

# CENTRAL ASIAN SEASONAL WORKERS ON UK FARMS – BRIEF 3: SOCIAL NORMS

The Central Asian region includes the countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan<sup>1</sup>. As the British agricultural sector increasingly engages with seasonal workers from this region, it becomes crucial to understand how workers' identity and culture derive from their history and language. This knowledge will not only foster a more inclusive and respectful working environment but also enhance the well-being and productivity of Central Asian employees.

## HIERARCHY: THE IMPORTANCE OF ELDERS

Age shapes the way authority and social roles are practised. In many Central Asian societies, age is closely tied to authority and respect. Elders are often regarded as the heads of families or communities and they hold significant authority. Youth, on the other hand, are expected to show deference to older people. They are often socialized to understand that their role is to listen and learn from those older than them. However, there is an increasing shift in urban areas with younger generations becoming more independent.

## GENDER ROLES

In Central Asian societies, particularly in rural and more conservative areas, patriarchal structures prevail. Men are traditionally seen as breadwinners and protectors, typically assuming leadership roles in the family, and in public and political spheres. Women, in contrast, are often seen as primary caregivers and responsible for managing domestic life, such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and managing the household. Labour force participation of women, especially in the service sector, and their education levels are high, but they face gender discrimination and workplace inequalities.

Gender based violence remains a significant issue across Central Asia. Despite legal reforms, patriarchal attitudes that condone gender-based violence persist in many communities. Women face barriers in seeking justice and legal accountability for sexual harassment due to the lack of clear legal provisions and social stigma. **Many seasonal workers to the UK come from the more conservative rural areas.**

In the region's urban areas, cultural norms are generally positive toward the concept of equality between women and men. The sense that women are strong and active members of society is part of the belief system. Women do have public and social spaces, and the majority do not experience religious or cultural restrictions.

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<sup>1</sup> Turkmenistan is the 5<sup>th</sup> country in Central Asia; it is not included here as currently there are not many seasonal workers from this country to the UK.

## SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Central Asian societies often prioritize community and collectivism. The family is the foundation of society, with extended families living together. Public displays of affection are avoided, especially among unmarried individuals, and criticizing religion or traditions is considered disrespectful. Community support during life events such as weddings and funerals is paramount. Social interactions frequently emphasize group cohesion and direct criticisms/ complaints are avoided. People may speak indirectly about issues to avoid causing offense. **This may limit their access to grievance mechanisms as workers express fear of causing (or being seen to cause) disturbance.** The family-oriented mindset means that workers often send remittances to support families, shaping their dedication and work ethic. At the same time, prioritising community leads to mutual support. For example, workers can help and support each other in adapting to UK culture and working conditions.

## ADAPTING TO UK CULTURE

As for many workers this is the first experience of working abroad, workers may need support with adaptation to local norms and culture, including being more ‘street-smart’. Overall, digital literacy around data protection and privacy can be quite low in Central Asia. Therefore, sharing private information like ID or bank account details via messengers is prevalent. Additionally, workers may have limited information around visa regulations and working conditions. Such factors increase susceptibility to scams/ other challenges.

### *Relevance to UK farms:*

- Establish trust by showing genuine interest in workers’ well-being and family
- Workers may find it difficult to have a supervisor who is younger than them. Male workers may lack respect for, and find it challenging to have, female supervisors or managers. Farms should clearly communicate that these appointments are based on skills/experience and emphasise equal opportunities. Clearly (and regularly) communicating the roles and responsibilities of each employee can be helpful.
- Farms can raise awareness about gender-based violence, harassment and discrimination risks in their training or pre-employment information sessions, as well as regularly throughout the season, reinforcing existing PDO content.
- Separate accommodation/ rooms and washrooms between men and women, with lockable doors, are essential.
- In their training or pre-employment information sessions, as well as regularly throughout the season, farms could reinforce SWS messages and resources and address topics of data protection/privacy, and how to be ‘street-smart’.
- See also Brief 4 on Communication styles and Conflict resolution for related topics.

Seasonal workers report that the opportunity to work on UK farms is **life changing**: it provides an economic opportunity of earning more money; changes their economic outlook; positively impacts them in terms of personal development; creates opportunities for family members to do more and helps improve their own and their families’ wellbeing.