



## Navigating Suicidal Crisis in Kyrgyzstan: A Case Study

Leila R. Salimova\*

ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal  
Bishkek State University, Kyrgyzstan

\*Correspondence: [lrksalimova@gmail.com](mailto:lrksalimova@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

*The family structure plays a critical role in shaping the developmental trajectory of children, and familial adversities have far-reaching implications that permeate the society. In Kyrgyzstan, adolescents constitute a considerable demographic segment, with a notable prevalence in rural locales where access to fundamental services is often constrained, resulting in a significant populace of children in socially precarious situations and deprivations. The financial constraints, prevalent labor migration phenomenon, unsupportive peer environment exacerbates these adversities, rendering numerous children susceptible to maltreatment and psychological distress which may lead to suicidal behavior. Addressing these multifaceted social and emotional challenges necessitates the implementation of holistic and culturally attuned intervention strategies. The study aims to understand and describe the essence of the phenomenon of suicide in a conservative country like Kyrgyzstan, using the case study of a 14-year-old named Azat (name changed) from a remote local school. This also helps identify the best intervention strategy and collaborative measures among different professionals involved. The case study involved phenomenological research methods, including unstructured interviews (n=3), observations, and field trips. The study reveals Azat's challenging circumstances, including financial instability, the labor migration of a parent, bullying and sibling abuse, which have culminated in two suicide attempts. The analysis of this case highlights the importance of ecological systems and societal constructs in social service practice and the crucial role of the social pedagogue and other professionals in advocating for marginalized individuals, like Azat. It recommends intervention such as psychological support, collaboration with school and community professionals, and regular family visits for monitoring and assistance, demonstrating the need for holistic, empathetic, and culturally sensitive social work intervention and surveillance for Azat's family.*

**Key words:** case study, social support, suicide attempt, Kyrgyzstan

### Introduction

The fundamental institution of the family plays a pivotal role in molding the lives of children, exerting a profound influence on their development. However, when a family encounters challenges or disruptions, the circumstances extend beyond the household, impacting the broader fabric of society. Azat's family's experience serves as a poignant example of this phenomenon.

In Kyrgyzstan, nearly one-fifth of the population comprises adolescents as per Kyrgyz Republic National Statistics (2021). This translates to over 2 million children below 18 years old, with 51% being boys. Compared to the beginning of 2021, there has been a 1.7% increase in the number of children, totaling 43 thousand more. Among these children, 43% are under 7 years old (1,108,000), 44% are aged 7-14 (1,119,000), and 13% are adolescents aged 15-17 (328,000). A majority of these children, 65.6%, reside in rural areas, facing challenges in accessing healthcare, education, social services, and recreational opportunities. By the end of 2021, Kyrgyzstan had over 15,000 socially vulnerable and dysfunctional families, housing approximately 309,000 children (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021).

Moreover, according to the International Organization for Migration (2022) around a million of Kyrgyz migrants are employed overseas, which not only significantly impacts the country's socio-economic and political landscape but also hides enormous layers of unsolved issues with left-behind families and children. The research of Zhu et al. (2023) emphasizes that left-behind children have a much higher risk of different mental health deviations, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation compared to children of non-migrant parents. Furthermore, the risk of suicidal ideation is influenced by multiple factors and that includes the duration of parental absence, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the level of social support available to these children (Nguyen et al., 2022). According to UNICEF (2020), such children can be labeled as 'invisible' due to such factors as when children are left in the care of relatives because their parents go to labor migration and in the long absence of the parents, such children are more exposed to maltreatment and aggression and other related societal and emotional issues.

These statistics underscore a pivotal truth: the socioeconomic environments in which young individuals are raised profoundly shape their choices and opportunities from adolescence into adulthood (Backes & Bonnie, 2019). Growing up in disadvantaged or underserved areas can instigate feelings of shame, hinder effective learning and social interactions, and heighten exposure to critical issues like substance abuse, illness, injuries, and even suicide (WHO, 2019). Researchers in Kyrgyzstan emphasize an alarming incidence of suicide among children from vulnerable backgrounds, indicating a higher susceptibility to risky behaviors (Zhanybek kyzy, 2021). Hence, it is imperative that the approximately 309,000 children spanning various age groups in these circumstances receive targeted care and support not just from their communities but crucially from governmental initiatives as well (UNICEF, 2021).

