Leila Toylyeva is an independent expert with extensive experience in governmental and non-governmental organizations. As a professional economist, Leila was head of the Department of Household Surveys at the Ashgabat city branch of Turkmenmilliyhisabat (National Statistical Service) of Turkmenistan for several years. Her activity within non-governmental organizations has for many years been aimed at supporting local communities, especially in rural areas, in small business development, environmental issues and the economic empowerment of women. In these areas, Leila has implemented projects in cooperation with ICRC, IOM, the OSCE Centre and the Regional office of UNODC.

GENDER APPROACHES IN TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan is one of the five countries in Central Asia, and is the second largest country in the region (491 210 km²). It is divided into five provinces (welayatlar), and the capital Ashgabat also has the status of a province (welayat). The provinces are subdivided into 65 districts (etraplar) and 20 cities. Eighty percent of the country is covered by land classified as desert.

The total population of Turkmenistan (as of 10 February, 2016) was 5 419 037 people. The male population represents 49.2 percent (2 667 307 people) of the total population and the female population represents 50.8 percent (2 751 730 people). Turkmenistan became a sovereign state in 1991, along with the other former Soviet republics. In the ensuing years of independence, Turkmenistan’s economy was transformed into one of the fastest growing economies in the world, maintaining an average economic growth rate of 11 percent annually since 2007 (in accordance with the official data). Steady economic growth, sustained over a long period of time, has contributed to an increase in income levels: by the end of 2012, the level of GDP per capita was higher than 6 000 US dollars, which corresponds to the level found in upper-middle income countries.

A large part of state revenue comes from natural gas exports. The second largest source of foreign exchange earnings is the agricultural sector, which accounts for 13–14 percent of GDP. Irrigated farming (production of cotton, wheat, melons, fruits and vegetables) and livestock breeding (sheep, horse, poultry and camel breeding) provide employment to almost half of the population (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Employment and GDP structure, by sector

1 National Statistical Committee of Turkmenistan, no date.
2 Estimates of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN Population Division (available at http://countrymeters.info/ru/Turkmenistan).
3 The World Bank, no date.
4 Ibid.
At the UN General Assembly in 1995, Turkmenistan acquired the status of a neutral state. The country agreed to the international rights and obligations associated with neutral status and refused to participate in military blocs. As a result, Turkmenistan received international guarantees of security. At present, Turkmenistan's "protective" function of neutrality is less significant than its international peacekeeping function.

Turkmenistan has set new goals, which are articulated in the National Socio-Economic Development Programme of Turkmenistan for 2011–2030. The main purposes of this programme are to significantly increase the standard of living for the population and ensure that Turkmenistan becomes one of the economically developed countries with a high ranking in the Human Development Index.

Domestic government policy is aimed at the balanced development of the regions of Turkmenistan, and takes into account the regional characteristics and individual potential of each province (welayat). The overarching aim of this policy is to improve the welfare and the quality of life of the population. An important goal of the national programmes is the formulation of common standards of social and living conditions for people living in both large cities and small towns and villages.

The agro-industrial complex of Turkmenistan focuses on further growth of agricultural production through the introduction of advanced water-saving technology, 100 percent domestic processing of agricultural products, and the substitution of imported food products with domestic products in order to achieve food independence. In 2014, over 1 200 000 tonnes of high quality wheat and over 1 100 000 tonnes of cotton were produced. Livestock and poultry production has also increased across all of the regions.

The National Socio-Economic Development Programme for 2011–2030 and the National Rural Development Programme are both aimed at comprehensive economic growth, alongside the preservation of economic independence. More than 25 000 hectares of land have been allocated for the building of model towns and villages in every province across the country. The rural investment projects focus on: building houses and roads; the construction of plants; the development of modern infrastructure; building new schools (equipped with multimedia technologies), kindergartens, cultural centres, health centres and commercial and communication facilities; and the creation of new jobs. Citizens of Turkmenistan receive extensive support in obtaining preferential loans for building houses in new villages.

In the first ten months of 2014, 6.2 billion TMT were invested in the “National Programme of the President of Turkmenistan on the transformation of social and everyday services for the population of villages, settlements, etrap towns and etrap centers during the period till 2020”. This exceeds the 2013 level of investment by 21.7 percent. In 2014, more than 400 facilities were operationalized, at a total cost of over nine billion United States dollars. The total cost of numerous ongoing construction projects in Turkmenistan is approximately 48 billion USD.

Having successfully integrated into the global political, economic and legal spheres, Turkmenistan performs a substantial amount of targeted work in the field of human rights, deepening international cooperation on a wide range of areas, the most important of which is gender equality.

