

COUNTRY BRIEFING PAPER

**WOMEN AND
GENDER RELATIONS IN
TAJIKISTAN**

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This publication is one of a series prepared by a consultant in conjunction with the Programs Department and Social Development Division (SOCD), Office of Environment and Social Development, Asian Development Bank (ADB). The purpose of the series is to provide information on the status and role of women to assist ADB staff in formulating country programming work and project design and implementation.

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List of Abbreviations

ACTED	— Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
ADB	— Asian Development Bank
ADTA	— advisory technical assistance
AKF	— Aga Khan Foundation
CARs	— Central Asian republics
CBT	— community based targeting
CCP	— cash compensation program
EBRD	— European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EU	— European Union
FFW	— food-for-work
FHH	— female-headed household
FSU	— Former Soviet Union
GAA	— German Agro Action
GBAO	— Gorno-Badakhshan
GDI	— Gender-related Development Index
GDP	— gross domestic product
HDI	— Human Development Index
ILO	— International Labour Organisation
IOS	— interim operational strategy
ISCO	— international standard classification of occupation
MHH	— male-headed household
MSP	— Ministry of Social Protection
NGO	— nongovernment organization
NPAAW	— National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women
RRS	— Regions of Republican Subordination
SSA	— State Statistical Agency
STD	— sexually transmitted disease
TA	— technical assistance
TFR	— Total fertility rate
TJR _s	— Tajikistan ruble
TLSS	— Tajikistan Living Standards Survey
UNDP	— United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	— United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	— United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	— United Nations High Commission on Refugees
UNICEF	— United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	— United States Agency for International Development
VAW	— violence against women
WHO	— World Health Organization
WID	— women in development

Executive Summary

At Independence in 1991, Tajikistan was the poorest of all the Soviet Republics, with a GDP per capita of just over \$2,000. Despite this, the country had relatively high human development indicators, reflecting the legacy of social development achieved during the Soviet period. Life expectancy at birth averaged 70 years and adult literacy was almost universal. Since Independence, Tajikistan has experienced a major reversal in both economic and social development. The economic upheaval accompanying transition from a planned to a market-led economy, and the disruption of traditional trading partnerships and the withdrawal subsidies from Moscow following the break-up of the former Soviet Union, has resulted in a dramatic drop in GDP and government expenditure. In addition, the country experienced a civil war in 1992-1993, followed by a long period of civil unrest.

Under the Soviet system, women enjoyed equal civic rights to men. The levels of labor force participation of Tajik women was high and political representation was higher than in most western European countries. However, they have been adversely affected by the lack of personal security following the war, and the economic impoverishment and declining participation accompanying both war and economic transition. The transition has severely affected industries that employ a high proportion of women (textiles, manufacturing, agriculture), causing them to be among the first to lose their jobs. Other sectors where women predominate, such as health and education, are those where wages have been least likely to have been paid. The collapse of the state social safety net has exacerbated the number of women and families living in poverty, while the loss of quotas guaranteeing equal representation in political and governmental bodies has increasingly kept them out of decision-making positions. Furthermore, women and girls are increasingly facing discrimination in access to education and health care services. There is a growing awareness of the gendered nature of transition within Tajikistan. However, urgent action needs to be taken to prevent losing all the advances gained by women under the Soviet system, and to ensure that both women and men have access to the opportunities afforded within the emerging economic and social systems.

A. Transition and changing gender roles in the private and public spheres

The roles modern Tajik women occupy within society are influenced both by the recent Soviet experience, with its strong emphasis on gender equality in the public sphere, and traditional Tajik values where women played a central role in the private sphere of the family. Since Independence, traditional cultural and social values have enjoyed a renaissance. Although Tajikistan remains a secular state, there has been a revival of Islamic practices. It is too early to assess the impact of this on gender roles. However, there has been a marked withdrawal of women from political life. Economic transition has also resulted in the discontinuation of many of the state structures and benefits that supported women in combining their reproductive and productive roles, such as universal child allowances, and

extensive child care facilities. The balance between women's roles in the public and private spheres achieved during the Soviet period appears to be changing and many of the advances that were gained with regard to gender equality during the Soviet period are now at risk.

