

SDG+10 MONITORING REPORT



PUBLIC ASSOCIATION
WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION ALGA

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**RURAL GIRLS AND
THEIR RIGHTS IN KYRGYZSTAN:
EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE AND
ACCESS TO SRHR**

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Introduction

Rural girls in Kyrgyzstan continue to face serious challenges in realizing their rights. Despite the adoption of laws and international commitments, early and forced marriage is still common in rural and remote areas. Once married, girls often leave school, lose access to health services and information, and become dependent on their husbands and in-laws. These patterns are connected to poverty, traditional gender roles, and the lack of youth-friendly services and community-based protection.

This national monitoring report is prepared as part of the SDG+10 initiative to review progress after ten years of the Sustainable Development Goals. In our application, we chose to focus on SDG 5 (Gender Equality), with special attention to Target 5.3 on ending child, early and forced marriage and Target 5.6 on ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and rights. These two areas were identified as priorities because they remain critical issues for rural girls in Kyrgyzstan. Although legal reforms have been introduced, implementation and accountability continue to fall short.

The preparation of this report combined a desk review of national legislation, government programs, statistical data, and monitoring reports with community-based qualitative research. Focus group discussions were held with rural girls aged 15-19, and interviews were conducted with parents, teachers, health workers, local officials, and community leaders in different regions. This approach made it possible to assess both official commitments and the lived realities of rural girls, confirming the gaps identified in existing policies and bringing in the voices of those most directly affected.

The government's Voluntary National Review 2025 presents a positive picture, highlighting a decline in child marriage to below 10 percent, near universal awareness of contraception, and stronger policies on gender equality. The evidence gathered through this report shows a different situation in practice. In rural areas unregistered religious marriages still take place and girls as young as 15 to 17 are married without civil registration. Teachers and community leaders often know about these cases but resolve them informally.

Girls who participated in focus groups reported that they had never received formal SRHR education and that health services were difficult to access without the consent of parents or husbands. Experiences of gender-based violence were described as common but rarely reported because of fear and the absence of trusted support.

By combining desk research with field evidence, this report presents a fuller picture of how Kyrgyzstan is progressing on SDG 5. It shows that while laws and national strategies exist, they are not reaching rural communities. National averages reported in official documents do not reflect the barriers that rural girls continue to face. The findings are intended to support national advocacy ahead of the VNR 2025 and ensure that the realities of rural girls are taken into account in regional and global monitoring processes.

Objectives

This monitoring report focuses on the lived realities of rural girls in Kyrgyzstan, especially in relation to early and forced marriage and their ability to access SRHR services. The main objectives of this research are:

1. To assess changes in the legal, policy, and social environment related to child marriage and SRHR since 2015. This includes analysing how new laws, action plans, and strategies have been introduced and whether they are being carried out in practice.
2. To identify barriers rural girls and young women face in accessing SRHR information, services, and protection from violence. The report brings together both national data and the perspectives of girls, parents, teachers, health workers, and local authorities in rural communities.
3. To develop clear, actionable recommendations that can inform national advocacy, especially for the 2025 VNR process. Aim is to provide civil society, government, and international partners with evidence that reflects realities on the ground and supports accountability.

These objectives are based on the understanding that legal commitments alone are not enough. Progress depends on how laws and policies are carried out at the local level and on whether girls themselves are able to access protection, education, and health services in practice.

Methodology

The preparation of this monitoring report combined desk-based research with qualitative evidence gathered in rural communities. This mixed approach made it possible to assess both the official commitments made by the government and the lived experiences of rural girls.

Desk research formed the foundation of the analysis. It covered national legislation, policy documents, statistical data, and monitoring reports from international organizations and civil society. Key sources included the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (Articles 172–176) criminalizing forced marriage and bride kidnapping; the Cabinet Action Plan on Preventing Forced Marriages (2023-2024); and the CRC Concluding Observations Action Plan (2025-2028). Statistical data was drawn from the National Statistical Committee, the WHO Global Health Observatory, and the Equal Measures 2030 Gender Index. Reports submitted to UN treaty bodies such as CEDAW and CRC, along with the recommendations received, were analysed to understand international monitoring of Kyrgyzstan’s obligations. Civil society reports, as well as regional reviews such as SDG+5 and ICPD+30, provided additional insights. The desk review highlighted where national commitments exist, where gaps remain, and what questions required further exploration.

