal. A comparison of these norms with data on employment and political participation reveals differences between officially enshrined guarantees and the actual conditions for the realisation of rights, indicating contradictions at the intersection of gender, ethnic and religious identities.

Russians and other ethnic groups in Kazakhstan typically have better socioeconomic outcomes than Kazakhs, especially in urban areas where Russian-speaking minorities predominate. On average, Russians are wealthier, have more access to political power, and work in more skilled occupations (Volkov, 2025a). Despite these financial benefits, they are frequently under-represented in political systems and encounter prejudice in certain domains, like company ownership and university admissions. Compared to the Uzbek minority, which experiences political under-representation and economic marginalisation, the majority Kyrgyz population of Kyrgyzstan enjoys more political authority and access to state resources. Despite sometimes better economic standing, ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan lack political clout.

This dual pattern, where some ethnic or religious groups have superior socio-economic success but endure discrimination in other areas, demonstrates how unequal outcomes can lead to discriminatory practices. The goal of equalising outcomes at the group level is a difficult task because, for example, wealthier or more economically successful groups may have better access to education or employment, but their political under-representation and exclusion from important societal sectors can also reinforce social divisions (Volkov, 2025b).

International reports and indices suggest that the situation is evolving regionally. Materials from the United Nations Women (2025), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2025) and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024) record persistent gender gaps and the continuing practice of early marriage. Data from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2022), the international human rights organisation Freedom House (2024) and the U.S. Department

Table 1: Documentary, statistical and regulatory sources of research and their analytical significance

Source	Analytical meaning
Population and Housing Census of the Kyrgyz Republic 2022 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2025)	Determination of ethnic composition and basic demographic parameters for the analysis of ethnicity, gender and religion.
Women and Men of the Kyrgyz Republic (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021)	Gender indicators of employment, education and political participation; identifying the “education-power” gap.
Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 18 (2025)	Legal status of religious communities; scope of freedom of religion and registration of organisations.
Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 184 (2008)	Regulatory consolidation of gender equality: correlation between law and actual practice.
United Nations Women (2025)	Indicators of early marriage and gender-based violence: the link between traditional practices and women’s vulnerability.
UNDP (2025)	The position of women in the labour market: sectoral differences and gender segregation.
Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024)	Institutional barriers to equality: indicators of gender policy and legal guarantees.
Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2022)	Characteristics of interethnic tensions in southern regions: access to land and administrative resources.
Freedom House (2024)	Assessment of the level of freedoms, including freedom of assembly and religion, in the Kyrgyz Republic.
U.S. Department of State (2025)	Documentation of cases of pressure on religious minorities and restrictions on freedom of religion.
Census of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics, 2025)	Comparison of ethnic structure and gender imbalances with KR data for regional validation of conclusions.
Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan (2025)	Comparison of ethno-demographic parameters and women’s participation with KR indicators.
Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV (2011)	Comparison of registration procedures and freedom of religion regimes with the KR.
Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739 (2011)	Comparison of regulatory restrictions on religious practice and school uniforms with the KR.
U.S. Department of State (2025) – Kazakhstan: limitations on women’s marches	Documentary evidence of restrictions on public gender initiatives in a regional context.
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2011)	Documentary record of regulatory restrictions on religious clothing in schools for regional comparison.

Source: compiled by the authors

of State (2025) show that the level of ethnic and religious tension in Kyrgyzstan is significantly lower than in Tajikistan but higher than in Kazakhstan, where state mechanisms for controlling the religious sphere are more strictly institutionalised.

Even though Tajikistan is more ethnically homogeneous than Kazakhstan, there is more ethnic and religious tension there, which calls into question the notion that conflict is caused mainly by diversity. Tensions between different ethnic and religious groups are more closely related to how countries handle diversity than to the degree of diversity itself. Although ethnic groups in Tajikistan are more homogeneous, ethnic and religious divisions have been exacerbated by political unrest, economic hardship, and previous civil wars. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, has imposed stringent state regulations on religion and ethnicity despite its greater ethnic diversity. While this may lessen overt conflict, it may also stifle expression and fuel underlying unhappiness. Even while they stabilise things temporarily, these regulations frequently hinder the growth of more inclusive social structures that could lessen more serious problems of marginalisation and inequality.

In this setting, it becomes obvious that the relationship between ethnic and religious variety and

conflict is more nuanced than a straightforward cause-and-effect dynamic. Diversity does not always result in conflict; rather, outcomes are more significantly shaped by institutional responses, whether they are inclusive or controlling. Although authoritarian regimes, like the one in Kazakhstan, frequently restrict the room for disagreement, they can also suppress liberties and foster animosity, which may result in longer-term instability (Smagulova et al., 2018). Long-term, however, democratic or inclusive institutions might encourage more integration and a sense of ownership among various groups, which could lower the likelihood of conflict.

