

## KEY POINTS

- Women's access to transport development benefits is often limited in rural Tajikistan because of deeply rooted intrafamilial hierarchies and limited opportunities for women's participation in activities outside their homes.
- Recent transport projects in Tajikistan include activities for promoting women's exposure outside their homes and enhancing their socioeconomic capacity. However, the project design often fails to capture and address the interlinked structural constraints hindering women's empowerment.
- It is essential to include women's empowerment activities in transport projects to enhance their socioeconomic capacity. To enhance such effects sustainably, extra efforts are needed at the project design stage to improve benefits for women. The project design should consider societal and intrafamilial contexts in addition to the project contents.

## Challenges to Women's Economic Empowerment in Rural Tajikistan: A Study from Road Projects

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## INTRODUCTION

This policy brief examines the effectiveness of women's economic empowerment activities in improving women's livelihoods in Tajikistan.<sup>1</sup> Tajikistan is a landlocked country located in the central part of Central Asia, and its poverty rate in 2019 was 26.3%.<sup>2</sup> The country's economy relies on remittances from emigrant workers, equivalent to 33.4% of its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021.<sup>3</sup> The male population in rural areas tend to move outside their localities to earn remittances, while their female family members stay in their areas and perform household responsibilities, including agricultural activities, to maintain their family members' livelihoods and ownership.<sup>4</sup> Such family-based farming is usually unpaid.

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<sup>2</sup> ADB. 2023. *Basic 2023 Statistics*. Manila. The percentage refers to the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line in 2019.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank. World Bank Open Data: Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)—Tajikistan (accessed 21 April 2023).

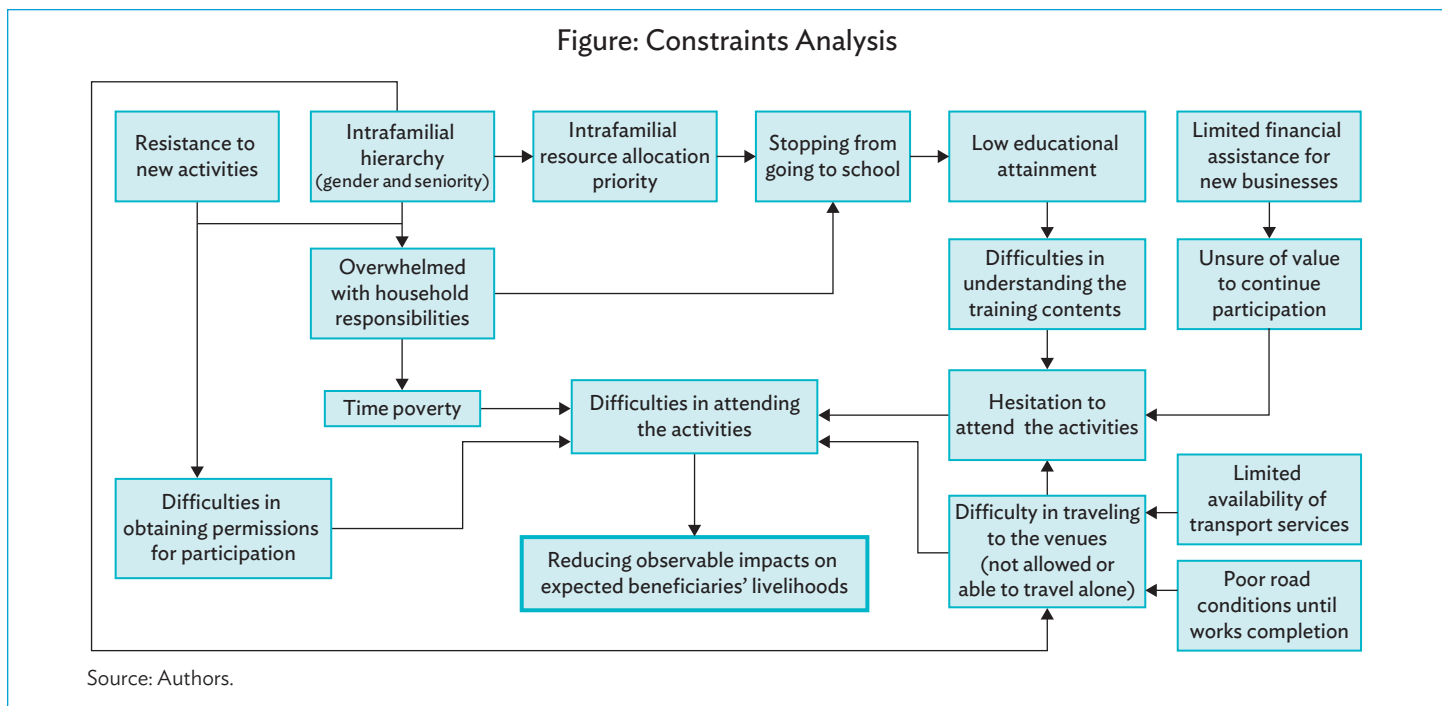
<sup>4</sup> S. Kan and R. E. Aytimur. 2019. Labor Force Participation of Women Left behind in Tajikistan. *Oxford Development Studies*. 47 (1). pp. 1–28; and ADB. 2020. *A Study of Women's Role in Irrigated Agriculture in the Lower Vakhsh River Basin, Tajikistan*. Manila.

