



# Nurturing Change: Women-Led Social Entrepreneurship and Maternal Support in Kyrgyzstan: The Mama Space Case Study

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## Abstract

## Case Studies

This article discusses the case of Mama Space, which positions itself as a social enterprise and aims to support women during and after pregnancy. This social enterprise emerged from personal needs and pain, and today is an essential actor in the maternal health and well-being sphere, supporting thousands of women in 77 countries. We analyze its history, main activities, problems, and lessons learnt.

**Keywords:** social entrepreneurship, women, pregnancy, maternity, digital app.

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## I. Introduction

According to a World Health Organization (WHO, 2025) report, approximately 260,000 women worldwide died from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth in 2023. This equates to more than 700 deaths per day - one woman dies every two minutes. Even after a successful birth, millions continue to face consequences that negatively impact their quality of life. As shown in a large-scale study published in *The Lancet Global Health* (Vogel et al., 2024), more than 40 million women worldwide experience long-term health problems after childbirth each year, both physical and psychological. These include anxiety disorders (9–24% of women), postpartum depression (11–17%),

and tokophobia, or fear of childbirth (6–15%). These conditions seriously impact daily life: physical well-being, emotional stability, family relationships, and the ability to care for a child. All of this highlights the need for a more thoughtful and comprehensive approach to pregnancy and postpartum recovery, not only within the context of medicine but also as part of a broader, systemic approach to women's health and well-being at all stages of life.

In Kyrgyzstan, most women have access to basic healthcare services during pregnancy. According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2024; UNICEF, 2024), 94% of women aged 15-49 who had a live birth in the past two years



received at least four antenatal visits, and 98% were examined at least once by a qualified health professional. The emotional state of expectant and new mothers, their information isolation, and a lack of support when making decisions related to motherhood are significant challenges. These issues are rarely reflected in official statistics, but are well-known in the real lives of women and their daily experiences. Many face anxieties, feelings of overload, loneliness, and uncertainty, especially in rural areas, where access to psychological support, reliable information, and support networks is limited.

In a context where women's experiences remain invisible in medical protocols, initiatives that create spaces of trust, open dialogue, and accessible information are significant. Support models focused on women's emotional well-being, their mental health, and culturally sensitive education about motherhood can significantly improve quality of life and strengthen families' long-term health.

Our main question is: How could *social entrepreneurship* effectively support women during and after pregnancy? We hypothesize that women-led social entrepreneurship can best address women's needs during maternity through contemporary digital tools, helping them in ways that are moral, psychological, and physical.

In our article, we will analyze the Mama Space project, a mobile app designed to provide informational, emotional, and practical support to women during pregnancy and early motherhood, which responds to this invisible, highly pressing problem in Kyrgyzstan. Mama Space provides access to a friendly community, tools for pregnancy tracking and recovery, and a 24/7 AI-powered chatbot that answers questions and offers comprehensive, timely support throughout all stages of motherhood. It offers more than a digital service; it creates a support ecosystem focused on a vulnerable and often undervalued group, expectant and new mothers. Based on principles of empathy, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity, this initiative combines a sustainable business model with a social mission: to empower women, reduce isolation, raise awareness, and strengthen emotional well-being during one of the most transformative periods of life.

According to theory, the Mama Space is a *Social entrepreneurship*, "it is when some person or group aims at creating social value, employs innovation, ranging from outright invention to adapting someone else's novelty, producing and distributing social value, accept a risk in developing and disseminating social value, and are fearless by scarce resources in pursuing their social project" (Lubberlink, 2019). The objective of social entrepreneurship is to build businesses that aim to solve important social problems (Gardner, 2025). Gardner (2025) identified three business models of social entrepreneurship: for-profit, non-profit, and hybrid. For-profit companies make a profit; however, they focus on solving social problems. A non-profit's primary goal is achieving its mission, and if it raises money, it reinvests it. Social entrepreneurship is "the process by which individuals, startups, and entrepreneurs develop and fund solutions that directly address social issues" (The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2025). A social entrepreneur was defined as "a business that prioritizes the greater good" (University of San Diego, 2025).

This article examines the history of Mama Space, its key activities, and the specifics of its mobile app, designed to support women at various stages of motherhood. Particular attention is given to the project's evolution, from a personal initiative and limited resources to a sustainable digital platform with a broad audience. Mama Space's experience is viewed as an example of how technological solutions can seamlessly integrate with cultural sensitivity and social responsibility.

Our methodology is a case study. Several hours of in-depth communication with the Mama Space's founder are the basis of our article. The interview allowed for a deeper understanding of the project's development and the key resources, opportunities, and unique features that influenced its formation and growth. We also utilize open-source information, including publications on the project's official platforms (social media, apps) and previously published interviews, which served as the basis for describing Mama Space's history, structure, and areas of activity.