In accordance with the Constitution of Turkmenistan and international legal norms and standards, the principle of equality between women and men and non-discrimination on the basis of sex is recognized as one of the main priorities for state policy. Turkmenistan strictly follows the international obligations arising from the United Nations’ human rights treaties. In 1996, the country joined the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and in 2009 it ratified the Optional Protocol. Turkmenistan also joined the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (in 1995). The national programmes of socio-economic development of Turkmenistan are based on the UN Millennium Declaration, in which gender equality is highlighted as one of the main objectives, in particular in relation to the health care of women and children, education, the promotion of equality between women and men and the empowerment of women.

---

5 Turkmenistan: The Golden age, 2015a.

The indicator for gender equality in politics and the economy is the index of empowerment of women. This index reflects the degree of participation by women in decision-making processes. There are no formal quotas for the election of women in Turkmenistan. Women take an active role in the full election process and their involvement is reflected in the following data. There are 33 women delegates in the Mejlis (parliament) of Turkmenistan (elections of 15 December 2013), or 26.4 percent of the total number of deputies, which is higher than the world average (22.8 percent). The Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson of the Mejlis and the Chair of one of the eight parliamentary Committees are women. Among elected representatives of local governments, women account for 16.67 percent at the regional level; 20.21 percent at the municipal and district levels; and 18.68 percent at the rural level.

In 2013, women represented more than 44 percent of people employed in the economy. Women are represented in government at various levels, and in foreign policy. For example, the Permanent Representative of Turkmenistan in the UN and the Ambassador of Turkmenistan in China are both women.

In 2014, more than 40 percent of employees in large and medium-sized enterprises in Turkmenistan were women. 38.7 percent of the total number of employed women work in education, 14.8 percent in health care and social services and 10.7 percent in the manufacturing industry. Business and entrepreneurship have become a new focus for women's activities.

Turkmenistan has established an extensive system of social protection for every citizen and every family, especially large families. For example, all citizens, regardless of their level of material well-being, enjoy free (within a certain limit) gas, electricity and drinking water, and families receive children's allowances.

On 17 July 1998, the Mejlis of Turkmenistan adopted the Law, “On State Benefits”, which stipulates the following types of social benefits: maternity allowance; allowance for children; (temporary) disability allowance; and allowance upon the loss of the breadwinner. A separate system of guarantees is established for mothers. Maternity allowance is assigned to women, amounting to 100 percent of salary during a maternity leave period of 112 calendar days, regardless of the length of employment and place of work, and including seasonal and temporary employment.

Low-income families receive an allowance for children under the age of three.

Women at the age of 57 years and men aged 62 years are entitled to a pension. Those who do not receive pensions, receive social benefits. Under the law, “On Pensions” (1998), pension provision incorporates a period of study in higher, secondary special and vocational institutions, and a non-working period of caring for a young child until three years of age (a total of no more than six years) as work experience. Women who have given birth to and raised three children up to the age of eight are entitled to retire one year earlier than the age prescribed by the Law; women with four children, two years earlier; and women with five or more children or a disabled child, three years earlier.

Targeted measures to stimulate women's employment are made available through a system of tax incentives. Working women with three or more children pay 30 percent less in tax. Mothers with five or more children are exempt from tax altogether.

---

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9TDH, 2015.
10 Ibid.
12 Periodic report (a).
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
The country also has a comprehensive system of social protection for motherhood and childhood, which provides women with mandatory prenatal, natal and postnatal care, as well as children, especially in the first five years of their lives. The health status of mothers and children up to one year of age is monitored at health centres. There are 208 women’s clinics and children’s health centres, providing services in the field of reproductive health. The effectiveness of prenatal health care is evident: 92 percent of pregnancies result in successful births.\(^\text{16}\)

In Turkmenistan, every third family has five or more children.\(^\text{17}\) According to existing national traditions, women raise children and maintain the household. Pregnant women working in agriculture have a shorter working day of six hours, with preservation of the average wage. According to the current rules, this proportion of economically active women is considered to be unemployed in statistical reporting. Large families are encouraged by the system of benefits and privileges. Annually, mothers who have given birth to eight or more children, are awarded with the honorary title, “Ēne mährī” (“Mother’s Tenderness”). In addition, the Leader of the Nation provides large families with the keys to houses of enhanced comfort. The order “Zenak kalby” (“Female Soul”) is awarded to women for their creative accomplishments in industry, science, education and health care.

