

Tajik Labour Migration Boosts Divorce Rates

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Wives left behind to manage households as husbands make new lives abroad and stop sending money home.

The money sent home by the huge numbers of labour migrants has helped prop up Tajikistan's economy for years. But the prolonged absence of so much of the adult male population also creates social problems, among them high divorce rates and the resulting loss of household incomes.

Figures from Tajikistan's official statistics agency indicate that the divorce rate doubled between 2005 and 2010. Migration seems to be a major factor behind the increase.

Saadat Sirojeva, head of the civil registry for the southern Khatlon region, told IWPR that the strains caused by migration were among the principal causes of divorce.

"This trend has been going on for the last several years," she said.

Sirojeva said that in four out of ten divorces recorded in Khatlon last year, one partner – generally the husband – was a labour migrant.

More than a million Tajiks spent time working abroad in 2014, the majority of them in Russia with Kazakhstan the next biggest destination. Many of them go home in winter when the work thins out, but others stay on from year to year.

Some men go on to put down roots in Russia, divorce their wives back in Tajikistan and remarry.

"They establish another family and forget about their wives and children," said Marifat Zoirzoda, head of the government's Committee for Women and the Family in the Khatlon region of southern Tajikistan.

Zoirzoda was speaking at an IWPR roundtable on the impact of labour migration on the women and children left behind, which took place on December 12 in Qurghonteppa, the main town in Khatlon.

Once they establish new lives abroad, husbands often stop helping their wives and children back home. This leaves women to care and provide for children alone.

In a family break-up, life becomes especially difficult for divorced wives living with the relatives of their absent husband, as custom dictates. The monthly payments dry up, and it can be hard to claim alimony since their husbands are living under Russian jurisdiction, and the marriage may in any case have been concluded only in an Islamic ritual, not in the civil registration ceremony required by Tajik law.

Rayhona Haqberdieva, the head of an NGO called Dilafruz, told the IWPR debate in Qurghonteppa that when wives lost contact with their husbands, they were left to provide for their children as best they could.

Anvar Abdulloev, 29, has settled down and made a new life in Russia, although unlike many in his position, he maintains contact with his family in Tajikistan and continues to support them.

Although he has lived in Russia for nine years, driving a taxi, his parents in Khatlon's Vakhsh district have continued to direct his life.

It was his parents who arranged his first marriage, which ended because they were unhappy that there were no children. Last year, despite his protests, they arranged a second marriage for him, to a woman from a neighbouring village in Khatlon's Vakhsh district. She has since had a baby boy.

Several months after the wedding, Abdulloev went back to Russia. He has now met and fallen in love with someone else, also from Tajikistan. Now they are living together in Moscow.

"Here I have a wife whom I chose myself. She helps me with everything I do and she is kind," he said. "My mother calls me and says she isn't happy with her daughter-in-law even though she chose her herself. They quarrel. I have a son now and of course I will help them, but I'm not going back."

Oinikhol Bobonazarova is head of Perspektiva Plus, an NGO that works to defend the rights of labour migrants. She explained how living far from home changed people's expectations and their view of the constraints of tradition.

"Over there [in Russia] everything is different – the lifestyle, the values, the environment," she said. "A young man from the countryside goes to live in a city in Russia. He starts earning money and provides for

his family back home. He comes to think that he should be able to decide for himself whom he marries, and that it isn't up to his parents to make that decision."

Rahmonali Dodarkhujaev is an IWPR-trained journalist in Tajikistan.

The December 12 IWPR roundtable in Qurghonteppa on the impact of labour migration on women and children in Tajikistan was one of several similar events held in November and December as part of work funded by the European Commission, the Norwegian foreign ministry and the National Endowment for Democracy.

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