## II. Discussions/Analysis

### 2.1. Historical Background of Mama Space

The Mama Space project was created in response to a specific and pressing social issue: the lack of emotional and informational support women face during pregnancy and early motherhood. The initiative was initiated by Gulnaza Khalmanbetova, a tech entrepreneur and activist from Bishkek. Her personal experience inspired the project: during her first pregnancy, she felt acutely the lack of reliable information, trusted sources, meetings with specialists, and, in general, an ecosystem where women could feel calm and safe. The lack of such an environment encouraged Gulnaza Khalmanbetova to create MamaFest, an open-city event that brings together pregnant women, new mothers, and medical professionals. At the festival, participants could directly connect with professionals, find support, and feel a sense of community. MamaFest quickly became a regular event and developed an active audience. However, the offline format limited its reach, especially for women in the regions. The idea of scaling up support through technology became a logical extension of her mission. Gulnaza Khalmanbetova's experience with her second pregnancy, during which she underwent five surgeries, was a particularly significant step in shaping her motivation. This challenging experience reinforced her awareness of women's vulnerability during motherhood and further strengthened her desire to create a reliable tool to help others. The physical and emotional stress she experienced, limited access to reliable information, and the lack of a space where women could be supported without pressure or imposed patterns formed the basis for a future digital solution (Interview with Gulnaza Khalmanbetova).

The Mama Space app began active operations in Kyrgyzstan in early 2024. It was officially launched at the third MamaFest event, held on April 21, 2024, in Bishkek, and brought together over 380 current and expectant mothers. Mama Space quickly evolved into an independent project offering women systematic support at various stages of motherhood. From the very beginning, it was conceived as more than just an information resource: the project combined emotional support, access to

proven knowledge, and practical tools, making women's care comprehensive, accessible, and modern. The initiative was built from scratch, without external funding: the first version of the app was financed by Gulnaza Khalmanbetova's personal funds. She assembled a small but close-knit team that, in a short time, created a functioning digital product with great potential.

### 2.2. Mama Space today

Mama Space's mission is to create an accessible, respectful, and culturally sensitive support environment for women at all stages of motherhood. The project strives not only to impart knowledge but also to restore a sense of confidence, belonging, and inner support, essential during transitional periods of life. Mama Space offers a space where motherhood is perceived not as an isolated ordeal, but as a journey to navigate together, with support, without pressure, and with freedom. Particular attention is paid to combating misinformation, entrenched myths, and unsafe practices still prevalent in pregnancy and postpartum care. The project strives to replace them with reliable, evidence-based, and ethical approaches.

Offline engagement remains an integral part of the project's development. Despite the launch and active development of the mobile app, the Mama Space team continues to focus on live interaction with women. It regularly organizes MamaFest, the event that started it all. This format remains a platform for building a community where women feel heard, respected, and included in the dialogue. Such events are held regularly. For example, on April 26 and 27, 2025, the latest MamaFest was held in Bishkek, bringing together dozens of participants and providing a space for communication, experience sharing, and support (MamaFest Facebook page).

In addition to festivals, the Mama Space project regularly organizes offline meetings with professionals. One of the most recent meetings featured a discussion with a neuropsychologist on the topic *"From Neurons to Skills: How a Montessori Environment Helps a Child Realize Their Potential."* Participants not only gained expert knowledge but also had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss

real-life examples from their parenting experiences. These meetings serve as community gathering points and help participants feel connected and safe, which is essential during motherhood (Interview with Mama Space).

While actively developing its offline activities, the Mama Space team continues to strengthen the project's digital component. The mobile app is a second key element of its activities, providing women with access to information, tools, and support in a convenient and personalized format. The app is actively used in 77 countries, with the majority of users residing in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. As of early 2025, the number of users exceeded 6,000. The team places special emphasis on language accessibility, incorporating Kyrgyz into the interface and content to ensure the app is accessible to women in the regions and reflects the country's cultural diversity. In addition to offline and digital formats, the Mama Space project actively uses information and communication channels to engage with its audience and disseminate knowledge. Two Instagram pages play a key role in the communication system, becoming key tools not only for announcements and feedback but also for educational outreach.

The @mamaspace\_community page reflects the project's lively side: it publishes event reports, MamaFest visual diaries, announcements of expert meetings, and warm responses from participants. This account helps women feel part of a supportive community where the maternal experience is not idealized but embraced in its true diversity. The second page, @mama\_space\_app, focuses on the digital platform and simultaneously serves an educational function. Here, Mama Space regularly posts content on pregnancy, postpartum recovery, emotional well-being, childcare, women's health, and self-esteem. The project team emphasizes accessible and warm communication, avoiding pressure and dogma. The primary focus is on fostering an honest, open conversation about motherhood, free from myths, judgment, and misinformation (Instagram pages).

