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## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN TURKEY: EXISTENT BARRIERS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION

DR. BENİ R. CENGİZ

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## AUTHOR

**Dr. Bengi R. CENGİZ**



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## DR. BENGİ R. CENGİZ

Bengi R. Cengiz attained her Bachelor of Arts degree from Boğaziçi University, and her Master of Arts degree from University College London, where she was honored as a Jean Monnet Scholar. Bengi R. Cengiz obtained her Doctor of Philosophy degree from Sabancı University's Political Science program, specializing in an extensive study on the perceptions of citizenship rights and freedoms in Turkey. She has also served as a visiting researcher at the prestigious Institute for Turkish Studies (SUITS) at Stockholm University, as well as the esteemed Department of Political Science at Uppsala University.

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# WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN TURKEY: EXISTENT BARRIERS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION

Despite being one of the essential conditions of democracy and the ideal of equal citizenship, gender equality remains a distant reality in today's politics. Ensuring the "visibility" of women in the political sphere is particularly essential for achieving gender equality and representing their experiences and interests marginalized within the political sphere.<sup>1</sup> This policy note will explore the barriers to achieving equal representation for women and deliberate on measures that can be taken to overcome these barriers, with the objective of fostering gender equality in the political sphere. Initially, unequal representation in Turkey will be examined through comparative data, and subsequently, the key problem areas will be presented alongside proposed solutions.

## COMPARATIVE DATA ANALYSIS ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN TURKEY

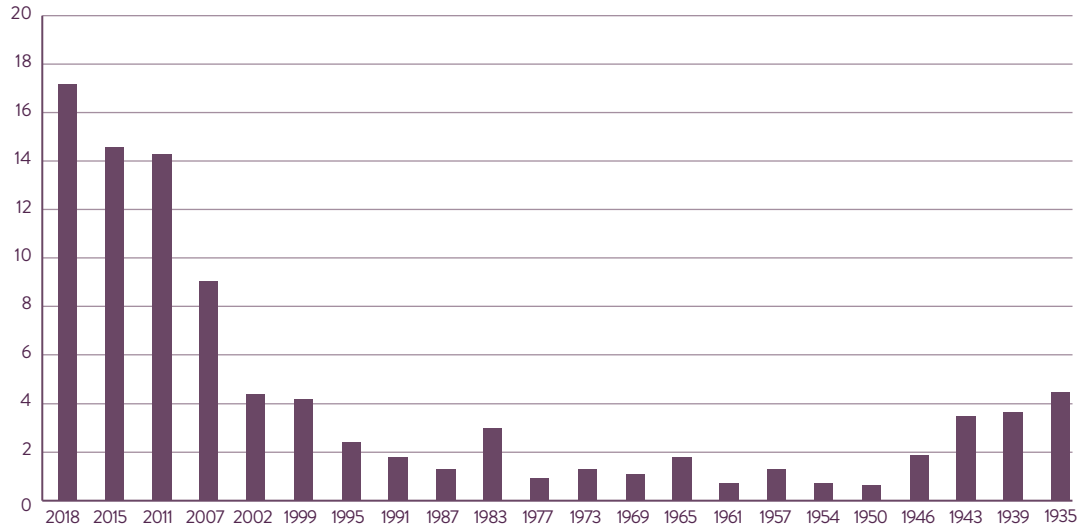
In Turkey, women are underrepresented in both national and local politics. The percentage of female members of parliament in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) is merely 17.3%. Turkey ranks among the lowest countries in the world in terms of women's representation in national parliaments with this percentage<sup>2</sup> (See Figures 1 and 2). According to the 2021 data from the World Economic Forum (WEF),<sup>3</sup> the global average for women's representation in parliaments is 26%, and at the ministerial level, it is 22%. In the European Parliament (EP), the representation of women stands at 39%.<sup>4</sup> Men make up at least 80% of the national parliaments in 10 of the 27 member states of the European Union (EU). According to ministerial-level data in member countries, in high-

*The percentage of female members of parliament in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) is merely 17.3%. Turkey ranks among the lowest countries in the world in terms of women's representation in national parliaments with this percentage.*

er-profile fields such as foreign affairs, interior, defense, and justice ministries, the percentage of male ministers is 42.8%, while female ministers make up 32.1%. It is