Community-level research was carried out to validate and deepen the findings from the desk review. This included:

- Focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescent girls aged 15-19 in rural communities of Chui, Osh, and Naryn regions. These discussions explored girls’ experiences with early marriage, access to SRHR information and services, and exposure to gender-based violence.

- Key informant interviews with teachers, health workers, local officials, and community leaders. These interviews provided insight into institutional awareness of national policies, challenges in implementation, and local practices.
- Community consultations with parents and women’s groups to capture broader social attitudes, expectations, and available resources at the village level.

Three focus group discussions with rural adolescent girls aged 15-19 were conducted in Chui, Osh, and Naryn regions (one per region, total 19 girls participated). We carried out 9 key informant interviews with teachers, health workers, and local officials or community leaders, ensuring at least one representative of each group in every region. We also held 2 small community consultations with 8 participants to document local practices and available resources. All participants provided informed consent and confidentiality was maintained.

By combining desk analysis with perspectives from rural communities, the methodology provides a fuller picture of both the formal commitments made by the state and the lived realities of girls. This approach makes it possible to compare what is presented in official reporting with what happens in practice at the community level.

Findings

This research was initiated by PA Women’s Organization Alga to better understand how early and forced marriage affects the lives of rural girls and young women in Kyrgyzstan, and how this connects to their access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and experiences of gender-based violence. The research also examines the extent to which existing laws and national action plans are being implemented and whether they offer real protection and opportunities for girls.

Across rural Kyrgyzstan, adolescent girls continue to face persistent barriers to exercising their fundamental rights, including the right to

education, health, bodily autonomy, and freedom from violence. While national legislation and international human rights frameworks recognize these rights, the lived experiences of girls in remote and underserved communities tell a different story. Early/child and forced marriage remains widespread, often seen as a cultural norm or a practical decision for families facing poverty or social pressure. Once married, girls are typically expected to leave school, perform unpaid care and domestic work, and follow the instructions of their husbands and in-laws without question. In such settings, the idea of choice, whether in health, marriage, or education is often absent.

Although Kyrgyzstan has taken steps in recent years to criminalize forced marriage and improve protections for women and children, including provisions under Articles 172 to 176 of the Criminal Code and the adoption of national strategies such as the Cabinet Action Plan on Preventing Forced Marriages (2023-2024), implementation at the local level remains weak. In many cases, families and communities resolve issues privately, religious marriages go unregistered, and girls have no access to information about their rights or how to seek help. As a result, harmful practices persist, often without consequence.

The challenges are not limited to early marriage. Once married, adolescent girls are less likely to access SRHR services, either because they are not available in rural areas or because providers require parental or spousal approval. Girls who experience violence often do not report it due to fear, shame, or the belief that no one will intervene. Health workers, teachers, and even police frequently lack the training or resources to respond effectively, and in some cases are unaware of the national frameworks they are expected to follow.

This report is a contribution to ongoing efforts to ensure that laws and policies in Kyrgyzstan are translated into real change in the lives of girls. It aligns with the country's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, Goals 5 on gender equality, and the elimination of harmful practices. The report aims to inform national dialogue, encourage accountability, and support practical, community-driven solutions.

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Focus group discussions and interviews with rural girls, teachers, health workers, and local leaders confirmed that the concerns raised in the desk review remain urgent. The additional evidence shows how widespread early marriage, limited access to SRHR, and gender-based violence continue to shape the everyday lives of rural girls. While the state highlights progress in official reporting, the testimonies collected for this study point to the persistence of harmful practices and the gap between laws on paper and the reality in communities.

Early and Forced Marriage as a Systemic Barrier

Early and forced marriage remains a deeply entrenched issue across rural regions. Although Article 172 of the Criminal Code prohibits forced marriage, including for minors, enforcement remains weak. Religious (nikah) marriages often take place outside legal frameworks and are not officially registered. These arrangements frequently involve girls aged 15-17, and are typically made by families and religious leaders, bypassing civil registration.

