THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

WOMEN LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

WLA and SAGE Alumni Network

Tashkent, Uzbekistan
4–5 December 2025

In partnership with
Canada

AGA KHAN FOUNDATION
CANADA
An Agency of the Aga Khan Development Network

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UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT
Civil Society Initiative

Introduction

As the F4HE initiative (2020–2025) ends, the *Civil Society for Resilient Futures* forum was held in Tashkent on December 4–5, 2025 to celebrate the achievements of the *Women Leadership Academy (WLA)* and the *School for the Advancement of Gender Equality (SAGE)*, and to examine how civil society, academia, and business can collaborate to build resilient futures in Central Asia. The forum served as an important side event of the *Civil Society Week 2025,* initiated by the *Centre of Strategic Development of Uzbekistan*, bringing together civil society leaders, gender-equality advocates, researchers, and activists from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Hosted by the *University of Central Asia's Civil Society Initiative (UCA CSI)* and *Aga Khan University (AKU),* this WLA and SAGE Alumni gathering highlighted the vital role of universities as hubs of civic leadership, research, and community-driven innovation. Over a day and a half, participants engaged in storytelling, partnership workshops, digital capacity-building, and collective reflection sessions to strengthen the WLA and SAGE Alumni network and promote sustainable, women-led social impact across the region.

Photo 1. Group photo of the WLA and SAGE Alumni

The registration included a creative workshop during which participants produced personal badges by colouring wooden brooches. After designing and wearing their badges, participants gathered for a group photograph (Figure 1), marking a joyful and symbolic opening to the forum. The event began with welcoming speeches from **Dr Madina Junussova,** Interim Director, UCA CSI; **Eldor Tulyakov**, Executive Director, Development Strategy Centre; **Muhammad Khan**, Regional Grant Manager for Asia, Aga Khan Foundation Canada; and **Deo Raj Gurung**, Senior Advisor, UCA Climate Resilience and Mountain Science. The opening session also featured a presentation by **Dr Amina Abubakar Ali,** Head of the Women

Leadership Academy at Aga Khan University, who shared key lessons learned from the WLA learning event, supported by programme data and participation statistics. Drawing on quantitative evidence, she highlighted the scale, reach, and outcomes of WLA activities, including participant engagement, skills development, and post-programme application of learning.

Voices of Change: Alumnae Impact Stories

Kunduz Zhekshen described how her participation in WLA prompted a shift in her understanding of leadership, moving from individual action to an ecosystem-based approach. By experimenting with podcast production, she translated this perspective into practice, using media as a tool to amplify women's voices and sustain engagement beyond the Academy:

"Through the WLA program, I was introduced to the concept of the ecosystem, which has significantly enriched my day-to-day work. During the academy, I also explored media production by creating podcasts featuring influential women."

For **Zebo Sharifova**, WLA created a rare opportunity to step into the public spotlight in a new way. Despite years of experience in advancing gender equality and leading civil society initiatives, the WLA encouraged her to overcome personal barriers to visibility, strengthening her confidence to communicate her expertise through recorded media:

"The WLA Academy gave me something I never imagined I would experience in my life. I was invited to be filmed for a podcast as part of a WLA project. Although I have extensive experience in promoting gender equality, working with various NGOs, founding my own organisation, and implementing many successful initiatives, I had never given an interview before."

Khosiyatkhon Komilova's SAGE-supported initiative illustrates the tangible societal impact of alumnae-led projects. By delivering gender-sensitive reporting trainings to journalists from Khatlon and Sughd, she not only enhanced professional standards but also sparked critical reflection at the household level — demonstrating how media education can catalyse deeply personal and transformative change:

"Through SAGE, I received a grant to train media professionals on gender equality and gender-sensitive reporting. The project was implemented very successfully. The training brought together 40 participants from the Khatlon and Sughd regions, both men and women, and its impact was significant."

