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GENDER ISSUES IN TAJIKISTAN : CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACT OF THE CIVIL WAR

*CONSÉQUENCES ET IMPACT DE LA GUERRE CIVILE :
PROBLÈMES DE GENRE AU TADJIKISTAN*

L'impact de la guerre civile au Tadjikistan a été énorme et ses conséquences continueront à être ressenties pendant un laps de temps considérable. Le fossé entre la position sociale des hommes et des femmes s'est creusé durant cette période (1992-1997) dans toutes les sphères – économique, politique, culturelle, familiale. Les rôles sociaux différenciés par genre dans la société tadjik sont en train de changer, mais le schéma traditionnel a encore la vie dure. Les phénomènes sociaux négatifs sont en augmentation : criminalité, violence, polygamie. Le rôle des femmes au sein des ONG est un élément transformateur de la société tadjik.

The Republic of Tajikistan – one of the new independent States of Central Asia (since 1991) – is currently engaged in a process of social, economic and political transition. This transition is very specific for several reasons. One of its peculiarities comes from the fact that during the Soviet times Tajikistan was one of the most backward republics in terms of social and economic development. Moreover, still in the course of its earliest independent years, the country is dealing with the consequences of the civil war that

destroyed the social, economic and political systems of its society. Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war have brought the country to the edge of catastrophe. After signing the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in 1997 the country entered the peace-building process.

The impact of the civil war on Tajikistan was enormous and its consequences will continue to be felt for a very long time. Among them:

- Human losses are 60,000 deaths (1% of the national population); 25,000 widows and 55,000 orphans.
- Material losses are estimated at a total amount of \$7 billion, which is almost 18 years' GDP at current level.
- Demographic changes: nearly 1 million persons – one out of every six Tajiks – were displaced by the war. More than 250,000 persons fled the country entirely, and 700,000 were internally displaced.
- Social relations disintegrated, mostly for religious and political reasons.
- Political processes of struggle between the new government and the opposition, followed by a process of reconciliation, reconstruction, and peace-building.
- Moral and psychological traumas (the growth of criminality and violence) (*Tajikistan Human Development Report 1996* : 12-16).

This situation has a strong impact on gender relations in the Tajik society. The gender gap widened in all spheres of life – economic, political, cultural, family. With the introduction of gender studies, Tajikistan is progressively understanding and formulating gender-sensitive development policies implemented by local researchers and professionals¹. At the same time several international experts are also investigating these issues².

1. Kuvatova & Khagai 1997 : 67-74; Khagai 1997; *Modern Woman...* 1998; Babajanov 1998; Olimova 1998; *Gender and Culture...* 1999; *School of*

Talking about gender issues in Tajikistan presupposes that we overcome the existing stereotype of the so-called "women's question". The social problems in Tajikistan concern both women and men, and their respective roles and responsibilities have to be understood before they are addressed. The prevailing social problems are not only women's problems, but also male concerns. In this respect gender relations crosscut all social and political institutions, culture, and way of thinking.

In Tajikistan, where 73% of the population live in rural areas, the main barrier to equal opportunities are the traditional stereotypes about female and male roles. Gender as social categories of women and men are differently constructed in the city than in the villages. Urban women had good results in fighting gender inequalities. In the city there are more opportunities for women to get secondary and professional education, to get a paid job (employment), to participate in the decision-making process, to access health services, etc.

The Gender Related Development Index (GDI) for Tajikistan is 0,524 (*National Status Report on Gender in Tajikistan 1999* : 106). Main statistical data show the disadvantages of women compared to men, in the fields of income, employment, leadership positions, high management positions in enterprises and university education. Unemployment rates among women are high. Especially in the rural areas where women only do household chores and take care for the members of family. Some are involved in unpaid labour at home. This traditional image of their unpaid non-productive labour at the household reproduces the steady stereotype of man as the breadwinner and woman as a dependent person. The absence of economic assessment of many forms of women's occupations explains their low social status. According to the data of a survey

Leadership for Women 1999; Avakova 1999; *Women's and Gender Studies...* 2000; *National Status Report...* 2000.

2. Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh 1996; Birkenes 1996; Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh 1998; *Violence against Women* 2000; Collete Harris 2000.

conducted in 1998 the work of 33,3% of women of working age in our country is not rewarded economically. (*Gender Statistics of the Republic of Tajikistan 1999* : 222-223).

During the armed conflict in Tajikistan (1992-1994) many women lost male relatives, i.e. protectors and breadwinners. Others saw their husbands become refugees and labour migrants. These women were forced to take up the burden of keeping their households going. Women started searching additional sources of income since their husbands were either in armed groups or refugees, or had no opportunity to move about freely because of the ongoing armed conflict. Trading in the market became a major occupation for many women as a form of survival, regardless of their educational and professional level. Women began to do jobs that were traditionally classified as male in Tajikistan, such as growing cereals and vegetables on private plots and gardens. In many regions where men left for Russia or other countries in search of an income, new responsibilities fell on women's shoulders. In general they handled this situation rather well.

Consequences of the civil war in Tajikistan together with the break-up of the traditional social organisation, and the increase of socio-economic difficulties during the post-conflict period created fertile grounds for the growth of criminality and violence in the community. Violence occurs in all spheres of women's life, from private to social, i.e. there is always a risk of being a victim of violence. Wife beating is a serious problem in both urban and rural areas. Many cases go unreported and many of those cases reported are not investigated. The problem of "domestic" and "psychological" violence has become salient in Tajikistan.

