Abandoned Wives Struggle to Survive in Tajikistan

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Experts say government action is needed to help families left behind by labour migrants.

Mohrukhsor, a 31-year-old mother of two from the southern Hatlon region of Tajikistan, says her whole life changed after her husband left to find work abroad.

After two happy years in which she gave birth to two daughters, her husband Alikhon went off to Russia.

“He left, and it’s now four years since he stopped sending money for me and our children,” Mohrukhsor said.

Mohrukhsor and her daughters were forced to move out of the house they shared with her in-laws and go back to her parents’ house in the village of Shakarkhon.

“But how long can I stay with my parents and my brothers, all living under the same roof? They’ve got problems enough of their own,” she said.

With only two years of schooling, Mohrukhsor cannot read or write and has found it hard to get a job. A brief period working on a farm came to an end when she fell ill.

“Sometimes I think of giving it all up and going to Russia to find work,” she told IWPR. “But I haven’t got the money for a ticket and here at home there aren’t any jobs. I don’t know how I’m going to survive the winter.”

There are no official statistics showing how many women are in the same position as Mohrukhsor, but experts and officials warn that their plight deserves attention at the highest levels of government.

The Tajik economy has been struggling for years, and hundreds of thousands of people – the vast majority men – seek work abroad each year, mostly in Russia. For many, the work is seasonal and they come back for the winter, but a study done by the International Organisation for Migration in 2010 found that around a third of them eventually settled down abroad.

Since wives generally go to live with their husbands’ families, they have few resources to fall back if they are divorced or just abandoned. Under Tajik law, husbands are bound to provide for their children, including after a separation, but this becomes difficult to enforce if they are in another country, and especially if the marriage has not been registered, which means a statement of divorce carries no legal force.

Local authorities and NGOs do what they can to help such women, but say national government needs to step in, especially to secure the cooperation of Russian officials to locate men abroad who are failing to support their families back home. Legal experts say a formal agreement with Moscow is needed to enforce maintenance payments, by deducting money from wages.

Earlier this year, Tajik politician Saodat Amirshoeva proposed a bill that would set up a database of emigrants, allowing maintenance payments to be tracked.

“There are now hundreds of cases where men leave the country in search of work, for example in Russia, and do not provide financial support for their children and families,” Amirshoeva told the Asia-Plus news agency. “This results in thousands of broken lives, and children who don’t attend school becoming beggars and potentially criminals.”

The government rejected the proposed law in September.

Often poorly educated and from rural areas, abandoned wives have little knowledge of their rights to property and other issues, let alone how to access legal aid.

Daler Kholikmurodov, head of the Vose district court in the Hatlon region, says that his staff alone had dealt with more than 300 cases of women abandoned by migrant workers in the first ten months of 2013.

“Some said their husbands had remarried. Others complained that their husbands divorced them while in Russia,” he said.

Saida Nurlaaminova, head of the department for women’s affairs and the family in the southern city of Kulob, said such women often lacked passports and birth certificates for their children.
She noted that many had only gone through a Muslim wedding without registering the marriage with the state. This meant that the laws governing marriage, divorce and alimony did not automatically apply.

Lutfullo Rasulov, a lawyer with the Shahrvand Centre for Civil Society Support, says his NGOs has had some success in locating husbands, providing mediation to reunite couples, or alternatively supporting women through divorce proceedings.

“With the help of the Tajik community in Russia, we’ve managed to trace the whereabouts of ten migrants,” he said.

The head of the Vose district department for women and the family, Hafizamoh Safarova, said local government was doing its best to help, although it had limited resources. Working in partnership with the Shahrvand NGO, her office had helped four families as well as 12 single mothers, providing them with food and a payment of 1,800 somoni (370 US dollars).

Safarova emphasised, however, that if real headway was to be made, the issue needed to be addressed by central government.

“We can’t do anything to these men because there’s no agreement with the Russian government,” she explained.

Shahobiddin Mirzohmedov, a lawyer with the government’s committee for women’s affairs and the family, declined to comment on whether the issue had been raised directly with Moscow.

He said his agency provided “legal advice, moral support and other assistance”, which included setting up information centres in parts of Tajikistan with a high rate of emigration. In cases where the husband’s whereabouts were known, Mirzohmedov said his committee could help the wife apply to the Russian courts for child maintenance.

For now, women like 30-year-old Saodat, who lives in the town of Farkhor in southern Tajikistan, can do little to change their situation.

Saodat has not heard from her husband Safarali since he left for Russia five years ago.

“Maybe he’s got married again to a Russian woman, because life there is better than here in Tajikistan,” she said.

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**Location:** Central Asia  
Tajikistan  
Russia  

**Topic:** Women's rights  

**Source URL:** https://iwpr.net/global-voices/abandoned-wives-struggle-survive-tajikistan