Photo 2. Participant contributing to the Voice of Change discussion

Photo 3. Participants engaged in dialogue during the Interactive Session

Interactive Session: Civil Society in Action

Facilitated by **Dr Madina Junussova (**Interim Director, UCA CSI), **Nargis Kuchakshoeva** (UCA CSI Research Fellow), **Gulru Azatshoeva**, and **Sanavbar Sherova** (SAGE Alumnae), the session invited participants to reflect on how AGECS research and learning products are being applied across diverse organisations, including universities, NGOs, private education centres, and government institutions. The session began with a 15-minute opening circle titled "Why We Are Here?", which set the purpose and highlighted the relevance of AGECS tools for advancing gender equality in practice.

Building on this foundation, alumnae shared personal leadership reflections that highlighted growth in confidence, skills acquisition, and shifts in perspective. Several participants emphasised how the WLA experience equipped them with practical competencies essential for leadership. As **Begaim Uruzokhonova** noted:

"The main lessons I learned from the academy are that everyone needs strong communication skills, the ability to collaborate with the private sector, as well as critical thinking and financial literacy."

Others reflected on personal transformation and increased willingness to take on leadership roles. **Shirin Amonbekova** described the experience as an opportunity for growth beyond familiar boundaries:

"I was able to step out of my comfort zone, develop new skills and knowledge, motivate others, and share the experience I gained."

Participants also engaged critically with structural and gendered dimensions of leadership. **Nazgul Abdukerim** highlighted the importance of sustainable leadership practices and gender-aware decision-making, reflecting on how the Academy reshaped her professional approach:

"A leader should not take everything upon themselves—they should delegate responsibility, be financially literate, and maintain a healthy work–life balance."

She further noted that the WLA deepened her understanding of why gender-disaggregated data matters, particularly in recognising the disproportionate burdens women face during crises.

The session also sparked forward-looking commitments. Inspired by the WLA model, participants discussed how similar initiatives could be adapted to local contexts. **Aziza Umarova** shared her intention to replicate the approach in Tajikistan, observing that:

"I see many young women with great ideas and ambitions, but who struggle to express themselves or turn their ideas into action."

She expressed plans to seek funding to create opportunities for young women to develop leadership skills and realise their potential.

For newer graduates, the session prompted important mindset shifts. **Perizat Tashtanova** reflected on how participation challenged deeply held assumptions:

"I shifted my traditional, stereotypical thinking to a more open one. Now I understand that anyone can be a leader in their community and contribute to decision-making and positive change."

The session concluded with a 30-minute commitment circle in which participants articulated concrete next steps for applying AGECS research and educational products. These included plans for use in teaching, community mobilisation, mentoring, public-sector training, advocacy, and organisational development. The collective reflection reinforced both individual and shared responsibility for sustaining women-led change beyond the session.

Interactive Session: Building Partnerships

Facilitated by **Dr Madina Junussova** (UCA CSI Interim Director), **Kanyshai Makeshova** (UCA CSI), and **Bermet Ubaydillayeva** (SAGE Alumna), this session explored how strategic partnerships can strengthen the long-term sustainability of civil society initiatives.

The session opened with a 30-minute discussion on the importance of partnerships, focusing on how collaboration with businesses, philanthropic actors, and local donors can enhance the impact and durability of community-led projects. Facilitators shared examples of successful philanthropy and local giving, highlighting practical pathways for cooperation between civil society and the private sector.

Introducing the discussion, Bermet Ubaydillayeva framed partnership-building within the broader context of gender-based violence. She highlighted global and regional data showing that one in three women experiences some form of violence and drew attention to technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including online harassment, deepfakes, and digital stalking, as a growing and insufficiently regulated challenge.

Bermet presented a 2020 case study illustrating how cross-sector partnerships can produce transformative outcomes when grounded in trust, empathy, and clear communication.

Coordinated action by police, legal professionals, psychologists, and supportive businesses enabled a survivor of domestic violence to secure protection, rebuild economic independence, and establish a sustainable livelihood. Bermet noted that such outcomes remain exceptional, as many businesses continue to prioritise profit and performance indicators over social responsibility.

Key lessons emerging from the discussion included the need to strengthen cooperation between NGOs and the private sector and to articulate the mutual benefits of partnership proposals. Bermet emphasised that effective collaboration depends on clear communication, safe environments, partner support, and a strategic approach to business engagement, prioritising capacity-building before deeper involvement. She also reaffirmed the role of civil society organisations in addressing gaps not covered by government institutions.

