

Taking Control in Tajikistan

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Women become the breadwinners in this patriarchal society, leaving men depressed and suicidal.

Tajik women are becoming increasingly dominant in the republic's labour market - a trend that appears to be demoralising their unemployed menfolk.

In the first three months of 2005, 66 cases of suicide - 40 of them men - were recorded in the northern Sogdy region alone. The rise has been partly blamed on a change in gender roles in the republic as a result of the 1992-97 civil war. Tens of thousands of men were killed and many of those that survived lost their jobs because of the subsequent economic downturn, leaving their women with little choice but to take on largely low grade work to make ends meet.

"After the war, when my husband lost his job and we did not know how to feed our children, I was ready to throw myself in the river," said market seller Zamira. "But I kept seeing my children, and realised no one would want them if I died. I took hold of myself and took any work I could in order to survive."

But the emergence of women as the main family wage earners has exacerbated the sense of despair felt by many men struggling to find work in the country's shattered economy.

Khujand taxi driver Bakhtier told IWPR, "Most of the people selling goods at the central market are women, and they are becoming the breadwinners of the family. It is difficult for men to find work with a decent wage, and this is leading to nervous breakdowns and suicides."

Rano Bobojonova, a teacher at the Khujand state university who is an expert on gender issues, said that Tajik men are unaccustomed to change and do not cope well with it.

"They were traditionally considered the masters of the house and the breadwinners, but when a man loses this position he begins to be depressed, which can often lead to suicide," she said.

Khujand resident Anvarjon agreed. "Do you think I like the role of 'house husband', watching my wife wear herself out at work as she tries to feed both me and our school-age child?" he asked, adding that he sometimes thinks about taking his own life because of his inability to find work.

The most recent case of suicide took place on April 23, when an Asht region resident hanged himself in his home. One local, who gave his name as Salomat, told IWPR that there is little or no work in the area - and that those who are lucky enough to find jobs are paid irregularly.

The prosecutor's office has confirmed that it is currently checking payment of salaries in the mountainous area. At the end of April, criminal cases were opened against the heads of two farms who had allegedly not paid their employees for six months.

Dilbar Ismoilova, executive director of the Gulrukhsor women's crisis centre, said, "Men are scared to share their problems with anyone else, and think that they will be blamed and will lose their status in society."

She added that there was now a great need for family crisis centres to address men's sense of despair, as many depressed males aged between 30 and 50 years old were now approaching her organisation for help and advice.

Specialists working at the Khujand Gender Research Centre say that men are not prepared to take low-paid or otherwise demeaning work that women readily accept in order to feed their families.

"Men will not agree to work for the small wage that most employers offer - only highly qualified specialists are given well-paid work," said Inomjon Umarov, head of the Khujand employment centre. "But women are willing to do any work, and they go on our register and wait for vacancies and opportunities to learn a profession. The centre has a special club for this."

While women are largely associated with unskilled jobs, there are signs that they are starting to enter the world of business.

Some non-governmental organisations such as the National Association of Businesswomen of Tajikistan, NABWT, issue small loans to assist would-be business people to launch their careers.

"Of our active clients, more than 70 per cent are women, and this shows that they have become more skilled in business issues," said Gulbakhor Makhkamova, head of the Sogdy branch of NABWT. "In the past, these women took risks by taking loans at high interest from their relatives and acquaintances, now they look for more stable sources of financing."

Analysts believe that this trend will continue as women grow in confidence - but is unlikely to lead to a significant change in Tajikistan's patriarchal society.

"Men will continue to occupy the chief position in the family hierarchy, while the role of breadwinner will go increasingly to the woman," said Bobojonova.

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