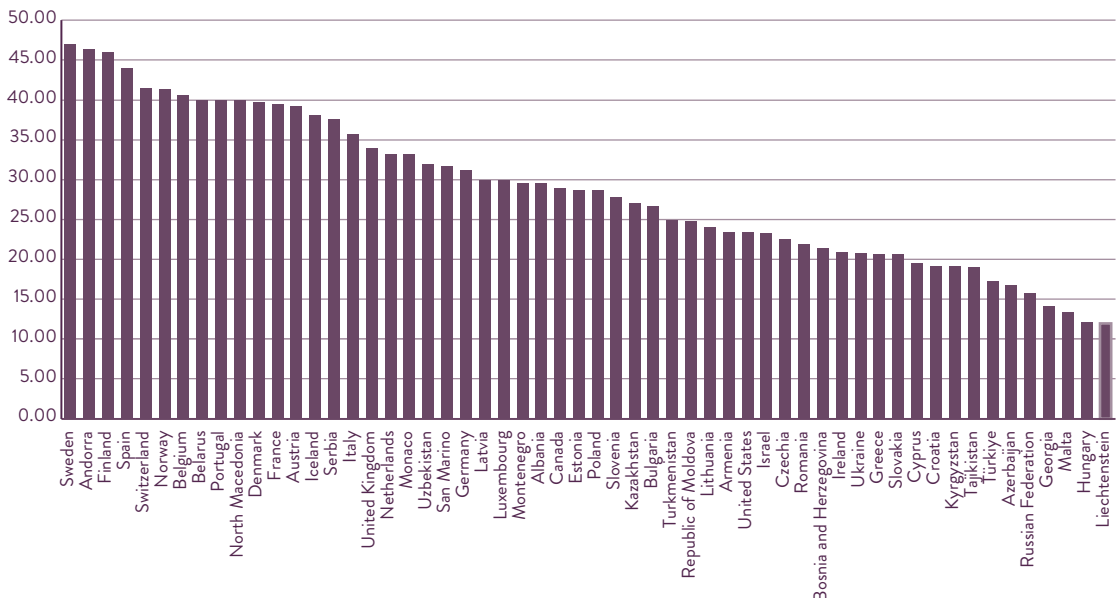
observed that women predominantly hold ministerial positions in the fields of health, education, social work, and security (40.4% for women vs 19.4% for men).

**FIGURE 1: CHANGE IN THE PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT OVER THE YEARS, % (1935-2018)**



Source: High Election Board and Turkish Grand National Assembly Databases. (Accessed 6 August 2021: [www.ysk.gov.tr](http://www.ysk.gov.tr), <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr>)

**FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS, 2020**



Note: The percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments is calculated based on the number of seats held by women in the single or lower houses of national parliaments and expressed as a percentage of all seats.

Source: United Nations Global SDG Database. (Accessed 6 August 2021: <https://w3.unece.org/SDG/en/Indicator?id=142>).

**TABLE 1: GLOBAL FEMALE REPRESENTATION BASED ON UNITED NATIONS WOMEN (UN WOMEN) DATA**

Percentage of women in parliaments (%)	25.5
Percentage of women in ministerial positions (%)	21.9
Number of countries with female government and state leaders	22
Percentage of countries with a female head of state (%)	5.9
Percentage of countries with a female head of government (%)	6.7
Percentage of female representatives in the European Parliament (%)	38.9

*Sources:*

*UN Turkey. (March 10, 2021). "UN Women – Women in Politics: New Data Shows Growth but also Setbacks" (<https://turkey.un.org/tr/115804-un-women-ipu-siya-sette-kadin-2021-baritasina-gore-parlamentolar-da-bakanliklarda-devlet-ve>)*

*European Parliament. (March 2021). "Women in politics in the EU: State of play" ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689345/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)689345\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689345/EPRS_BRI(2021)689345_EN.pdf))*

***In the 2019 local elections, the percentage of female candidates in parties other than the HDP did not exceed 6%, whereas this rate was approximately 21% within the HDP.***

In Turkey, women's representation also remains insufficient at the local level. In the 2019 local elections, women held a mere 3% of positions in local administrations. This percentage falls well below global averages. Among the countries in the WEF report, the average percentage of women in local government is 36%. Within the European Union, the percentage of male mayors stands at 85%.

Gender inequality in representation is also evident during the candidacy process. For instance, in the 2019 local elections, the percentage of female candidates in parties other than the HDP did not exceed 6%, whereas this rate was approximately 21% within the HDP (Table 3).

**TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF ELECTED MEN AND WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

Role	Men	Percentage (%)	Women	Percentage (%)	Total
Metropolitan Municipality Mayor	27	90	3	10	30
Metropolitan District Municipality Mayor	494	95	25	5	519
Municipal Council Member	18461	89	2284	11	20475
Provincial Mayor	50	98	1	2	51
District and Township Municipality Mayor	776	98	12	2	788
Provincial General Assembly Member	1223	96	48	4	1271
Village Chief	18081	99	115	1	18196
Neighborhood Chief (Muhtar)	31049	98	970	2	32019
Village Council Member	76689	99	1007	1	80696
Neighborhood Council Member	134362	98	3418	2	137780
Total	284212	97	7883	3	292095

*KADER, "Examining the 2019 Local Elections through a Gender Equality Lens" report. (Accessed 6 August 2021: [http://ka-der.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/K.A.DER\\_Sivil-Dusun\\_Kitapcik.pdf](http://ka-der.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/K.A.DER_Sivil-Dusun_Kitapcik.pdf))*

**TABLE 3: GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF CANDIDATES IN THE 2019 LOCAL ELECTIONS ACROSS POLITICAL PARTIES**

Political Parties	Number of Female Candidates	Percentage (%)	Number of Male Candidates	Percentage (%)	Total
AKP	26	02.02	1256	97.98	1282
CHP	50	5.66	832	94.34	882
HDP	50	21.36	184	78.64	234
MHP	23	2.81	794	97.19	817
IYIP	27	4.80	535	95.19	562

*Note: Prior to the Presidential Elections held on June 24, 2018, the 'People's Alliance' was formed between the AKP and MHP. This alliance remained intact in the local elections held on March 31, 2019. As a result, the two parties joined forces in 51 cities, including 30 metropolitan municipalities. CHP and IYIP, on the other hand, cooperated in the local elections as members of the Nation Alliance.*

*Source: KA-DER, "The Absence of Women Has Been Confirmed". March 20, 2019. (Accessed 06 August 2021: <http://ka-der.org.tr/kadinin-yoklugu-onaylandi/>)*

Women are also underrepresented at the political party leadership level. None of the parties at the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) have been able to establish full gender equality in leadership. Furthermore, men predominantly hold decision-making

positions in the local organizations of these parties as well. With the exception of the HDP, no political party has more than 5% of female representation in terms of provincial chairpersons and provincial and district mayors (Table 4 - 7).

***Women are also underrepresented at the political party leadership level. None of the parties at the Turkish Grand National Assembly have been able to establish full gender equality in leadership.***

**TABLE 4: NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE AND MALE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT FOR PARTIES WITH PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS IN THE GRAND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF TURKEY (TBMM)**

Political Party	Women		Men		Party Total
	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)	
Justice and Development Party	54	18.82	233	81.18	287
Republican People's Party	16	11.85	119	88.15	135
Peoples' Democratic Party	23	41.07	33	58.93	56
Nationalist Movement Party	4	8.33	44	91.67	48
Good Party	2	5.56	34	94.44	36

*Source: The data provided by the Turkish Grand National Assembly have been used. (Accessed 06 August 2021: <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/SandalyeDagilimi>)*

**TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN THE LEADERSHIP OF POLITICAL PARTIES WITH PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS IN THE GRAND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF TURKEY (TBMM)**

JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY			
	TOTAL NUMBER	NUMBER OF WOMEN	PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN (%)
Central Executive Board	27	5	18.51
Central Decision and Executive Board	75	24	32
Central Disciplinary Committee (Including Substitute Members)	20	6	30
Intra-Party Democracy Arbitration Board	5	0	0
Political Integrity and Ethics Committee (Including Substitute Members)	7	2	28.57
TOTAL	134	37	27.61
REPUBLICAN PEOPLE'S PARTY			
	TOTAL NUMBER	NUMBER OF WOMEN	PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN (%)
Central Executive Board	15	4	26.6
Secretary-General	1	1	100
High Disciplinary Board	15	5	33.3
Members of the Party Council	60	20	33.3
TOTAL	91	30	32.96
PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC PARTY			
	TOTAL NUMBER	NUMBER OF WOMEN	PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN (%)
Central Executive Board	31	10	32.25
Members of the Party Council	98	48	48.97
Conciliation Committee (Including Substitute Members)	7	2	28.57
TOTAL	136	60	44.11
NATIONALIST MOVEMENT PARTY			
	TOTAL NUMBER	NUMBER OF WOMEN	PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN (%)
Central Executive Board	75	5	6.6
Presidency Council	15	2	13.33
Central Disciplinary Board		1	11.11
TOTAL		8	08.08
GOOD PARTY			
	TOTAL NUMBER	NUMBER OF WOMEN	PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN (%)
Presidency Council	21	6	28.57
General Administrative Board	74	20	27.02
Central Disciplinary Board	18	5	27.7
TOTAL	113	31	27.43

