

## **Labour Migration "Orphans" in Tajikistan**

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More and more women join exodus in search of work and leave their children behind.

Loik, 12, has spent the last seven years in a children's home, longing for his mother to come and get him.

When she travelled abroad to work after his father died, Loik was entrusted to the care of relatives. But they sent him to a home in the Yavan district of the southern Khatlon region.

"These last seven years have been very difficult for me," said Loik, who is disabled and has a speech impediment. "But despite that, I haven't forgotten my mum. I want her to visit, give me a hug and take me away with her."

He dreams of becoming a teacher and working with children like himself whose parents are far away.

According to Nadezhda Bobokhonova, a nurse at the home, the institution used to take in only orphans, but that has changed.

"The majority of children at the care home are like Loik – they are 'orphans' whose parents are alive," Bobokhonova said.

Hundreds of thousands of people from Tajikistan spend time working abroad each year, with Russia the main destination. The majority are men, but increasing numbers of women are now going as well. According to the Tajik labour ministry, 671,00 people left the country last year, and one sixth – 106,000 – were female.

Although there are no exact figures for how many children in Tajikistan are left without either parent as a result of labour migration, some estimates put the number as high as 100,000. Most are left in the care of grandparents or other relatives. Some are placed in care homes for want of a better alternative, sometimes because the relatives cannot cope and in other cases because parents make a conscious decision to send them there.

A staff member at a children's home in the capital Dushanbe which caters for under-fives, told IWPR that the number of children temporarily placed there by mothers going to Russia was rising. Speaking on condition of anonymity, she said she understood how hard it was to make a decision like that.

"They say that they haven't got anyone to leave the children with, and that they trust state institutions more than their family members," she added.

Namozkhon Boboev, director of a special school for vulnerable children, currently has 59 in his care. Most were brought in by relatives after their parents left to work abroad. Boboev said this was at least better than abandoning the children to fend for themselves on the streets.

"Here they are given good food and a place to sleep, and they attend lessons," he said.

All too often, parents lose contact with their children.

"We have children who have been here for more than three years and no one has enquired about them, no one has called in all that time. Some parents don't know whether their child is still here or not," Boboev said.

When Marcel Ramazonov was a year old, his parents, who work in Moscow, sent him to live with his grandmother.

Now 14, he has seen his mother only twice since she left. When he hit his teenage years, his behaviour deteriorated and he began to struggle at school.

"I used to run away from home and walk round the city on my own at night. I worked as a bus conductor," Ramazonov said.

His grandmother was unable to manage him and went to the police, and he ended up at the special school which Boboev runs.

When Marcel's mother visited Tajikistan last year, he was allowed home to spend some time with her. She now calls him every week to ask how he is.

“They asked me to join them in Moscow, but I didn’t go. I didn’t want to. I love my grandmother. I don’t know my mother, I don’t love her,” Marcel said.

According to Boboev, children who are neglected in this way feel rejected and can develop social, educational and behavioural problems as they grow up. All this makes them particularly vulnerable and restricts their opportunities in life.

“Sometimes we take in teenagers who are old enough to be in secondary school, yet some of them haven’t even attended the first year of schooling,” Boboev said. “It’s easy to deal with children aged seven or eight. But kids who are 13 or 15 aren’t easy. There are a lot of cases at our school, and others too, where parents bring them in because they can’t handle them any more and want to be rid of them.”

Gulnisso, a 33-year-old single mother, is a labour migrant who has spent several years shuttling between Tajikistan and Russia, where she works as a cleaner.

Recently, the Russian authorities introduced stricter rules for migrants that include a language test and mandatory medical insurance. It now costs several hundred US dollars to comply with all the regulations, while the market for migrant labour has contracted because of the weakened Russian economy. (See **Tajiks Face New Obstacles to Work in Russia .**)

Gulnisso was forced to return home, and moved into her parents’ house with two of her children. She has had to leave her eldest son, aged 15, in a state-run boarding school in the Yavan district.

The wives of her two brothers live in the same house, and they “can’t stand him”, she said.

“He’s going through his teenage phase and he’s often rude when they talk to him. There are endless arguments and insults,” Gulnisso said. “It’s better for him to stay at the boarding school.”

Ruyo, a young woman who did not give her age, has worked in the Russian city of Perm for the last two years, washing dishes in a restaurant. She would like to save enough money to return home to her son, but she does not earn much.

“It’s a difficult job. You get good money as a labour migrant if you work on a building site. They don’t pay much in a restaurant,” she said. “I don’t know whether I should stay here or go back so that I can be with my child.”

According to Zebunisso Kholdorbekova, deputy head of a government agency that addresses delinquent behaviour among minors, the emigration of parents is contributing to a rise in the number of street children, and child labour is also a problem.

Last year, her agency carried out more than 1,500 raids which netted some 9,150 children – 1,200 more than in 2013. About one-third of them were picked up for vagrancy, and many were washing cars or working as porters at markets.

Tatiana Khatyukhina from the Centre for Human Rights in the northern Soghd region argues that the government needs a programme to help women with young children come home.

“When the father heads abroad and then disappears, that’s half the problem. But when the mother goes away, the real trouble starts,” she told IWPR. (See **Tajik Labour Migration Boosts Divorce Rates** on the many women left to support households on their own.)

Oinikhol Bobonazarova, head of the Perspektiva Plus NGO, agreed, adding that the government needed to create the right conditions for women to be able to return and support their families.

“[The authorities] should offer soft loans and land plots so that they can earn a living here at home and take care of their children,” she said.

**Location:** Tajikistan

**Topic:** Children  
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