Terms of Reference

Research Study on Legal and Political Constraints for Women's Groups in Kyrgyzstan

Background

CEE Bankwatch Network is seeking a consultant or research team to conduct a research study on the legal and political constraints affecting women's groups and women-led movements in Kyrgyzstan, with a particular focus on their participation in decision-making processes related to municipal infrastructure, rural development and energy. The research is done under the Bread for the World and Bankwatch project 'Pathways for change enhancing civic space and human rights protection in Kyrgyzstan' funded by the European Union Delegation in Kyrgyzstan.

Objectives

The objective is to produce a focused, evidence-based and locally grounded assessment of how selected ADB, EBRD and World Bank Group projects in Kyrgyzstan translate gender commitments into project-level practice and how relevant legal, political, institutional and civic space constraints affect women's meaningful participation, access to information and project benefits. The study will identify specific implementation gaps and good practices and develop specific, feasible recommendations for multilateral development bank (MDB) teams working on gender, safeguards, stakeholder-engagement and specific sectors for Kyrgyzstan-related activities. The research will incorporate the perspectives of women-led groups through a small number of interviews and an online validation session.

Rationale

Within its broader accountability work, Bankwatch has increasingly highlighted the importance of applying a **gender-sensitive approach** to public finance and development projects. Bankwatch's past work on gender has shown that infrastructure, energy, transport, urban development and climate-related investments are not gender-neutral. Women and men often experience the impacts of projects differently because of unequal access to resources, differences in mobility patterns, care responsibilities, income levels, exposure to violence and harassment, and unequal participation in public decision-making.

Bankwatch's previous gender-related work has also demonstrated that multilateral development bank safeguards and project-level assessments often fail to fully capture these differentiated impacts. Gender considerations may be treated as a formal requirement rather than as a substantive part of risk assessment, project design, implementation and monitoring. Consultation processes may count the number of women participants without assessing whether women were able to speak freely, influence decisions or raise sensitive concerns safely. As a result, gender-specific risks related to mobility, safety, affordability, land use, livelihoods, unpaid care work, access to services and exposure to harassment may remain insufficiently addressed.

In many contexts where Bankwatch and its partners work, women face structural barriers that limit their ability to influence projects that affect their daily lives. These barriers may include lack of access to information, exclusion from formal consultation processes, social norms discouraging women's public participation, underrepresentation in local decision-making bodies, economic dependency, language barriers, safety concerns and risk of retaliation against activists. Women from rural areas, low-income households, ethnic minorities, informal settlements or other marginalised groups may face additional barriers.

The research will support Bankwatch's advocacy by generating concrete, evidence-based recommendations for MDBs on how to integrate gender-sensitive risk assessments and safeguards into project design and due diligence through a defined sample of MDB projects. It will assess whether project documents and available implementation evidence address gender-specific risks, meaningful participation, gender-responsive design, access to benefits, monitoring and grievance mechanisms.

Recommendations should be directed primarily to the relevant MDB project and country teams and should be sufficiently specific to inform project preparation, implementation and supervision.

It will examine whether MDBs are adequately identifying gender-specific risks, engaging women-led groups, addressing barriers to participation and monitoring gender-related outcomes. The findings will help Bankwatch and local partners advocate for stronger MDB policies and practices, including safer consultation processes, accessible grievance mechanisms, better protection from reprisals and more systematic inclusion of women's rights organisations in project planning and monitoring.

MDB investments in transport, municipal services and urban infrastructure, rural development, agriculture, energy and financial intermediary sectors directly affect women's daily lives and economic opportunities. These investments shape access to public services, safe public spaces, land, irrigation, finance, markets, reliable energy, livelihoods and decision-making. They can also affect affordability, unpaid care work, safety, exposure to harassment, resettlement and access to project benefits. In each sector, failure to understand women's differentiated experiences and constraints can reinforce existing inequalities or create new risks. The study will consider how legal, political, institutional and civic-space constraints shape project implementation, including whether women and women-led organisations can participate safely and influence decisions. It will also examine whether project design responds to women's needs and whether women can access intended project benefits. This project-level focus will produce practical findings for MDB gender departments, safeguards teams, sector teams and country management.

Target audience - Primary audience: ADB, EBRD and World Bank Group's gender, environmental and social safeguards, stakeholder-engagement and sector teams working on transport, urban infrastructure and energy in Kyrgyzstan, as well as country office staff, country or regional directors, executive directors and civil society engagement units.