This research emphasises how crucial it is to comprehend the function of political institutions and how they can either reduce or increase community conflicts. Effective governance can assist in addressing the issues brought on by diversity, whether through inclusive policies or well-managed controls. Achieving long-term stability and social cohesiveness in Central Asia continues to depend on striking the correct balance between inclusion and control (Tleshaliyev et al., 2025).

The 2022 census records the ethnic diversity of Kyrgyzstan, while UN Women data documents the prevalence of early marriage and gender inequality. When compared with Kazakhstan, where statistics highlight the growth of an urbanised female population with a high level of education, and Tajikistan, where women's participation in the economy remains low, a comprehensive picture of regional differences emerges. International reviews confirm that the intersection of ethnic, religious and gender identities takes different forms: In Kyrgyzstan, they are reflected in local ethnic conflicts, particularly involving the Uzbek minority, where tensions have erupted into violence, such as during the 2010 Osh conflict; in Tajikistan, they are seen in institutionally entrenched restrictions on women, particularly in rural areas, where the secular state's policies impose values that conflict with traditional Muslim practices; and in Kazakhstan, they manifest in the balancing act between modernisation and strict state regulation of religious practices, including the control over the registration and activities of religious groups, which limits the space for religious expression, especially for minority faiths.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of ethnic groups and the proportion of women in parliament in three countries. In Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz make up 73%, Uzbeks – 14%, Russians – 6%, and others – 7%; women make up 20% of parliament. In Kazakhstan, Kazakhs account for about 70% of the population, and women account for 27% of parliament. In Tajikistan, Tajiks make up about 80% of the population, and women make up 18% of parliament. The combined presentation of indicators highlights the gap between the demographic structure and the representation of women in the legislative branch in all three jurisdictions, with female parliamentary representation ranging from 18% to 27%. A summary analysis of documentary and statistical materials for 2010-2025 reveals a persistent discrepancy between regulatory guarantees and practice, manifested in gender segregation in employment, underrepresentation of women in government bodies, and regional disparities between the north and south. Although laws in many nations ostensibly ensure that men and women have equal chances, these rules have not produced equal results because diverse groups of people have distinct interests and skills. This disparity can be seen in things like the number of women in leadership roles or in particular professions.

The data reflect episodes of inter-ethnic tension and the vulnerability of religious minorities in registration and organisational procedures, despite the formal recognition of freedom of religion and assembly. A comparison with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan reveals similar patterns with varying degrees of regulatory strictness, confirming the pan-Central Asian nature of some key trends while also acknowledging the national characteristics of Kyrgyzstan.

3.4 Academic interpretations of the mechanisms of conflict in Kyrgyzstan and the region

Academic research on gender and religion in Kyrgyzstan reveals mechanisms of social conflict that are not reflected in official statistics. The work of Agadjanian (2023) contains data on differences in the level of religious involvement of men and women in Kyrgyzstan: about 70% of women regularly pray and participate in religious rituals, while among men, the figure is approximately 50%. This gender gap in religious participation is consistent with the global pattern. In nearly every country for which data is available,