Changes in the family and household formation

Tajikistan has a relatively young and rapidly growing population, with 48 percent of the population aged under 18 and a rate of natural population increase of just under 2 percent per annum. Traditionally, the Tajik family had many children. There is, however, clear evidence that women have adjusted their reproductive behavior in direct response to the economic hardships currently facing most families. Since 1991, the total fertility rate has fallen by nearly 1.5 births, to 3.6 in 1997. There has also been a decline in the marriage rate, related to increased uncertainty due to the renewal of conflict and to the lack of financial resources. Both of these trends in a traditional agrarian country like Tajikistan, which places a high value on marriage and children, highlight a population under economic and social stress.

Violence against women

Violence during the civil war. Violence against all citizens within Tajikistan was intensified beyond all reason during the civil war in 1992-1993 and the subsequent period of civil unrest. While the vast majority of deaths during this period were to men, women were also subject to pernicious forms of violence, including rape, torture, and verbal abuse. There are an estimated 55,000 orphans and 20,000 widows as a direct result of the war. This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of female-headed households. The increase in the number of young, often childless widows, has resulted in the revitalization of the tradition, banned during the Soviet period, of Tajik Muslim men taking a second wife. Although still illegal, officials have often turned a blind eye as this has been seen as one solution to the problem of a shortage of men of marriageable age. Many women's nongovernment organizations (NGOs) are increasingly concerned about the vulnerable position of second wives and their children who have no legal status and no rights to protection under the law.

The legacy of the civil war is still marked in certain regions of the country, and fear of harassment has restricted girls' access to school. There has been little recognition of the long-term physical and psychological impact of the war on the population. Tajikistan still lacks trained personnel in trauma counselling and there has been no large-scale effort as has been seen elsewhere in post-conflict situations.

Violence within the home. Violence against women (VAW) and girl children continues to be a problem within Tajikistan. A recent survey found that two thirds of Tajik women are regularly exposed to some form of violence (including physical, psychological, and economic violence) within the home. Increased economic stress and tension at the household level has placed greater pressure on the relations between women and men and manifested itself in increased violence. Recent qualitative research indicates that nearly half of women thought that economic stress had led to more arguments and tensions within the household

and 36 percent of women reported an increase in violence against women, mainly linked to the frustrations that men felt with unemployment and the lack of income.

The Government has recently recognized the problem of VAW and the National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women includes the prevention of all forms of VAW as one of its six central themes. However, the majority of women reported that they would not report rape or assault to the militia or seek medical aid. Trust in the ability of the police and the judiciary to take such cases seriously is still very low.

Women and the Public Domain

One of the biggest transformations in gender roles in Tajikistan has been the withdrawal of women from public life. Political and economic transition has been accompanied by an increase in gender inequality in the political, economic, and social spheres.

Political representation. Strict quotas by gender ensured that women's representative participation during the Soviet period was high by international standards. However, since Independence, there has been a dramatic change in the gender balance within politics in Tajikistan. Women have all but disappeared from the national political map, contributing just 3 percent of parliamentary deputies and 7 percent of senior posts within government ministries. At the regional level of government the position is not much better. Only five women head the administrations of cities and regions (*hukumats*), although women hold positions as deputy chairs in 45 of the total 64 local administrations. Women also head 28 of the country's 342 village (*jamoat*) councils. On a positive note, it should be recognized that those women who are elected have now been elected in their own right and may therefore be more effective than the cosmetically high "quota" in the past.

Civil society. Women have also increasingly found an alternative voice in the political life of Tajikistan through their activity in new nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Women constitute 35 percent of the heads of all NGOs, compared with only 3 percent of Parliamentarians.

