

EVERYDAY LIFE OF TAJIK WOMEN. SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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Rezumat: Viața de zi cu zi a femeilor tadjice. Câteva considerații

Articolul propune o privire de ansamblu asupra complexului univers contemporan al femeilor din Tadjikistan. Sunt luate în considerație tradițiile, obiceiurile și cutumele care definesc viața cotidiană a acestora, ca și restricțiile și limitările impuse de dificultățile economice și sociale sau de mentalitate. De asemenea, sunt prezentate câteva dintre provocările și imperativele societății tadjice, precum nevoia de reconsiderare a rolului femeii în familie și comunitate.

Résumé: La vie quotidienne des femmes tadjikes. Quelques considérations

L'article ci-joint propose une image d'ensemble sur l'univers contemporain complexe des femmes de Tadjikistan. On y prit en considération les traditions, les usages et les coutumes qui définissent leur vie quotidienne, ainsi que les restrictions et les limitations imposées par les difficultés économiques et sociales ou de mentalité. On y présenta aussi quelques-uns des défis et des impératifs de la société tadjike, ainsi que le besoin de reprendre en considération le rôle de la femme dans la famille et la communauté.

***Abstract:** This paper proposes an overview of the complex world of contemporary women in Tajikistan. There are considered the traditions, customs and rules that define their daily lives, as well as the restrictions and limitations imposed by economic difficulties and social mentality. Additionally, there are presented some of the challenges and imperatives of Tajik society, such as the need to reconsider the role of women in family and community.*

Keywords: *Tajikistan, women, gender, custom, vulnerability, stereotype*

*“Paradise is located under a mother’s heel”
(Tajik proverb)*

Tajikistan is an agricultural society with 72% of its population residing in rural areas; 60% of those employed in agriculture are women. Generally speaking, women represent 51% of Tajikistan population. The collapse of the Soviet empire (1991), and the civil war (1992-1995) produced a chaotic time for Tajik people, as society deconstructed and criticized the old values and struggled to find its national and ethnic identity. This movement has brought new challenges for Tajik women. The number of women’s and grass-roots organizations mushroomed after political

independence of Republic of Tajikistan. They have played an important role in assisting women and have encouraged them to express themselves through NGO's. The post-1991 liberalization of society and blossoming of women movement in Tajikistan opened space for female leaders, who spearheaded the reintegration of gender, class and ethnicity in patriarchal society.

The gender policy and gender study in Tajikistan began relatively recently, in the middle of the 1990s. It is necessary to recognize that numerous works on women's liberation or woman's involvement in the society management were conducted by Soviets. Notable results have been accumulated in the fields of education, health care, maternity and child protection.

Currently, Tajikistan has ratified a number of international conventions and agreements on human rights, participates in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), signing important international documents. However a situation analysis shows that there are traditional and new gender problems at all levels in the Tajikistan's political, economic and social spheres.

A dividing line exists between women in urban and rural areas, and gender proportion is different in Tajikistan. Travelling from cities into rural areas means leaving behind modern technology, information and know-how, and entering places where conservatism and religious control are entrenched in people's values and the poverty and gender inequality are the norm.

Tajikistan has another specific feature because of separating women's society, depending on where the women lived: in the mountain areas or in the valleys. The origins of traditions in the regions of Tajikistan had, in many respects, identified specifics of gender development in various districts. Following Islamic traditions (*Ismailiya*, the Shiite movement in Badakhshan, or the Sunni movement in Northern and Central Tajikistan), social and economic conditions in mountainous regions and in valleys imprinted on political, social, and spiritual culture, as well as on women's situation in society.¹

In Tajik Badakhshan (Pamir, currently GBAO/the Badakhshan Mountain Autonomous Region), where, since the 11th century, the ideology of *Ismailiya* has been accepted by the population as the main religion, and women had certain freedoms and rights, the female role has always been significant in solving issues, although their social cultural activities were never visibly displayed. Till this time, GBAO is the one area of the country does not show any decline in women's participation in education. There women and girls of all ages and all levels of

¹ *Tajikistan: On the Way to Gender Equality*, UNDP, Dushanbe, 2003, p. 8; *The Tajik Pamirs. Challenger and Sustainable Development in an Isolation Mountain Region*, SDE, SDC, 2003, p. 16.