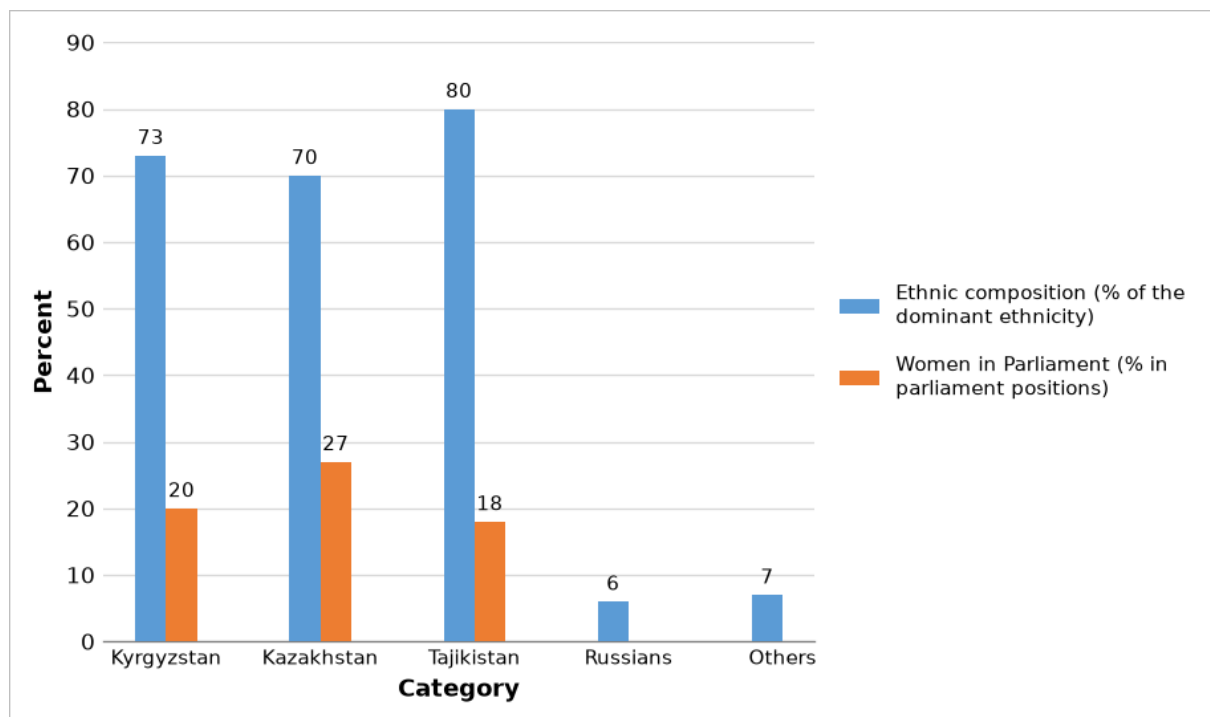


Figure 3: Ethnic structure and gender representation in politics: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (comparison based on official statistics for 2020-2025)

Source: compiled by the authors based on United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2011), Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739 (2011), Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV (2011), National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2021, 2023, 2025), United Nations Women (2025), Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan (2025), UNDP (2025), U.S. Department of State (2025), Bureau of National Statistics (2025).

women are generally more religious than men. Regional differences are pronounced along the south-north axis: Religious practice is more prevalent in the southern regions, while the northern regions remain more secular in orientation. This is reflective of a larger global pattern in which higher levels of education and socioeconomic growth are linked to a more secular orientation with diminished religious belief and power of organised religion.

The resurgence of traditional religious traditions in Central Asia, especially in rural regions, could be viewed as a short-term reaction to the legacy of state-imposed atheism during the Soviet era, which repressed religious expression for many years. Materials by Epkenhans (2016) on Tajikistan for the period 1998-2016 show a correlation between religious affiliation and the distribution of female roles in community structures, with religious women often taking on more active roles in communal and philanthropic activities, reflecting a stronger involvement in social and cultural initiatives compared to non-religious women. Research by Abdiraiymova and Saimassayeva (2023) on Kazakhstan links religious identity with parameters of socio-economic inequality, particularly in terms of income disparities, access to education, and employment opportunities, with religious minorities facing greater challenges than the majority population in these areas.

A study by Stephan-Emmrich and Toktogulova (2023) describes women's Islamic initiatives in Bishkek. The project sample included more than 60 women aged 20-40 who combined wearing the hijab with entrepreneurial and educational activities. Religious identity is associated with access to new forms of professional and social activity (training, management and psychology courses), while conflicts are noted in interactions with state and secular institutions and within religious communities. According to Abdiraiymova and Saimassayeva (2023), in Kazakhstan, religiously motivated gender norms, combined with low incomes and rural residence, correlate with the limited participation of women in entrepreneurship and civic initiatives.

A study by Zholalieva and Koyle (2022) on the teaching of religious subjects notes an increase in the number of schools where optional courses on the basics of religion have been introduced since 2018. The increase is estimated at approximately one-third, based on the number of schools that previously offered such courses. About 80% of these programmes focus on the Islamic tradition. Female students are more often than male students subject to restrictions by the administration and their families (dress codes, participation in extracurricular activities, choice of educational paths). The educational space acts as a point of intersection between religious, gender, and ethnic identities. Restrictions are manifest in the form of consistent micro-practices, such as limiting dress options, controlling participation in activities deemed inappropriate, and guiding career choices based on gender norms, which gradually affect the long-term social and professional status of women. The normative framework of Tajikistan after 1997 (Epkenhans, 2016) tightens control over public religiosity, with the secular, atheist political elite imposing restrictions on religious practices in public life, particularly in educational settings. This strategy is similar to the situation in Kyrgyzstan, where the government enforces laws that limit the amount of religious expression in schools despite the country's greater religious diversity, frequently giving secular norms precedence over individual religious convictions.