Kyrgyzstan has been sluggish in addressing adolescent suicide compared to other societal concerns. While strategies exist in documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Kyrgyz Republic's Children's Code, their practical implementation has been lacking. Although Order No. 120 in 2016 attempted to address this issue, it expired in 2018, leaving a void. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development was entrusted with oversight but encountered challenges in implementing clinical guidelines for psychological support (Molchanova et al., 2022).

UNICEF (2020) identified primary-level service providers, including school psychologists, social pedagogues, and social workers, tasked with recognizing individuals in need of psychosocial support. These professionals possess tools and protocols for assistance, primarily accessible in urban areas, with rural regions lacking these services and specialists. The scope of prevention and support efforts is confined primarily to social pedagogues in these rural settings. Moreover, the need for specialized social workers for children and youth, as mandated by the new Child Code, remains unfulfilled due to slow implementation, leaving children without the necessary support (Makymbai kyzy, 2022).

The scenario depicted is a commonplace occurrence in smaller regions of Kyrgyzstan characterized by rampant poverty, unstable employment opportunities, and family members migrating for work, leaving children often in the care of grandparents or relatives. In these circumstances, families frequently grapple with abuse and negative dynamics. While social state policies prioritize the safety and well-being of children in such high-risk social environments, the reality differs. Social workers tend to intervene only in response to specific requests or complaints from neighbors, schools, or community members.

Typically, issues in these families are reduced to common 'labels' such as alcoholism, domestic abuse, poverty, or peer bullying, reflecting broader social constructs (Savani et al., 2020). However, these labels often fall short in resolving the root problems. True resolution lies in thorough analysis of these labeled issues, consolidating information from diverse sources, and collaborating with various specialists engaged in the case. It is through this comprehensive approach and collaboration that substantive progress towards resolving these multifaceted challenges can be made.

## Methods

In the context of Azat's story, utilizing a case study approach to analyze adolescent suicide sheds light on the complex web of factors at play in his situation. This method involves a comprehensive exploration of a specific scenario, such as Azat's school, family and community, to unravel the multifaceted influences contributing to adolescent suicide attempt.

Through data collection such as unstructured interview with the social pedagogue, the social worker and the school teacher (n=3). Sanchez (2014) defines the term "unstructured interview" as "go with the flow" conversation which is guided by the participants' roles in the field. That method allowed the Researcher to extract data from non-formal conversation based on the concrete topic of the research. Other approaches were also used including observations, and field visits which aimed to comprehensively comprehend the unique circumstances surrounding Azat's experience. It delves deep into identifying risk factors, triggers, and potential preventive measures.

## Ethics declarations

### **Ethical Approval**

Prior to the meetings, the Researcher conducted introductory meetings to clarify the qualifications for the study's purpose. The chosen participants were informed about the study's objectives and their rights. The participants were also informed about their voluntary participation and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence.

### **Consent to Participate**

The Informed Consent forms were signed by all participants after the purpose of the study had been explained to them. In addition, participants' data were kept confidential and no names were used. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and their anonymity was maintained throughout the study. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were recorded to avoid misinterpretation and cross-checking of the information.

### **Results: Case Description**

Client's name: Azat (name is changed)

Age: 14 years old

Place of residence: A village in Kyrgyzstan

### **Living conditions**

The household is bustling with two older brothers, a younger sister, and Azat. Unfortunately, their father works as a labor migrant in the Russian Federation, leaving the older brothers to frequently subject Azat to physical abuse, compelling him to manage livestock and household chores. His bond with his sister is a source of solace, as she is the one person he trusts implicitly with his secrets. Meanwhile, their mother juggles two jobs—working as a school cleaner and supplementing her income with fieldwork. However, her absence due to work leaves Azat feeling disconnected, as she is seldom home. The family grapples with financial instability, often struggling to afford adequate meals, clothing, and school fees, leading to frequent reprimands from teachers. Compounding this, Azat is regularly forced to wear his older brothers' clothing, adding to his sense of alienation within the family dynamic.

