



## Gender Award 2024

**GIZ Regional Project in Central Asia: Professional Education for Economic Growth Sectors in Central Asia (PECA Project)**

**Bishkek/Kyrgyzstan, 1.12.2023**

*Step aside Gentlemen – Female Innovators coming*

### **Promoting Gender Equality:**

The GIZ PECA is a regional GE 1 project in Central Asia dedicated to enhancing professional education within key economic sectors in the region particularly food processing and logistics sectors. It places a strong emphasis on fostering and championing academic excellence among females, particularly in an environment where male dominance prevails.

One of the core problems in the Central Asia higher education institutions is the limited access to resources of female researchers in the male dominated area. Based on data released by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in March 2023, it is estimated that **only 16.2 percent of inventors in international patent applications were women in 2022. Female researchers need resources for and representation in applied research activities to increase the number of female innovators patent holders.**

Therefore, the PECA project successfully initiated and implemented an Applied Research Fund. One of the primary objectives of the fund is to provide female researchers with the opportunity to access resources, apply their research in practical settings, and secure patents and recognition of their work.

Just in one year, we have supported 7 (seven) female researchers from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who submitted their patents (invention) applications to the local patent offices and published their work on famous portals like Scopus/Web of Science. These female

innovators have not only demonstrated remarkable professional skills but have also become role models for emerging female student researchers within university settings.

As one of the results of the Applied Research Fund, on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023 with support of the Aga Khan Foundation, Kyrgyzpatent and UN Women, the project organized a **Central Asian Women in Science and Innovative Education forum**, showcasing winners of the applied research fund supported by the PECA project and women who spent many years working in STEM from other technical universities. The outcome of the conference was overwhelming, it was the first time that women in STEM were featured publicly! In addition, the publication "Women in Science" that celebrates female innovators in STEM reflects the project's commitment to gender-transformative approaches. The topic has gained attention from academic communities, international organizations and the first lady herself. We are expecting that we will increase the influence of female research, innovation and part-taking in influential networks with this contribution.

### **Gender as a quality feature of our work**

Our partner universities have effectively implemented the Applied Research Fund as a competition, with a female quota. **This is the first that the representation of women is structurally included through a quota in the academic sphere.** The applied research concept including the quota approach was **integrated into the university regulations.** The conference feature female innovation will as of now take place on an annual basis, thus it will be a sustainable event. We have institutionalized a feminist, transformative approach to innovation in Central Asia! The conference "Women in Science and Innovative Education forum" united key stakeholders, including UN Women, the Aga Khan Foundation, and Kyrgyzpatent under the Cabinet of Ministers. These partners collectively endorsed the forum's perspectives and emphasized the importance of acknowledging and raising awareness about female scientists, researchers and innovators in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. In alignment with these objectives, Kyrgyzpatent proposed collaborative initiatives with the GIZ PECA project, focusing on events related to "Girls in STEM". Additionally, Kyrgyzpatent suggested making the Women in Science forum an annual event to consistently address and promote the role of women in scientific pursuits.

### **Implementing feminist core principles**

An essential component of our feminist transformative journey within the PECA project has been the embrace of the Feminist Development Policy introduced by BMZ in March 2023. Our initiatives and activities were designed to meet the 3Rs concept—Rights, Representation, and Resources. Within the Applied Research Fund, we've strived to promote the **Rights** of women researchers by providing them with essential financial resources, creating an environment that fosters equal opportunities through influencing the partner university regulations towards a quota for women in funding female innovators and actively promoting women's rights in a male-dominated sector. By publishing the "Women in Science" book and organizing the first Central Asian Women in Science and Innovative Education forum, we have actively worked towards **Representation** of women researchers and innovators. This initiative is not just a one-time effort; we have institutionalized it through the Kyrgyzpatent, who committed themselves to continue this

regular featuring of female innovation in Kyrgyzstan. And speaking of **Resources:** through the Applied Research Fund, we've provided tangible financial resources to female innovators, enabling them to pursue their scientific projects in the food technology sector.