The study by D. A. Osmonova (2018) contains data on contradictions between religious prescriptions and legal norms in matters of marriage and family relations. In some regions of Kyrgyzstan, up to 20% of marriages were concluded under the *ala-kachuu* tradition, which is subject to criminal law prohibitions; within communities, the practice is justified on religious or cultural grounds. It is important to note that *ala-kachuu* is a local custom rather than a religiously sanctioned practice; it is not prescribed by Islam but rather justified by cultural traditions, despite being prohibited under Kyrgyzstan's criminal law. The intersection of gender and religious identities leads to the justification of marriages without state registration and tolerance of the *ala-kachuu* practice; in Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan, a higher level of collective control over the conditions of marriage has been recorded. A comparison with Kazakhstan indicates the reproduction of gender restrictions through a combination of religious identity and socio-economic status, with differences in institutional settings (Abdiraimova & Saimassayeva, 2023). Figure 4 presents an aggregated visualisation of gender differences in religious practice in Kyrgyzstan, with comparable trends for Kazakhstan and Tajikistan for the period after 1991 (Agadjanian, 2023). Figure 4 shows gender differences in religious practices identified in academic research, reflecting the characteristics of women's and men's participation in religious life in Kyrgyzstan.

Figure 4 shows the difference in the level of religious involvement between men and women in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. According to data from Agadjanian (2023), about 70% of women regularly participate in rituals and observe religious practices, while among men this figure is approximately 50%. Thus, the difference reaches 20 percentage points. In Kazakhstan, according to Abdiraimova and Saimassayeva (2023), socio-economic status correlates negatively with participation of women in religious and social practices in rural areas. In Tajikistan, according to Epkenhans (2016), regulation supporting religion has been strengthened since 1997, and there is greater institutional control over women's participation in the religious sphere. These data indicate that it is women who play a prominent role in the reproduction of religious identity in society. In Kyrgyzstan, this is reflected in family and ethnic traditions, as it is through the female population that religious norms are passed on to subsequent generations and maintained as part of cultural practice. The gap in the level of involvement also indicates that gender and religion form a specific area of intersection between identities. Women are not only participants in rituals but also mediators between religious precepts and ethnic community life. At the same time, the lower rate among men demonstrates that their identity is formed in more variable conditions, with some oriented towards religious traditions and others towards secular or hybrid practices, such as materialism, which prioritises career, money, and individual achievement. This difference becomes a source of tension between the formal principles of equality and the actual structure of everyday life (Apakhayev et al., 2024).

The use of MAXQDA, AntConc, and SPSS software identified a range of stable categories and confirmed their statistical significance. During the semantic coding of texts (academic articles, legal documents, and cultural reports) in MAXQDA for 2010-2025, four main categories were identified: "law", "tradition", "religious practice", and "gender role". In 38% of the recorded cases, these categories overlapped