Available data from the National Statistical Committee and the EM2030 Index shows that the percentage of girls aged 20-24 who were married before age 18 remains high - 13.4% as of the most recent data. Once married, girls are often forced to leave school and have little opportunity to continue their education. Although the Cabinet Action Plan on Preventing Forced Marriages (2023-2024) outlines several prevention measures, including school-based awareness and early warning systems, and training, the desk review did not find evidence of these activities being carried out in rural areas. Some of these measures have been piloted in urban schools, where teachers received guidance on identifying at-risk girls and referring them to social services. To work in rural communities, however, these interventions would need to involve village-level actors and mobile services, since schools and clinics lack trained staff and formal referral pathways.

Teachers and school administrators are often aware of cases of early marriage but have no clear guidance or institutional procedures for reporting or intervention. Informal conflict resolution at the community level is still preferred over legal response, which leaves girls without protection or support.

“At school they told us marriage under 18 is not allowed, but in our village nobody listens. Everyone says this is the way it has always been.”

FGDs confirmed that many girls are married before completing secondary education. Several participants described situations where they or their classmates disappeared from school after ninth grade, with no explanation given to teachers. Teachers interviewed admitted that they know about such cases but feel powerless because no reporting or referral mechanisms exist in their schools.

Although the Cabinet Action Plan on Preventing Forced Marriages (2023-2024) included awareness campaigns and prevention measures, local officials and teachers in rural areas said they had never received guidance or resources for implementation. This confirms that national laws and policies are not being translated into local-level action. Early and forced marriage directly restricts the rights and opportunities of rural girls. Once married, girls almost always leave school and lose their chance to complete secondary education, which limits future employment options and financial independence. Marriage at a young age also places them in unequal household roles where decisions about health, mobility, and contraception are made by husbands or in-laws. Many girls face pressure to begin childbearing early, increasing health risks and reducing the possibility of pursuing any personal goals. Those who experience violence often have no access to support services or safe reporting channels. As a result, early marriage shapes the entire life trajectory of rural girls, limiting their education, health, safety, and long-term economic prospects.

Gaps in Access to SRHR Services

Young women, especially those in early marriages, face multiple barriers to accessing SRHR services. In rural areas there are few youth-friendly clinics, services are often under-resourced, and confidentiality is not guaranteed. Social stigma and the requirement for parental or spousal permission add further obstacles.

Girls in focus groups said that they had received little to no formal SRHR education in school. Many explained that they only learned about menstruation, pregnancy, or contraception after marriage, usually through friends or social media. Married girls often described having no say over contraception. As one participant recalled, “I wanted to use protection, but my husband said it is not needed. The nurse also told me to come back with him next time.”

Health providers themselves admitted that they are not trained in adolescent-sensitive approaches. Some said they refuse to provide services to girls under 18 unless a parent is present, even when confidentiality is essential. This practice undermines girls’ right to health.

Official data paints a more positive picture, showing a contraceptive prevalence rate of 39.2 percent and high awareness of contraception among women of reproductive age. Yet these national averages hide the fact that adolescent girls in rural areas often cannot access services in practice. The lack of disaggregated data makes it impossible to track their needs or hold institutions accountable. In rural communities, access to SRHR is also shaped by strong social and cultural norms. Traditional family structures place decision-making in the hands of parents, elders, and husbands, which limits girls’ ability to seek information or services independently. Discussions about sexuality are considered inappropriate, especially for unmarried girls, and many parents discourage their daughters from visiting clinics out of fear of community judgment. Economic pressures further reduce access: families with limited income often prioritise immediate household needs over health services, and girls may lack money for transportation to district centres where services are available. These factors, combined with expectations of early marriage and childbearing, create an environment where girls have little autonomy over their bodies and few opportunities to make informed decisions about their health.