### **Physical development**

Azat, a slender and tall young boy, has faced health challenges like pneumonia in his childhood and currently grapples with gastritis. At school, Azat becomes a target of ridicule owing to his frail physical health and towering stature. Fortunately, one of his older brothers sometimes shields him from physical harm, preventing any direct physical confrontations. Psychologically, Azat displays no noticeable deviations from expected mental norms. However, he exhibits heightened sensitivity to mockery or bullying, significantly stressing over such incidents. This susceptibility to ridicule deeply impacts his emotional well-being.

### **Description of the case**

Azat underwent two distressing experiences leading to attempted suicide. The initial incident occurred when he, after a physical altercation with his older brother, attempted to cut his veins. Despite the timely intervention of his brother, the family downplayed the seriousness of the incident and, as a result, didn't report anywhere. The second attempt took place when Azat was alone at home. Prior to this, a distressing event unfolded at school when he confessed his affection to a female classmate and received a hurtful, mocking letter in response. The letter, belittling his appearance and worthiness, deeply affected him. His sister, upon returning home, discovered the situation and promptly alerted their mother, who rushed Azat to the rayon (district) hospital. Recognizing the severity of the situation, medical professionals recommended psychiatric intervention for Azat's well-being.

### **The situation at the moment**

The psychiatrist did not identify any mental illness. It was recommended to put on a record with a social pedagogue at the school with the careful surveillance of the psychologist (if possible) and the social worker. The department of Children's Rights Defense was reported to be aware of the situation.

### **Comments from the School Pedagogue (female, 43y.)**

*"As a social pedagogue, I understand and support children like Azat within our school community. With my commitment to maintaining detailed documentation (social passports) on all students, I have a comprehensive understanding of Azat's background, including his family situation and personal challenges. Given the prevalence of migrant children in our school, I am particularly attuned to the needs of individuals like Azat, who may face additional stressors due to familial separation and financial instability. While my primary responsibility is to conduct classes and many*

*more duties at the school, I also find myself addressing issues such as conflicts and emotional distress among school children, including Azat. Despite these challenges, I remain dedicated to fostering trusting relationships with all children, providing them with a sense of security and a safe space to seek assistance when needed. Yet, I wish we had more services to support children in crisis. For example, we still don't have the psychologist at the school, so I play this role too, but I have a lot in my plate, I can't do everything. I do my best to ensure that children like Azat feel supported and empowered to navigate their difficulties with confidence, but it is still challenging”.*

This passage highlights the role of a social pedagogue in supporting students like Azat in a school community. The social pedagogue emphasizes the importance of understanding each child's background and challenges, particularly in a diverse environment with many migrant children. Despite primary responsibilities such as conducting classes, the interview participant also addresses conflicts and emotional distress among students. However, the absence of certain support services, like a psychologist, presents challenges. Nonetheless, the social pedagogue remains dedicated to fostering trusting relationships and providing a safe space for students to seek help.

#### **Comments from the Social Worker (female, 37y.)**

*“It's heartbreaking to see a child like Azat going through so much. Poor kid's had a rough time, and it's not an easy fate to deal with. But you know, it's situations like this where having support from social services can really make a difference. It's about giving kids like Azat a chance to trust again, to believe that help is out there. Even though we have some cases of suicide attempts and some young people think about this seriously, this word is still stigmatized in our conservative society. That's why our prevention measures should be culturally sensitive. The role of social workers is very important because it's not just about having services available, it's about having caring, empathetic people who really understand the needs of the children they're helping. I also work with families; their situation gives different prospective. For example, Azat's family is not full at this moment, his father is on migration and this is normal to most of the families in our village. Pulling out all pieces of his story is important to understand from different angles. We're all in this together, and our priority is always to provide the support these kids need, right from the heart.”*

This comment emphasizes the importance of support from social services for children like Azat, who are facing significant challenges. The interview participant acknowledges the severity of Azat's situation and the stigma surrounding topics like suicide in their conservative society. It is also highlighted that the crucial role of social workers in providing not just services, but also empathy and understanding to children in need. Additionally, the speaker mentions the work with families, recognizing that understanding Azat's story from multiple perspectives is essential.