There is a small but growing network of women's NGOs, under the coordination of the governmental Women in Development Bureau, which is committed to the advancement of the status of women in Tajikistan. However, although there is a strong sense of dedication among women's NGOs to address gender issues, there remains a fundamental lack of capacity—both in terms of the skills that are necessary to design and implement projects and for effective advocacy, and a chronic shortage of financial resources.

Gender and the labor market

Under communism, the Constitution guaranteed the right to employment for every able-bodied individual of working age and the right to equal pay for equal work among men and work. There was no formal unemployment and, in common with other countries of the

former Soviet Union, women in Tajikistan were actively engaged in almost all sectors of the labor market. Women enjoyed generous formal and informal benefits related to child care responsibilities and many state-run enterprises had nurseries, kindergartens, and health facilities. In 1991, women made up 40 percent of the Tajik labor force.

The transition to a market economy has meant that many of the old certainties have now been removed. Jobs are no longer guaranteed. Secure state jobs are being eliminated and where they do continue, pay is often months in arrears. Child care facilities are being closed down, leaving women to bear the burden of both family and work.

Women and the formal labor market. In contrast to elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, women's formal labor market participation in Tajikistan has fallen less than men's, with the result that their share in the total labor force has actually risen over the last decade. However, women remain concentrated in the lowest paid sectors of agriculture, education and health where wages are now paid at a level insufficient to live on. In 1998, nearly 30 percent of women were employed in agriculture, with an average monthly wage of just \$6 a month. The social services, health and education, accounted for a further four out of every 10 women employees, and wages in these sectors averaged between \$5 and \$7 a month. Furthermore, even these low wages are often not being paid. Over one third of employees report suffering from significant wage arrears.

Women also experience higher levels of unemployment than men. A recent World Bank survey estimated that a third of the economically active population is unemployed (including hidden unemployment and involuntary and discouraged workers). Unemployment was highest among people aged 16-19, with over half of both young women and men unemployed. Active labor market policies to address youth unemployment are urgently needed if Tajikistan is not to lose a generation of workers.

Women as economic leaders. Prior to Independence, women were rarely found in key economic positions such as the director of large state enterprises, and this remains the case today. The low representation of women in senior economic positions is the result of discrimination, direct and indirect, combined with traditional views about the appropriate roles for men and women in society.

Women as new "entrepreneurs"—Access to credit. There has been little systematic study of the Tajik labor market and new forms of economic activity. Although there are some slight gender differentials, the available data do *not* indicate that women face significantly greater barriers in taking up self-employment as compared to men. However, the type of private sector activity does vary by gender, with the majority of women in the non-state sector working in family businesses based on trade. Many of these are engaged in the sale in local bazaars of food and other products produced by the household or in the resale of products purchased from local collective farms. In contrast, men are nearly twice as likely as women to be engaged in (more lucrative) private companies. Factors that limit women's ability to

engage in new private business initiatives include lack of relevant entrepreneurial skills, access to capital, and gender discrimination.

The gendered division of unpaid labor. Despite the advances of women in the public sphere during the Soviet period, women continue to bear most, if not all, of the burden of unpaid work within the household. Now, with the closure of state-run kindergartens, and the increasing reliance on the consumption of home-produced foodstuffs, unpaid work in the home has increased rather than diminished with the result that women are bearing the heaviest burden of economic transition. There has been an intensification of women's workload with increasing participation in both formal and informal labor markets alongside an unequal household division of labor.

B. Changes in the social sectors: The human cost of transition

At Independence, Tajikistan inherited a well-established system of social services, including education, health, and social protection. Since 1992, however, the social sectors have suffered from severe financial constraints. Total spending on the social sectors in 1998 amounted to just over 7 percent of GDP, compared with 20 percent in 1992. The challenge now is to maintain the country's human development inheritance. This inheritance is under threat both from reduced supply and increasing barriers to access among the poor. Since women and children are the main beneficiaries of social spending, it is likely that this will have a gendered impact.