Tajikistan was ranked 125th among 157 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index in 2021.<sup>5</sup> This relatively low rank is primarily attributable to the low female participation in the economic and political spheres, as evidenced by the following figures: women’s labor participation rate is 30.7% against that of men (52.3%); women occupy only 14.8% of legislators, and senior or managerial positions against that of men (85.2%); and 41.1% of women are engaged in professional and technical jobs, whereas 58.9% of men work in such jobs. The gender gap in educational attainment could explain this—for example, in 2017, 16.9% of men above 25 years of age completed a bachelor’s degree or equivalent higher educational program, whereas only 6.8% of women above 25 years of age did the same.<sup>6</sup> These illustrate women’s limited participation in job markets. Thus, the country’s gender issues are highly structural and contextual.

International financial institutions assist developing countries in strengthening transport infrastructure and networks, aiming to promote economic development and improve people’s livelihoods. However, empirical evidence shows that women often benefit less from transport infrastructure development than men. This is attributable to expectations and constraints on

women’s behaviors and activities, which are deeply rooted in their societies. Women tend to engage in a range of household duties inside and outside their houses, resulting in the complication of their travel needs and patterns;<sup>7</sup> social and cultural norms constrain their activities outside their homes or community;<sup>8</sup> and available transport modes are limited because of the low ownership of driving licenses and limited economic capacities to purchase personal travel modes, while the use of public transport infrastructure and service is also ridden with safety concerns.<sup>9</sup> Economic empowerment activities targeting women are often included in transport projects to address these challenges and enhance the projects’ benefits for women.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has incorporated activities for empowering women in road projects in Tajikistan since 2010. To assess the effects of such activities, ADB conducted post-project surveys for three completed projects in 2022. The surveys confirmed the positive effects of these activities on beneficiaries’ livelihoods. On the other hand, the surveys also identified issues rooted in the projects’ areas and potential beneficiaries’ families, which affected women’s participation in the activities and hindered the realization of expected benefits. These constraints were structural and interlinked, as presented in the following figure:



<sup>5</sup> World Economic Forum. 2021. *Global Gender Gap Report 2021: Insight Report*. Geneva. Some indicators demonstrating gender disparity in the country were not available in the *Global Gender Gap Report 2023: Insight Report*, published in June 2023. This policy brief, thus, refers to the report of 2021.  
<sup>6</sup> CEIC. Tajikistan Education Statistics (accessed 25 August 2023).  
<sup>7</sup> F. Leach. 2000. Gender Implications of Development Agency Policies on Education and Training. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 20 (4). pp. 333–347.  
<sup>8</sup> J. Turner et al. 1998. *Users Not Losers: Gender Representation in Transport Design and Operation*. Paper presented at the 8th World Conference on Transport Research. Antwerp, Belgium. 12–16 July.  
<sup>9</sup> T. P. Uteng and J. Turner. 2019. Addressing the Linkages between Gender and Transport in Low- and Middle-Income Countries. *Sustainability*. 11 (17). 4555.

## POST-PROJECT IMPACT SURVEY

From May to June 2022, a survey was conducted in the areas of three completed road projects in Tajikistan:

1. Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Corridor 3 (Dushanbe–Uzbekistan Border) Improvement Project (implementation period: 2010–2017),<sup>10</sup>
2. CAREC Corridor 6 (Ayni–Uzbekistan Border Road) Improvement Project (implementation period: 2012–2017),<sup>11</sup> and
3. CAREC Corridors 3 and 5 Enhancement Project (implementation period: 2013–2018).<sup>12</sup>

