Nazgul Shadybekova:
The Minister
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When she was a young girl, Nazgul Shadybekova was a dreamer. She fantasised about learning languages and travelling all over the world; a natural-born adventurer. She hadn’t planned to become a midwife initially, but the enthusiasm and wisdom of her mentors was infectious. These midwives loved their work and, despite the low wages, gave their whole soul to it – and so Nazgul followed.

“The ability and desire to help a person, participating in a significant event in the life of a person, the possibility of self-improvement – all this inspires us to work,” she says, “The love for this profession probably originates from the depths of the soul.”

Born and raised in Kerben in the Jalal-Abad oblast of Kyrgyzstan, Nazgul worked autonomously quite early in her career due to the absence of any obstetrician-gynaecologists in the region. This enabled her to develop an advanced understanding of the needs of women, newborns and their midwives. The accessibility of vital maternity services is a subject she is passionate about given that the expansive, mountainous geography of the Kyrgyz Republic. In places like this, medical centre placement is never quite perfect; care can feel very far away during an emergency.

Kyrgyz Republic is afflicted by a high maternal mortality rate, and midwives face difficulty to reduce it because they are not formally defined within the health system, lack official core standards or competencies for practice. The Ministry of Health, informed by Nazgul’s expertise, has made a commitment to resolving all of these issues and establishing regulatory systems to ensure accountability.

“The protection of mother and child health is an important direction in our republic,” Nazgul says, “Through the development of manuals, protocols, Standards Operation Procedures for midwives, programs for the protection of mother and child health are being actively introduced.”

The process is collaborative: “The closest approach to international health standards is with the support of international organisations.” A key component of this success, she says, is linked to capacity development through both health system strengthening and midwifery education.

“The Ministry of Health, with development partners, and the Kyrgyz Midwifery Alliance are holding trainings and seminars to increase the knowledge and practical skills of midwives,” she says, “In these
trainings, midwives are involved, and training is conducted on a peer-to-peer basis ... One of the priorities is pre-diploma training for midwives, which requires changes in terms of teaching and training programs that meet international standards.”

Nazgul is considerate in her approach, ensuring special acknowledgment is given to every stakeholder who has helped her country begin its journey towards leadership in midwifery at a national level. She gives thanks to them all: The German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) who has provided technical and advisory support since 2011, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Aga Khan Foundation, to name a few.

The International Confederation of Midwives has embarked on a partnership with the Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Health, the Kyrgyz Midwifery Alliance and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to launch the Midwifery Services Framework programme, which is an analytic tool that guides governments in the development and strengthening of midwifery services through focus on a quality midwifery workforce. It aligns neatly with the larger commitment to midwifery that the Kyrgyz Republic government has made.

“The status of midwives in our country has now significantly increased. A lot of activities are carried out in the republic to increase the capacity of midwives and delegate functional duties,” Nazgul says, “Numerous trainings and seminars are held in all areas ... where participants gather from all over the republic. Every year, the Kyrgyz Midwifery Alliance holds a congress of midwives at the level of the republic, where the most active members of the Association of Midwives are gathered; this also motivates and enhances the potential of midwives. Also, annually, together with the Ministry of Health and the Kyrgyz Midwifery Alliance, the awarding of the best advanced midwives is held.”

It is perhaps no surprise then that Nazgul is optimistic about the future of midwifery in her country. She sees the successful investment today multiplying in a short window – and given that this was the same conclusion as UNFPA’s own in their State of the World’s Midwifery report in 2014 (which concluded that investment in midwifery yielded a sixteenfold return), she is likely correct. When asked what the coming five years hold for midwifery in Kyrgyz Republic, her response leaps from one triumph to the next: first, improvement of the regulatory framework based on the recommended international standards, then the improved role of midwives which will, in turn, improve the provision of services to pregnant women, newborns and women of childbearing age, and ensure better health outcomes for the whole family.

“I worked as a midwife for 17 years,” Nazgul says, “And still, I do not see myself in another profession.”