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The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies nr 2 (2), 201-210

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2012

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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## **BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA? TAJIK WOMEN COPING WITH THE POST-SOVIET REALITY**

### **ABSTRACT**

The role of a Tajik woman had been impacted by two contrasting factors. On the one hand, the Soviet period created equal citizens that “knew no gender or social class”. Women were provided identical access to education, health care and a right to work professionally outside of home as men. The traditional Tajik culture, however, regarded woman as a center of the family home, installed in the private sphere, exclusively caring for the children and the household. Position of women in contemporary Tajikistan depends largely on the influence of geographical and cultural factors as well as religious traditions and deeply rooted mentality. The processes of transformation are at full speed, but the time needed to provide education, overcome poverty and the traditional gender role stereotype may be longer-lasting than in other nations with less culturally rooted customary roles.

### **Key words**

Tajikistan, post-Soviet area, Tajik woman, traditional culture

Tajikistan, the smallest of the former Soviet Republics, is a country lying in the heart of Central Asia. Strategically located, it is bordered by Kyrgyzstan on the north, China on the east, Afghanistan on the south, and Uzbekistan on the west and northwest. Ethnically heterogeneous, Tajikistan is inhabited mainly by Tajiks and Uzbeks including some Russian and Jewish minorities. The domineering religion of the republic is Islam with two main variations (Ismailia and Sunnites). After independence, Tajikistan had been economically dilapidated and became the poorest country of the former Soviet Union, with the lowest GDP about \$ 2,000 per citizen. Despite this fact, it was a country with relatively high levels of human development, the effect of Soviet influence on the

social development of the country. Statistical life expectancy was 70 years, with widespread literacy within society. After the collapse of the USSR, Tajikistan has experienced a rapid return to economic and social arena. The withdrawal of subsidies coming from Moscow and disruption of trade agreements led to a dramatic decline in GDP and an increase in the government's cost of living.

Under the Soviet rule women enjoyed equal civic rights to men. They were actively cooperating in the creation of strong industry and considerable numbers of women represented the labour force in textiles, manufacturing as well as agriculture. Women were also the main group belonging to the workforce of educational and health sectors. As the result of the equal rights philosophy, they were represented in the parliament in quotas larger than those of most of the European countries at that time. Thus, they were actively participating in the decision-making processes and had palpable influence over the direction the country was heading towards. The female population was able to gain proper education and young mothers had somehow limited, but nevertheless constant access to child-caring facilities, therefore many of them re-commenced work after child-bearing.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought the disintegration of the state's social safety net. The financial resources formerly provided by Moscow had been exhausted and the nation was not able to cope with the new socio-economic situation. Industry has been dramatically shrunken and the first people to lose their jobs were women employed in light industry, manufacturing as well as agriculture. It reinforced their lack of security introduced into Tajik homes after system change. Women, who managed to uphold continuous employment in the health and education sectors, became the first group not to obtain remuneration for their labour. As a result, the widespread poverty ensued and there was a strong return to the Muslim practices from the period prior to the Soviet Union era. Women began their course of disappearance from the public life. They became underrepresented in the government authorities and now hold only 3% of the parliamentary posts and 7% of senior posts within government ministries. With such low quotas they virtually have no influence over the decision-making process. Women do become active within non-governmental organizations, where they constitute 35% of the heading officers. It is an alternative choice for empowering women, however still not enough for definite changes to take place<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2000/women\\_in\\_tajikistan.pdf](http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2000/women_in_tajikistan.pdf) [access: 24.01.2013]

According to the new “rules”, there was no need for girls to be educated and their school attendance dropped sharply<sup>2</sup>. They were increasingly facing discrimination in this respect. Access to health care by the female population had also been limited. Corruption on the government levels was high, the industry and agriculture dropped in numbers and women stopped their active participation in the professional life of the country. Although Tajikistan is not a religious state, in fact, many of the “common religious laws” are being strictly observed by its citizens. With no income of their own women became extremely dependent on their relatives. A natural consequence – the return to the under-age marriage custom<sup>3</sup> – ensued. Many families were forced to resort to such means due to the lack of money. Women were slowly losing all the privileges granted to them during the Soviet period.

