



Domestic Violence in Tajikistan: Shattered Dreams, Broken Ribs, and the Future

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Abstract

This paper focuses on domestic violence in Tajikistan, discusses the findings of a qualitative study that the authors conducted during 2023-2024 with 17 informants who experienced domestic violence directly or indirectly, and concludes with some recommendations to address this significant issue that has become so ingrained in Tajik society. The in-depth interviews demonstrated the pervasiveness and severity of domestic violence and the numerous social, economic and cultural factors that contributed to it. The concluding discussion shared the informants' thoughts on changes needed to address this issue.

Keywords: *Domestic Abuse, Intimate Partner Violence/Partner Abuse, Families and Violence*

INTRODUCTION

Domestic Violence in Tajikistan: Shattered Dreams, Broken Ribs, and the Future

Tajikistan is a landlocked, a predominantly Muslim country in Central Asia. Surrounded by Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China, the country is known for its mountainous terrains. The country currently has a population of approximately 9.6 million, with females accounting slightly more than 50% (McGarry, 2020). Domestic violence is a significant issue in Tajikistan. Among Central Asian countries, Tajikistan scored in the lowest in internationally comparable indices of gender equality. In 2020, it ranked 137 of 153 countries (Turakhanova, 2021). Various research reported the perseverance of domestic violence in Tajikistan. Often, these take severe forms including murders and incitement to suicide (Human Rights Watch, 2019). According to one estimate, 497 women in Tajikistan committed

suicide in 2017 (Eurasianet, 2018). Amnesty International (2019) reported that, between a third and a half of women in Tajikistan have experienced physical, psychological, or sexual abuse by husbands or other family members. Many men would divorce their wives just by saying *talak* three times (Nawa, 2022). A recent study reported that 53.8% of Tajikistan women experienced violence from their partners (Vinnakota, et al., 2022). Most women in Tajikistan believe that domestic violence against women, especially against wives, is an integral part of married life (Joshi & Childress, 2017).

This paper focuses on domestic violence in Tajikistan, discusses the findings of a qualitative study that the authors conducted during 2023-2024 with 17 informants who experienced domestic violence directly or indirectly, and concludes with some recommendations to address this significant issue that has become so ingrained in Tajik society. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with 16 Tajik women and one Tajik man, some were conducted face to face in Tajikistan, while some were conducted via the zoom platform. Many of the women interviewed were poor and could speak only Tajik. For those interviews, their stories were later transcribed into English.

Setting the Context: The Magnitude of Domestic Violence

The United Nations defines domestic violence, also known as “intimate partner violence” as “a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner” (<https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse>). Examples of domestic violence include physical, sexual, economic, psychological threats or actions that cause intimidation, manipulation, humiliation, or injuries. The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment emphasizes that domestic violence is “one of the predominant sources of humiliation and death worldwide . . . and is still considered to be a private matter” (OHCHR, 2019, p.5).

Similar to many other central Asian countries, domestic violence is a grave social issue in Tajikistan. Many social, economic, and political factors impacted the current low status of women in Tajikistan. Tajik society is highly patriarchal. McGarry (2020) explains that before 1991, when it was a part of the former USSR, Tajik men and women enjoyed equal economic and political opportunities. After independence and the civil war (1992 -1997), Tajik society began to reinforce strict gender roles. A variety of sociocultural expectations such as importance of maintaining the family, stigmatizing victims of spousal violence, viewing spousal relations a family matter, reprimanding women for speaking out about spousal violence, forced and early marriages, and polygamous practices – all of these enforce patriarchy and the subjugation of women (Haarr, 2007). One of the contributing factors is that the Tajikistan Family Law does not recognize domestic violence as a crime, and hence the law does not criminalize domestic violence. A 2016 study found that 97% of men and 72% of women in Tajikistan believe that women are obliged to tolerate domestic violence in order to keep peace in the family (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 2021). Moving with the husband’s family is a common practice in the country; in fact, only 5.7% of Tajik households consist of a married, childless couple living without older parents in the household (Turaeva & Becker, 2022, p. 63). In such extended family, the mother-in-law usually is the central authority making decisions. Women living with in-laws are far more likely to experience domestic violence. Turaeva & Becker (2022) found in their research that the presence of the family matriarch is significantly related to emotional abuse towards the daughter- in- law.

Tajik tradition or cultural expectation dictates that sons take their parents’ side in any conflict, as siding with a wife is seen as a weakness (Najibullah, 2022). Although child marriage is illegal in Tajikistan, many poor families marry their daughters off earlier. Another issue is polygamy which even though outlawed, is still quite pervasive in Tajikistan; many of these marriages are unregistered religious marriages (*nikah*). Since these religious marriages have no legal bearing, these women have no property rights with their husbands, and so many continue to stay in abusive relationships (Administrator, 2019).

