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## **Life Challenges of Youth During COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan**

### **Herausforderungen im Leben von Jugendlichen während des COVID-19 in Kirgisistan**

### **Životné výzvy mládeže počas COVID-19 v Kirgizsku**

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#### **Abstract**

Interest in youth has become a global trend in the last 10 years in Kyrgyzstan. Youth as a category of people differs with age, social position, and psychological characteristics identified by social structure, culture, socialization ways, and other patterns. To understand young people's mentalities, it is significant to know which values are important in their lives, their benchmarks, their orientations, and their principles. The study deals with youth problems and challenges in Kyrgyzstan during Covid-19. The case and field study is chosen as the base of this research methodology. The story of a student from one of the universities in Bishkek is an example.

**Keywords:** Youth. Pandemic. Student. Well-being. Life value. Covid-19.

#### **Introduction**

Kyrgyz law indicates youth as “a socio-demographic group distinguished on the basis of an aggregate of age characteristics, specifics of social position, and other conditional socio-psychological characteristics determined by the social structure, culture, socialization, and child-rearing patterns of society”. Over half of the Kyrgyzstan population is under the age of 25, and about 32 percent is between 15 and 25. Interest in youth has become a global trend in the last 10 years in Kyrgyzstan (UNDP KG report, 2010). Community politicians, leaders, and social scientists have become more concerned about the gap between the political and social structures, individualism, social passiveness, and political indifference of youth. A few numbers of youth issues, like migration, unemployment, drugs, gambling, and HIV/AIDS sicknesses became significant impacts on the development of the country. International forums have started to draw the attention of governments and the public to the need to develop and use the capacities of the youth, directing

their energy into productive channels, and giving timely attention to demographic, social, and other problems. That's why National Human Development Reports (NHDRs) focused on youth were published in various parts of the world (UNDP KG report, 2010).

Youth is the real wealth of the country and its nation. This kind of truth is mainly replaced with notions of economic growth and decline in the focus on the gross domestic product (GDP) as its indicators. We try to make equal the well-being of youth with their welfare. However, the most hopeful progress indicator is the life quality of people which offers adequate income, education, health, and life without violence.

Wellbeing and welfare are closely related to values in life. What do young Kyrgyz people consider by the word "value"?

Values impact behavior. Hanson and Ginsburg (1988) found that young people were likely to have high academic achievements when they placed a high value on education and had parents who were concerned about their activities and well-being. In fact, the researchers found that even when socioeconomic status was taken into consideration, values had a greater impact on school achievement than socioeconomic status. (Myron H. Dembo, 1994)

Collectivism-related values are very popular in young Kyrgyz people's value universe. The tendency between young people's value universe for collectivism and the individual is high. Though most young people mean values related to themselves, their welfare, and personal benefits, great emphasis is placed on the collective/community, common welfare, personal environment, or higher ranking dominant values (Heide Möller-Slawinski, 2015). Patriotism issues are strong among young Kyrgyz people. They perceive Kyrgyzstan as "valuable" in a patriotic context. Young people love and are strongly attached to Kyrgyzstan as their native country. They are proud of it, especially with its beautiful landscape, its natural resources, and its culture: language, clothes, traditions, and religion.

### **Contextual framework**

Covid-19 was found on March 17, 2019, in Kyrgyzstan, the first cases of unknown pneumonia were reported in the Suzak region of Jalal-Abad oblast. Kyrgyzstan completely closed the border and banned the entry of foreigners. The government banned the work of restaurants and cafes with more than 50 seats, and the Islam mufti stopped Friday prayers in the country.

The first 3 citizens of Kyrgyzstan who were found to be infected with the coronavirus flew from Saudi Arabia on March 12. It was found that there were 135 passengers on the flight from which they flew, and they were put under observation. These patients were residents of the Blagoveshchenka and Boston villages of the Suzak district. On March 21-24, the Government

declared a state of emergency in the country and imposed a curfew from 8:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. (Wikipedia, 2020)

### **The story of a university student from Bishkek**

Amantur Baybolsunov (pseudonym) was a 3rd-course student, (23-year-old) of at one of the leading private universities in Kyrgyzstan. He lived in a rented apartment in Bishkek with his two friends and studied psychology. He was for two years older than the coursemates of his job in Moscow before entering the university. Amantur did his best to study, but he had to work in the evenings to pay for his tuition contract, which was a big amount of money. He was the elder child in the family, where there were more than four children. He wanted and had to help his parents. He earned the money working in the pub near his apartment and payed for rent, for study, and for household expenses. Nothing was unusual before the pandemic, Amantur was sure of his study, his girlfriend who was also a student of the same university, and his job.

