

# Supporting women with disabilities to achieve their life goals

**Nazyk Kyz, Kyrgyzstan**

*Working at the intersection of feminist  
and disability rights activism*



## ‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’

Mama Cash funds feminist groups and movements led by women, girls, trans people, and intersex people working to secure justice and freedom. Mama Cash’s grantee-partners include groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights activism. This story is excerpted from a longer report on feminist disability rights activism called ‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’. The full report presents the stories of eight activist groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights movements. The full report can be found on our website:

<https://www.mamacash.org/en/disability-rights-report>

**Cover photo:** Participants in Nazyk Kyz’s 2021 Leadership School training in Bishkek. Photo: Alexey Skachkov.



**When Ukei Muratalieva was in her early twenties, she had no place to go for the information she needed as a woman with a disability. She was connected to a disability rights organisation, the Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities. But as the name suggests, the focus of the organisation was on the rights of parents with children with disabilities. The issues and challenges that she and her age group were facing were not addressed.**

‘We were entering adult life,’ Ukei recalls. ‘And we encountered many challenges and problems – access to education and work, health issues, issues around sexual and reproductive health and rights. No one could answer our questions. There was no organisation to protect our rights.’ In 2008 Ukei teamed up with others she knew from the Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities to found Nazyk Kyz. Nazyk Kyz is dedicated to supporting and advocating for the rights of women and girls with disabilities, whose needs and concerns often go unaddressed. ‘Programmes on gender don’t take into account people with disabilities and programmes on disability don’t take into account gender,’ continues Ukei. The group is part of and works closely with the Central Asian Network of Women with Disabilities.

One of the key issues that Nazyk Kyz works to address is violence against women with disabilities, which is common in Kyrgyzstan. ‘Women with disabilities are highly exploited by their

families,’ Ukei explains. ‘They are forced to be servants, to do all the housework. They are denied an education. All their life they are servants to their family.’ According to Ukei, in Kyrgyzstan’s Muslim society, it is believed that God will forgive a man his sins if he marries a girl or woman with a disability. In such cases, she is often a second wife and the marriage is religious in nature, meaning the marriage is not officially recognised by law, so the girl or woman has no legal protections. Last year, due to the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nazyk Kyz provided support to many girls and women with disabilities whose husbands had decided to divorce them. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Nazyk Kyz, together with the Central Asian Network of Women with Disabilities, has provided food aid, hygiene products, and other assistance to more than 400 people in need.

### **Evacuation to a safe shelter**

Over the years, Nazyk Kyz has supported many girls and women who have been abused by their family members. Nazyk Kyz operates the country’s only hotline and shelter for women with disabilities. Women with disabilities run both the hotline and shelter, applying their own life experience in their efforts to support others. The women receive special training to help prepare them for this work. Many women and girls with disabilities turn to the hotline with questions and problems related to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Their cases often revolve

around families trying to control their reproductive decisions, usually by pressuring them to have an abortion if they become pregnant. Nazyk Kyz is proud to have supported four women with disabilities in their journey from pregnancy to childbirth. Just recently, a baby girl was born to a woman who had originally been refused pregnancy care, because of her disability. Through its relationship with the national gynaecological association, Nazyk Kyz was able to find her a doctor who would provide her care and supported the woman throughout her pregnancy. 'I feel like I gave birth!' laughs Ukei.

If the situation calls for it, Nazyk Kyz will decide to evacuate a woman who is in danger and bring her to its shelter, in Bishkek, the nation's capital, where the group is based. While there are other shelters in the rural regions outside of Bishkek, none are accessible to women and girls with disabilities. In the future, the group aims to open more shelters in the regions, where most women and girls with disabilities live.

Increasingly, Nazyk Kyz is providing legal support to women and girls with disabilities who are challenging violence and other rights violations in court. The group is currently supporting a girl who was repeatedly raped by her grandfather and uncle. The girl's family is falsely claiming that the girl has a mental disability so the court will dismiss her allegations as untrue. Nazyk Kyz is disputing a diagnosis given to the girl that was based on an examination that was not properly conducted. 'This is just one of many examples of relatives, parents, and grandparents using and

abusing disabled women and girls,' says Ukei.