Women also suffer disproportionately from poverty. The 1992-1997 civil war severely damaged the already economic infrastructure in Tajikistan. Many Tajik men migrated to Russia to find a livelihood. Lemon (2019) asserted that the actual number of Tajiks in Russia may be much higher, with as many as 40% who are working illegally (hence not counted in the official statistics) and that 30% to 40% of Tajik households have at least one member working abroad. When these men leave, their wives have no other option but to continue staying with their in-laws. Many women report facing domestic violence when their partners migrate to work in Russia (Nawa, 2022).

Despite compulsory primary and secondary education in Tajikistan, children from poor families, especially girls, frequently drop out before completing the currently required nine years of schooling (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The 2021 World Bank report noted that according to 2016 data, approximately 69% of Tajikistan's working-age female population were not working for pay and that the share of employed women among the total number of employed was declining steadily. Women's representation in Tajik politics and decision making also remains below international standards. In Parliament, only 19% (12 of 63 legislators) are women and only two parliamentary committees and one ministry is headed by women (UN Women, nd). There are two requirements for running for elections: 1) an election deposit that has to be paid by candidates during the registration process, and 2) higher education. By default, both these requirements pose challenges for women to run for electoral positions. In the civil service, the share of women among civil service decreased from 35.2% in 2013 to 23.8% in 2019 (Turakhanova, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on understanding a select group of Tajik women's experiences (direct or indirect) in domestic violence. Considering the complex and experiential nature of the topic, the authors chose the story telling methodology and grounded theory. Storytelling has been used as a research method in various disciplines such as social work, anthropology, political science, and history. As Webster & Mertova (2007) explain, stories provide a framework through which we investigate experiences. Practically, they provide a framework through which we investigate experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007) and gain access to the complexity of human affairs and human activity. Storytelling is part of the narrative genre. In simple terms, a story is what someone tells, and a narrative is a researcher's account of what someone tells (Redwood, 1999). Essential to storytelling is conveying an experience in such a way that it seems real (McCall, et al., 2019, p. 3). There is an appeal in storytelling because it is not just information but information with emotions and experiences. Grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) is another qualitative research methodology that generates/discovers theories from data using a systematic and iterative process usually through open ended interviews and participants' observations. Storytelling and grounded theory as research methodologies are significantly different than the positivist/quantitative research methodology. The latter emphasizes predictability, reliability and search for truth and generalization. Storytelling and grounded theory are qualitative approaches that do not seek to find a causal and effect relationship, instead focus on individual's in-depth experiences.

Considering the nature of the inquiry on hand (to understand the experiences of women), storytelling and grounded theory methodologies were not only appropriate to use but also essential as one tries to understand a highly sensitive issue (domestic violence) through the lens of these informants. Following the grounded theory's methodology, the authors used the interviews to identify and explore themes and sub themes, through ongoing references to the transcripts and refining them.

A snowball sampling method was used to identify informants who were willing to volunteer for the interviews. This method is a non-probability sampling method that identifies and recruits new informants based on references from one or few of the initial informants. Considering the sensitivity of the issue,

snowball sampling was the appropriate one. One of the authors, who used to live in Tajikistan, knew some individuals who experienced domestic violence. The other author, who visited Tajikistan on a Fulbright Project, met some women who had shared their experiences of domestic violence with her during some informal conversation. The authors contacted them to recruit the initial informants. The final sample included a total of 17 informants (16 women and one man). All the informants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and anonymity will be maintained. Following the standard IRB protocol, they all were asked to read the consent form and sign it as evidence of their voluntary participation. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

The authors started with twelve questions; some follow up questions were asked depending on the unique situations.

Following are the interview questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself (age, education, family background, marital status, and other relevant information)
2. Please share with us some specific stories of domestic violence that you witnessed.
3. Do you feel safe in your home?
4. Do you feel comfortable talking openly to your family members?
5. Have you ever experienced violence from any of your family members?
6. Have the police ever been involved due to violence in your home?
7. Is it a custom in Tajikistan, to treat boys and girls differently?
8. What are some challenges that you faced or are facing?
9. How do you plan to deal with those challenges?
10. What are your goals in life or where do you want to see yourself in the future?
11. In your view, what is one of the most important factors that is needed to see a positive change in the status and wellbeing of women in Tajikistan.
12. Would you recommend to us any other women or men who might be interested to talk to us about these issues? If yes, please give us his/her name and contact information.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 17 informants came from different regions (rural and city) and different socio-economic background. Most of these women moved with their in-laws after marriage, a strong tradition in Tajikistan. The interviews lasted for 45 minutes to an hour. Some of the interviews were in Tajik language; they were transcribed and later shared with these informants to ensure for their authenticity. The following section shares some of the experiences of these women (using pseudonyms). The discussion is structured in themes that appeared frequently in their responses.

