

## WFP USA : Visiting Kazakhstan - Opportunity of a Lifetime

Katarina Connery  
September 2024



This month I was given the opportunity of a lifetime. It took me a while for it to really sink in how special this opportunity was, but I am so grateful for this amazing experience. What was it, you ask? I had a chance to visit Almaty, Kazakhstan and spend a week with Dilbar Kadyrkul, WFP's CEE Fellow from earlier this year. Maybe some of our readers would have to look at a map to realize where Kazakhstan is. But you might recall the reports, articles, and Instagram reels from Dilbar about her many experiences working with WFP USA and the WFP International UN Office. She was such an amazing and instrumental part of our teams for four short months, it was sad to see her return home.



The [Community Engagement Exchange](#) (CEE) Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State with funding provided by the U.S. Government and supported in its implementation by IREX. At the conclusion of the program, Dilbar had the task of implementing a project in her home country based on all she learned while in the United States. And what wonderful news it was to learn that there was a funding opportunity we could apply for to send me over, as her Host Supervisor in the US, to support her project. Since she is such an amazing woman leader with so much potential and commitment to empowering other women - you will know what I mean if you get the chance to meet her - we leaped at the opportunity. Reading the acceptance letter, learning that we were selected for this prestigious grant, was a surprise and a blessing. "Wow I'm really going to Kazakhstan" I know very little about the country and culture, but if Dilbar is any measure, I thought it will be an excellent experience. And it was



As I told my family, friends, and colleagues about my impending trip, I was met with shock, surprise, and excitement. But even more exciting was sharing why I was going and the projects I would be supporting.

It was no easy going for Dilbar to put together her project, there were some challenges to work through as some promises were not fulfilled and original dreams and plans had to quickly be reevaluated. But perhaps nothing is a coincidence and even in difficulties we can use the lessons and shifts to bring about an even greater result.



The first program I had the pleasure of contributing to took place in a small rural village outside of the major city of Almaty. At 11:00 am Dilbar called me and we drove for 3 hours across some beautiful, expansive plains and mountains to a factory which employs women. The man who built this factory is originally from this village of about 5,000 to 7,000 inhabitants. Growing up and living there, he realized that not many women have an opportunity for employment. They are mostly expected to stay at home and take care of the family, but even a little bit of income can be a tremendous boon, helping her to get some independence or feel empowered in being able to contribute financially to her family's care. So, rather than building a factory in the city as expected and convenient, he specifically chose his hometown and employs women, currently about 25 to 30. The produce food products such as cooking oil, honey, dried fruits, nuts and more on one floor, and sew PPE items on the second floor. Items are then delivered to supermarkets in the city or hospitals and medical centers.



It was so wonderful to meet these ladies who attended the EmpowHERment workshop Dilbar organized.



Since they are living in a rural village, they don't get such opportunities, which are usually concentrated in the big cities. First, Dilbar gave an overview of the purpose of the program and other sessions happening on other days. Then, I gave a motivational talk. Even though we spoke different languages and have different cultures, I wanted to just give them the message that they are important, their thoughts, feelings, and their own care are important. As we speak of often in WFPW, before we step out into important roles as women, we must first know our own value and worth in our own hearts, so that when we care for others and give of ourselves, we do so out of the fullness of our hearts. I encouraged them to spend a little time to recharge and care for themselves, and to create a supportive sisterhood amongst themselves working in this factory.



Afterwards, Zhansaya Beskempir an HR specialist gave a talk about making an achieving your goals. She talked about an inner motivation, such as what you want to learn or contribute to the job or community, and an outer motivation, such as increased salary. She asked the ladies what their goals are and walked through how to create SMART goals. She also gave some helpful tips of free opportunities to continue learning, which can be accessed anywhere, and encouraged them to never stop learning. At the end, everyone was all smiles as we took pictures together and they treated us to a delicious home-cooked meal of some traditional Kazak foods. There were some delicious breads, sheep, and beef filled dumplings. I also got the chance to try horse milk, which is loved by many throughout the Central Asian region. It was a first for me, and I must say that it's not an experience I care to repeat.