In the process of the development of the National Action Plan, the recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women were taken into consideration. These recommendations were made in October 2012 at the fifty-third session of the Committee. The “National Action Plan for Gender Equality in Turkmenistan for 2015–2020” is a comprehensive document which outlines the objectives and implementation strategies, and also stipulates the structures responsible for the development and implementation of these objectives with regard to gender mainstreaming in various aspects of women’s lives.\(^\text{18}\)

Despite some successes in recent years, much remains to be done in order to achieve full gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. The following activities are a priority:

- Continued monitoring of the laws of Turkmenistan for their compliance with regulations and commitments undertaken by Turkmenistan as a result of the signed and ratified conventions and treaties, the preparation of the new revisions and the elaboration of new normative-legal acts;
- Further study of international experience and methodologies used in conducting sample surveys and methods of collecting and processing data on gender; adaptation of methodology and the development of tools to conduct surveys; definition of pilot projects; training of interviewers; training of members of the Working group on methodology in data collection; organizing workshops, meetings and consultations;
- Continued awareness raising events for different stakeholders (including employees of state institutions, academics, students, representatives of law enforcement agencies, local authorities and voluntary associations); a series of seminars and round tables on international standards and mechanisms for the protection of human rights, including women’s rights and gender equality; the expansion of the network of Information Centres on human rights, including the rights of women, with the participation of national and international experts.

The creation of an economic basis for the realization of gender equality should also be one of the most important goals in the development of the country. This is especially true for the agricultural sector, where the situation of women is similar to that found in other countries in the region:

- Women in agriculture form the basis of food production, nutrition and family incomes;
- Women are very concerned about issues relating to health, education and employment;
- In low-income families, women spend a large amount of time (70 percent) on reproductive and domestic activities (childbirth, childcare and household chores);
- Women’s work often goes unnoticed and is low-paid.

---

\(^{16}\) Ibid.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid.  
\(^{18}\) CEDAW, 2012.
This suggests that in order to successfully harness the potential of rural women, more active involvement of women is needed in decision-making processes – in civil society organizations, in local communities, but also at state and local levels, as representatives of local and executive authorities and administration.

It is also necessary to involve women in the management of soil and water resources at farm level. For this purpose, the provision of seminars and training for rural residents, both women and men, is important. This type of work could be achieved either through the development of Field Schools for Farmers, or through specialist information and educational / training centres, either within the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources, or in the form of a project with an NGO. The work to involve more women should be combined with awareness raising of experts, including decision-makers on gender approaches.

It is essential to continue raising the awareness of the population, particularly in rural areas, and for both women and men, about the importance of women's equal participation in all processes relating to agriculture and rural development, and to improve women's access to various resources such as land, water, finances and advanced, cost-effective technologies for agriculture. Civil society organizations and resource centres could be involved in the training of rural women and men.

Presentations at the FAO-organized Experts Meeting held in Minsk (25–26 February, 2016), identified issues relevant to the entire region, and significantly, issues concerning statistical data. The experts reflected upon the absence of a common statistical platform, which could reflect gender issues in the development of rural areas and the agricultural sector at country level across the region. At the same time, they pointed to the value and successes of existing practices in the countries of the region.

In order to formulate a streamlined approach to the implementation of outcomes set by FAO at the regional level, it would be appropriate to provide technical support to national statistical services to conduct specific surveys in rural areas, using FAO indicators and standardized analytical tables.

The following recommendations are required to advance gender equality and empower rural women in Turkmenistan:

- The organization of regional women’s business forums and fairs to sell goods and products made by rural women, in order to enhance initiatives and opportunities for small business development among rural women, especially in regions where there are strong local traditions;

- The establishment of independent studies involving women from rural communities in order to: (i) determine women’s priorities in the development of the industries and spheres of agricultural production; and (ii) assess the existing platforms and opportunities for women's participation in the management of natural and human resources in rural areas, the organization of small businesses in rural areas, the development of personal growth, and ways of enhancing the social welfare of rural women;

- The development of a system of measures to enhance the vocational education of rural women; and the organization of small businesses in rural areas for the more effective production of competitive products (particularly for processing agricultural products and rural crafts with access to trading markets). Provision needs to take into account the age and social characteristics of women, and be located in centres within walking distance from homes and without the need for separation from the family;

- The development of a system of preferential credits for the purchase of equipment and agricultural machinery by rural women to enhance sustainable agricultural production and create jobs for women in rural communities (in, for example, weaving, processing wool from domestic animals, the production of dried fruit, and canning and other types of storage for agricultural products).
References

Central Council of Women’s Union of Turkmenistan. Official website (available at http://zenan.gov.tm/content/145.)