Source: Compiled from records on the official websites of political parties. (Accessed 6 August 2021) & Serpil Sançar. (December 2018). "Gender Equality in Political Decision-Making Mapping and Monitoring". CEID (Association for Monitoring Gender Equality). (Accessed 26 September 2021: <http://www.ceidizleme.org/medya/dosya/94.pdf>)



**TABLE 6: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN THE PROVINCIAL LEADERSHIPS OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

Political Parties	AKP	CHP	HDP	MHP	Good Party
Total Provincial Chairpersons	81	81	81	81	81
Female Provincial Chairpersons	2	4	81	2	3
Percentage of Female Provincial Chairpersons (%)	2.46	4.93	100*	2.46	3.7

*Note: In accordance with the co-presidency system adopted by the HDP, a female provincial co-chair is present in every province.*

*Source: Compiled from records on the official websites of political parties. (Accessed 6 August 2021)*

**TABLE 7: PERCENTAGE OF ELECTED FEMALE PROVINCIAL AND DISTRICT MAYORS IN POLITICAL PARTIES**

Partiler	AKP	CHP	HDP	MHP	İYİ Parti
Political Parties	AKP	CHP	HDP	MHP	IYIP
Total Provincial Mayors	38	22	8	11	0
Female Provincial Mayors	1	1	3	0	0
Percentage of Female Provincial Mayors (%)	2.63	4.54	37.5	0	0
Total District Mayors	744	241	58	233	23
Female District Mayors	6	9	21	1	0
Percentage of Female District Mayors (%)	0.8	3.73	36.2	0.42	0

*Source: Supreme Election Council (YSK), "31 March 2019 Local Administration General Election Statistics Bulletin," pp. 25-32. & Serkan Alan, "Chilling' Results: 45 Female Mayors Out of 1,389 Municipalities!" Gazete Duvar. (April 15, 2019). (Accessed 6 August 2021)*

## BARRIERS TO EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

As data suggests, gender inequality has cast its shadow over the entire political landscape. In this section, barriers to equal representation and potential solutions for overcoming them will be discussed, complemented by examples from around the world.

*Gender quotas are the most frequently used approach to enhance female representation in politics.*

### Institutional Barriers and Proposed Solutions

- Gender quotas are the most frequently used approach *to enhance female representation in politics*. Gender quotas may take the form of *legally reserved seats for female candidates, candidate quotas, or voluntary quota schemes implemented by political parties*. As of 2021, gender quota systems at the parliamentary level are in place in 36 countries<sup>5</sup>. Gender quotas,

both legislatively mandated and voluntarily adopted by political parties, are also present across the European Union. These quotas can be implemented in candidate nominations, candidacies, or elected representative positions, with the objective of reaching the "critical minority" target typically set at 30% or 40%. To illustrate, in Argentina, it is required that women candidates make up at least 30% of the electable positions on party lists in all national elections.<sup>6</sup> In India, the rural local self-governance system

known as the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) allocates one-third of the seats for women<sup>7</sup>.

- *It can be argued that quota measures established at the constitutional level or domestic legal regulations such as political party laws or election laws prove more effective in achieving results compared to voluntary quota practices.* For instance, in Tunisia, a legal amendment in April 2017 mandated that political parties must include an equal number of male and female candidates on their lists. As a result of the requirement for equal number of female and male candidates in municipal elections, women constituted 47% of the elected officials in the May 2018 municipal elections.<sup>8</sup>

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***To address the shortcomings in the implementation of quotas, it is essential to create incentives and implement deterrent measures.***

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- *To address the shortcomings in the implementation of quotas, it is essential to create incentives and implement deterrent measures.* For instance, in Georgia, when party lists include at least 30% female candidates within the top 10 positions, political parties receive an additional 30% in funding. Furthermore, political parties that nominate and elect female candidates can also receive additional funding<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, in France, a constitutional amendment in 1999 mandated that 50% of the candidates on party election lists must be women; otherwise, parties might be subject to financial penalties.<sup>10</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, after it came to light that political parties were expelling women from their ranks once they had met the women's representation quota, a requirement was introduced that whenever female representatives are expelled from the party, they must be replaced with other female representatives<sup>11</sup>.

