

American University of Central Asia

Policy Brief

**Empowering Gender Equality Through Public Art: Engaged Learning and Communities
of Practice for Effective Gender Policy Briefs in Kyrgyzstan**

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Executive Summary

Public art in Kyrgyzstan can be a powerful tool in the fight for gender equality, serving as a platform for dialogue and learning between artists and government. This policy brief emphasizes the role of engaged learning and communities of practice, through which individuals learn and collaborate in a social context, to promote gender inequality through public arts. The study reveals how these communities can effectively influence gender policies, promoting social change and equality in Kyrgyzstan. In order to research this topic deeply, the authors conducted field work in cities such as Bishkek, Osh and Tashkent. The recommendations include policy modifications, stakeholder engagement, and the allocation of resources for the integration of public art in gender empowerment programs.

Introduction

Public art is art created for general public consumption. Public institutions for a specific site often commission public art. Public art must always be, by definition, visually and physically accessible to the general population. Therefore it is usually installed or staged in easily accessible public spaces. These spaces are generally outside. Public works are most often seen in city parks, squares, or streets that residents can easily reach. Public art can be any style and size, from large to small. Sculptures and murals are common public art forms, but the term ‘public art’ does not explicitly apply to any particular art style or art form.

Because public art is often commissioned for an outdoor space, many examples of public art are sculptures. Other art forms, such as photography or painting, could be better

suited to display outdoors. Public art is considered an essential part of urban design because it contributes to a community's identity by setting it apart from others and attracting visitors to see its uniqueness.

Gender inequality remains a pervasive issue in Kyrgyzstan, and novel strategies are needed to address this systemic issue. Public art, an accessible and influential medium, can challenge gender norms, stimulate dialogue, and promote social change. This brief explores the potential of public art as a mechanism for driving gender equality, specifically focusing on the role of engaged learning and communities of practice. Engaged learning refers to participatory and interactive learning experiences that promote critical thinking, while communities of practice denote groups where learning takes place among individuals sharing a common interest.

Public Art in Bishkek is not well developed due to the lack of interest of municipal agencies. Therefore, this policy brief will navigate better perception of inequality in public arts and will be delivered to the municipal agencies.

In order to develop the policy brief there were following questions addressed to the artists and social activists:

1. What specific policy changes can be implemented to ensure equal representation of women artists in public art projects, and how can these policies be effectively communicated to local governments and organizations responsible for public art initiatives?
2. How can public art projects be designed to address and combat gender-based violence and harassment in public spaces, and what policy measures can be put in place to ensure that these projects receive adequate funding and support?

3. What policies and strategies can be implemented to increase access to public art for marginalized communities, particularly those who have historically been excluded from public art initiatives, and how can these policies be enforced and evaluated for their effectiveness?

Methodology

In the research the authors used qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key members of communities of practice, including artists and social activists to gain in-depth insights into the application of public art in promoting gender equality.

Research, Results and Conclusion

The research findings indicate that public art plays a significant role in empowering gender equality in Kyrgyzstan. By utilizing creative mediums such as murals, sculptures, performances, and installations, public art creates visible and accessible platforms for discussing and challenging gender norms and stereotypes. It engages communities in critical dialogues, fostering empathy, understanding, and collective action towards gender equality. The engaged learning process facilitated by public art encourages individuals to question existing gender dynamics and envision alternative narratives that promote inclusivity and equal opportunities.

Moreover, the formation of communities of practice around public art initiatives strengthens the impact of gender policy briefs. These communities bring together artists, activists, policymakers, and members of civil society to collaborate, exchange knowledge, and co-create inclusive gender policies. Through shared expertise, experiences, and resources, communities of practice enhance the effectiveness of gender policy briefs, ensuring that they are contextually relevant, comprehensive, and actionable.

There were few significant public arts found in Bishkek, Osh and Tashkent. In Bishkek, there is a mural of Burulay Turdaly Kyzy who was a victim of bride kidnapping. The mural was drawn by the DOXA art-group on the facade of the Bishkek Medical College dormitory, where she was a student before she was kidnapped and then murdered by her abductor. In this study, the authors conducted an interview with one of the members of DOXA group who shared more about the mural and the effect of it to the people in Bishkek.

In Osh, a mural appeared on a five-story building dedicated to the theme of equal access to education. The idea, according to the media, belongs to Vera Andrianova and the artist Arslan Narynbekov. "This art object has a special meaning. With it, we talk about how education affects people on a personal level and on the level of society as a source of development," said the Youth of Osh organization, which implements the project.