The following day's EmpowerHERment program took place at American Space in Almaty, the use of which was generously donated by the U.S. Consulate General in Almaty. After opening remarks from a representative of the U.S. Consulate and a beautiful demonstration of a traditional cultural dance, I had the great honor of presenting about WFPW's activities in the US and around the world and our commitment to sparking internal transformation for women to take a lead in building peace. Two of the



founders of Trigada, a women's sport community, also came and talked about their work. I couldn't help but feel there was a connection of purpose. While they do focus on sport and the mental and physical benefits of it, Trigada is also a place where women can connect in heart with each other, be refreshed through being together and training together, and then go back into their busy lives. Women need that place where we can let down our barriers, share our hearts without judgement, and be supported in a sisterhood. That helps us to be better wives, mothers, employees, colleagues, and friends. You could feel the warmth, strength, and support from these two speakers from Trigada as they encouraged the audience to even take 15 minutes a day for physical activity, which can change your life.



The final speaker was Dr. Dinara Abildenova, who has a Ph.D. in social anthropology. She shared her very interesting research on marriage customs in Kazakhstan and how they changed over time. In the past, there were many different factors and cultural practices which were not favorable for women, including kidnapping a woman in order to force her into marriage. Fortunately, many of those customs have changed, though there is still more ground to cover. Even though we are from other sides of the world, I think we in the US can resonate with that. Though there is still much to do to elevate and empower women, also together in partnership with men, with the love, support, and commitment of those like Dilbar, the speakers, and the program participants, we will make improvements step by step. Even looking how far things have come, we can feel hopeful and grateful.



On September 21st there will be a third EmpowHERment program, though I will be back in the US by



then and will sadly miss it. But judging from these first two programs, it will be a great success and wonderful contribution to the wider efforts of many women and men throughout Almaty who are seeking similar goals.



This trip was not all business, though. Somehow, I received some heavenly fortune in traveling to Almaty, Kazakhstan the very weekend that the city was celebrating "Almaty Day" through various festivals and activities. We visited an Ethno Popup shop with vendors selling traditional clothing, jewelry, and more and heard a performance on some traditional instruments. The weather was perfect and sunny as we visited several street fairs set up along the busy roadways of the city. We perused the wares of vendors who set up their booths, selling traditional and modern items displaying the rich culture of Kazakhstan.

I must say that something that especially inspired and touched me was the prevalence of playgrounds throughout the city. In the US, typically if you want to go to the playground, you must find a park. But imagine if you were walking down 5th avenue or through Times Square in NYC, and there are playgrounds and play equipment built directly into the sidewalks. In Almaty, as we walked down the busy road, there is a playground with kids playing and running around; you walk a little further and there's another one; walk a little further and there's another one. This is truly family-friendly. You can do your errands and shopping, then take a little break to let the kids play and get out their energy without going too far. Maybe it's a small thing, but as a mother of small children, it's actually quite big.



Another highlight was visiting the majestic mountains right outside the city. Dilbar and I went to Shymbulak, a ski resort where during the off-season anyone can come to take the gondolas up to the highest points. We went up over 3,000 feet to breathe in the calm, crisp

mountain air which was so refreshing and invigorating after the busyness of the previous days. Personally, I love mountains and feel so much energy from their silent and beautiful presence and embrace. In some ways, I feel the mountains are like God's love; they are so big, they cannot be moved or changed by me or my concerns; and when you are really climbing up in their heights it can be so calm and peaceful all around you.

Several other highlights included visiting the U.S. Consulate General offices, the UN Plaza in Almaty including UN Migration where Dilbar works and UN Women, and of course tasting all the delicious foods the country has to offer. The final day was the cherry on top as we toured a small school - 1st through 8th grade with about 220 students - and heard more about the principals dedication and philosophy of educating both mind and heart in a safe and caring environment. It is with a heart full of gratitude that I return home and with hope that this cultural exchange will open new opportunities to continue the relationship between our organization at WFWP and the people of Kazakhstan. Who knows, maybe in the future you will hear about a new chapter of WFWP opening in the country

There is more to say and share, but for now since a picture is worth a thousand words, please enjoy the photos from this trip.