education make up 50-51% of the total enrolment.²

Prof. S. Niyozov recorded some very interesting stories on female teachers from Pamir who shared their experiences in the Soviet and Post-Soviet epoch. One of them – Nigina – told that to be a teacher in the village was an honour in Soviet time. She was in the centre of the society, and led other women. They came to Nigina for everything, from consultation on women's health to borrowing money. A woman-teacher got good money and a higher education compared with the majority of women who were housewives and kolkhoz workers. Unlike them, Nigina argued and talked openly with men other than her husband. She was “the intelligentsia of the village” and knew more than any other woman did and that was the main source of her respect. Women-teachers felt other women looked at them to lead them.³

Yet, there are many worries “at home” after political independence of Tajikistan: in spring landslides, snow slides, planting; in summer, there are heat, mudslides and lack of water; in fall, harvesting, and collecting fuel and paying debts – too much work in a too short time; in winter, cold, darkness, and snow. July and August are supposed to be for rest. In fact, they are the busiest seasons: building a house or something added to, renovation alter the winter and spring cutting the fodder, harvesting, and threshing wheat grass. Unlike in the cities, no one renovates and fixes anything here for “us”.

Another colleague of Nigina told that *now* female teachers in the mountains are *beiloj* (powerless). They have no time for themselves. All their life goes in serving others. For instance, she takes care of six children, a husband, old parents, guests and cattle, and has many worries with them. When they watch the lives of the women in the West they feel guilty for being born and living here. She asked: “What have we been punished for?”⁴

In the Northern Tajikistan, the men's meetings held in so-called “men's houses” – *gapkhona* (space for talking) regulated the social and ceremonial life of a village. In this context they were like a tribune of a local parliament in which there was no place for a woman. Women gathered separately and during their meetings they talked about very different subjects, sewed, knitted, entertained themselves, danced, played music, drew etc. expressing through these activities their “women's view of life”. It is their traditional gender role or a “leadership behind the scene” that makes it possible for them to influence human development.

² S. Tychieva, *History of Gender in Culture of Pamir (late 19th — early 21st centuries)*, Dushanbe, 2011, p. 26.

³ S. Niyozov, *The reality of Being a Women-Teacher in the Mountains in Tajikistan*, “Cahiers d'Asie Centrale”, 2004, no. 11-12, pp. 24, 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The main factors that aggravate the vulnerability of women are related to their cultural isolation from the “outside world” and the stereotyped image of a woman as a housewife and object of sexual pleasure. The most evident way to earn money for uneducated women is using their household experience. Limitation of the women's activities by parts of the family, are "natural" conditions of the social relationships between men and women in traditional society.

Obviously, there are some other traditional stereotypes for women and men in Tajik contemporary society. The role of woman as wife, mother and home-maker is particularly important, but not politics and business. She should be involved in educating children. Man should be a family supporter, being involved in business, and politics, improving his qualifications and getting promotion. He should rest and expand his erudition.

Gender stereotypes influence women's aspirations and self-appraisal. There are no accidents therefore that only a small number of women wish to participate in political life and work in a higher position. Female politicians are usually the objects of public attention because they are judged according to stereotypes. In comparison with men, people more often discuss women's appearance, family situation and their own lives.⁵

It is also very important that not only the elder generation is the subject of gender stereotypes, but young people. Moreover, teenagers, in comparison with their parents, are oriented on gender stereotypes to a larger degree. Therefore practical reality is characterized by visible contradictions between the declared state gender policy directed at increasing the status of women in society, and traditional standards regulating the gender roles.

About 50% of the surveyed women-housewives are engaged in embroidery, sewing things for sale, trading produce from their own gardens in the market (milk, fruit, vegetables and nuts), and small trade near the house (especially in summer - drinks, groceries). The men mainly go to Russia to work as *mandikors* (loaders) in the construction industry and are engaged in repairing houses and electrical equipment; they also work in agriculture on collective farms (cotton, wheat) and trade. The children help their parents to earn money (wash cars in the city, collect wood, rhubarb, flowers and other plants for further sale).

The impact of mass labour migration on women is substantial and significantly vulnerable, particularly if the husband chooses not to return home or no longer send remittances. Young people – in search of proper income to lead a normal life and earn money enough for a car and their marriage – leave their home-towns, families whom they love just to return home in a zinc-coffin. For many of countrymen this mistake turns into the most tragic and the last one in their life.

⁵ *Tajikistan: On the Way...*, p. 24.