The role of a Tajik woman had been impacted by two contrasting factors. On the one hand, the Soviet period created equal citizens that “knew no gender or social class”. Women were provided identical access to education, health care and a right to work professionally outside of home as men. The traditional Tajik culture, however, regarded woman as a center of the family home, installed in the private sphere, exclusively caring for the children and the household. After Tajikistan gained its independence the traditional values have been revived and Islamic customs have been re-entering Tajik homes to quite a considerable extent. As a consequence, women withdrew from political life, became unrepresented in the parliament and as such, have little or no influence over their own lives. The Soviet philosophy aimed at incorporating the productive and reproductive role of a female, providing financial support to women by funding child allowances and creating child care facilities. However at present, it is becoming almost an extinct idea, as traditional Tajik view sees a woman in a solely reproductive role ensuring the well-being of her husband and children. Although the country is officially secular, it has been observed that Islamic habits began to grow in strength.

A year after the collapse of the USSR, in 1992–1993, the Tajik society experienced a severe civil war that divided the post-communist and Islamic fractions of the society. The insurgency resulted in deaths of numerous men and vicious torture, including rape as well as other physical violence, inflicted on

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/051-tajikistan-a-roadmap-for-development.aspx> [access: 05.01.2013].

<sup>3</sup> A custom banned by the Soviet Union authorities and officially prohibited by the government of the Republic in Tajikistan.

women. The aftermath of the war is an estimated number of 55,000 orphans and 20,000 widows<sup>4</sup>. The result of such dire circumstances has been a significant increase in the number of female-headed households. The nation faced a situation, where many abandoned women remained, often young and childless, and hence there have been a significant shortage of men, some of the defunct traditional practices were revived. The act of entering into a second or third marriage was banned during the Soviet period as a symbol of unfair women subordination and lack of equality between the sexes. However, in times of distress, poverty and practically non-existent male population women are willing to become the second, third or even fourth wife on informal and unofficial basis. The practice is still illegal, however, the officials turn a blind eye at the custom, as they lack in resources to solve the issue otherwise. The position of second and third wives is very vulnerable – they do not officially exist from the legal point of view as they cannot be included in the marriage register and the “marriage” only occurs within a traditional, unrecorded ceremony. Thus second wives are not accepted legal “wives” and their children cannot be registered as the husband’s children. They have no rights protection under the law, their legal status being unclear. This troublesome issue became a great source of concern for the women non-governmental organizations operating in Tajikistan.

An officially registered marriage has always been a safety backup for women and children in Muslim countries, including Tajikistan. However, recently, when the stance on marriage has also undergone transformation, marriage has become another risky endeavour. After independence, most couples become married in a nikkah ceremony, which is a traditional Muslim form of marriage. It is only conducted by an imam, and the registration of the ceremony rarely follows the customary celebration. One of the reasons for low numbers of registered ceremonies is the lack of awareness within the society – numerous Tajik citizens inhabit the rural sector of the country and they are not familiar with the government provisions or the law in force. By living far from urban centers, many have not heard of the necessity to have the marital liaison officially recorded in the state registry files. Other reasons include location – the state registry offices are often situated in localities unavailable to villagers due to lack of travel arrangements and thus the traditional ceremony remains to be the sole union, with no accompanying certificates to prove that the marriage has been concluded.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2000/women\\_in\\_tajikistan.pdf](http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2000/women_in_tajikistan.pdf) [access: 24.01.2013].