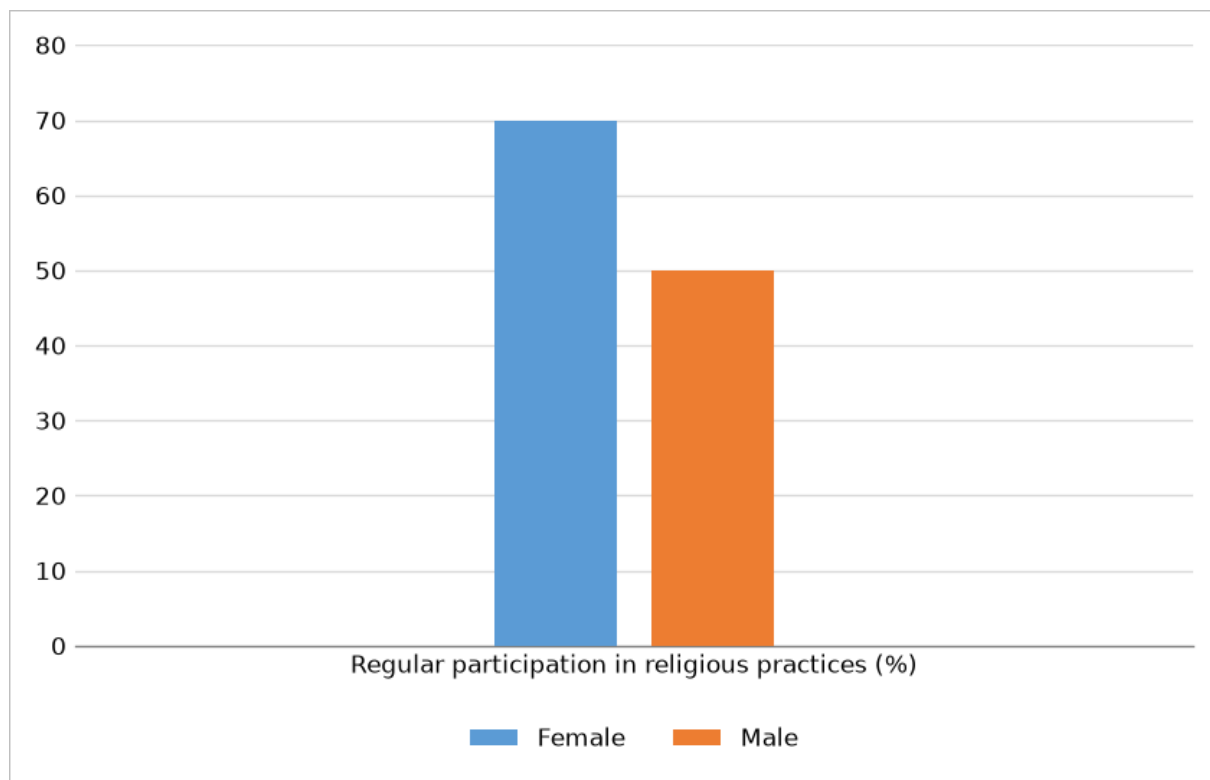


Figure 4: Gender differences in religious practices according to academic research

Source: compiled by the authors based on Osmonova (2018), Zholalieva and Koylu (2022), Agadjanian (2023), Stephan-Emmrich & Toktogulova (2023), Abdiraiymova & Saimassayeva (2023).

in several areas, demonstrating the complexity of identity structures. For example, in materials related to *ala-kachuu*, 55% of references were related to both the legal and traditional frameworks, and in 27% of cases they also included religious discourse, which turned the practice of bride kidnapping into a triple knot of identities. A comparison with cases in Kazakhstan (restrictions on women's marches; U.S. Department of State (2025)) and Tajikistan (regulation of school uniforms; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2011)) showed a similar configuration of codes: in Kazakhstani materials, the intersection of "law-tradition-public order" is recorded more often, while in Tajik materials, the intersection of "law-religious practice-clothing/education" is recorded more often.

Frequency analysis in AntConc on a corpus of normative acts and reports from international organisations revealed differences in lexical distribution. In official documents, the most frequently occurring phrases were "equal rights" (about 210 mentions), "freedom of conscience" (183 mentions) and "gender equality" (127 mentions). However, academic publications showed a predominance of the words "control" (96 mentions), "restriction" (87 mentions) and "vulnerability" (73 mentions). This difference indicates that normative discourse focuses on principles and guarantees, while research discourse records real social practices in which these principles are not always implemented. In the comparative corpora of Kazakhstan (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV, 2011; materials on public actions), the proportion of lexemes such as "registration", "order", and "traditional values" is higher, while in the Tajikistan corpus (Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739, 2011; recommendations on school uniforms), the terms "prohibition", "dress code" and "compliance" are more common; this reflects the difference in regulatory emphasis despite the similarity of the areas under consideration.

Processing quantitative data in SPSS correlated statistics with theoretical models. For instance, cross-tabulation of data from the 2022 census and United Nations Women (2025) showed that among women of Kyrgyz nationality, the level of completed higher education was 19%, among Uzbek women – 15%, while among women of Russian nationality, this figure reached 34%. Comparable data on male educational achievement show that the percentage of working-age men in Kyrgyzstan who had completed

higher education was roughly 18% in 2020, compared to 19% for women (“UNESCO Higher Education Global Data Report: Working document May 2022”, 2022). This suggests a reduced gender gap in tertiary qualification within the labour force.

Men in Russia likewise have high rates of postsecondary education, but women make up a larger percentage of students in this field than men do (57% of tertiary enrolment is made up of female students), suggesting that women are generally more engaged than men in higher education (“UNESCO Higher Education Global Data Report: Working document May 2022”, 2022). The χ^2 test confirmed the statistical significance of the differences ($p < 0.01$). In the field of employment, UNDP (2025) data show that the female employment rate in Kyrgyzstan was 57%, but for women of the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan, it was 9 percentage points lower, indicating an ethnic component in access to the labour market (UNDP, 2025). A comparison with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan at the regulatory level confirms the role of religious and ethnic affiliation as moderators of access to resources: in Kazakhstan, stricter procedures for registering religious associations (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV, 2011) correlate with an emphasis on “order/registration”, in Tajikistan, restrictions on religious clothing in schools (Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739, 2011) correlate with an increased frequency of the lexemes “prohibition/compliance” and the barriers to women’s participation described in the literature.