## Cooperation

The Applied Research Fund, a cornerstone of our initiative, has produced exceptional outcomes, reshaping the landscape of academic research inclusivity. A significant milestone has been the introduction of a **groundbreaking female quota, ensuring that over 50% of researchers within our partner universities across Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are women.** This transformative move not only promotes gender diversity but also amplifies the voices and contributions of women researchers, fostering a richer and more inclusive research environment.

**What has brought the three of us together within the PECA project** is a shared passion for tangible change and impactful gender transformation. Our unity comes from a collective vision that extends beyond conventional boundaries: Sonja Kabbashi-Andjelkovic, serving as the Gender Focal Point for the Division 3700, brings invaluable insights to the table, actively promoting gender topics and diversity throughout the region. Her dedication to fostering a more inclusive environment resonates with our shared mission. Zarina Omorova, and passionate and creative member of our team, is a Gender Action Learning Systems (GALS) trained expert on bridging academia with the market with a special focus on women. This experience has not only enhanced our collective understanding but has also contributed to building a gender-responsive workplace culture. As the Gender Focal Point of the PECA project and co-speaker for the LNOB working group of SENECA SEDE Sector Network, Asya Chatoeva is driven by a commitment to promoting not only women's rights and representation but also ensuring inclusivity for less advantaged groups.

Together, our varied experiences, roles, and commitments converge into a powerful force for meaningful change. In our collective journey, the three of us initiated a transformative process of self-development. We conceptualized and brought to life the Central Asian Feminist Development Channel (CAFD channel), creating a vital platform for feminists from the region to share their perspectives. Our aim is to bring a real impact, transformative approaches and strive not only for project success but for a lasting legacy of positive transformation within the scope of our work. We run every extra mile possible to engage and motivate others and mobilize interest for the cause of feminist development in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia (note: even on weekends, with liters of coffee and nice cake baked by Asya's Kurdish mom ;-)

Despite our collective steps towards gender equality within the region, we face and deal daily with certain **challenges.** Operating within a traditionally male-dominated sector, we come across long-standing mindsets that historically perceive women differently, limiting them to household keeping and child upbringing. Breaking through these barriers demands persistent effort and a commitment to reshaping these perceptions. Moreover, the term "feminist" carries a nuanced weight in many Central Asian countries, often perceived as radical or some campaign that is

oriented against men. (Note: our Kazakh colleague Natalya says, feminists in Central Asia are believed to be ugly women with cats 😞)

This perception poses an additional layer of complexity, as it can lead to hesitancy and resistance to certain activities or initiatives. Recognizing these challenges, we remain optimistic and motivated in our dedication to fostering understanding, dismantling stereotypes, and paving the way for an inclusive environment that embraces the principles of gender equality - humor helps to do that!

In our journey for change, we can highlight the **three main key success factors that** have emerged, shaping our journey, and helping us to move forward.

### **1. The Power of Dedication and Commitment:**

At the heart of our achievements lies dedication and commitment to our cause. This isn't just a job; it's a commitment to reshaping the narrative and eliminating age-old barriers that limit us as women and other women in Central Asia, too. This commitment motivates us to foster collaboration and unites us under common ideas and strive for transformative change and handle resistance, discrimination and rejection.

### **2. Taking the Lead to Stand Our Ground:**

Taking lead and standing our ground in a male-dominated sector is not easy and smooth. We handle challenges by leading by example, inspiring others to look at gender equality from different angles, be brave and dare to suggest unconventional ideas and follow through!

### **3. Mobilizing Others to follow this "energy":**

Success does not happen alone; it is a collective effort – our mission statement is one of our success factors:

We create channels for far-reaching communication that ignites a spark of energy to challenge boundaries of what women can achieve in traditional societies.

We create a safe space for enthusiastic stakeholders, colleagues, and local communities to speak about existing problems and barriers when promoting feminist approaches in the academic world.

We create networks of like-minded people to work towards a common goal - a fair society that strives for gender equality.

Asya Chatoeva, Zarina Omorova, Sonja Kabbashi-Andjelkovic