Women remain married, but their husbands from abroad, having withdrawn financial and social support could remarry and start new families. Women as “true widows”, living in poverty, have no access to such resources as credits and the succession are weekly informed about their rights. Migrant wives face significant barriers to employment and typically do not control family resources. As a rule, agricultural land belongs of farm headed by men. Women by virtue of poverty and hopelessness agree to become second, third and forth wives.⁶

Violence against women includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuses. The most widespread kind of domestic violence in Tajikistan is the psychological one. The older the woman, the more likely she was to play a role in family decision-making, as well as a report her husband’s assistance with household chores. Within compound family the young wife, in most instances, expected to defer to decisions made by her mother-in-law, as well as to those of her husband, both in matter of finance and of household management.⁷

The number of suicides among young women, especially in Sugd region (Northern Tajikistan) is increasing. The majority of real reasons leading to these tragic events are originating from the existing inequality between men and women throughout their lives, caused by the absence of access to information, education, medical services and poor knowledge of legislation and rights. The problem of self-immolation of women has been repeatedly mentioned in Mass Media. Such agonizing way of suicide committed by unhappy girls is provoked by unfair treatment of girls in a new family after their marriage, still immature and capable of committing the most unpredictable reckless acts. Cases of suicide are extreme signs of protest against the existing inequality of realizing the real depth of the problem.⁸

Contrary to widespread opinion that trafficking is limited in the traditional public environment, in reality, the patriarchal nature of Tajik society makes women

⁶ *Needs Assessment of Rural Women on Land Tenure Rights in Tajikistan*. UNIFEM. October 15, 2008, www.un-tj.org/library/mode+details?id=307

⁷ *Заключительные замечания Комитета по ликвидации дискриминации в отношении женщин: Таджикистан* [Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Tajikistan], (CEDAW/C/TJK/CO/3 February 2007) [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/898586b1dc7b4043c1256a450044f331/16313018419e3b4ac12572a400337a3e/\\$FILE/N0724356.pdf](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/898586b1dc7b4043c1256a450044f331/16313018419e3b4ac12572a400337a3e/$FILE/N0724356.pdf)

⁸ *Альтернативный доклад неправительственных организаций Таджикистана по реализации Конвенции о ликвидации всех форм дискриминации в отношении женщин, Душанбе, 2006 г.* [Shadow Report on the Realization of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women by Non-governmental Organizations of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, November 2006]: http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/russian/cedaw/Ralngoreport_tajikistan.html; <http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/Tajikistan%20final%20report%20English.pdf>

more unprotected from trafficking, compared to a less conservative society.⁹ IOM Research in Tajikistan (2001) noted the presence of the following traffic types: trafficking of women with the purpose of prostitution or sexual exploitation; transporting drugs; slave labour abroad; home or sexual slavery extracting organs.¹⁰

A major factor promoting the growth of the industry is the drug traffic crossing the republic. By virtue of special circumstances (neighbouring Afghanistan is the world's leading supplier of raw opium and heroin, civil war), socio-economic situation of the majority of the population increase the financial difficulties of families (from lack of money to even lack of food and ordinary cloth).

In contemporary society, as the result of culture-imposed religious prejudices, a woman is more often confined inside her home. The situation in Tajikistan is aggravated in post-Soviet Tajikistan by religious and social prejudices as well as lack of knowledge of all aspects of this problem or by lack of «gender education». As a result, the general public believes that gender is an exclusively women's problem and they have to face it all alone.

Launched in 2008, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's "UNiTE to End Violence against women" campaign is a multi-year effort aimed to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls in all parts of the world. Among the measures recommended for the civil society to undertake was to ask local artists to create a film, a piece on violence against women and to organize an exhibit where the film to be displayed and discussed as a panel or question and answer session with the authors.

In 2010, the Tajik artists had got the opportunity to reflect the local gender issues in Tajikistan through the different contemporary art approaches. They presented the results of their work at the exhibition "Modalities" which was initiated and supported by the Swiss Cooperation office in Tajikistan and UNIFEM, Bactria Cultural centre.¹¹ The exhibition was aimed at attracting attention to the global campaign "SAY NO – UNiTE", initiated by UN Secretary General, in order to strengthen efforts to prevent violence against women worldwide. Tajik artists would like to attract attention and express their position in regard of different aspects of daily life, relations and development perspectives of the country itself and Tajik men and women separately. We would like to present some examples of this exhibition as an artist's intention to make a positive influence to equal and fair development within families and the society.

⁹ *Tajikistan: On the Way...*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Саодат Олимова, Нигина Мамаджанова, *Торговля людьми в Таджикистане* [Trafficking in human beings in Tajikistan], Душанбе IOM International Organization for Migration, 2006, <http://www.iom.tj/pubs/Human%20trafficking%20publication%20IOM%202006.pdf>

¹¹ Exhibition *Modalities*, March 30-April 12, 2010, Dushanbe, 2010.



Picture 1, A. MIRHASKAR: *Rural Women in the City*



Picture 2, S. O. SHARIFI: *Lost Mystery*