In conclusion, the research results highlighted the considerable influence of public art on society's perceptions of gender roles. The majority of interviewees indicated that public art pieces addressing gender issues sparked meaningful dialogue and shifted their perceptions of gender roles. Interviews with members of communities of practice revealed a similar sentiment. These communities effectively incorporated public art in their activities to challenge gender norms and promote equality. They showcased how public art fosters an environment conducive to open discussions, further reinforcing the positive impact on gender perceptions. The study concluded that public art, when used strategically, can promote gender equality. Through engaged learning and communities of practice, the influence of public art on societal norms and gender policies is substantial, thereby advocating its integration into strategies aimed at gender empowerment.

Policy Implications/Recommendations

Positive attitude towards the artists

Embrace a policy of welcoming artists by creating favorable conditions for their development through laws and permits, without necessarily providing direct financial support. It is important for the government to demonstrate a positive attitude towards contemporary art and express a willingness to attract artists to work in the city. Currently, it seems that non-traditional art genres are not a priority for politicians.

Engagement of the city

Organize events to promote art and make the path to art more accessible. While the municipality may not directly organize these events, the city can develop an annual event concept that encompasses exhibitions, presentations of works, and invitations to foreign artists, particularly those from neighboring countries. Additionally, the city can offer spaces and facilities for educational and outreach programs related to art. By doing so, the city can create numerous opportunities to facilitate and encourage artistic engagement, making it easier for individuals to pursue and appreciate art.

Stakeholder Engagement

Involvement of key stakeholders, including local government, artists, educators, and community leaders, is crucial. Their collaboration ensures a holistic approach to utilizing public art in gender empowerment initiatives.

Space for public art

Determine ideal spots within the city to serve as platforms for public art. The city may present art in unexpected locations and give the public a more engaging and memorable cultural experience by adopting a more straightforward and moralistic approach to culture. This necessitates abandoning a strategy that only serves the interests of the authorities and putting an emphasis on transparency and citizen engagement. In order to effectively execute this advice, the city should:

- Identify various locations within the city that can serve as platforms for public art. These can include parks, squares, buildings, and other public spaces that are accessible and visible to a wide audience.
- Encourage a mindset shift within the city's cultural approach, focusing on inclusivity and reducing moral pathos. This means embracing diverse forms of art that challenge traditional norms and expectations, fostering a dynamic and thought-provoking artistic environment.
- Foster a sense of surprise and curiosity by placing art in unexpected locations. By breaking away from conventional art spaces, the city can create engaging encounters for the public, making art accessible to a wider audience.
- Prioritize citizen involvement and engagement in the decision-making process. Empowering the local community and encouraging their participation in selecting and appreciating public art will promote a sense of ownership and pride in the city's artistic landscape.

By giving platforms for public art in unconventional locations and fostering a more inclusive and citizen-centric approach, the city can create a vibrant and memorable artistic atmosphere, enhancing cultural appreciation and engagement of society.

Involve qualified experts in public arts

Seek the expertise of professionals and adopt a holistic approach towards art installations. The installation of new decorative elements or art objects should be viewed as an investment in the city's development rather than a mere economic expenditure. By embracing this mindset, the city can attract talented artists, designers, and architects, rather than solely relying on specialists from a single country. Currently, it appears that the city authorities primarily consider art objects as a means to beautify the streets. However, a more fruitful approach would be to:

- Aim to establish Bishkek as the modern art capital of Central Asia by actively promoting contemporary art and creating an environment conducive to artistic expression and experimentation.
- Explore the integration of national culture with contemporary art, enabling a fresh perspective on cultural heritage and fostering innovative artistic expressions.
- Encourage the Ministry of Culture to broaden its scope beyond popular art and actively engage with the global art community. This entails being open to learning from other cultures, keeping an eye on international art trends, and facilitating cultural exchange.

By consulting experts in the field, adopting a forward-thinking approach, and embracing the potential of contemporary art, Bishkek can position itself as a vibrant hub for artistic creativity and cultural exchange within Central Asia.

Policy Modification

Government should reconsider existing policies or establish new ones to encourage the use of public art in public spaces, with specific focus on gender issues.

Public Awareness Campaigns

Leverage media to increase the visibility of public art focused on gender equality, thereby stimulating broader societal conversations.

By integrating public art into the wider gender empowerment strategy, we can foster a more egalitarian society in Kyrgyzstan, setting an example for other nations grappling with similar issues.