Gender-Based Violence and Institutional Invisibility

GBV remains pervasive but underreported in rural Kyrgyzstan. The Criminal Code includes specific provisions against domestic violence (Articles 174-176), but these are rarely enforced in rural settings. Girls in early marriages are particularly vulnerable to psychological, physical, and sometimes sexual violence from spouses or in-laws.

The desk review revealed that rural police and health institutions often lack protocols or trained personnel to respond to GBV cases. Survivors face multiple barriers: fear of retaliation, lack of shelter, community pressure, and disbelief that their claims will be taken seriously. Even where legislation exists, the institutional system to respond and protect girls is weak.

Schools and clinics, which could serve as early warning or reporting spaces, generally do not have trained staff or confidentiality safeguards. Without community-based referral systems and accessible services, girls remain trapped in cycles of violence, silence, and impunity.

Focus groups revealed that girls experiencing violence rarely report it, fearing stigma or retaliation. Many said that even if they approached the police, officers would tell them to “solve it within the family.” One participant explained, “Even if we report, the police just send us back home. They say it is a family issue.” Teachers and health workers confirmed that they have no formal protocols for reporting suspected abuse of minors. This leaves most cases unreported and unaddressed.

Girls also shared that they often stay silent about abuse because they do not know of any crisis centres or support services in their communities. The absence of rural-based referral systems leaves survivors trapped without help.

Disconnect Between Law and Practice

While Kyrgyzstan has adopted strong legal and policy frameworks, their local implementation is inconsistent and under-resourced. For example, the Cabinet Action Plan (2023-2024) includes awareness campaigns, training for service providers, and birth registration

improvements but little evidence of implementation is available in rural areas.

The CRC Action Plan (2025-2028) also calls for multisectoral coordination and community-level interventions. However, during the desk review, no local-level monitoring or inter-agency coordination was identified. Officials may be aware of legal provisions like Articles 172 and 175, but they are rarely used, and most cases are addressed informally to maintain family unity.

The absence of follow-through leaves rural girls invisible to protection systems. This lack of institutional presence creates a gap between policy goals and the lived reality of girls, who are left without clear pathways for support, justice, or redress.

In FGDs, none of the girls had heard of government action plans on child marriage or violence prevention. Teachers and local leaders also admitted they were unfamiliar with the Cabinet Action Plan or the CRC Concluding Observations Action Plan. This shows that national-level commitments remain distant from rural realities.

Instead, families and communities continue to rely on informal solutions. For example, if a girl is abducted for marriage, elders often negotiate between families rather than involve the police. Such practices leave girls without protection or justice. Civil society organizations have tried to fill this gap by raising awareness and providing limited referral services, but their coverage is small compared to the scale of the problem.

Gaps in Existing Data

While Kyrgyzstan’s legal and policy frameworks include clear commitments to eliminate early and forced marriage and improve access to adolescent health services, the desk review reveals a persistent gap between official policy and what is happening on the ground, especially in rural areas. This was reinforced by evidence from community consultations, focus group discussions, and interviews, which showed that the realities of rural girls are often invisible in official statistics.

One of the most evident gaps lies in the enforcement of existing laws. Although the Criminal Code (Articles 172-176) criminalizes forced marriage and outlines responsibilities for protection and

prosecution, most cases continue to be handled informally at the community or family level. Focus group participants explained that unregistered religious marriages are still common, yet they are never recorded in national data. As one girl said, “In our village nobody registers marriage at 17. The imam comes, and that is all. Nobody counts this.” Teachers added that when students leave school for marriage, they are not required to report this information, which further contributes to the invisibility of such cases.

Another key issue is the absence of accessible and adolescent-friendly health services. Reports from national and international sources indicate that rural clinics are often under-resourced and not equipped to meet the needs of adolescents. There are no standardized protocols for working with adolescent girls, and services are not guaranteed to be confidential or free from stigma. Consultations with health workers confirmed this picture. Many admitted that they do not collect or keep separate records on adolescent clients, and that they sometimes refuse services to minors who arrive without a parent. Girls in FGDs explained that they often avoid health facilities altogether. One girl stated, “Nobody asks about us. If we don’t go to the clinic, it is like we do not exist.”