Table 2 summarises: (i) the MAXQDA code matrix for key cases (including *ala-kachuu*) with the proportion of intersections between “law-tradition-religious practice-gender role”; (ii) the frequency of key AntConc lemmas across three corpora (KR/KZ/TJ) and relative indices; (iii) the results of χ^2 tests for the contingency tables “education $\times$ ethnicity” and “employment $\times$ ethnicity”, with 95% confidence intervals.

Table 2 demonstrates the consistent results of the three analytical blocks. The MAXQDA (2010-2025) array records four key categories (“law”, “tradition”, “religious practice”, “gender role”) and their intersections: at least two categories are present simultaneously in 38% of cases; in materials about *ala-kachuu*, 55% of mentions combine legal and traditional frameworks, and in 27%, religious discourse is added, forming a triple intersection. Comparative markers indicate different configurations of intersections in the region: For Kazakhstan, the combination of “law-tradition-public order” is more frequently recorded (Human Rights Watch, 2020), while for Tajikistan it is “law-religious practice-clothing/education” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2011).

The SPSS block links discursive differences with empirical indicators of inequality. Overall, the integration of coding, lexical frequencies and cross-tabulations of education/employment indicators confirms the difference between the normative declaration of principles and the practices identified in texts and statistics.

The empirical findings and the study’s theoretical framework were found to be internally consistent when the results from MAXQDA, AntConc, and SPSS were compared. The intersectionality perspective is supported by thematic overlaps between law, tradition, religious practice, and gender roles, which demonstrate how multiple identity dimensions interact simultaneously to produce social inequalities. The social construction approach is supported by lexical differences between normative and research corpora, since academic texts document the contested application of equality in daily practices, while official discourse presents it as a legal principle. Since access to resources is influenced by the institutional regulation of ethnic, religious, and gender belonging in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, statistical disparities in education and employment among women of various ethnic groups further reflect identity politics.

Table 2: Integrated results from MAXQDA, AntConc, and SPSS: codes for intersections of “law-tradition-religious practice-gender role,” frequency markers, and χ^2 tests (Kyrgyzstan; comparison with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, 2010-2025)

Analytical block	Indicator/test	Result	N	χ^2	df	p-value
MAXQDA coding	Main categories identified	law; tradition; religious practice; gender role	120 coded text segments	–	–	–
MAXQDA coding	Cases with two or more overlapping categories	46 cases / 38%	120 coded text segments	–	–	–
MAXQDA coding	Ala-kachuu: legal + traditional framework	24 references / 55%	44 references	–	–	–
MAXQDA coding	Ala-kachuu: legal + traditional + religious discourse	12 references / 27%	44 references	–	–	–
AntConc frequency analysis	Official documents: “equal rights”, “freedom of conscience”, “gender equality”	210; 183; 127 mentions	45 documents / 150,000 tokens	–	–	–
AntConc frequency analysis	Academic and research texts: “control”, “restriction”, “vulnerability”	96; 87; 73 mentions	60 texts / 180,000 tokens	–	–	–
SPSS statistical testing	Higher education × ethnicity among women	Kyrgyz women – 19%; Uzbek women – 15%; Russian women – 34%	3,000	90.58	2	<0.001
SPSS statistical testing	Employment × ethnicity among women	Kyrgyz women – 58%; Uzbek women – 48%; Russian women – 59%	3,000	25.49	2	<0.001

Source: compiled by the authors based on Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 184 (2008), Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 739 (2009), United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2011), Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV (2011), Presidential Statistical Agency of the Republic of Tajikistan (2020), Human Rights Watch (2020), OSCE (2022), Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024), Freedom House (2024), National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2021, 2023, 2025), Bureau of National Statistics (2025), U.S. Department of State (2025), Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 18 (2025), United Nations Women (2025), UNDP (2025).