The gender action plan (GAP) for project 1 included activities such as (i) civil rights training for women in some project areas; (ii) provision of legal advice by trained female lawyers in the concerned district branches of the National Committee for Women and Family Affairs (CWFA);<sup>13</sup> and (iii) training in business development; grant proposal writing; financial management; and business-related skills such as cheese making, baking, sewing, and tailoring. Approximately 300 women participated in these training sessions.<sup>14</sup>

In the GAP of project 2, the following were included: (i) improving road safety for male and female travelers and safe access to schools for girls, (ii) developing a gender-sensitive border-crossing point, (iii) enhancing benefits for women from improved highways, (iv) providing an enabling environment for women to start a business, and (v) improving public transportation for women travelers.<sup>15</sup> This study focuses mainly on components (iii) and (iv). Approximately 200 women attended civil rights training, and about 100 women were trained in business development, financial literacy, business plan preparation, and prevention of HIV and AIDS.

Activities in project 3 included training in business development, financial literacy, and awareness of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted disease (STD). The training was designed based on the outcomes of a needs assessment with potential participants, such as women in the project area, and items specified in the project's GAP, such as awareness of HIV/AIDS/STDs, were also considered. More than 1,000 women residing in the project area participated in this training.<sup>16</sup>

## SURVEY METHODOLOGIES

The survey consisted of three parts: (i) individual interviews with stakeholders involved in implementation, including local authorities; (ii) focus group discussions (FGDs) with participants in the economic empowerment training; and (iii) FGDs with the male family members of training participants.

The individual interviews covered interviewees' responsibilities, institutional arrangements, engagement of women in project areas' community, interviewees' post-project socioeconomic conditions, challenges observed during implementation, and lessons and recommendations for future road projects. The FGDs with the training participants focused on socioeconomic conditions of their locality, project road conditions and local populations' patterns of using the roads, motivation to participate in the training, family members' reactions to their participation in the training, challenges they faced during implementation, participants' post-project situations, and recommendations for future projects of similar nature. Another set of questions was prepared for FGDs with training participants' family members to gather their perspectives on their female family members' participation in the training and changes in their locality after the road improvement under the case projects. The number of participants is summarized in the following table (see next page):

<sup>10</sup> This section was developed based on ADB. 2010. *Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors: Proposed Grant to the Republic of Tajikistan for the CAREC Corridor 3 (Dushanbe–Uzbekistan Border) Improvement Project*. Manila; and ADB. 2017. *Project Completion Report for the CAREC Corridor 3 (Dushanbe–Uzbekistan Border) Improvement Project*. Manila.

<sup>11</sup> This section was developed based on ADB. 2012. *Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors: Proposed Grant and Administration of Loan to the Republic of Tajikistan for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridor 6 (Ayni–Uzbekistan Border Road) Improvement*. Manila; and ADB. 2018. *Project Completion Report for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridor 6 (Ayni–Uzbekistan Border Road) Improvement Project*. Manila.

<sup>12</sup> This section was developed based on ADB. 2013. *Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors: Proposed Grant to the Republic of Tajikistan for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridors 3 and 5 Enhancement Project*. Manila; and ADB. 2021. *Project Completion Report for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridors 3 and 5 Enhancement Project*. Manila.

<sup>13</sup> The CWFA is responsible for implementing national policies on protecting women's interests and rights in Tajikistan and promoting gender equality, as well as monitoring Tajikistan's compliance with international standards.

<sup>14</sup> A total of 202 women participated in business development training, while 100 women attended vocational skills training. ADB. 2017. *Project Completion Report for the CAREC Corridor 3 (Dushanbe–Uzbekistan Border) Improvement Project*. Manila.

<sup>15</sup> The project's GAP was included in ADB. 2012. *Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors: Proposed Grant and Administration of Loan to the Republic of Tajikistan for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridor 6 (Ayni–Uzbekistan Border Road) Improvement*. Manila.

<sup>16</sup> There were 755 women who attended trainings on human and property rights, whereas 454 participated in business-related training. These numbers include participants in events held along the Sayron–Karamyk section. ADB. 2021. *Project Completion Report for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridors 3 and 5 Enhancement Project*. Manila

Table: Participants in the Impact Assessment Survey

Project	Number of Interviewees	Number of FGDs	FGD Participants	
			Women	Men
Project 1: CAREC Corridor 3 (Dushanbe–Uzbekistan Border) Improvement Project	3 <sup>a</sup>	4	25	5
Project 2: CAREC Corridor 6 (Ayni–Uzbekistan Border Road) Improvement Project	4 <sup>a</sup>	4	22	4
Project 3: CAREC Corridors 3 and 5 Enhancement Project <sup>b</sup>	3	4	24	5
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>9<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>12</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>14</b>

CAREC = Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, FGD = focus group discussion.