Scope of research and deliverables

The study will cover the period from 2020 to 2026, with particular attention to developments from 2024 onwards. It will review at least three ADB-, EBRD- or World Bank Group-financed projects in energy, transport, municipal services and urban infrastructure, rural development, agriculture, energy and financial intermediaries as detailed case studies. Selection should prioritise projects that are gender-tagged, contain gender action measures, or present material gender-related risks or intended benefits. The legal, political, institutional and civic space analysis will be an integral part of the assignment; however, it should be targeted rather than comprehensive. The study will focus on specific national laws, policies and institutional practices that may be directly relevant to consultation, civic participation, access to information, freedom of association, women's and women-led groups' participation protection from reprisals, and implementation of gender measures in the selected projects.

The consultant will produce a concise research report of approximately 20 pages, excluding annexes, including an executive summary of no more than 2 to 3 pages. The report will contain three project case studies and a comparative analysis identifying common gaps, good practices and recommendations. Each case study should examine women's participation; gender-responsive design; access to project benefits; implementation of relevant gender measures; and the practical effects of legal, political, institutional and civic-space constraints. The case studies should combine project-document review with original evidence generated through engagement with stakeholders in Kyrgyzstan and should be integrated into, rather than additional to, the main report. The assignment does not require routine travel to project sites, but a desk review alone will not be sufficient.

Annexes may be included as needed and may contain:

- methodology;
- list of documents reviewed and anonymised list of interviewees;
- interview guide;

- case study selection criteria;
- additional project-level details.

Methodology

The study will use a proportionate qualitative methodology combining desk research with original research conducted in Kyrgyzstan. It will include:

(i) a targeted review of national laws, policies, institutional practices and recent political developments relevant to the selected projects;

(ii) review of MDB strategies and project documents for three selected projects;

(iii) three project case studies, each informed by locally generated evidence;

(iv) approximately 8 to 10 semi-structured interviews with women-led groups, women's rights organisations, affected women or community representatives, local civil society organisations, experts and, where feasible, MDB or implementing-agency staff. Interview coverage should ensure that each case study includes relevant local perspectives. Interviews may be conducted in person or remotely, depending on location, safety and accessibility, but the research must involve direct engagement with stakeholders in Kyrgyzstan.

Bankwatch will provide support to the consultant with initial introduction and will be available to discuss any urgent questions that may arise.

Validation

The consultant will support or participate in a validation session with local women-led movements, activists and civil society partners to discuss preliminary findings and recommendations. Bankwatch will be responsible for organising the session, inviting participants and providing interpretation if required. This session will be held online.

Timeline

Deadline for the Call for proposals: 15 September 2026

Interviews with the candidates and selection of consultant: by 30 September 2025

Presentation of preliminary findings and selection of cases: 30 November 2026

Draft report: 14 January 2027

Validation session and commenting: 28 January 2027

Finalising: 5 February 2027

Ethical and safety considerations

The consultant must apply a do-no-harm approach throughout the research by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, anonymisation of sensitive information where necessary, secure data storage, careful handling of politically sensitive issues, gender-sensitive and trauma-informed interview practices, avoidance of any exposure of activists or organisations to retaliation, and prior consultation with Bankwatch before including identifying information.

Eligibility

Applicants may be individual consultants, research teams or organisations.

The consultant or research team should demonstrate:

- strong knowledge of gender equality and women's rights in Central Asia, preferably Kyrgyzstan;
- experience researching civic space, public participation, human rights or legal/political constraints on civil society;
- familiarity with MDB safeguards, gender policies and infrastructure financing;
- understanding of MDB sectors' impacts on gender;
- experience using qualitative and mixed-methods research approaches;
- experience conducting interviews with civil society actors, activists or affected communities;
- ability to apply ethical, gender-sensitive and do-no-harm research practices;
- strong analytical and writing skills;
- fluency in English;
- knowledge of Kyrgyz and Russian is strongly desirable;
- experience working with women-led movements, grassroots organisations or human rights defenders is an asset.

How to apply

Applicants may apply as individual consultants, research teams or organisations. Applications must be submitted in English and should include:

1. **Technical proposal**, of no more than three pages, describing, the applicant's understanding of the assignment, the proposed methodology for combining legal and political analysis, project-level research and original research conducted in Kyrgyzstan, the proposed approach to selecting and preparing the three project case studies, the proposed interview and stakeholder-engagement approach, the approach to ethical, gender-sensitive and do-no-harm research, the applicant's proposed role in preparing and facilitating the validation workshop; and the proposed workplan and timeline.
2. **Team composition and local research arrangements**, including, the names and proposed roles of all team members; an explanation of how the team will conduct interviews in the languages preferred by participants; confirmation of the team's availability during the assignment period.
3. **Financial proposal**, indicating the proposed daily rate or rates; the estimated number of working days; the allocation of working days and professional fees across the main deliverables; the total professional fee requested. The maximum professional fee available for the assignment is **EUR 4 000**, inclusive of consultancy fees, taxes and ordinary administrative costs. The professional fee must cover the desk review, legal and political analysis, interviews, preparation of three case studies, facilitation of the validation workshop, and preparation and revision of the report.
4. **Curriculum vitae** of the individual consultant or all proposed team members.
5. **Brief description of relevant experience**, covering gender equality and women's rights; legal, political or civic-space constraints affecting civil society; MDB-financed projects and safeguard requirements; public participation and stakeholder engagement; research involving