The trouble with non-registered marriages becomes especially stark when the couple “divorces” and the woman is in need to obtain the custody of children, support as well as her 50% of property, which are guaranteed by the Tajik law<sup>5</sup>. The act of only entering into marriage through a nikkah ceremony has triggered dire consequences. Many Muslim Tajik men simply resort to uttering the word “taloq”<sup>6</sup> three times to divorce their wives. In the not so distant past, migrant workers away in Russia or other countries had been able to send a simple text message to their wives, and immediately obtain a divorce via these means. Since April 11, 2011 following the decision of the head of the State Religious Affairs Committee, a marriage dissolution by a text message is no longer valid<sup>7</sup>. However, it is extremely difficult to obtain support from the former spouse if the marriage was not officially registered. An example of 43-year-old Shamsigul Khulova is an exceptional case<sup>8</sup>. After being abused by her husband for 18 years she decided to leave him, but had not been able to retrieve any material help for herself and her six children. As the marriage had exclusively been established in an nikkah ceremony, according to the letter of the law, she had no right to his property. Assisted by non-governmental organizations Shamsigul managed to win the battle for the custody of her children and support (their house was divided in two: she received 1,200 square meters and her husband the remaining 1000), but it is extremely rare to be able to resolve a case for the benefit of the former wife.

Another problem that follows divorced women with children is being stigmatized by the society. In Tajikistan, most of marriages are pre-arranged, oftentimes the bride seeing her future husband only once before the wedding ensues. According to sanctioned regulations weddings must now be limited to 150 guests and cannot last longer than 3 hours. An official from the local authority is sent to participate in the ceremony to ensure observance of the law<sup>9</sup>. The bride is virtually handed over to the new husband’s family and her fate is from then on dependent on the relations present among her husband’s relatives. The romantic involvement is not even taken into account, which makes the marriage much more vulnerable. A woman is treated as a piece of property and

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<sup>5</sup> Courts can oblige salary-earning husbands who divorce to pay child support, but it’s difficult to enforce those decisions on migrant workers.

<sup>6</sup> “divorce”.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63296> [access: 25.01.2013].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13088692> [access: 08.03.2013].

this leaves room for widespread liberty in abuse and violence inflicted. However, if the woman frees abandons such a relationship, she is often considered a social outcast and is no longer welcome within this community.

An important issue infringing on human rights in Tajikistan is the fact that the occurrence of domestic violence against women is standing strong. The examples of abuse include sexual, physical, economic and psychological violence. Authorities reluctantly intervene if the incidence takes place within the family. They often do not respond appropriately to reports concerning family tragedies treating them as matters of private and not public interest<sup>10</sup>. Although women are the victims of these circumstances, they themselves are often blamed for the violence. It frequently appears that the vicious circle never ends and some women make dramatic decisions to commit suicide. Due to this factor, by 2009, twelve crisis centers were established by the government across the country to help women and their children who are victims of domestic violence. Amnesty International claims that about half of Tajik women experience regular physical, sexual or psychological violence inflicted by their husbands or their relatives. The main reasons for this observable fact within the society is the traditional notion of “honor and shame” of man as well as the family as a whole<sup>11</sup>.

Hardships of the Soviet Union’s rupture and its aftermath impacted the birth rates in the country<sup>12</sup>. Women began to have more control over pregnancy rate and the number of children born has been gradually declining. Formerly a Tajik family enjoyed numerous offspring, however in 1991, the total fertility rate had dropped by nearly 1.5 births, and only 3.6 children were born in an average family in 1997<sup>13</sup>. The marriage rate has also been falling as there are no financial resources and the uncertainty of living ensues. It is a clear indication that the population is undergoing distress as well as economic turbulences and has difficulties in returning to previous stability.

There is however an opportunity for a new beginning, as with time and access to Western knowledge and resources, the government as well as NGOs operating in Tajikistan began implementing changes. The amendments are aimed at improving the quality of lives of the most vulnerable citizens, in the

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/women-face-abuse-tajikistan-20091124> [access: 24.01.2013].

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2000/women\\_in\\_tajikistan.pdf](http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2000/women_in_tajikistan.pdf) [access: 24.01.2013].

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

public as well as private spheres. Some of the most interesting endeavours are listed in the paragraphs below.