#### **Comments from the School Teacher (female, 29y.)**

*“I understand the importance of remaining vigilant for signs of distress and offering a listening ear and encouragement whenever possible. Azat's situation is concerning, given his family's financial struggles and parental absence, which undoubtedly affect his ability to concentrate and participate in school activities. It's crucial for me to recognize the challenges he faces outside the classroom, including his physical health issues and experiences of bullying. However, we very often see children only during the classes but not outside. Collaborating with the school pedagogue is essential to providing Azat with the necessary support to navigate his challenges and succeed academically and emotionally. We also need to involve psychologist, but it is very hard to do since we don't have such service in our school, so we either invite a psychologist from the bigger town or ask the medical staff to support such cases. I truly believe that working together as a team, we can ensure that Azat receives the care and assistance he needs to thrive despite the obstacles he faces.”*

This school teacher demonstrates the awareness of Azat's challenges and the commitment to providing support within the school environment. The interview participant emphasizes the importance of remaining vigilant for signs of distress and offering encouragement. The teacher acknowledges the impact of Azat's family situation and health issues on his academic performance and well-being. It is also stressed the need for collaboration with the school pedagogue to ensure Azat receives the necessary support. Despite the absence of a psychologist at the school, the teacher expresses willingness to seek assistance from external sources, such as medical staff or professionals from nearby towns.

#### **Discussion: Psychosocial Case Analysis**

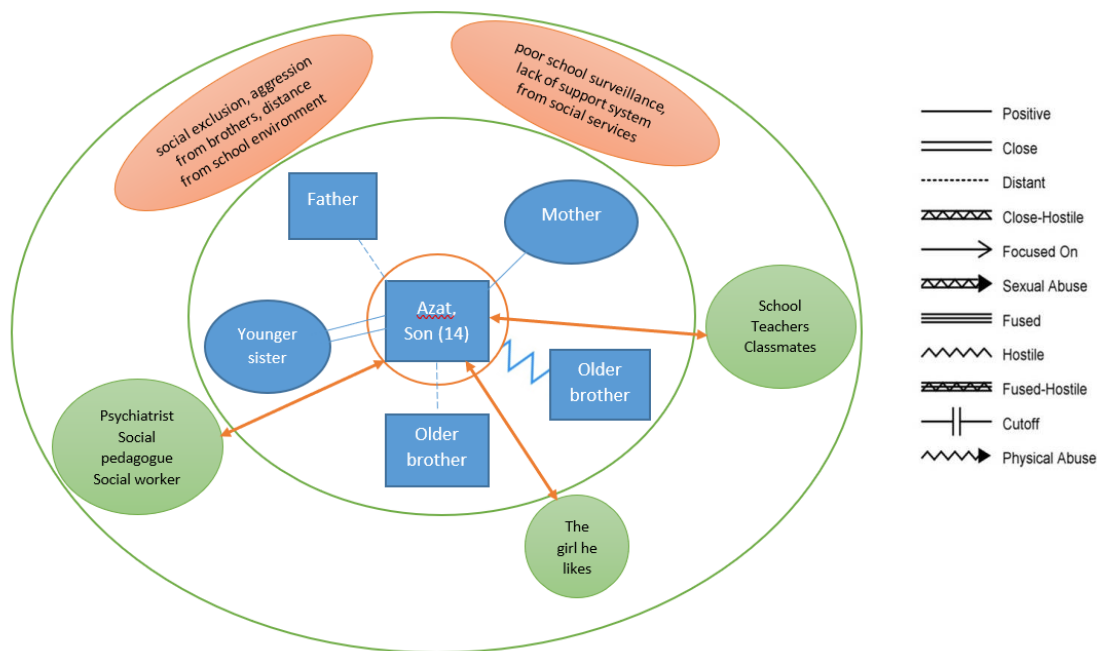
##### ***Interpretational Analysis Based on Bronfenbrenner's EST***

According to the Ecological Systems Theory, as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1994), this case underscores the intricate interplay between Azat and his environment as he navigates his life pathways.

As Azat traversed his unique path, he encountered various life stressors that could disrupt the equilibrium between him and his surroundings. The proposed eco-genogram explains well Azat's interactions with different key actors/situations and suggests the observation on how they impacted his struggle on various levels of interactions.