### **Before Covid-19**

He thought and was sure the most valuable things of life are: being successful and rich in the society.

### **After Covid-19**

He changed his ideas about values and considered that it is: being healthy and being supportive to people.

### **Why did he change his thoughts?**

Using the case of Amantur, we may state the problems and questions: do the life values of Kyrgyz youth (20-25 year-olds) have a new clarity after pandemia? Where or how have they found recovering? How do they live through what they cannot change? What are the main orientations and values of Kyrgyz youth (before and after COVID-19)? Why are the values important for them and do values help them in their life? How have these past years (2019, 2020) reframed or reshaped their life? Do they or their family live differently as a result of COVID-19? How did that happen? What does that look like?

### **Methodology of the research**

A case study “is a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, or a single depository of documents, or one particular event” (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1998) and it enables “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon” (Merriam 1998). Case study research is characterized by “delimiting of the object of the study;” a case thus constitutes a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. The boundaries are defined by

“temporal, geographical, organizational, institutional, and other contexts that enable boundaries to be drawn around the case” (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000).

The sampling was used “to increase the utility of information to be obtained from small samples. The power and logic of purposeful sampling are that a few cases studied in depth yield many insights about the topic” (McMillan, Schumacher, 1997).

For the case described in this study, a psychology student from the university was selected. To explain the case study context, informal meetings and conversations were conducted with people of the wide society. The objective sampling was used once again, to determine skilled and strong students from Psychology, English, and Literature departments, Bishkek City Education department specialists, Professors of Humanitarian Science Faculties of International Ala-Too University, community members from Tunguch microregion in Bishkek, and parents of the students. These people made it possible go insight into the context, where the students were studying and gave the chance to different perspectives on youth problem-solving issues such as getting an education, migration, and the work and life of the youth deeply. Fieldwork was organized from 2020 to 2021. Data analysis collection was a challenging experience, including some travel to interview people, conversations and meetings, observations and reflections, and planning future activities. It was done with the awareness that the data was not simply waiting passively to be gathered through interviews and observations (Ball, 1993). The data was a significant and meaningful research process itself which encompasses the researcher’s skills and imagination, and the interactions between the researcher and the researched (Niyozov, 2001). The data was as open-minded as possible and used interviews and observations. It was recorded on dictaphones of the researchers’ cell phones. The interview transcripts, memories and field notes, reflections, and other materials were gathered, fixed, and noted. The description of the experiences of a 3rd-year student from South Kyrgyzstan, who was the witness of pandemic stories, struggling in his study and life against the disease. Some of the challenges he faced were very sad, unhappy, strange, surprising, shocking, and sometimes typical for that time. But these challenges were overwhelmed by the social and economic changes that Kyrgyzstan has faced since the pandemic began in March 2019.

Amantur’s life story was similar to many other students who received their school education and studied at universities in Bishkek. In addition to all the usual challenges faced by a student (including adjusting to new rules of wearing masks, interval keeping, sanitizing hands and working in the evenings at the fast food office in Bishkek, learning how to earn money for the tuition of the study), he encountered challenges uniquely related to health, life and well being. Amantur struggled to study online through Zoom at the university, but it was unmotivational and boring while working in the

evenings as a waiter in a cafe to make his living. He struggled to interact with friends and relatives via what's app, social networks, and face-to-face. Amantur attempted to make his life and work meaningful during pandemic, and he continued studying despite all sorts of challenges. Amantur's initial unexpected and heartbreaking experience was the incident with his friend Urmatbek's parents' death in one day. Urmatbek lived together with Amantur in rented flat. He took the parents from the village to Bishkek city after they became ill. The diagnose was: Coronavirus. The parents both were treated at Central Infection Diseases Hospital. The father died in the morning at 09 am on the 20th of July, the mother passed away at 07pm the on same date. Amantur could hardly stand near his friend during the funeral, he felt very weak and helpless. He also faced his friends' working in harsh hot climatic and poor economic conditions, with hardly family living with limited food and money. He began to worry about his own parents' health and life. He attempted to improve the financial and material conditions of his family by working at: cafes, at washing car places, and fast food offices, wherever possible. All this in turn negatively affected his studying at the University and his self-education development. Amantur's deep concerns were connected with his thoughts about health which is considered as the first value in life. Another story happened with his close friend from school, young man Seyit (pseudonym). The story made him change his idea about the value in life one more time.