<sup>a</sup> One interviewee was involved in implementing projects 1 and 2.

<sup>b</sup> Only the Vose–Khovaling section was studied for this paper.

Source: Authors.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

There are common findings from interview surveys and FGDs with participants in training aimed at economic empowerment under the three projects and their male family members.

**Positive impact on participants' livelihoods.** Women who attended the economic empowerment training expressed excitement and appreciation for the opportunity to acquire new knowledge. They highlighted the rarity of such training opportunities in rural areas and believed the training would benefit their livelihoods. According to one male participant in the FGDs for project 3, he encouraged his daughter to participate in the training because she had not completed secondary education, and he recognized the value of continuous learning to enrich his daughter's life.

**Synergetic effects between road improvements and economic empowerment.** The improved road conditions contributed to promoting women's mobility around the project areas. Before the road improvement, women relied on male family members to accompany them for security and safety reasons when traveling outside their villages. However, with the improved roads, women could travel more frequently and independently to visit relatives, friends, and shops. Some of them used these roads for selling products and/or buying materials at markets outside their villages for businesses, after attending the economic empowerment training. FGD participants for projects 2 and 3 reported that public transportation services, such as taxis and minibuses, started operating at reasonable rates after the road improvements, contributing to saving time and expenses on their daily travels.

**Financial resources for starting new businesses.** Under project 1, ADB provided grants to women selected based on their proposals to start new businesses. Around 240 proposals were submitted, and a selection committee—chaired by the CWFA and composed of representatives from relevant government agencies and project stakeholders—evaluated these proposals. As a result, 137 women in the project area received grants from the project for starting new businesses,<sup>17</sup> such as sewing, fast-food kiosks, bakeries, greenhouses, and livestock raising.<sup>18</sup> FGD participants who had received grant funds confirmed that such an opportunity resulted in the attainment of economic independence and income augmentation, and sustained the livelihoods of their family members. It was further learned that some FGD participants provided employment opportunities for other women in their village. Moreover, the women who did well with their businesses also reported increased status among their families. Meanwhile, there was no grant provision under projects 2 and 3. After the training under the projects, some training participants were willing to start businesses and developed business plans to improve their livelihoods. They had to apply for private bank loans or presidential grants,<sup>19</sup> but not all participants showed interest in loan or grant applications.

**Barriers to women's participation in economic empowerment training in the project areas.** Deeply rooted intrafamilial hierarchies posed challenges to women's participation in economic empowerment training. Women in the project areas were burdened with numerous household responsibilities and were expected to prioritize those tasks over engaging in additional activities. This has been more critically observed in younger generations who faced supervision from male family members and, if married, their mother-in-law. These family members were not supportive

<sup>17</sup> As per the project completion report, the grant recipients started a variety of businesses such as entrepreneurial activities; livestock and poultry farming; processing fruits and vegetables; operating shops, kiosks, and canteens; beekeeping; greenhouse businesses; party rental services; and pillow or bed décor business. ADB. 2017. *Project Completion Report for the CAREC Corridor 3 (Dushanbe–Uzbekistan Border) Improvement Project*. Manila.

<sup>18</sup> During FGDs in Gissor and Tursunzoda, it was reported that the livestock-raising business was challenging from the perspective of operational sustainability because the business could not be sustained if livestock died or livestock breeding did not go well.

<sup>19</sup> Government of Tajikistan. 2021. *Rules for Allocating Grants from the President of the Republic of Tajikistan to Support and Develop Women's Entrepreneurship for 2021–2025*. Decree No. 5. Adopted on 28 January 2021.

of their female family members' participation in the training related to new economic activities because of concerns about associated risks, such as debts, and the belief that household duties of female family members should always take precedence. Nongovernment organizations (NGOs) involved in the implementation and local government representatives, such as those from the Units for Women and Family Affairs (UWFAs), tried to address these barriers by visiting family members who opposed their female family members' participation in the training and explaining the training's anticipated benefits to their livelihoods.

