

EXPANDING ETHNIC AND CONFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES: MARRIAGES BETWEEN TAJIK WOMEN AND FOREIGN MEN. *Summary*

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Studies by scholars and international organizations on the situation of Tajik women tend to conclude that their lot has generally worsened in the post-Soviet transformations. The evidence cited includes increased discrimination against women and the curtailing of personal freedom and choice, processes that are summarized under the headings of re-patriarchalization and re-Islamization. At the same time, post-Soviet Tajikistan exhibits increased geographic and social mobility among women, leading to the formation of new socio-professional groups, such as businesswomen, female heads of households or breadwinners, and female migrant laborers. As a result, economically active women are gradually gaining autonomy. The ability to provide for themselves and their families increases their material and social resources, and, together with the expansion of other opportunities, this gives them the freedom to make important life choices independently—from clothing and place of residence to marriage partner.

This is evidenced by the rising number of interethnic and interconfessional marriages, which are increasingly being initiated by Tajik women. Similar processes are at work, often on a larger scale, in other post-Soviet countries. What is peculiar to Tajikistan is that it is the republic where patriarchal relations were least touched by the Soviet-era modernization of the gender regime. This raises the following question: if the negative impact of traditional patriarchal norms and values on the condition of women is increasing, how are practices accepted as the norm in European cultures even possible? How are the boundaries of women's individual choice and personal freedom being expanded under these circumstances?

The paper analyzes the parallel functioning, within a single ethno-social community, of distinct and sometimes mutually opposed cultural norms and behavioral rules for social groups and individuals, ranging from marriages arranged by parents to a woman freely choosing her marriage partner. I study the growing number of interethnic and interconfessional marriages between Tajik women and foreign men as an expression of these women's increased social and spatial mobility compared to their mothers and grandmothers. By choosing a foreign marriage partner (especially if he is a non-Muslim from the United States, Canada, Europe, or

Russia), these women not only leave the local community of their family and *avlod* (clan), but also transcend the limits of traditional ethnic norms, rules, and values.

The implications evidently transcend relations between individuals, and in particular affect gender relations, a particularly sensitive topic in Tajik society. Public attention to interethnic marriages is intense, sometimes taking the form of a moral panic that centers on the perceived dichotomy between modernization and traditionalism, and between Tajiks and foreigners. In the Soviet period, the discursive distinctions were the same, but at the time the focus was on the positive aspects of intermarriage, especially between Muslims and non-Muslim Europeans. In contrast, the ideology of contemporary Tajikistani nation-building favors norms and practices associated with ethnic identity. In particular, it constructs gendered identities for male and female Tajiks that are built around ethnic and religious components. As a consequence, modernity or modernization, which in the minds of most residents of Tajikistan is associated with European values and norms, are usually viewed from a traditionalist standpoint. The debate between modernizers and traditionalists is ideologically charged and highly normative.

Turning to the past is one way in which Tajiks attempt to protect a local identity in the face of globalization; the other way is to seek integration into the globalized culture associated with powerful foreign political and cultural actors. Globalization, which reached Tajikistan with full force in the 1990s, provided almost universal access to channels of geographic mobility. This is evidenced by the multifold growth in the migration of rural dwellers, which increasingly involves women, often as migrant laborers. In addition, the long-term presence of international humanitarian organizations and financial institutions enables men and women of different ethnic, confessional, and socio-cultural backgrounds to interact with each other, sometimes creating romance and leading to the formation of interethnic families.

However, globalization and spatial closeness could not have this effect if the Sovietization of Tajikistan had not created fertile social and cultural conditions. The emancipation of Muslim women is one of the major results of the Soviet modernization of gender relations in Central Asia. Yet Soviet gender policies did not affect all women in Tajikistan in the same way. The most numerous group among them—rural women—were least touched by it. Modernization mostly reached urban dwellers who worked in state factories or administrative agencies. The differences between rural and urban women, who emerged as separate groups in Soviet times, continue to determine the gender order in post-Soviet Tajikistan, which is best viewed as a modernized patriarchy. It is multi-layered, socially stratified, and subject to constant change. This means that in the framework of a single ethnic culture, social groups and individuals espouse mutually contradictory norms and rules of behavior.

Most Tajiks are opposed to interethnic marriage because, firstly, it is counter to the traditional norm of endogamy and, secondly, it contradicts one of the main principles of the patriarchal family, namely that marriages should be arranged by parents. For a long time, marriage and family life in Tajikistan were regulated by sharia law and a patriarchal system of gender relations. Soviet modernization transformed these traditions to some degree. Despite a significant weakening of control

by elders and men, endogamy and arranged marriages remain widespread. Marriage partners are generally sought within the confines of one's own or neighboring kishlaks (rural settlements), which are linked by a web of long-standing kinship relations.

In urban settings, however, most young people choose their marriage partner based on their own feelings, desires, and interest; or at least parents take these into account when choosing a partner for their son or daughter. The primacy of individual over collective interest leads to a widening of the pool of potential spouses; yet motivations and expectations remain governed by traditional cultural factors, as the paper shows in exploring the biographies of Tajik women who have entered into interethnic marriages and moved to their husband's home country.

One of the paper's conclusions is that marriages between Tajik women and foreign men (the same goes for women from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan) are not usually unions of equals. Having unequal status positions to begin with, the partners engage in a patriarchal status exchange. This implies that each partner contributes certain resources: the bride trades her beauty and youth for the groom's material well-being and the opportunity to live in his prosperous home country. This patriarchal exchange is correlated with a traditional model of gender relations, where the husband is the provider and the wife does not work outside the home and is more or less financially and otherwise dependent on the husband. This inevitably curtails her rights and liberties and exposes her to discrimination (including on cultural and ethnic grounds) and domestic violence—even though most potential wives of foreign (especially European) men are emancipated women from educated, urbanized, educated, and Russified strata of Tajik society, who espouse the idea of gender equality.

The cultural traditions, values, norms, and language of the husband's home country are dominant in the families of every one of my respondents. Their children, even if they were born in Tajikistan, do not speak Tajik. Integrating into a new culture, the women adopt its everyday practices, shedding most of their own cultural difference. For example, my respondents accept various forms of serial monogamy and relationships between partners with considerable age difference, even though these are considered unacceptable in traditional Tajik culture. Nevertheless, full assimilation does not take place since these women are typically isolated in their host countries, both because locals tend to ignore the foreign wives of their co-nationals, and because while ostensibly adopting the modern values of autonomy and individualism, the Tajik women remain anchored in the patriarchal way of thinking that continues to dominate Tajik society. This is evidenced by their expectations from marriage with foreign men: they expect constant care and protection, and in exchange consider it the mother's exclusive role to care, and sacrifice herself, for her children, contrary to the European model of equality within the family.

Thus, among these ostensibly educated and Russified women, the adoption of modernized practices outpaces changes in world view and acceptance of the values and ideas of gender equality. Yet as the patriarchal system is crumbling, leaving them without the traditional paternalistic protection of husbands, families, and communities, these women are prepared to use the norms of European culture as a resource.