It happened on May 2, 2020, Seyit's mother, Zhuzumkan Kokumbaeva (58 years old), the head of the family doctors' group of Family Medical Centre № 3 in Bishkek suddenly died. She was being treated for a coronavirus infection. In Kyrgyzstan, this was the first death among doctors infected with COVID-19. Less than a week ago, her son Seyit Sultakeev was discharged from the hospital after treatment for coronavirus. But the doctor Zhuzumkan herself was powerless in the face of a dangerous illness. The first signs of her disease began to appear on the 19th of April. 2021.

Seyit told: "April 19 was a day off. My mother did not feel well, she said that she was tired, and went to bed early. On Monday, she was unable to go to work. She contacted her colleagues, who reported that the nurse working next to her had infected her with the virus. Doctors were called home to take tests. They arrived on Wednesday".

The first two tests taken showed negative results, but Zhuzumkan's condition continued to deteriorate. She was diagnosed with coronavirus on April 24. A week later, Kokumbaeva died in the hospital. Seyit could not hold back his tears and continued telling: "On Friday, PCR analysis revealed the virus in both of us, and we were immediately taken by ambulance to the Republican Infectious Diseases Hospital. Mom was getting worse, so she was put in intensive care. The last time I saw my mother was on April 24th. She was a strong but kind person. She lit up with her presence any place where she appeared".

Gulnura Kyshtoobaeva, the doctor's sister-in-law told: „With the onset of the epidemic, Zhuzum Kokumbaeva went to work on foot. She tried to persuade her to go on vacation, but in vain - Kokumbaeva was adamant: “She put her work above herself, telling that patients were waiting for her. The husband died a long time ago. All relatives are grieving. In case of any illness, they immediately ran to her, she was like a mother to us.

Turdubay Musuraliev, a colleague of Zhuzumkan Kokumbayeva noted that: „she was an excellent doctor, I had been working at FMC № 3 since 1985 side by side with her for the last 25 years. The health sector of Kyrgyzstan suffered a great loss, Kokumbaeva was a great professional and experienced leader. He recalled: “We assume that the nurse of our FMC was infected with COVID-19 from a patient, and she worked in the same office with Dr. Zhuzumkan. Since 1996, Kokumbayeva was the head of a group of family doctors. She always treated her doctors and nurses well. I had never seen or heard a patient complain about her“.

Later, in addition to Kokumbayeva, ten more employees of FMC № 3 were found to have coronavirus, including the head of the institution, Zhyrgal Sabdanbekov. All of them were hospitalized and recovered from the virus: “I call up all my colleagues, they are in good condition. Some are getting ready to leave. In the morning I barely got up, but now I feel better“.

The Republican Operational Headquarters informed that the deceased Zhuzumkan Kokumbayeva had a severe illness, she was diagnosed with bilateral pneumonia and respiratory failure. The situation was aggravated by concomitant diseases: heart failure, diabetes mellitus, and multiple organ failure. On the morning of May 5, the total number of people infected with coronavirus in Kyrgyzstan reached 843, and 217 of them were doctors. At the same time, 600 people have recovered from the infection, including 150 health workers. There are 11 COVID-19-related deaths have been reported on that date (Azattyk Radio Forecast, 2020).

All these sad stories, sorrows, problems, and challenges made Amantur's life change and reshape. He was often frustrated and often thought of life values. He was caught in different dilemmas and paradoxes: what is valuable in life? Health, wealth, or success? Amantur encouraged his friends and relatives to follow the sanitarian rules, not to believe some people's talking about the lack of virus, and to have their own views. He wanted to admit that he knows some stories or news about pandemics because he feared for his future life. Because he had not much time for warning people about the virus and its consequences of it, he did not know what might happen later. He knew that people suffered because of it. At the end of the fieldwork, Amantur was still studying at the university, practicing psychology, helping his family, worrying still about the future, and struggling with his personal life values and challenges. He continued gaining respect among friends and relatives; at the same time, he was not sure if he would work in psychology field at graduation.

## **Conclusion**

This is the picture of a young student who is trying to make sense of his personal life value and well-being. Amantur's awareness of the conflicting realities of Covid-19 could help him to reshape the values of life. However, ultimately, one student cannot continue to work and address these contradictions of life in isolation. The realities of the student are simply a reflection of the shaping values in the life of Kyrgyz. Listening to the stories of young people in Kyrgyzstan is an important step toward improving their lives, enhancing support for their self-development, and ultimately improving the quality of their study in Kyrgyzstan.

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