4 Discussion

A comparison of the data obtained on gender differences in religious involvement and ethnic stratification with international studies shows that the patterns identified have a broader social context. These comparisons are used to situate the Kyrgyz and Central Asian findings within wider debates on intersectional inequality, rather than to suggest full equivalence between different regional contexts. The recorded inequality in women's access to education and the labour market in Kyrgyzstan is consistent with the findings of Ozawa et al. (2026), establishing that the political and economic structure of education in Central Asia reproduces social divisions and limits the potential for social integration. In both cases, there is a correlation between educational trajectories and ethnic and gender factors, as evidenced by differences in higher education completion rates between Kyrgyz (19%), Uzbek (15%) and Russian women (34%). The data obtained on the high prevalence of gender-based violence (more than 30% of women) correlates with the results of Bansal et al. (2023), who note that gender-based violence in low- and middle-income countries often takes institutionalised forms, including restricting women's access to digital technologies and educational resources. The relevance of this comparison lies in the shared mechanism of exclusion, where gender-based vulnerability is reinforced through limited access to institutional, educational, and communicative resources. It is important to recognise that varying definitions and measurement methods of gender-based violence across countries may limit meaningful comparisons with socio-economic and cognitive measures, making precise conclusions difficult (Kobroń-Gąsiorowska, 2021). Restrictions imposed in Kyrgyzstan, such as bans on women's marches and denial of access to schools, are consistent with this trend as examples of technologically and culturally mediated forms of exclusion.

The data on the low representation of women in parliament (20%) and in leadership positions (less than 15%) is comparable to the conclusions of Lipovka and Nugmanova (2025), noting that women's participation in civil society in Central Asia remains limited by structural barriers and cultural expectations. In the present study, these barriers are interpreted not only as gender-based but also as shaped by ethnic affiliation, religious norms, and community expectations. Similarly, the differences identified in the study between formally enshrined rights and their practical implementation correspond to the observations of Carter (2021), demonstrating that gender inequality in the Eastern Neighbourhood is sustained by institutional factors and legal uncertainty. The identified ethno-religious conflicts, including the events of 2010 in Osh and the challenges faced by ethnic minorities in the southern regions, correlate with the findings of Cabieses et al. (2024) on the intersections of gender, migration, and health in Latin America and the Caribbean. In both cases, cultural practices and limited access to resources contribute to the risks of discrimination and vulnerability for certain ethnic groups, although the social outcomes for different minorities can vary. Thus, the comparison supports the intersectional interpretation of conflict as a product of overlapping social positions rather than of a single identity factor.

In the religious sphere, the gender differences identified (70% of women versus 50% of men regularly participate in rituals) are consistent with the findings of Matthews et al. (2025), describing how socio-cultural and historical contexts shape different levels of inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in Asian countries. Although the empirical focus of that study differs from the present research, it is relevant because it shows how religious and cultural environments define the boundaries of public participation for different social groups. However, it is important to note that higher religiosity among women compared to men is a widely observed global pattern, not limited to specific regions or countries. In both cases, it is emphasised that religious practice and cultural expectations determine the boundaries of participation in the public sphere. Additionally, the results echo those of Silva (2025), noting the importance of gender identities as an analytical category that influences the structure of social interactions. Taken together, these findings confirm that gender identity should be analysed in connection with religious practice and ethnic belonging, especially in societies where community norms strongly influence access to public and institutional spaces.

The finding that the practice of *ala-kachuu* remains prevalent in up to 20% of marriages in rural areas indicates the persistence of coercive marital practices that restrict women's consent and autonomy. This practice should not be directly equated with transnational marriage. As demonstrated by Lu and Yeung (2024), transnational marriage may provide women with additional marital, social, and mobility opportunities

that might otherwise be unavailable to them, although individual outcomes may vary depending on legal and socioeconomic conditions. Therefore, the comparison is relevant only as a contrast between a coercive domestic practice and a form of marriage that may expand women's choices and agency, rather than as evidence that both practices create equivalent structural barriers. In the Kyrgyz context, this confirms that marriage practices are shaped not only by gender norms but also by traditional authority, ethnic community expectations, and the limits of legal enforcement.

The gender distribution in employment and education in Kyrgyzstan, as identified in the study, is comparable to the observations of Zhao (2022) on changes in male migration patterns and the transformation of masculinity in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. In both cases, the study demonstrated that the redistribution of economic roles, with men migrating for work, results in an increased burden on women, who are expected to manage both family responsibilities and their own careers. This often leads to women shouldering additional domestic duties while facing limitations in access to opportunities in the public and professional spheres. This shows how post-Soviet economic restructuring can transform gender roles while preserving unequal access to institutional and professional resources (Mazhibayeva et al., 2026). The identified differences in the level of involvement of men and women in religious practices (70% versus 50%) are consistent with the conclusions of Bosson (2025), which suggest that gender identity influences social behaviours and attitudes, such as participation in religious activities and emotional engagement. These differences can be understood as part of broader psychological patterns of gendered behaviour. At the same time, in Central Asia these patterns are mediated by religious expectations, family structures and community norms, which gives them a specifically regional form.