women-led organisations, affected communities or human rights defenders; relevant sector experience; experience working in Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia.

Applications should be sent to natalia.luchko@bankwatch.org by **15 September 2026,** with the subject line:

Application – Gender and MDB Research Study in Kyrgyzstan

Only complete applications containing all required documents will be considered.

Disclaimer

The terms of reference are prepared under the project funded by the European Union. The content of the material is the sole responsibility of CEE Bankwatch Network and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

Annex 1 Proposed Structure of the Final Report

Delivery language – English

Indicative report structure:

1. Executive summary
2. Introduction and methodology
3. Targeted legal, political, institutional and civic-space context
4. Selection and comparative overview of the three case-study projects
5. Three project case studies
6. Cross-cutting findings on participation, gender-responsive design, access to benefits and constraints affecting implementation
7. Recommendations for MDBs
8. Annexes

Annex 2 Main Research Questions

To what extent do three MDB-financed projects in Kyrgyzstan, selected from the sectors of transport, municipal services and urban infrastructure, rural development, energy, and financial intermediaries, enable women's meaningful participation, incorporate gender-responsive design and provide equitable access to project benefits, and what specific project-level improvements are needed?

Specific research questions and desktop review

The study should address the following questions:

- How do the selected projects identify gender-specific risks, differentiated impacts and intended benefits for women?
- To what extent do the selected projects provide for meaningful and safe participation by women and women-led organisations?
- How do project design and implementation arrangements respond to women's needs and support equitable access to project benefits?
- Which legal, political, institutional or civic-space constraints affect implementation of gender commitments in the selected projects?

- What project-specific gaps, good practices and practical improvements can be identified for ADB, EBRD and World Bank Group teams?

The consultant should conduct a targeted review of national laws, policies, institutional practices and recent political developments only insofar as they affect the selected projects. This should include access to information and consultation, freedom of association and civic participation, the operating environment for women-led groups and civil society organisations, risks of intimidation or retaliation, gender-based discrimination or backlash, and barriers affecting rural women, minority groups, low-income women and women outside major urban centres. The analysis must be informed by interviews and other locally generated evidence and should explain the practical implications of these constraints for project consultations, design, implementation, monitoring, grievance mechanisms and access to benefits.

The study will include three project case studies selected from at least three of the following sectors:

- Transport
- Municipal infrastructure and urban development
- Energy
- Rural development
- Financial Intermediaries
- Agriculture

The final selection will be confirmed during the inception phase based on project relevance, availability of implementation evidence, feasibility of local stakeholder engagement and, where possible, coverage of different MDBs.

The consultant should review MDB country strategies relevant for Kyrgyzstan. For the selected project sample, the consultant should assess whether project design and implementation documents: identify gender-specific risks and differentiated impacts; include meaningful and safe participation by women and women-led groups; incorporate gender-responsive design measures; define how women will access project benefits; establish measurable indicators and monitoring arrangements; provide accessible grievance mechanisms; and address risks of retaliation or reprisals. The assignment does not require a comprehensive assessment of all MDB policies and procedures.

Annex 3 Expected Deliverables

The consultant will be responsible for producing the following deliverables:

Deliverable	Description
Inception note	Refined methodology, research questions, stakeholder mapping, proposed interview list, project/document selection criteria and workplan
Interview guide and ethics protocol	Semi-structured interview questions, consent approach, confidentiality procedures and risk mitigation measures
Case study selection and desk review note	Proposed selection of the three case-study projects representing at least three sectors, brief summary of relevant projects documents, proposed interviews coverage for each case and targeted legal, political, institutional and civic space issues

Deliverable	Description
Preliminary findings presentation	Short presentation for Bankwatch and local partners outlining emerging findings
Draft research report	Full draft report including analysis, findings, case examples and recommendations
Validation input	Participation in or support for a validation session with local women-led movements and civil society organisation partners
Final research report	Revised report incorporating feedback from Bankwatch and local partners
Executive summary / briefing note	Concise summary aimed at MDB decision-makers and advocacy use