## **Bringing life plans to fruition**

Alongside of direct support and legal services, Nazyk Kyz is strengthening leadership of women and girls with disabilities. In cooperation with the Central Asian Network of Women with Disabilities, Nazyk Kyz organises summer camps for girls, as well as a programme called the School of Independent Life for Women with Disabilities. For several days some thirty women and girls gather to discuss matters that concern them, their challenges and goals. Participants in the School develop a life plan, which Nazyk Kyz then supports them in bringing to fruition. The group supports women and girls in breaking down specific barriers – be it discrimination or abuse or violence – that stand in the way of achieving their life plans.

Nazyk Kyz has developed strong, lasting relationships with many of the School's participants. Four graduates of the programme are running for Parliament in the upcoming election. 'It's the first time that people will be voting for a specific candidate rather than a party. So we think there's a big chance that the voice of women with disabilities will finally be heard,' says Ukei with excitement. Another talented girl first attended Nazyk Kyz's summer camp when she was 17. She began working for Nazyk Kyz and later attended the Leadership School. One of her main goals in life was to attend university, but she did not have the required documents for admittance. Nazyk Kyz helped her in

obtaining the documents, and the girl went on to graduate with the highest marks. At 26, she now heads Nazyk Kyz's evacuation programme.

## **Holding authorities to account**

Barriers to education are all too common for girls and women with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan. Ukei describes her own struggle to attend university, just over a decade ago, as a 'war'. She explains the situation, which includes structural barriers: 'Every child with a disability is assessed by a special medical commission that determines whether the child will attend a regular school, which does not offer accommodations for people with disabilities, or a special school that does. The problem is that the special schools do not provide the same curriculum as the regular schools, nor the necessary papers needed for college or university admission. Universities require applicants to pass a national test, which is contrary to the law and discriminatory. Persons with disabilities are doomed to fail.'

In an effort to enhance inclusive education, some universities and colleges provide government-subsidised spots for students with disabilities. But only persons who desperately demand their rights manage to get these spots. Nazyk Kyz recently discovered that one university had given away their subsidised spots to students who did not have a disability. The group challenged the university's actions and ultimately supported five girls with

disabilities to lay claim to these spots and enrol.

In addition to assisting girls and women with disabilities to get the education they want, Nazyk Kyz is putting pressure on the government. In 2019 Kyrgyzstan ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Together with the Central Asian Network of Women with Disabilities, Nazyk Kyz is closely monitoring the government's efforts to implement the Convention. The group works closely with the country's Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, which now includes a Councillor of People with Disabilities, thanks to the efforts of disability rights activists. The Councillor acts as an independent advocate for the human rights of people with disabilities. Nazyk Kyz aims to see the government put such a Councillor in every ministry of the government.

## **Pressing for action**

In 2020 Nazyk Kyz joined 15 disability rights organisations in presenting a baseline report on the situation for people with disabilities to the President. In response to the report, the government-led Council on People with Disabilities, on which Nazyk Kyz sits, issued an order to all Ministries to make necessary changes to laws to comply with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In addition, the government adopted an 'accessible country programme', which identifies priority measures for improving social protection and services for people with disabilities.

But none of these commitments have actually translated into action by the government. ‘They didn’t do anything!’ Ukei explains. ‘The government has not signed the document with actual measures for implementation of the Convention. So this accessible country programme so far is just a recommendation.’ Nazyk Kyz is putting pressure on the government to match its words with deeds, and the government will soon issue a report on the measures it has taken since adopting the Convention. Anticipating that the government’s report may be quite positive about the steps that it has taken, Nazyk Kyz has teamed up with

other disability rights organisations to prepare a shadow report in response.

Nazyk Kyz has come a long way since its founding just over a decade ago. The group values funders that have been consistent and comprehensive in their support of disability rights activism, funding all aspects of disability rights, from employment to culture to education. Flexible, long-term funding has given Nazyk Kyz a chance to develop as an organisation. Despite the enormous work that lies ahead, Ukei is very optimistic about the future. ‘We’re very powerful now,’ Ukei says. ‘Now is the time we can really make a change.’



*Participants in Nazyk Kyz’s 2021 Leadership School training in Bishkek.  
Photo: Alexey Skachkov.*

# Acknowledgements

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The name of the full report 'If you stay quiet, you stay invisible,' is a quote from Fela Razafinjato, of Association des Femmes Handicapées de Madagascar.

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