Childhood Experiences:

Many of these informants grew up in affluent and educated families and have fond memories of their childhood. For example, *Delruba* fondly spoke of her childhood: “*I was born in Dushanbe and grew up in a rich family. My parents never made a distinction between boys and girls.*” *Afsoon*, *Farzana*, *Rezina*, and *Mehrana* shared a similar experience – they grew up in educated and liberal families. As *Afsoon* mentioned: “*We are three sisters – we never felt that our parents treated us differently because we were girls.*” *Alina* also grew up in a very loving family. As she reminisces: “*My father was always there for us and mentored us. He was actually a bit biased towards his two daughters. He would often say that daughters are delicate. . . beautiful like roses and hence needs special care and attention.*”

In contrast, some of the informants (such as *Sofia*, *Bahar*, *Aliya*, and *Dilfuza*) grew up in the countryside and in poverty. Their childhood was hard, and some of them grew up witnessing domestic violence at home. *Sofia*'s story resembles many of these women's childhood experiences. As she narrates:

"I am now 37 years old; but I still recall vividly my childhood when I and my siblings regularly witnessed domestic violence in our own family. Every time after my dad visited his family, we would experience the nightmare. He would come home agitated, and kick and beat my mom, sometimes very badly. Believe me, we did try to protect my mom. But my dad would not allow us and will lock us in a different room while he continues to torture my mom. We could hear his beatings and my mom's screaming! I could never forget her screaming and the bruises she regularly had all over her body."

Tanvir witnessed directly how his mother was abused by his father. As he describes:

"I remember those days – my father would get drunk, come home, and beat my mom in front of me. In Tajikistan, domestic violence is almost taken for granted – people do not talk about that issue, and no one in the family such as the elderly tries to stop domestic violence. People do not realize that an abused woman is someone's daughter or sister."

Love and Marriage:

These women got married for different reasons – some for love, while some to escape from harsh realities. Many of these women got married at an early age. Such as *Nabila*, who got married when she was only 17. Her parents met *Aziz* and his family; they liked both and asked her whether she would like to marry *Aziz*. *Afsoon* (the informant and *Nabila*'s sister) mentioned that *Nabila* initially was reluctant to marry at that early age, but after a while gave in. *Afsoon* still wonders about this:

*"I do not know why my parents got her married at that young age, even now I keep asking them that question. My loving parents actually thought that they found a good family and a good husband for my sister. As for *Nabila*, I think she agreed to the wedding because she was too young and at an innocent age when girls dream of romances and love!"*

Amrin fell in love with *Ali* when she was 18 years old and married him after having a two years relationship. The first years of marriage were good, and as she explained:

"Actually, we did start with a loving relationship based on trust, mutual respect, and love. My in-laws were also nice. I felt that my life was full of happiness and peace, and I was grateful for having such a blessed life."

Rezina also married out of love. She was only 17 when she met *Farid* at a wedding party. According to her: *"it was love at first sight."* As *Rezina* explained: *"I felt blessed every day and was thankful to Allah – he gave me everything that one could desire to have in one's life. All my relatives and neighbors would tell me how blessed I was having a good and handsome husband."* *Aliya* married her colleague and friend, *Zayen*. As she reminisces: *"In a way, our wedding was like a true love story. The wedding ceremony was simple, but I was happy to be married to my friend."*

Meher, experienced severe domestic violence while growing up, and had initially decided not to get married. However, when she was in her mid-twenties, she met *Mizan* and fell in love. In her own words: *"When *Mizan* proposed to me, I was excited and immediately accepted that. Our gorgeous wedding was almost like a fairy tale wedding."* *Bahar*'s case was very different; she got married when she was 34 years old. As *Bahar* mentioned, *"I was a 'pirdukhtar."* She explained that in Tajik society, women getting married after 22 years of age were called *"pirdukhtar"*, which means "old girl". She narrates her reason for getting married:

“I was so tired of hearing that I was too old to get married and living a boring poor woman’s life, that I agreed quickly to the marriage proposal. I actually did not know or meet him and actually felt like marrying a stranger. However, marrying a stranger was not an unusual event for a poor old girl like me.”