Social phenomena such as poverty, prostitution, drug addiction are affecting many women. In 1997 the share of female criminality grew from 12,5% to 14,5% (*Tajikistan. Human Development Report 1998* : 99). Women basically used to commit rape, theft and seldom murders, but in recent years, they have committed grave crimes: gangsterism, robberies, murders, and often in connec-

tion with narcotics trafficking. In 1993, 29 women were arrested on drug-related crimes, in 1994 – 47, in 1995 – 58, in 1996 – 66, in 1997 – 63 women (*Gender Statistics of the Republic of Tajikistan* 1999 : 214-216).

The stereotype that a woman should be under the protection of a man and the revival of Islam in the region has brought polygamy as a new phenomenon in Tajikistan. Today's reality shows that polygamy has become an everyday fact, due to the low economic status of women (absence of permanent work, low income). Many women cannot make their own living and are facing an uncertain future, and an absence of security. In the 1991-1998 period the number of officially registered marriages decreased 2.7 times. But this does not prove an actual decrease or an increase in extra-marital unions. Many marriages are sanctioned through a religious ceremony called "nikoh" with the agreement of the parents of the bride. This means that second or third wives have no legal rights as to joint property, inheritance or their part in case of divorce or death of husband. The full economic dependence and absence of legal rights deprive them of the opportunity to make choices concerning their social and economic activities.

Social and political life is slowly being reformed and a program of transition to the market economy is being elaborated. Women have played an increasingly important role in these processes, especially during the last five years. The number of women's organizations has grown from 3 in 1995 to 54 in 1998 (*Gender Statistics of the Republic of Tajikistan* 1999 : 14) and now there are more than 70 women's NGOs (Ministry of Justice 2000) working in all regions of Tajikistan. Women NGOs have proven to be the most active private organizations, as a result of the challenges women had to face during the transition period after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The female NGOs defined their missions in the following directions :

- promote the formation of the civil society through the comprehension of the role of a woman in the democratic reorganization ;

- enliven women's movement to ensure stable peace ;
- give equal possibilities for village women in all spheres of life, protect their interests and rights ;
- give women and girls law education ;
- organize various kinds of training with the purpose of increasing the activity of women in all spheres of socio-political and economic life ;
- support and develop female business ;
- increase the role of women in science, culture, (applied) arts and use their creative potential ;
- study the problems of violence against women and rehabilitation of victims of violence ;
- guarantee reproductive rights and reproductive education of the population.

Through their work they pursue an operational and a long-term goal. The first direction is restoring destroyed dwellings for the returning refugees and rendering assistance to children-orphans as well as support and help to families whose breadwinners died during the military conflict. The second direction is upholding the civil and political rights, the civil and legal education, training of women leaders, etc.

About half of the women's NGOs work hard to construct the civil society. These NGOs have set their priorities in reaction to the straightjacket of the traditional gender roles, which are reflected in all main structures of social life. As the rights of women extend, many of those women's problems that were considered private (such as cruelty, assault on the part of the husband) become concerns for the whole society. Gender injustice is particularly strong in rural areas. This fact is aggravated by poor communication, lack of access to information and education, by low mobility for rural women, poverty and other factors.

As the number of organizations has risen, qualitative changes have occurred. In the early 90s, NGOs primarily worked within a vertical hierarchy, from the donor to the organization to the target group. Now NGOs work more horizontally with local counterparts in conferences, seminars and joint projects. In the past two years, women's NGOs have started forming coalitions to lobby for their interests, especially to improve the representation of women in appointed and elected government positions.

As a result of this campaign, in December 1999 the country's president issued a decree entitled "On Increasing the Role of Women in the Society". The decree charged the government with appointing qualified women to leadership positions in the ministries, state committees, agencies, judicial bodies, and educational institutions. Shortly after the president issued this decree, the number of women in both national and local governments increased remarkably. Eight women were elected to the new lower chamber of the Parliament, Majlisi Namoyandagon, at the 2000 elections (compared to five women in the old Majlisi Oli). These women represent 13 percent of the total number of seats in the lower chamber (compared to 3 percent in the old Majlisi Oli). A National Program on the Main Directions of State Policy on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (2000) was developed in a mutual effort from scientists, professionals and representatives from women's NGOs and its implementation is discussed now at different levels of Tajik society.

NGOs and community groups have become an alternative for women interested in becoming more active in public affairs. Unlike membership in a political party, NGO activism is seen as apolitical. Yet it can help get people involved in politics, and it can promote their interests in the upper echelons of power where policies are defined. Unlike political parties, which usually stand in opposition to one another, NGOs can collaborate with several political parties at once.

During the 2000 parliamentary election campaign, many NGOs, including women's groups, helped organize roundtables, training seminars, civil forums and debates, giving candidates equal opportunities to promote their election platforms to the voters. Women, as compared to men, were generally more motivated to achieve agreement on diverging points rather than to achieve personal leadership.

All these facts testify that non-governmental organizations and social movements can help counter centralization and the expansion of state power and facilitate civil control. They can also help ensure the participation of people in the political process, creating informal channels along with formal democratic institutions.

The experience of Tajikistan with regard to the resolution of armed conflict and peace-building at different levels of society is important and useful and will be analyzed by local scientists and professionals. Furthermore it can be considered as a successful model for other countries having to resolve conflicts and complications in a post-conflict period.

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