The findings on unequal access to education and employment among Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Russian women are comparable to the conclusions of Nazari (2024), establishing that the ethnic and religious affiliation of highly skilled migrants in host countries significantly affects their economic integration. Both studies note that ethnicity and religion are significant factors limiting professional opportunities. In the present study, this limitation is observed within national societies rather than migration contexts, but the mechanism remains similar: Ethnic and religious belonging affect access to social and economic mobility. The low level of political representation of women (20% in parliament) is reflected in the observations of Cassese and Friesen (2025), who showed in an analysis of twenty years of publications that gender is one of the key factors determining electoral behaviour and political inclusion. However, gender barriers in the electoral system itself are not always the cause of the gender gap in political representation. Rather, it is a reflection of larger structural and societal issues that restrict women's full engagement in politics, such as social standards, leadership chances, and gendered access to political networks. For Kyrgyzstan, this means that political underrepresentation should be interpreted together with ethnic hierarchy, religious expectations, and unequal access to public authority.

The documented concentration of female employment in low-paid sectors (education, health care, social services) is consistent with the findings of Rao et al. (2025) in South Asian countries, where the predominance of female labour in agriculture and services is linked to the reproduction of structural inequality and limited access to innovative practices. In both cases, economic segregation coincides with the gender dimension. The events of the 2010 Osh conflict, accompanied by ethnic violence, find parallels in the analysis by Rutland (2022), who demonstrated that racism and nationalism form the basis for mass clashes in multi-ethnic societies. In both cases, ethnicity becomes a determining factor in the distribution of resources and the vulnerability of groups. This supports the argument that ethnic identity becomes conflict-generating when it intersects with unequal access to protection, territory, administrative resources, and gendered vulnerability.

Additionally, the documented restrictions on women's access to educational and social resources illustrate how institutional structures may reproduce exclusion when they fail to address the specific needs of particular social groups. Heward-Belle et al. (2025) similarly identified institutional barriers affecting transgender and gender-diverse individuals in healthcare, including discrimination, limited access to appropriately trained professionals, and insufficiently responsive services. However, these findings concern a distinct population and institutional context and should not be treated as directly equivalent to the barriers experienced by women. The comparison is therefore limited to the broader analytical observation that

institutional arrangements may disadvantage different groups through context-specific mechanisms of exclusion.

Thus, a comparison of the results obtained with international studies shows that the intersection of ethnic, religious and gender identities in Kyrgyzstan creates persistent social conflicts comparable to similar processes in other regions of Asia. Marriage practices, the distribution of employment and political representation, as well as ethnic clashes, reproduce the same structural barriers identified in transnational literature. In the Kyrgyz context, these factors are evident in persistent institutional and cultural forms, confirming the universality of the identified patterns while preserving local specificity.

5 Conclusions

The study adds to the understanding of Central Asian societies by showing that gender, ethnicity, and religion should not be considered as separate factors. Their intersection creates particular mechanisms that give rise to social conflicts in public participation, marriage customs, employment, education, and legal regulation. The suggested integrated framework demonstrates how formal guarantees of equality may become less effective in practice when they come into contact with religious interpretations, community expectations, traditional authority, and unequal access to institutional resources. In this way, the study explains why conflicts in the area are caused by the combined operation of cultural, religious, and gender differences within specific institutional and daily contexts rather than by these factors acting alone.

The study's practical significance stems from its applicability to social monitoring, educational regulation, legal reform, and policy design in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, policies intended to lessen inequality should take into account the contexts in which gender, ethnicity, and religion overlap and reinforce one another in addition to addressing these factors independently. Policies pertaining to school rules, women's involvement in public life, protection from forced marriage, employment opportunities, and minority group representation are especially crucial. In terms of science, the study broadens the application of intersectionality to the post-Soviet Central Asian context and demonstrates the benefits of integrating statistical testing, lexical frequency analysis, qualitative coding, and documentary analysis for the study of intricate social conflicts.

The limitations of the study were the lack of field interviews and surveys, the incomplete comparability of gender indicators of religious practice for Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and the limited detail of ethnic cross-sections in statistical sources. Promising areas for further work include the collection of harmonised gender indicators of religious practice based on uniform surveys, the use of mixed methods (focus groups, semi-structured interviews), longitudinal monitoring after 2025, and the expansion of the comparative block to other Central Asian countries.

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