The session concluded with a guided reflection exercise led by Dr Madina Junussova. Participants were invited to reconsider their positionality, imagining themselves as equal partners rather than applicants and to visualise scenarios in which businesses proactively approach civil society organisations with resources. The exercise aimed to strengthen confidence and rebalance power dynamics in partnership negotiations. Participants then outlined initial partnership directions, which were further developed during the Partnership Lab Session.
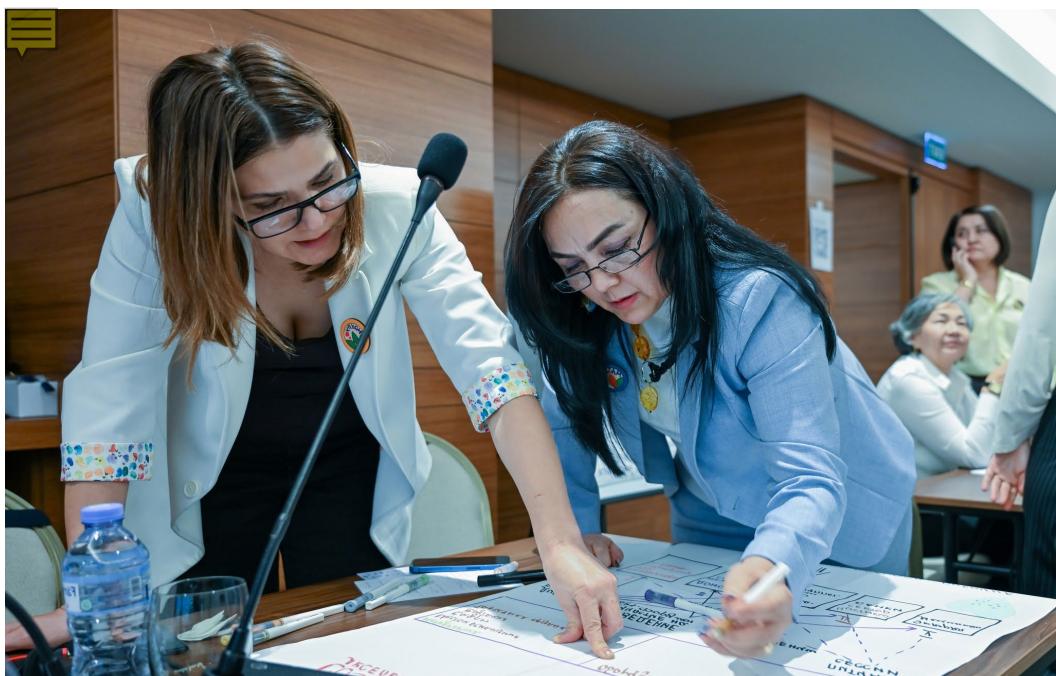

Photo 4. Group work during the Partnership Lab session

Partnership Lab Session

Facilitated by **Aigerim Askarova** (Research Associate, UCA GSD) and **Muhammad Shah Khan** (Regional Grant Manager – Asia, Aga Khan Foundation Canada), the Partnership Lab offered participants an opportunity to apply the concepts explored earlier in the day. The

session began with a brief introduction outlining objectives and expected outcomes. Participants were encouraged to think ambitiously yet realistically about cross-sector collaboration, focusing on partnership models that are sustainable, values-based, and responsive to community needs.

Working in the same groups, participants engaged in hands-on design of partnership proposals. Teams identified potential partners, defined value propositions, and considered governance, accountability, and sustainability mechanisms, translating abstract concepts into actionable projects.

The presentations showcased diverse partnership models aligned with gender equality, social inclusion, and women's economic empowerment:

- The first presented group proposed a regional initiative to engage influential bloggers across Central Asia, focusing on training in social responsibility and participation in socially significant initiatives to enable independent collaboration and content promotion.

- The second group presented a structured strategy for private-sector engagement, identifying access points such as personal networks, direct outreach, and business forums. The approach emphasised value alignment, resource and interest mapping, building a partner database, and developing tailored project proposals.