The complexities of Azat's family issues transcend multiple levels: micro (involving interpersonal dynamics between spouses, parents and children, and Azat with his siblings), mezzo (encompassing social exclusion, aggression from brothers, and alienation from the school environment), and macro (involving poor school surveillance and a lack of support systems from government services and policy). These systems are intricately interrelated with subsystems, each defined by its unique set of relationships which encompass interactions with peers, a psychiatrist, a social pedagogue, a social worker, and even the girl Azat has affection for.

Figure 1: Eco-Genogram of Azat's family based on interviews and observations (with interpretation symbols)



In the case of Azat, a child who seems socially "abandoned," we witness a complex tapestry of interconnected social issues. The primary challenge stems from the consistent financial instability faced by his family of five. With the father frequently absent, the mother is compelled to work tirelessly, leaving limited room for providing emotional warmth and support to her children. In this void, Azat's older brothers assume the role of familial authority, often overexerting their influence over their younger sibling. The research of Salimova (2022) found that in times of crisis, parents in Kyrgyzstan exhibit either indifference or panic and aggression, with children bearing the brunt, as these adults often lack the time and opportunity for heartfelt communication, leading to a lack of awareness regarding their children's internal turmoil and emotions.

Furthermore, Azat experiences a palpable lack of welcome and support within his school environment, where both peers and some teachers appear indifferent to his struggles. This case underscores the unpreparedness of the school administration and the whole school environment in addressing para-suicidal behavior and post-suicidal attempts. Yet, the social pedagogue reacted immediately by taking proactive measures by seeking psychological and medical assistance.

The research of Wexler et al. (2022) emphasizes the necessity for culturally-responsive suicide prevention strategies that engage community safety and align with local systems of care. Collaboration, particularly in small, rural, under-resourced areas, is essential. This approach involves understanding the definition of research evidence, prioritizing community perspectives, and creating adaptable, evidence-informed models for suicide prevention, emphasizing mutual respect and shared community vision.

Azat's story reflects the profound influence of various systems and subsystems in shaping his experiences and struggles, underscoring the need for a holistic and multi-level approach to addressing his complex social issues.

**The Interpretation from the Social Constructionism Theory's View**

Social Constructionism Theory suggests that our understanding of the world is shaped by social interactions, and much of what we perceive as reality is based on shared assumptions (Vinney, 2019). Many aspects we assume to be objective reality are, in fact, products of social agreement and can evolve with societal changes. In essence, social constructionists perceive the world as shaped by collective understandings and subject to transformation as society evolves.

In 1977, Spector and Kituse (as cited in White, 2012) proposed a different way to think about social problems. Instead of seeing them as things that exist independently, they suggested thinking of them as something people create through their actions and words. For example, issues like youth suicide are not just "out there" to be found; they are shaped by how we talk about them and the things we do in our communities.

Social constructionism arises from the collective perspectives within a society or group, often lacking objectivity in opinions (Andrews, 2012). It is a phenomenon where individuals tend to adopt and pass on socially accepted norms and behavioral expectations. In the case study at hand, young Azat serves as an illustrative "victim" of the repercussions stemming from societal pressure to conform to traditional notions of masculinity, characterized by qualities like rigidity, conservatism, and physical prowess. Nevertheless, Azat does not inherently align with these conventional constructs prevalent in his society. As a result, he finds himself in the unfortunate position of facing rejection and abuse from his peers and siblings due to this misalignment between his true self and societal expectations.

This case underscores the complex interplay between individual identity and socially constructed gender roles, shedding light on the challenges faced by those who do not conform to prevailing stereotypes.

