

## **Female Ex-Cons Struggle to Find Jobs in Tajikistan**

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Poverty and social stigma contribute to high re-offending rate among women released from jail.

Roza, a woman in her early forties, seems oddly resigned to life in a Tajik jail.

“You might find it strange, but I’m better off in prison than on the outside,” she told IWPR. “At least here I can work – I sew bedsheets for hotels in the workshop.”

This is Roza’s second stretch in Tajikistan’s only prison for women, located some 70 kilometres from the capital Dushanbe. After spending six years locked up for drug smuggling, she was arrested for robbery just two years after being released.

She says she found it hard to find work on the outside and received no help from the local authorities. Eventually she got a job as a dishwasher in a café, but decided to leave as working conditions were poor.

After a dispute with the café owner over outstanding wages, she returned later and stole a bag containing the day’s takings.

“I stood for two minutes in two minds about it, and then something inside me said I should take it and run, so I did,” she said, adding that someone told the police, who tracked her down to her village.

Roza is one of many women finding it hard to get back to normal life following their release from prison. The re-offending rate among them is high.

An official from the women’s prison told IWPR that over 60 of the 291 inmates released under a 2007 amnesty were now back inside, and accounted for a quarter of the current inmates. Another 30 or so had been released in the period since the amnesty, but around one-third had already re-offended and were in prison again.

Larisa Kabilova, a judge with Tajikistan’s Supreme Court, acknowledges that the lack of rehabilitation programmes for former prisoners, male as well as female, contributes to re-offending.

“Many are freed before their sentences expire, but there seem to be societal factors that drive these women back into prison, or else to join the army of unemployed,” she said.

The widespread prejudice against ex-convicts means few employers are prepared to take them on. The current economic crisis, which has forced some of the migrants working in Russia to return home, have placed added strain on the job market.

Nilufar, 24, has struggled to find work since being released under an amnesty to mark International

Women's Day in March, after serving five of her eight-year sentence for drug smuggling.

"The personnel manager at a phone company looked at my papers and turned me down. I was also trying to get a job at a supermarket but I got turned away. Now I have to think about how I'm going to survive," she said, adding that she had been promised a cleaning job in a school but was still unsure whether it would materialise.

Even before the crisis, Tajikistan was the poorest of the Central Asian states, as reflected in the World Bank calculation that 54 per cent of the population were living on less than two US dollars a day, its benchmark figure for assessing poverty.

Hayrinisso Yusufi, who heads the government's committee for women's affairs, told IWPR she was well aware of the employment problems facing ex-convicts.

"We try to find jobs for mothers with many children, as a priority. They include former prisoners who come to us for help, although not all of them do, unfortunately," she said. "Over the last year, the financial crisis has made it harder to find employment for women. Many businesspeople who used to offer low-paid jobs to women recommended to them by us are now declining to do so."

Aside from the government committee, there are some 400 women's organisations in Tajikistan, but none is currently working on female prisoner rehabilitation.

The illegal narcotics trade is a magnet for people with poor job prospects, and women often serve as drugs mules as smugglers calculate that they will be less conspicuous than men.

Tajikistan long border with Afghanistan goes through difficult terrain and is thinly policed, making it a major transit point for heroin being shifted northwards to Russia and the rest of Europe.

The deputy head of the government's penal affairs office, Bahrom Abdulhakov, says most of the women in jail have been convicted of smuggling, selling or using illicit drugs.

Other crimes include human trafficking, prostitution and theft.

The first time Sabina, now 45, was convicted it was for smuggling drugs, and while the second time she was jailed for prostitution and pimping. On her release, she joined a gang that was doing robberies, and now finds herself locked up for a third time.

She says it was hard for her to adapt to life outside prison. Homeless, with no money and no prospect of a job, she says she felt ostracised and was easy prey for police when they conducted regular sweeps.

"You're constantly trembling with fear that the police will catch you and beat you up," she said. "It's even worse if they find out you've done time for Article 205 [running a brothel]; they always harass you when

they question you.”

Like her fellow-inmate Roza, Sabina says being in prison means she does not have to struggle to get food, medical help and a roof over her head.

“It’s simpler here in prison. You just have to follow the rules and regulations,” she said.

Sabina added, “When I get out I will try not to break the law any more and not to make easy money, but to find honest work.”

The women’s prison currently has around 290 inmates. Another amnesty was announced on November 4, and many female convicts are eligible. The chances are, however, that many will find life outside so difficult that they will be back in prison within a matter of months.

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Also see **Story Behind the Story**, published in RCA Issue 604, 23-Feb-10.

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