Declining Education

Basic Education. Universal access to free basic education is a key element of children's rights. The guarantee of such universal access was a notable achievement of the Soviet system and at Independence, Tajikistan had almost universal literacy. Since Independence, there has been growing evidence of a reversal in educational attainment. School enrolments have dropped and there is evidence of a growing gender gap. A recent survey found that 89 percent of boys aged 12-16 in urban areas were enrolled compared with 75 percent of girls; and in rural areas the enrolment rate was 90 percent for boys compared with 80 percent of girls.

Furthermore, a third of children aged 7-15 reported that they had been absent from school for two or more weeks during the last academic year and there was a clear relationship with the household's financial well-being and ability to pay for textbooks, uniforms, etc. This raises a number of issues for policymakers. The deterioration in access to education has so far been mainly tackled from the supply-side factors and ADB is supporting school improvements and capacity building. However, it is also important to look at the demand side and the barriers and constraints facing the poor in accessing education, and the factors causing high absence rates. Guaranteeing continued access to basic education for all, including girls, must remain a priority of the Government of Tajikistan.

Postcompulsory education. The proportion of teenagers aged 15-18 in education has fallen from over 50 percent in 1990 to 36 percent in 1998 and there have been significant gender disparities within this decline. There are now just 63 girls per 100 boys in general secondary schools, whereas in 1990 there were 104 girls per 100 boys. There is also a clear pattern of subject segregation between the sexes, with girls much more likely to study subjects related to health care and education, while boys are more likely to study industry, agriculture, and business related subjects.

The gender gap in higher education has also widened, from 58 girls per 100 boys in 1990 to just 34 in 1998. Urgent action is needed to halt the widening chasm between the educational achievement of boys and girls. While the highest priority is rightly being given to basic education, it is also essential to focus on the technical and vocational training of both boys and girls.

Deteriorating health and health care

At independence, Tajikistan inherited a complex but inefficient health care system characterized by substantial excess human and physical infrastructure. There has been a steady decrease in public spending on health during the transition period. Health expenditure as a percent of GDP has dropped from 6.4 percent in 1994 to 1.5 percent in 1999. These considerable reductions have eroded the capacity of the health system to provide effective and accessible medical care to the public. At the same time there has been a re-emergence and upsurge in the incidence of infectious diseases, notably malaria, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, and measles, as well as respiratory and intestinal infection, reflecting declining health status (and poor water/sanitation), particularly in young children who are most vulnerable to these conditions.

Children have been among those hit hardest by deteriorating living conditions. Several major nutrition/anthropometry surveys have been carried out since 1994, and the results indicate a steady deterioration in nutritional status. There is some evidence that girl children are more malnourished than boys. There is also evidence that mothers are cutting back on their own nutritional intake to ensure there is food for their children.

Women's health status. High birth rates, high rates of maternal and infant mortality, relatively large numbers of abortions, and rising prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) all contribute to low women's health status. This is compounded by the growing incidence of informal charges for health care services, which are predominantly used by women and children. There is evidence that poor women are increasingly giving birth at home without medical assistance as one way to reduce the costs associated with childbirth, a factor that may be contributing to high maternal morbidity and mortality.

Inadequate Social Protection

Prior to Independence, there was a comprehensive system of social welfare benefits. With a guarantee of full employment, unemployment was unknown. For those unable to work, there was an extensive system of invalidity and old age benefits, and for families with young children, there were generous child benefits. Coverage of benefits was universal and almost every household was eligible for at least one. In addition to cash benefits, there were numerous "benefits-in-kind" including free preschool and child care, free or heavily subsidized holiday camps, subsidized housing and utilities, free cultural and sport facilities, and generous maternity leaves.

Over the last decade, the ability of the Government to fund social protection has been severely curtailed. Today, there are just two main types of social protection benefit in Tajikistan: a means-tested cash compensation program (CCP) offering social assistance type benefits to poor families; and pensions providing social insurance type benefits to the elderly, disabled, and bereaved. Women and children have been particularly hard hit by the collapse of the inherited system of social security benefits as universal family benefits were often a significant part of the household resources controlled by women.