In 2003 a concept of a local district task force was planned and implemented by the government of Tajikistan. In 2011, seventy-two Local District Task Forces had been operating across Tajikistan providing much needed services to the vulnerable members of the Tajik society, such as women, the elderly and physically challenged. The facilities operate as legal aid centres and provide simple to complex services and advice on matters related to land ownership, support claims, disability pensions or passport issues. Many of the rural inhabitants of the country have low levels of literacy and are not able to deal with legal as well as other formal matters without assistance. Women constitute close to 70% of the centres' customers and they obtain assistance with training and schooling, official paperwork, as well as legal representation when needed, for court cases. United Nations Women supports this initiative as one of the means out of poverty and illiteracy for underserved women of Tajikistan. By accepting the assistance women may resume university study (which is quite often interrupted when their first child is born) or simply apply for a passport or a disability pension. It is quite a considerable change for citizens exposing low levels of literacy and coping.

In 2003 the World Bank commenced a project under the name of UNIFEM. The aim of this undertaking was to facilitate the transition from the Soviet model of land ownership and else to the post-Soviet agriculture. Many women lost their rights to land after the collapse of the USSR and the project's main directive was to enable and facilitate the implementations of women's land ownership rights. It was to be conducted by applying changes to government and community informational facilities as well as developing them in order to allow for collective action, self-help and economic advancement. Women in rural areas are especially vulnerable to the lack of information on their rights, thus the project was to ensure the support mechanisms were implemented in these areas as well as the progress of land reform was observed.

The Land Code of the Republic of Tajikistan guarantees women equal rights to men in respect to land ownership. In fact, however, the situation had been different – due to problems with legalizing marriages women were often deprived of their property, including land. The committee of the project reviewed the policy and legal frameworks of the code in respect to gender transparency. It also urged to enforce the observance of policies and the letter of the law in terms of land ownership by women. The effect of the project implementation was 11 amendments concerning gender equality that were introduced into the Tajik



Land Code. Some of them include: The amended article states that “all members of family, including women, will receive a land use certificate”<sup>14</sup> (formerly neither women, nor children received the ownership title in writing). Articles 67–69 of the Code were deleted as they stated that the land distribution of the collective farms (*kolkhozy*) was to be conducted among the permanent and full members, which excluded women on maternity leaves<sup>15</sup>.

Apart from applying changes in the legislature, the process of their factual implementation was monitored by the UNIFEM coordinators and there were partnerships established. An informational campaign was conducted and the project achieved satisfactory results. Women constituted 99% of the applicants in the project and in total 1,427 people obtained assistance in legal matters as well as paperwork. In 2000 about 3% of women were supervising *dekhan* farms<sup>16</sup>, however due to the project implementation, 500 women obtained support and the percentage of the *dekhan* farm heads changed into 13% of women in 2006. Close to 90% of applicants obtained their certificates of land ownership. To facilitate the launch of women’s entrepreneurship all the women gathered in the self-help groups in the Jabbor-Rasulovski district acquired microcredits for establishment of their own businesses<sup>17</sup>.

One of other recent ideas to facilitate the life of women in Tajikistan is the introduction of the so-called “one-stop-shop” service delivery of government services. The main purpose of the project is again to assist the vulnerable members of the society with low literacy levels. The “one-stop-shop” allows the citizen to resolve an official matter at virtually “one stop”. Previously it required many trips to the city hall and door-to-door travelling within the office. The clients are able to access assistance related to passports, health care, pensions, as well as education through fast delivery of services. On Saturdays, the officials (so far in selected districts) collect in a single hall, and all the matters can be resolved

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<sup>14</sup> *Land Code of the Republic of Tajikistan*, Article 17, Clause A.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Midsized peasant farms that are legally and physically distinct from household plots. *Dehkan* farms cultivate more than 60% of agricultural land in Tajikistan, averaging about 20 hectares in size (compared to less than 2 hectares in household plots). *Dehkan* farms concentrate in crop production (cotton, wheat, and vegetables) and their share of livestock is minimal.

