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TAJKISTAN: Gender Equality Clashes With Culture, Religion

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DUSHANBE, Nov 15 (IPS) - Women have played important roles in rebuilding Tajikistan after the country's civil war of the 1990's. But women in this central Asian country still have many obstacles to overcome to reach equality with men, according to some local activists and international observers.

"I think it is hard to generalise, but there are some disturbing factors," said Igor Bosc, a deputy resident representative with the United Nations Development Programme in Tajikistan.

For example, many parents see their sons as future breadwinners, so they take their daughters out of school early to work at home or outside, he said. Those that are educated often end up marrying young and staying at home.

Bosc believes this is partly due to culture and tradition and partly due to the revival of radical Islam, after Tajikistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

"It's an issue that concerns every family in the country, where women from a very early age are taught to become homemakers and how to raise families, and are not given an opportunity to participate outside the family in the economic and public life of the country -- so young men, boys are given the priority," he added.

It is this mentality that forms the basis of many challenges women in Tajikistan have faced in recent years, said Parvina Asadova, a psychologist at Tajikistan's Women's Crisis Center NGO. Many women come to the NGO for advice on how to deal with domestic violence or difficulties they have as second wives.

During Tajikistan's civil war, many men died, leaving widows and orphans behind. The economy deteriorated, and some women were forced into prostitution or fell victim to trafficking. Others felt compelled to become second wives. Asadova said one of her clients is a second wife whose husband wants to kick her and their three children out because he no longer wanted to support them.

"She doesn't know what to do," she said. "Our lawyer said that she has only the right to ask him to pay for her children because our government doesn't recognize the marriages of second wives."

Asadova said before Tajikistan gained independence, women were somewhat better off. "During the Soviet time, husbands were responsible for the family and had only one wife, and if he refused for example to pay to do something for their children, the woman had the right to protect her children and herself," she said.

The end of the Soviet era also affected women here in other ways. After independence, many Russian-backed factories ground to a halt. Now up to one million people in this country of around seven million seek work abroad, especially in Russia.

Some, like Gulnaz Ortiqova's husband, send money back home to their families. But Gulnaz still works -- both because she likes to and because she has to -- so that she can support their daughter. As a nurse, the 40-year-old earns ten dollars a month.

"Finding work itself is hard in Tajikistan, and if you work in only one place, you can't support your own family -- not even that, you can't support yourself," she said. "It's harder for women than men, but maybe this is my destiny. It's just meant to be difficult for me."

Still, Gulnaz is relatively lucky. Some women's husbands get remarried and never come home. Others return, carrying not only money but also HIV.

Tajikistan's government says it is working to improve the situation of women here. It has set up a committee on women and families. Anzurat Nurova, who heads the women's committee, said it addresses issues such as violence against women and women's health, education, and welfare.

"Since the Republic of Tajikistan obtained its independence, the government has taken a lot of steps to improve the condition of women," she said. "The president wants more than anything for families to be healthy in society, and we're working to solve women's problems."

While Tajikistan's government acknowledges that women have certain problems that men do not, it also says men and women are equals in Tajikistan. Doulatali Doulatov, who heads the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan, said President Emomali Rahmonov has created freedom for all citizens, including women.

"These freedoms include giving women the ability to find work as men do and to earn equal pay," he said. "We have what they call, gender security."

Indeed, many Tajik women are active outside of the home. Some work in local and national government, although critics say they do not have significant decision-making powers.

Women also have a large presence in civil society, businesses, and the media. At Internews agency in Dushanbe, seven of the 10 journalists are women. Shahlo Akobirova, the agency's director, believes men and women face the same challenges and opportunities in Tajikistan.

"I don't think there's much of a problem related to whether you are man or woman, but there are problems for journalists that have nothing to do with gender, for example, freedom of speech," she said.

"I never thought about what problems exist for women in society," she added. "I haven't seen differences that make things easier for men or harder for women."

Women's rights activists may not agree with Akobirova's view, but many of them would admire her confidence in women's abilities. Asadova, the psychologist at the Women's Crisis Center NGO, said this confidence needs to be taught to all women in Tajikistan.. She said to avoid social fractures in the future, women should become more educated and empowered, but this job should not be left only to the government and the international community.

"I think that from the very beginning we should inform people how to respect the girl, how to show that marriage is not the protection in her life because her husband could die, and he could find another person," she said. "We should show the girl from the very beginning that she can take of herself."

This is a lesson that one of Asadova's clients, Larissa, said she is trying to learn. The 28-year-old biologist earns a living working at a university in Dushanbe, but she is afraid of living alone. Her boyfriend has been promising to marry her for the past two years, but she still has no wedding ring on her finger.

"Woman is dreaming of marrying man and having children," said Larissa, who did not want to give her last name. "But I will try to become more independent and to understand that it depends on no one else but myself to not only survive, but also to really live." (FIN/2006)