

Tajikistan: Elderly Struggle to Survive

Author: IWPR

Small pensions and low earnings mean many older people are left cold and hungry. Tajikistan, the poorest country in Central Asia, is failing to provide its elderly people with a respectable old age and the situation may get worse in future, experts say.

Alevtina, 68, lives alone. Her pension ran out half-way through the month, and the next pay day is a long way off. Sometimes she goes without anything to eat.

Her husband died seven years ago and her only son was killed in the Tajik civil war of 1992-97. Alevtina did not want to give her last name because she is ashamed of the poverty in which she lives.

She worked her whole life as an accountant and carried on for two years after retirement. She draws a pension of 64 somoni a month (just under 15 US dollars).

Things got worse after her husband died and she has had to sell some of her possessions for very little.

She managed to find two jobs that are hard work for someone of her age – washing dishes in a cafe and cleaning in a clinic.

Her pension and two wages are only enough to buy some food and pay for public transport. She has not bought any clothes for a long time. At weekends she sometimes goes to a local bazaar to sell some of her old clothes.

“I don’t earn much. At least I won’t die of starvation and if I get sick, doctors here will help me,” she said.

Tajikistan is the poorest of the five Central Asian states, and more than half the population live below the poverty line defined by the World Bank as two dollars a day. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the country went through economic collapse and civil war.

In the years since then, the elderly and other vulnerable groups have been hardest hit by low living standards, the declining value of benefits and pensions, and the crumbling of social and health service provision.

In more recent years, Tajikistan has seen a mass exodus of working-age people, mainly men, leaving for jobs in Russia and Kazakstan. The money they sent home has been a lifeline to many households, but as their departure places an added burden on elderly people in farming communities and breaks up the family structure in which parents and grandparents traditionally enjoyed a respected position.

“Because the majority of young people has emigrated, only the elderly and women are left to work in rural areas,” said social scientist Firuz Saidov.

According to the ministry of labour and welfare, there are around 550,000 elderly people in the country.

At present, the minimum pension is 60 somoni (14 dollars) and the maximum is 300 somoni, or 70 dollars, but payment of pensions is currently months late. According to Shukurjon Zuhuruv, the minister of labour, the main reason for arrears to pensioners is belated collection of social welfare contributions by the tax authorities.

Single and poor pensioners receive benefit supplements to pay for gas and electricity and a 50 per cent reduction on communal service charges.

Zinaida Gavrilova, 76, is on a pension worth 22 dollars a month plus benefits worth 11 dollars provided by the energy ministry where she used to work. Half her income goes on utilities, phone and electricity.

“I can only dream of such luxuries as coffee, sausages and meat,” she said.

She rarely sees a doctor because she does not have money to pay for medicine.

Tajik non-government organisations, NGOs, which deal with the concerns of the elderly have urged the government to take into account the recommendations of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, which was accepted at the United Nations General Assembly in 2002 by more than 160 countries. This treaty binds countries to include ageing in all social and economic policies including those aimed at poverty reduction.

Zahro Qurbonbekova, project manager at the Tajikistan office of HelpAge International, said the country is on the threshold of a steep demographic aging process and it is important to take steps now.

Current poverty reduction policies hardly make any mention of the elderly, Qurbonbekova said, adding, “We need a separate strategy for improving [their] quality of life.”

Government officials accept there is a problem, but say they lack the funds to improve pensioners’ lives dramatically, especially at the moment when Tajikistan is suffering the effects of global economic crisis.

“The state is helping elderly people as far as is possible but its financial resources are limited at the moment,” said Davron Valiev, head of the welfare department at the labour and welfare ministry.

In the current climate, he said, there will be no pension increases in the near future. Instead, he said, the priority is to reform pensions and streamline social services. Reforms now under consideration would be created out of employee contributions as well as the funds provided by employers and the state.

Saifullo Safarov, deputy director of the Centre for Strategic Studies, a think-tank close to government, said a new strategy for supporting the elderly was needed.

“Laws relating to the elderly do exist, but these do not cover a wide range of issues to do with protecting their social and economic rights,” he said.

While NGOs and government consider ways of improving elderly people’s lives, many have lost hope of getting a decent pension, eating well and resting in their old age.

“I’ve just got back from the market where I sold my coat,” said Alevtina. “Now I can survive until the next pension payment comes.”

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