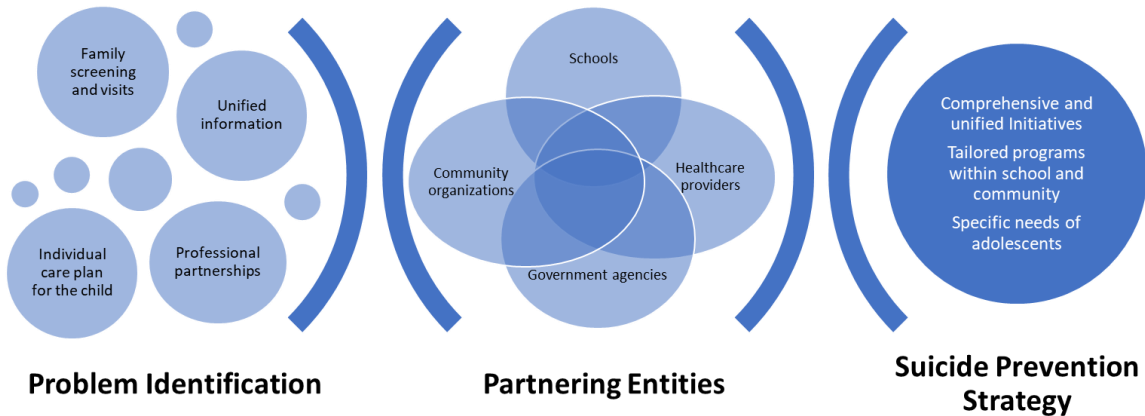
### ***The Role of Social Services***

It is essential to have the ability to develop resiliency which helps to bounce back from adverse events or situations. Payne (1997) has emphasized that social services do not only focus on individuals, but also on families, careers, and the community around them. Social service representatives such as social pedagogues, social workers, psychologists as well as school teachers and community members have a pivotal role in identifying risk factors and early warning signs of adolescent suicide (Singer & Slovak, 2011). While many suicidal adolescents may not openly communicate their distress, they frequently exhibit indications of their emotional struggles to peers, parents, or trusted school staff (Wasserman, 2019). By detecting these factors early on, social pedagogues can play a significant role in averting suicide attempts and providing crucial support to adolescents in crisis.

Social services are instrumental in formulating prevention strategies and treatment plans for at-risk adolescents. In the case of Azat, the school pedagogue and the social worker were actively involved from the very beginning by identifying the familial issues, screening for the plot of the problem, gathering the relevant information and referring to the psychological support. The research conducted by Singer et al. (2019) underscores the essential role of social workers as specialists who collaborate with adolescents and their families to devise safety plans, connect them with suitable mental health services, and offer continuous support and counseling. Studies have demonstrated that community outreach social workers can directly deliver services to youth grappling with suicidal thoughts or attempts, resulting in improved outcomes (Daniel & Goldston, 2009). Consequently, through their expertise and training, social workers can assist adolescents in developing coping skills and resilience, which act as protective factors against suicide.

Moreover, fostering collaboration with other professionals and community resources is another critical function of social workers and educators in preventing adolescent suicide. This entails partnering with schools, healthcare providers, and government agencies to design comprehensive suicide prevention initiatives tailored to the specific needs of adolescents (Andrews et al., 2022). Social service providers can work alongside community organizations to heighten awareness about suicide prevention and provide assistance to at-risk adolescents. By working collectively, social professionals contribute to establishing a supportive network for adolescents grappling with suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

*Figure 2: Plan of Collaboration*



In the remote and often underserved regions of Kyrgyzstan, social pedagogues combine a few roles in one often serving simultaneously as a social pedagogue, school psychologists, and a social worker that emerge as crucial pillars of support within their communities (UNICEF, 2020). These dedicated professionals take on a diverse array of roles, striving to address a wide spectrum of social issues that affect individuals and families in these areas. Despite the numerous challenges they face, including limited access to professional education, a scarcity of qualified practitioners, and the constant burden of extra duties, these social pedagogues remain essential figures in promoting the well-being and development of their communities (Brown et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2020).

In many instances, social pedagogues are stretched thin due to the overwhelming demands placed on them, which can sometimes lead to instances where they are unable to fulfill all their duties adequately. However, it is heartening to note that in Azat's case, the social pedagogue was able to intervene effectively. The social pedagogue together with the social worker also made sure to report about the case to the government agency - the Department of Children's Rights Defense<sup>1</sup> - drawing upon various intervention approaches with the school, family, and community. These dedicated professionals demonstrated unwavering commitment and good intentions in assisting Azat in overcoming the challenges associated with societal expectations of masculinity and gender roles. This success story serves as a testament to the resilience and dedication of social pedagogues in remote areas, who continue to make a positive impact despite the adversities they face.