- The third group introduced a proposal to establish business accelerators for women and youth in rural Tajikistan, leveraging partnerships with state investment bodies, business associations, and small and medium enterprises, with EBRD identified as a potential donor. The group highlighted its existing capacity, including trained staff, facilities, and established methodologies.

- The fourth group's presentation focused on creating 10–12 jobs for women survivors of domestic violence and women receiving state social assistance through a tripartite partnership involving the private sector and relevant government agencies. The initiative combines food-rescue practices with women's employment, supported by existing equipment agreements.

- The fifth group outlined a cashmere fibre production project engaging women from remote villages in labour-intensive collection and processing for international markets. The proposal is supported by strong team capacity, training methodologies, and established international partnerships.

- The six groups' presentation explored partnerships with taxi companies to improve women's safety and expand employment opportunities. Proposed measures included driver training, branding companies as "safe taxis," increasing the number of women drivers, and implementing analytical tools to support service improvement and corporate responsibility.

The session concluded with group pitches: each team presented its proposal, followed by a question-and-answer segment. This process enabled peer learning, feedback, and idea refinement, strengthening participants' readiness to pursue partnership opportunities beyond the event.

Digital Tools and Strategic Collaboration

The second day of the forum focused on strengthening the digital capacity of WLA and SAGE alumnae and equipping them with tools to enhance their professional visibility, expand partnerships, and sustain cross-border collaboration. Through a series of workshops, group activities, and strategic design exercises, participants developed a shared vision for the alumnae network's long-term digital presence.

Photo 5. Presentation and discussion during the Partnership Lab

Digital Networking Exercise

The morning began with a workshop facilitated by **Aigerim Askarova** (Research Associate, UCA GSD), **Sanavbar Sherova**, and **Khosiyatkhon Komilova** (UCA GSD and SAGE Alumnae). The session opened with a presentation on "Why Digital Visibility Matters?", highlighting the increasingly crucial role of online platforms in enabling civil society leaders to attract funders, form partnerships, and communicate the impact of their work. Facilitators

underscored that a strong digital identity not only strengthens individual leadership trajectories but also amplifies the collective voice of the WLA-SAGE community.

As part of the forum's broader focus on strengthening digital capacity and long-term collaboration, participants engaged in a structured group exercise to design the concept, mission, structure, and operational strategy for a joint WLA–SAGE Alumnae LinkedIn page. The exercise aimed to establish a unified online presence that reflects the shared identity of alumnae across Central Asia while enhancing visibility, credibility, and opportunities for collective action. Four groups contributed distinct elements to this design process, creating a comprehensive blueprint for the platform's launch and sustained development.

Group I concentrated on defining the platform's name and mission. Their proposals — such as "Women Leaders Changing the Future of Central Asia" and the acronym [SCARF (Central Asia for a Resilient Future)](#) — demonstrated an intention to articulate both regional belonging and shared ambition. Their mission statement highlighted knowledge exchange, professional connection, and collective action, signalling a shift from individual leadership toward a regional ecosystem of women changemakers.

Group II emphasised building an inclusive and active community. Their suggestions included a welcoming introductory message, personalised invitations to alumnae and mentors, and short video introductions where members share their leadership "superpower." These proposals recognised that sustained engagement requires recognition, encouragement, and the creation of spaces where women can present themselves confidently and authentically.

Group III proposed a structured posting schedule of two to three posts per week featuring alumnae stories, videos, event photos, and project updates. Their focus on consistent branding and visual formats reflects an understanding that storytelling is central to increasing visibility and communicating the network's collective impact.

Group IV outlined the key sections of the platform — About Us, News, Research Insights, Events, and Partners — to ensure clarity, professionalism, and accessibility. Their structure positions the platform as a repository of knowledge and a credible communication channel for alumnae and external audiences alike.

Together, the group outputs illustrate a shared recognition that digital presence is not merely a communication tool but a strategic asset. Their proposals demonstrate an emerging vision of the platform as a space for visibility, influence, and sustained regional leadership — laying the foundation for a resilient, interconnected alumnae network across Central Asia.