<sup>17</sup> <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENAGRLIVSOUBOOK/Resources/Module11Innovation3.pdf>, pp. 1–6 [access: 09.03.2013].

in this one room. The service is directed to the poorest and most exposed, about 70% of its clients being women<sup>18</sup>.

It is also worth to draw public attention to the women clubs operation in Tajikistan. Clubs are entities that affiliate women who do not accept being the so-called “second-class” human beings. As it was mentioned before, the Soviet Union enabled women to benefit from extensive educational and professional opportunities. It facilitated their commitment within the socio-economic and political spheres. However, after Tajikistan became independent in 1991, their position began to deteriorate rapidly. The current dire situation of women’s rights was described in the first part of the article. Yet, there is a growing group of women in Tajikistan, who have opted for a different way of life than the one advocated by Sunnis, unofficially supported by Tajik decision-makers. Women associate in clubs, train and use the assistance of Western resources granted by the human rights NGOs. They have also started asking for help and seek for it themselves, which to a large extent helps them survive in spite of widespread poverty. It has been observed that a solid application of birth control has caused a steady decrease in the population of Tajikistan, which is a sign that women adapted to the new material conditions. As it was pointed out by Michal Olszewski, “leaders [of clubs in different regions] meet with coaches from larger cities and abroad, listen to lectures about women’s rights, prevention of domestic violence, micro-credits based on the Hindu system, and they are informed there are means to fight for their rights. And if the men forgot about them – they learn the ability to maintain their family and household”<sup>19</sup>. It appears that in the present circumstances clubs have become a necessity in some sense. Abandoned in the new reality, with limited possibilities for maneuver, women had to adapt to new roles. The small number of men that remain in the country usually works in offices as clerks or government representatives, and on average there is only one man per village. Therefore the entire burden of maintaining the household, family and themselves became the responsibility of women.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/2012/04/one-stop-shop-service-delivery-in-tajikistan/> [access: 09.03.2013].

<sup>19</sup> M. Olszewski, *Kraj bez mężczyzn. Ile warta jest kobieta w Azji Środkowej? 250 dolarów. Więcej trzeba wydać na zakup krowy*, „Tygodnik Powszechny”, 03.02.2009, <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/31,0,20825,2,artykul.html> [access: 08.03.2013].

The position of women had been changing throughout history, regardless of the period: in Tsarist Russia, in the era of Communism and during the independent Republic of Tajikistan. This means that they have developed specific skills and have developed mechanisms to adapt to life in a changing environment. The formation of the contemporary woman's role or position occurred as a result of long-lasting and gradual change, but it should be noted that the ongoing civil war and unrest (1992–1997) of nearly 5 years had a definite formative impact on their current stance.

A contemporary Tajik woman is living on the borderline of two unrelated worlds. She is somehow suspended between the clan along with ancestral traditions, religion and the contemporary, global world with its access to modern solutions. While the period of communism led to marginalization of religious life, the traditional ancestral clan system remained relatively intact. After 1991 there has been a revival of religious practices, which, however, failed to return the social order destroyed in 1921. Factors that have played the role of catalysts in the formation of the woman's role in contemporary Tajikistan are the interrelating waves of feminism: the first, primary wave, strongly associated with women's suffrage movement and the third, representing the gender existing at present time. The function of the second wave of feminism was assumed by communism, which "liberated women from the shackles" of the traditional social role.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the position of women in contemporary Tajikistan depends largely on the influence of geographical and cultural factors as well as religious traditions and deeply rooted mentality. The processes of transformation are at full speed, but the time needed to provide education, overcome poverty and the traditional gender role stereotype may be longer-lasting than in other nations with less culturally rooted customary roles. With all the assistance of NGOs and the Western world, women of Tajikistan obtain opportunities to be professionally active and stop relying on men's or state's support. They are at the beginning of the road; however, if women are able to become liberated from economic oppression they will gain an opportunity to influence their own destinies.