These two Instagram platforms have become a full-fledged extension of the initiative,

where Mama Space not only shares news and events but also builds a sustainable dialogue with its audience. Mama Space continues to grow thanks to the efforts of a small but close-knit team, including a medical expert, developers, designers, and illustrators. Despite limited resources, Mama Space has successfully built a sustainable model based on individual investment, partnerships, and monetization elements such as subscriptions and advertising integrations.

Mama Space's current processes reflect a commitment to systemic, multi-layered support for women during motherhood through technology, live communication, educational content, and value-based teamwork. The project remains flexible and open to development, continuing to build resources, expand its regional presence, and strengthen women's trust. Its evolution clearly demonstrates how the intersection of technological solutions and social sensitivity can create a sustainable platform capable of truly transforming women's daily experiences, gently, carefully, and tailored to real needs. "Any sustainable solution begins with a clear understanding of the problem. If it affects entire communities, it is a socially significant task. It is important for social entrepreneurs not just to solve problems, but to deeply explore the roots of these problems, listen to those affected, and create solutions that provide people not only with support but also with the opportunity to improve their lives" (Interview with Gulnaza Khalmanbetova, founder of Mama Space).

### 2.3. Mama Space App

The Mama Space mobile app is a modern and compassionate support tool for women at all stages of motherhood. Mama Space helps women not only during pregnancy but also during pregnancy planning, postpartum recovery, breastfeeding, and monitoring their child's development. This broad coverage makes the app a versatile companion during one of the most intense and sensitive periods of life.

The centerpiece of the app is the chatbot Umami, a 24/7 digital assistant powered by artificial intelligence. It can answer a wide range of questions, from the physiological processes of pregnancy to

anxiety, postpartum conditions, attachment to the baby, and self-care. Umai's algorithms incorporate elements of cognitive behavioural therapy, allowing it not only to inform but also to provide emotional support during challenging times. The app also offers an extensive educational library, including evidence-based articles, videos, and brief reference texts. The content is available in Russian and Kyrgyz, making it understandable and accessible to a broad audience of women in Kyrgyzstan and beyond. The information is presented without pressure or judgment (Interview with Mama Space). Mama Space creates a digital community of women united by similar experiences. The app offers groups by pregnancy stage and topic-specific forums.

As a result, Mama Space is a living and flexible product that continues to evolve based on feedback from women. The team regularly improves functionality, updates content, and refines the design to ensure the app truly reflects the needs and lifestyles of its users. This approach allows not only to accompany women on their journey to motherhood but also to remain close by sensitively, appropriately, and timely, offering the support they truly need.

#### 2.4. The Paths of Mama Space's Development

The development of Mama Space clearly demonstrates the path a social initiative can take to grow into a sustainable form of activity focused on social benefit. Mama Space demonstrates how entrepreneurship with a social mission can be built from within, based on meaning, personal motivation, and trust, while successfully addressing women's real needs with concrete, accessible solutions.

One of the most valuable resources at the outset is human support. Mama Space began its journey without external funding, grants, and institutional support. Friends, professional connections, and colleagues contributed: some helped with registration, others provided tax advice, and others offered encouragement. Mentors also played a vital role, those who shared not only their experience but also their confidence that she was moving in the right direction. This allowed her to focus on the core, creating something beneficial and needed for women, rather than on routine and

bureaucracy. "I had personal mentors who supported me. One was Tilek Mamutov. He probably provided very inspiring support and mentorship at the initial stage" (Interview with Gulnaza Khalmanbetova, founder of Mama Space).

The personal involvement and dedication of the founder, Gulnaza Khalmanbetova, played a significant role. With limited resources, Gulnaza Khalmanbetova performed several functions: coordinator, designer, accountant, marketer, and editor. She communicated with developers, created visual materials, managed social media, organized filming, and even recorded video courses. This multi-tasking not only helped organize the flood of tasks but also kept the project's spirit cohesive and vibrant, because personal involvement and care were evident throughout. At the same time, the focus always remained on the most important thing: creating a warm, accessible, and supportive environment for women. "I helped everywhere, participated in all processes. I was a designer, an accountant, a marketer, managed social media, videos, and even filmed some courses" (Interview with Gulnaza Khalmanbetova, founder of Mama Space).