Photo 6. Participants outlining partnership concepts

Key Results and Next Steps

The Civil Society for Resilient Futures forum reaffirmed the long-term value of sustained investment in women's leadership, learning ecosystems, and alumnae networks across Central Asia. Bringing together more than 60 WLA and SAGE alumnae and partners, the forum demonstrated how long-term engagement translates into individual transformation, strengthened collective capacity, and growing regional collaboration.

Across all sessions, several strategic learnings emerged. Leadership development is most effective when it moves beyond individual skill-building toward ecosystem thinking, enabling alumnae to act as connectors, mentors, and institutional change agents. Sustainable partnerships require a mindset shift toward confidence-based, trust-driven collaboration with the private sector and donors. Digital presence and storytelling are no longer auxiliary skills but core leadership competencies. Finally, safe spaces for reflection, peer support, and narrative exchange are essential for sustaining motivation, preventing burnout, and maintaining long-term civic engagement.

The forum generated several tangible results across leadership development, network consolidation, partnership readiness, and digital capacity:

- Participants demonstrated measurable leadership outcomes, including increased confidence, strengthened communication and advocacy skills, improved strategic thinking, and enhanced ability to navigate patriarchal and institutional constraints. The

Voices of Change stories illustrated how WLA and SAGE learning has already translated into tangible societal impact — from gender-sensitive media initiatives and community education to mentoring, organisational leadership, and survivor-centred economic empowerment. These examples confirmed that leadership development is most effective when it extends beyond individual skill-building toward ecosystem thinking, enabling alumnae to act as connectors, mentors, and institutional change agents.

- The forum significantly strengthened the WLA–SAGE alumnae network as a functional community of practice. Interactive sessions enabled participants to openly share challenges, exchange strategies, and reaffirm their commitment to advancing gender equality across diverse national and local contexts. These exchanges reinforced the network not only as a professional platform but also as a source of solidarity, emotional resilience, and long-term motivation for sustained civic engagement.

- Participants enhanced their practical capacity to design and operationalise cross-sector partnerships. Partnership-focused discussions and the Partnership Lab strengthened participants' capacity to operationalise leadership through concrete collaboration models. Alumnae demonstrated growing ability to conceptualise cross-sector partnerships, articulate mutual value propositions, and engage businesses and donors in addressing complex social challenges such as gender-based violence, women's safety, and economic inclusion. A key learning was the importance of shifting from a project-based, dependency-driven approach to a confidence-driven, trust-based partnership-building approach that positions civil society actors as equal strategic partners.

- The digital capacity-building component produced a concrete institutional output: the co-designed concept, governance logic, and content architecture of a joint WLA–SAGE Alumnae LinkedIn platform. Participants collectively defined the platform's mission, audience, posting strategy, and management approach, positioning it as a strategic tool for visibility, partnership development, knowledge exchange, and regional coordination.

Building on these outcomes, participants agreed on several concrete next steps to sustain momentum and deepen impact. The immediate priority is the launch and coordinated development of the joint WLA–SAGE Alumnae LinkedIn platform [SCARF (Central Asia for a Resilient Future)](#), with designated focal points in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan responsible for content development, engagement, and moderation. An initial coordination meeting has already taken place, and the first operational step is to invite all WLA and SAGE alumnae to join the platform, creating a critical mass and regional visibility.

A second action line involves organising informal regional meetups in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to map fundraising opportunities, explore partnerships, and identify pathways to continue and scale selected initiatives initiated through WLA and SAGE. These meetings will also explore practical approaches for extending leadership programming beyond capital cities into underserved regions.

As a concrete pilot, participants proposed to explore the expansion of leadership activities in Naryn as a first rural testing ground. Building on existing institutional partnerships and community engagement experience, the pilot will assess how leadership training, mentoring, and civic innovation methodologies can be adapted to small towns and peripheral contexts, generating lessons for future replication across the region.

Together, these next steps aim to consolidate the alumnae network institutionally and digitally, strengthen regional collaboration, and progressively extend the social impact of women-led leadership beyond urban centres. Sustained institutional support, facilitation, and cross-border collaboration will remain essential to ensure that women leaders across Central Asia continue to remain visible, connected, and influential in shaping resilient futures.

The event proceeding was prepared by Madina Junussova, Aigerim Askarova, Gulru Sharipova, and Sanavbar Sherova