In May 1999, less than 1 percent of households in Tajikistan were actually receiving anything from the CCP—the main poverty alleviation benefit. This is despite the fact that 19 percent of the population were thought to be eligible. Furthermore, the benefits from the CCP were being paid at a level insufficient to lift families and older people out of poverty. Its nominal value has remained unchanged since March 1996 and in autumn 1999, the monthly payment of TJR500 barely covered the cost of two loaves of bread, or less than 2 percent of the minimum consumption basket of TJR32,083. As a result, low-income households with children are offered little protection by the State against falling into poverty.

The pension system is functioning somewhat better than the cash compensation system, but significant problems remain with arrears and the average value of pensions is too low to maintain individuals without alternative forms of support. Family ties, traditional institutions, and local cultural identity remain crucial factors in providing social support. However, there is evidence that traditional social support networks are coming under strain as more and more pressure is put upon them. Tajikistan remains critically dependent upon the humanitarian support of the world community. It is estimated that in 1999 Tajikistan's food deficit amounted to 360,000 million tons out of an overall need of between 800,000 and 850,000 million tons. At the beginning of 1999, there were almost 1.4 million beneficiaries receiving food aid.

C. Gender and Poverty

Both the causes and outcomes of poverty are heavily engendered and women and girls have borne a greater share of the cost of economic transition. Women often assume responsibility for "making ends meet" when real income falls. This has resulted in the intensification of

women's workloads with increasing participation in formal and, more importantly, informal labor markets alongside an unequal household division of labor. Efforts to care for and protect their children have diverted many women away from the political process with the result that their political representation is now virtually nonexistent. Large cuts in social service programs such as health care, family planning, child care, and education have also disproportionately affected women with long-term implications for their entitlements, capabilities, and rights.

Material Poverty

The first nationally representative survey of household living standards in Tajikistan, was carried out in May 1999. According to the results of this survey two thirds of the population live below the World Bank poverty line of purchasing power parity (PPP) \$2.15 a day and a third live below the "extreme" poverty line set by the Tajik State Statistical Agency at around 30 percent of the value of the minimum subsistence basket.

The results of the survey do not seem to show any significant difference in the poverty rates for men and women in Tajikistan. However, in common with traditional economic approaches, poverty is defined here by the expenditure of the *household* and as such involves the implicit assumption that resources are distributed equally within the household and all members share the same standard of living. Evidence suggests that this is rarely the case in reality and that statistics based on household measures may *underestimate* the true extent to which women are affected by poverty.

Female-headed households face particular problems. The civil war created approximately 25,000 female-headed households, predominately in Khatlon and Garm. Some women lost their husbands during the war. Others lost their husbands to emigration. Female-headed households have less access to land, irrigation and livestock. They are also less food secure, but receive more humanitarian assistance. Even with this assistance, their monthly income is less than male-headed households.

Household Coping Strategies

Women and their families are using a range of different strategies to help them survive on limited resources. Worryingly over time, there appears to be *increasing* use of reductive, depleting, and maintaining strategies that are not sustainable in the longer term. Over a quarter of all households had sold assets in the last month, and a third had to borrow from relatives, friends, and neighbors. Furthermore, even among the most well-off households, nearly 30 percent reported having reduced the number of meals a day and a similar proportion reported eating smaller portions. This rose to over 60 percent among the poorest households.

Much of the burden of survival falls on women. Qualitative research found that women worry more than men about the everyday problems of managing food in the household, and are more prepared to ask others for help, and to consider trading and other activities that could generate income to buy food for the household. Poverty reduction strategies that are sensitive to the gendered nature of poverty and that empower women to maximize their existing entitlements, enhance their capabilities, and facilitate their participation in political, economic, and civil society are essential.