The lack of services and protection mechanisms for girls experiencing gender-based violence also remains critical. Shelters and safe spaces are concentrated in urban centers, and there is little infrastructure in rural areas for reporting violence or receiving psychosocial support. Even where school or health staff may suspect abuse, there are no clear referral pathways or institutional protocols in place to respond effectively. Legal remedies, such as protection orders, exist on paper but are rarely used. Local officials noted that they rarely receive clear guidance or resources to act on national frameworks, and girls themselves said they were not aware of any protection mechanisms in their communities.

National action plans, including the Cabinet Action Plan on Preventing Forced Marriages (2023-2024) and the CRC Concluding Observations Action Plan (2025-2028), contain strong commitments such as training for service providers, community education, and better coordination between agencies.

However, evidence from communities shows that these measures have not been consistently implemented at the local level. Teachers, health workers, and local authorities interviewed, were often unaware of these frameworks, or lacked the capacity and resources to apply them.

Finally, the absence of disaggregated, community-level data on early marriage, adolescent SRHR, and gender-based violence remains a serious obstacle. Without such data, it is difficult to monitor progress, identify priority areas, or hold institutions accountable. Tools for data collection are either not available in rural areas or are not being used, and reporting mechanisms remain weak. Civil society organizations have attempted to fill this gap by collecting community-level evidence, but these findings are not integrated into national SDG monitoring. As a result, progress reported at the national level often does not reflect the experiences of rural girls.

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan has taken important steps in recent years by updating laws, adopting national action plans, and strengthening its formal commitments to protect the rights of girls. These developments show that the issue of early and forced marriage, as well as access to SRHR, is recognized at the national level. At the same time, the findings of this research make it clear that these achievements have not yet reached rural communities in a meaningful or consistent way.

Early and forced marriage continues to shape the lives of many rural girls. Once married, they often leave school, lose access to health information and services, and become dependent on their families or husbands for decisions about their futures. Access to SRHR is also influenced by social expectations, family norms, stigma around discussing sexuality, and economic pressures that limit girls’ autonomy and mobility. When violence occurs, girls rarely have a safe or confidential place to seek help, and community-level informal practices continue to override formal protection mechanisms.

A central issue highlighted throughout the research is the persistent gap between the laws that exist on paper and what happens in practice. Teachers, health workers, and local officials often say they have not received guidance, training, or resources that would allow them to carry out

national policies at the community level. As a result, many harmful practices remain invisible, and families continue to rely on familiar ways of resolving issues rather than seeking institutional support.

Moving forward requires a stronger focus on what rural communities actually need. Schools, clinics, and local authorities need clear instructions, practical tools, and support to apply national frameworks in their daily work. Rural clinics should be equipped to provide confidential and adolescent-friendly SRHR services, and girls should know where they can go for help without fear of judgment. Community engagement is also important. Parents, elders, and religious leaders can play a key role in shifting harmful norms, especially when supported with accurate information and accessible services. Improving data collection at the community level is equally important, since rural girls remain largely invisible in national statistics.

Bridging the gap between law and practice is essential. Without stronger efforts at the local level, national progress will remain uneven, and many rural girls will continue to face the same barriers that have limited their rights and opportunities for generations. Meaningful change will require consistent support for community-based solutions, better coordination among local institutions, and an environment where the rights and safety of girls are not only written into policy but reflected in their everyday lives.

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ABOUT PUBLIC ASSOCIATION WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION ALGA

Alga founded in 1995 during Kyrgyzstan's land reform, brings together over 100 women to advance rural women's rights, economic security, and participation in public life. The organization focuses on poverty reduction, women's leadership, gender-based violence prevention, and access to resources through training, advocacy, and community mobilization. Its programs are grounded in the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, and the SDGs, with priorities shaped by the needs of local women and communities.

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ABOUT ARROW

ARROW is a regional non-profit women's NGO based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Established in 1993, it envisions an equal, just, and equitable world, where every woman enjoys her full sexual and reproductive rights. ARROW promotes and defends women's rights and needs, particularly in the areas of health and sexuality, and to reaffirm their agency to claim these rights. To find out more about ARROW, go to www.arrow.org.my.