### Conclusion

Azat's case serves as a bright reminder of the profound impact of familial, societal, and economic factors on the well-being of vulnerable children. His experiences underscore the critical importance of multidimensional and culturally sensitive interventions within the field of social work. While Azat's challenges are representative of those faced by many children in similar contexts, they are, by no means, insurmountable.

The Ecological System Theory, as applied to this case, illuminates the interconnectedness of micro (close relational disputes), mezzo (relationship with groups including the school, peers), and macro (community environment, government support) systems and the need for comprehensive support across these levels. Azat's journey reflects the complexity of societal constructs, particularly gender roles, age segments, and relational connections, and their detrimental effects when individuals deviate from them.

Social pedagogues together with social workers, as mediators between individuals and state systems, are pivotal in effecting change. They possess the expertise to navigate these societal constructs, challenge stigmas, and advocate for individuals like Azat. The suggested interventions, encompassing psychological support, collaboration with school and community professionals, and ongoing family visits, demonstrate the multifaceted approach required to address such complex psychosocial challenges effectively. Moreover, social pedagogues often serve as "a bridge" between community, school, and family and, thus, encapsulate the wholesome of intervention measures.

Ultimately, Azat's case is a testament to the resilience of individuals facing adversity. With the right support, understanding, and interventions, he can embark on a path toward healing, growth, and a brighter future. It is a significant reminder of the transformative power of social services in shaping the lives of those in need, reaffirming the profession's unwavering commitment to promoting human dignity and well-being.

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://ombudsman.kg/ru/administration/otdel-po-zashchite-prav-detev-zhenshchin-i-semi>

### Suggestion

It is crucial to prioritize comprehensive support for Azat, integrating interventive measures of social pedagogues, social workers, psychologists, as well as teachers at his school to address his emotional needs while also fostering a safe and nurturing environment at home. Establishing regular communication and counseling sessions involving both family members and school authorities can significantly contribute to Azat's emotional well-being and overall stability. Moreover, practicing in handling such cases might increase the collaborative effort not only on the local level but also on the government levels integrating suicide prevention strategy into the national development programs.

Specifically, I would like to emphasize the following practical suggestions for social workers in ASEAN countries in dealing with the issue of suicide among children and adolescents and enhance the system of prevention and knowledge sharing across regions:

1. Culturally adapted advocacy: It is proposed to actively promote culturally appropriate social work practices that includes acknowledging the family characteristics that exist in the ASEAN region and the various role of genders within the region's societies. This ensures that any intervention initiated is in line with the people's antecedent and does not futuristic or impose alien frameworks.
2. Strengthening community collaboration: The social workers of ASEAN countries are suggested to establish good relationships with the political, societal and cultural canons in the communities. Use the knowledge of the local settings to complement the better practice of interventions and ensure that the community gets to support individuals in crisis, especially children and youth.
3. Networking and knowledge sharing: It is suggested to encourage some form of association and cooperation involving ASEAN countries amongst themselves and to facilitate improvement in sharing of coordinated best practices as well as enact and implement successful interventions suited to the region's vulnerable children. This can be done by conducting training sessions, sharing information on available websites, or fitting into appropriate training with an experienced professional practitioner.

### Acknowledgment

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the dedicated social pedagogues, the social worker, and the school teacher(s) in the small village of Kyrgyzstan. Your unwavering commitment and tireless efforts in supporting individuals and communities have made a significant impact. Your empathy, guidance, and advocacy have been instrumental in improving the lives of those you serve. Thank you for your invaluable contributions to our community's well-being and development.

### Brief bio

**Leila Salimova** is a social work researcher, a lecturer at the Bishkek State University, Kyrgyzstan and a prospective PhD student at the School of Social Work, the University of Alabama (2024). Leila previously held master's degree in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY'23) as well as her bachelors at teaching and law. Subsequently, for about 15 years she devoted herself professionally to youth, organizational, and community projects in Kyrgyzstan and abroad. Leila's research interests focus on problems with adolescent suicide, social work in crises, and social psychology.

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