- *Gender quotas should be complemented with other policy tools such as “the zipper system” or “vertical parity” (placing men and women alternately on candidate lists), shortlists consisting solely of female candidates, and nominating female candidates in positions and ranks where they are likely to win<sup>12</sup>.* Rwanda provides a similar example through the use of a multi-ballot system in local elections, where voters have three voting options, including the general vote, women's representation vote, and youth representative vote<sup>13</sup>.

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***The control exercised by male “gatekeepers” within political parties over candidate lists is a fundamental obstacle for female candidates.***

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- The control exercised by male “gatekeepers<sup>14</sup>” within political parties over candidate lists is a fundamental obstacle for female candidates. To overcome this, *candidate lists need to be prepared through transparent and inclusive processes that prioritize gender equality. Empowering women's organizations within political parties with decision-making authority regarding women's representation can facilitate women's greater and higher-ranking inclusion on candidate lists.*

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### **Structural Barriers and Proposed Solutions**

- Access to socio-economic resources like education and income is a fundamental requirement for women to establish themselves in politics. It has been calculated that it will take 267.6 years to bridge the existing gender gap in economic participation and opportunities between women and men<sup>15</sup>. To overcome this obstacle, *women should not be charged candidate nomination fees, and political parties should provide financial support to women running campaigns.*

### Cultural Barriers and Proposed Solutions

- The male-dominated perspective prevalent in political culture hinders women from developing the self-confidence to engage in politics, and when they hold political positions, they are often viewed as “unsuccessful” or “incompetent” politicians.<sup>16</sup> *To shift this negative perception, political parties should implement education and capacity-building programs that encourage women to enter the political arena and nurture their self-confidence. These programs should be designed to unleash women’s leadership potentials.*

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***The male-dominated perspective prevalent in political culture hinders women from developing the self-confidence to engage in politics, and when they hold political positions, they are often viewed as “unsuccessful” or “incompetent” politicians.***

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- Alongside educational programs, political parties should integrate gender equality into their bylaws, party policy documents, and structures such as party committees or congresses, *underscoring that women have a place within the party*<sup>17</sup>. An exemplary initiative in this context is the establishment of a Gender Equality Prosecutor’s Office by Costa Rica’s Citizen Action Party (Partido Acción Ciudadana - PAC), which is responsible for monitoring, reporting, and offering guidance on the enforcement of gender equality regulations.<sup>18</sup>

- *Special educational programs can be crafted for male politicians to increase their awareness of gender equality. This is beneficial for both transforming the male-dominated culture within the parties and ensuring the lasting impact of institutional measures aimed at increasing women’s political participation. For example, in Mexico, the female members of the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional - PAN) organized training sessions for their male colleagues to promote quota reforms and secure the support of the party’s base*<sup>19</sup>.
- *It is essential for political parties to adopt a clear stance on sexual harassment, establish relevant disciplinary mechanisms, and ensure their unwavering enforcement.*
- Women’s involvement in domestic caregiving duties also presents an obstacle to their political participation. A case in point is the European Union, where women dedicate twice the time men spend on childcare<sup>20</sup>. This situation leads women to start their political careers at a later age compared to men and makes it more challenging for women with young children to engage in politics. *Therefore, working hours and organization of political institutions and spaces need to be adjusted accordingly. The availability of childcare services will assist women in overcoming disadvantages stemming from societal gender role expectations.*

### CONCLUSION

Despite being a fundamental element of democracy and the ideal of equal citizenship, gender equality has yet to be fully realized neither in Turkey nor globally. The experiences and interests of women are excluded from the political arena due to structural, institutional, and cultural barriers that restrict women’s representation. While achieving gender equality demands long-term and comprehensive changes, it is possible to facilitate and promote women’s participation in politics with the measures discussed in this policy note. Particularly within the context of political parties, it is evident from global examples that these measures, whether indirectly or directly, contribute to enhancing women’s representation in politics.

# NOTES

- 1 Philips, A. (1994). "Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas or A Politics of Presence?" *Constellations*, 1(1): 88-91
- 2 Since 1935, when female members of parliament began to serve in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, the highest numerical representation of women in the parliament was witnessed during the 25th term parliamentary elections on June 7, 2015. One of the reasons for this was the HDP, which adheres to the principle of equal representation, participating in these elections as a political party for the first time and having 40% of the 80 elected members as women.
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- 11 Beijing+25: National-Level Review of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Beijing Platform for Action: Progress and Challenges. (May 15, 2019) ([https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Kgz\\_Beijing%2B25\\_Review\\_Eng\\_FINAL\\_with%20layout\\_16082019.pdf](https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Kgz_Beijing%2B25_Review_Eng_FINAL_with%20layout_16082019.pdf))

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