The Mama Space team has been a key factor in the project's development and sustainability. It formed as a community of like-minded individuals united by shared values and a desire to contribute to a significant social initiative. Participation in the project was motivated not by financial interests or career ambitions, but by a desire to support an important cause. This approach laid the foundation for a unique working atmosphere, one that emphasizes trust, mutual understanding, and a high level of personal responsibility. This allowed the team to flexibly respond to challenges, effectively utilize resources, and build partnerships based on a common goal. "Initially, people came together for the idea, not for money. This, I believe, is why we built a great team" (Interview with Gulnaza Khalmanbetova, founder of Mama Space). Participation in acceleration and training programs made a significant contribution to the project's development. These formats became platforms for professional growth, strategic rethinking, and the establishment of new partnerships. Competitions and

incubators provided access to mentoring, expert knowledge, and an international community. The skills and feedback gained strengthened our confidence in our chosen direction and helped us adjust our goals to a rapidly changing environment. The external rethinking of our strategy and operational focus was particularly valuable. "The High-Tech Park recently held the Unicorn from KG competition. We won first place and were sent to Draper University (California) for an accelerator program. This really helped us grow and change our perspective, mission, and vision. I participated in incubation programs from Accelerate Prosperity. They supported us in participating in the regional *She Loves Tech project*, where we took second place in Central Asia. Later, we participated in *The Most Hub in Almaty*, and also in the international *Aurora Tech Awards* competition, which featured over 2,000 startups from over 100 countries. We made it to the final ten. At every stage, we received informational and mentoring support from our mentors" (Interview with Gulnaza Khalmanbetova, founder of Mama Space).

The story of Mama Space's development demonstrates how a socially oriented initiative can develop gradually, through personal engagement, support from others, the unification of like-minded individuals, and the acquisition of new knowledge. This path wasn't pre-planned or one-size-fits-all: it evolved from specific decisions made in response to real-life circumstances. All of this shaped a unique experience that continues to help the team move forward.

### III. Concluding Remarks

The story of Mama Space offers a valuable example of how social entrepreneurship can emerge from personal motivation, address systemic gaps, and find sustainable forms of implementation even with limited resources. This example illuminates how social initiatives are born and develop in response to real needs, and what factors make them viable over the long term.

The first important lesson from Mama Space's story is the importance of personal experience as a source of sustainable social initiative. The project responded to a real, but previously

under-recognized, social need. Its development demonstrates how personal history can become the foundation of entrepreneurial action when it stems not only from pain but also from a desire to make a difference for others.

Launching a sustainable project doesn't require significant funding. In the case of Mama Space, trust from the community, mentor engagement, cultural empathy, the team's willingness to share the project's values, and a high degree of flexibility proved far more critical. This illustrates the value of intangible resources at the initial stage of social entrepreneurship: social capital, expert support, and deliberate self-organization.

Additionally, Mama Space's practice clearly demonstrates the importance of community support, both for the women the project is aimed at and for those creating it. It thrives thanks to the engagement of those around it: specialists, mentors, program participants, and team members who shared its mission and supported its development. This proves that social entrepreneurship is not an individual effort, but the result of collaboration, in which value is determined not only by the results achieved but also by the quality of the connections built.

Another important lesson is how the project managed to combine digital technologies with socially oriented content. The *Mama Space app* demonstrates that technological solutions can be not only tools for efficiency but also forms of care. Another conclusion is the project model's flexibility. *Mama Space* successfully combines offline and online components, creating a hybrid format that engages both urban and regional users. This experience demonstrates that a project's sustainability and its value to its target audience are enhanced when it is not limited to a single form of interaction.

The project's history also highlights the importance of strategic educational and accelerator programs, which provide social entrepreneurs with opportunities for growth, analysis, and integration into professional communities, rather than financial resources. Mama Space's participation in such initiatives helped clarify its vision, build a sustainable business model, and strengthen its

confidence in the social impact of its activities. This confirms the need to develop local and international programs that can enhance the capacity of those working on social solutions on the ground.

Moreover, Mama Space's story highlights the unique characteristics of female leadership in social initiatives that often remain on the fringes of public attention. Finally, Mama Space's example demonstrates that resilience in social entrepreneurship is formed not so much by a stable external environment as by internal guidelines, mission, team, and values. In a climate of uncertainty, these elements become sources of energy and vectors for development. This project not only addressed a vulnerable area of women's well-being but also built a scalable, adaptable, and evolving model in a changing context. Initiatives like these provide valuable insight into the nature of social innovation, demonstrating that they are founded on trust, values, and the ability to listen to and consider the complexities of the environment. Mama Space illustrates how to move forward: with respect for people, a realistic approach to resources, and a desire to improve what truly matters. Initiatives like these become growth points for society and an inspiration for future generations of social entrepreneurs.

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