**Challenges posed in economic enhancement training by limited educational attainment.** During the interview survey for project 2, the NGO mentioned that participants who were economically disadvantaged, disabled, or single mothers faced challenges applying the knowledge acquired during the training, and their livelihoods remained unchanged. Meanwhile, one FGD participant for project 3 mentioned that training programs might be complicated for those who had not completed secondary education or did not have experience in relevant economic opportunities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of women's economic empowerment components in future projects are as follows:

**Comprehend intrafamilial hierarchy.** Understanding and addressing the influence of intrafamilial hierarchies on women's participation is crucial. An intrafamilial hierarchy was found to be a determinant of women's participation in the project areas. A possible measure is to make target groups more specific and tailor training programs to the target groups' interests and availability to promote regular participation and comprehensive learning. Advance consultation with the target groups' family members is also essential. The availability of safe travel modes was an important factor of consideration for the male family members. It is thus suggested to include assistance in promoting transport services and implementing economic empowerment training for women under road projects.

**Address possible limited educational attainment.** A critical issue found through FGDs was that young women in the project areas had limited access to educational opportunities and exposure to new knowledge. This could be explained by resource allocation decisions among family members. In Tajikistan, compulsory education is free and mandatory until the ninth grade. However, parents are expected to pay for school uniforms, educational materials, commutes to and from school, and other expenses required for regular school operations.

When resources for children's education are limited, parents often prioritize their son's education over that of their daughters because girls and young women are expected to help take care of household duties and, eventually, leave their houses upon marriage. Sons are expected to become breadwinners for their parents and family and, thus, must complete their education to position themselves better in formal job markets.<sup>20</sup> These are the outcome of the patriarchal nature of society, which is often more widely predominant in rural areas. Hence, training programs for women should be designed with consideration of the target groups' educational backgrounds and interests, ensuring their continuous engagement. Women's limited exposure to educational or training programs would affect their children's educational attainment, as empirically evidenced.<sup>21</sup> Breaking the cycle of limited educational opportunities for rural women is crucial for the long-term economic development in the areas.

**Align training programs with market needs.** To improve local women's economic capacity effectively, it is essential to assess the needs of current markets and identify feasible approaches for helping women in rural areas acquire knowledge and skills to respond to such market needs. As the local government agency for project 2 mentioned, women in rural areas tend to sell the same products that are available at their place, resulting in high competition among themselves and low product prices. Another observation during the FGDs was that existing structural and cultural customs strongly influence the roles of men and women in society and impact the enjoyment of rights; most women, including educated women, have limited awareness of their rights as citizens.<sup>22</sup> Providing training that equips women with relevant skills and knowledge for business would help women design their businesses more efficiently and profitably. It is suggested to include training on legal rights to increase women's awareness and empower them to navigate their rights and available support systems.

**Conduct risk assessment and provide mitigation measures.** It was observed that some grant recipients were fragile to unexpected situations after project 1 was completed, particularly external shocks such as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Simultaneously, grant recipients' family members did not support their businesses for fear of such risks. In fact, some recipients had to abandon their businesses eventually. Thus, it is suggested to conduct business risk assessments and design risk management programs for entrepreneurs.

**Establish business consultation services.** Women's access to financial resources for new income-generation activities was limited to the project areas. In project 1, a grant was provided to selected women using secured ADB-financed project grants. This approach could be effective in the short term but not necessarily in the long term. Meanwhile, FGD participants for projects 2 and 3 informed that some had to give up their new businesses because

<sup>20</sup> P. Yakubova. 2020. The Effects of Traditional Gender Norms on the Fate of Girls' Education in Tajikistan. Doctoral dissertation. North Dakota State University.

<sup>21</sup> R. Thammaphornphilas. 2013. Impact of Household Factors on Youth's School Decisions in Thailand. *Economics of Education Review*. 37 (C). pp. 258–272.

<sup>22</sup> S. F. Hayat. 2019. *Gender, Enterprise and Markets in Tajikistan: Building Resilience, Empowering Lives*. Dushanbe/Oxford: Oxfam International.

of the unavailability of seed funds. It is, therefore, recommended to establish business support services to assist women who want to start and organize businesses after the training completion for their business sustainability. These services may include networking with existing entrepreneurs, coaching support, and advice on available financial support.

**Involve relevant authorities.** NGOs involved in the implementation of the projects' GAPs appreciated the engagement of the CWFA and UWFAs. During implementation, the UWFAs reached out to women in the project areas to encourage their participation in the training while having discussed with family members who were not supportive of their female family members' activities outside.

These agencies are expected to be integral to enhancing women's engagement in economic empowerment activities in rural Tajikistan.

**Conduct before- and after-training surveys.** Various implications were obtained for designing and implementing women's economic empowerment activities under future transport projects through post-implementation surveys for the three projects, which were completed at various timings. It is suggested to conduct baseline and post-training surveys during implementation (i) to identify the training effects that training participants and their family members perceived and (ii) to capture lessons from the implementation experience in a timely manner.

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