Dilfuza also wanted to escape from a harsh reality – her dad eventually had gone to Russia, married a Russian woman, and divorced her mom. She got into an arranged marriage, and in her own words to a “stranger” and to “escape from poverty.” Delruba met her future husband, Rustom, when she was only 18. Delruba, being young and naïve, entered the marriage with lots of dreams. However, as she mentioned, “I soon woke up from those dreams and found myself in a loveless, humiliating, and abusive relationship.” Salma decided not to marry. She grew up in a rich family, but she saw her mother facing abuses not only from her dad, but also from her grandmother. As she explains:

“Frankly speaking, I am scared of getting married. I worry that my mother-in-law will be like my grandmother and will ruin my life. “

Sabina grew up in a rich and highly educated family. She studied abroad and graduated from a prestigious university. She explained that in Tajik society, getting married around the age of 18-22 was considered as the perfect time. However, in her case, there were many proposals, but she and her family realized that most of those men were after her family’s money. In her own words:

“Some men during their discussion did not even hide that they wanted to have a rich father-in-law, unbelievable, right? As time passed, it was becoming a challenge for me and my parents to find and choose a good person as my future husband. One day, I was introduced to Azim, who was 10 years older than me, divorced and had two children. Somehow, I liked him and felt safe thinking that he was a matured man and a family person. So, I agreed to marry him after a few days of spending time with him.”

Tanvir provided an introspective understanding of Tajik society when it comes to marriage and expectations:

“There is a Tajik saying, which is “arusa dar arush kuchuka dar kuchukish,” which means that a husband should kick or beat his wife on the first day of marriage so she will learn how to obey, similar to teaching a dog from early on.”

Shattered Dreams

Many of these women’s dream of a happy marriage ended in a few months or within a few years. Their narratives illuminated the trauma of experiencing severe forms of domestic violence.

Sophie: The Destination of Mothers and Daughters are the Same

Sophie grew up with the understanding that violence is acceptable, and normal. As she explained:

“I grew up assuming that all married women’s lives would be like my mom’s – facing all kinds of abuses from husbands and in-laws. My experiences of growing up with these abuses also made me internalized that women should tolerate these abuses and still be good wives to their husbands.”

Her husband, Firoz, within a few months after marriage started to beat her for no reason. One night, Firoz beat her so badly that she had to go to the hospital. Sophie continues to face verbal and physical abuses, but she has no support system that would give her the strength to divorce Firoz. She worries about her daughters as she explained:

“Now a days, I do not care about my situation anymore, but as a mother I worry about my daughters I can see that all these have impacted them. My daughters are now nine and seven years old and both are exhibiting psychological issues.”

Delruba: Men wants to control us

Delruba's nightmares started a few months after her marriage, when Rustom, her husband, started to drink and frequently visit nightclubs. To her surprise and heartbreaking, she realized that Rustom was having relationships with other girls. It became a regular pattern for him to come home drunk and beat *Delruba*. She painfully recollects her thoughts on those days:

"I realized if my daughters were near me, he would not beat me. So, I would try to be with my daughters when he would come home, but sometimes it was not possible. Often times, my daughters would see me during or after the beating and my bruises, and I realized that it was affecting them psychologically."

After staying in this abusive marriage for 13 years, she found the strength to share all this with her family. With the support from her family, she finally made the decision to divorce Rustom.

Azin: My Mother-in-law is my nightmare

Azin's world started to change during her first pregnancy, which was terrible in itself. They had moved to Russia since her husband secured a job there. It was a part time job, so the family was struggling financially. Her mother-in-law started the mental abuse, first by depriving her of adequate food, then continuing her demand to do all the household works, and complaining to her husband about her. In *Azin's* words:

"In that household, the mother's words were like law, and everyone was expected or rather required to obey those. Her sons were always eager to comfort and support her in all different ways."

Azin grew up in a middle-class family but could not find the strength to share all these with her parents. However, one of her dad's friends, living in Russia, saw her one day at the restaurant where she was working and informed her dad. Her dad helped her get back to Tajikistan. After a year or so, her husband married a Russian girl while he was still married to her. *Azin* then divorced her husband.

Arzu: My Fake Living

Arzu continues to live in a loveless and abusive marriage. Initially, she was happy. After a few years, *Arzu* observed some changes in her husband's behaviors – he was aloof and abusive (both psychologically and physically). Eventually, she realized that he was having an affair with one of her neighbors. She feels that every day she is dying inside. The worst part is as she explained:

"My children know about their father having this relationship. I feel ashamed of myself and cannot sleep at night. I don't have peace of mind anymore. I feel that I am betraying myself. But I grew up in poverty, and I am scared of going back to that life. I am living a life of lies and torments – there is no escape for me from this fake life."

Bahar: I was a 'pirdukhtar'

Bahar entered into the marriage with very little expectations. As she mentioned: *"Rashed was also poor and I knew there had to be a reason why he married an old woman like me, so I was not expecting happiness from this marriage."* Before getting married, her mother's advice was this: *"a husband's home has a sharp knife with six sides and that I would have to tolerate every side of that knife."* However, whatever little expectations she had were shattered the very first night of her wedding when all of a sudden, Rashed started to slap her continuously and for no reason. Experiencing verbal and physical abuses became a normal part of her life. After many years of enduring that, she could not take it anymore and decided to divorce him. It was after that she came to know that Rashed had a mental condition.

Mehrana: mother's word was the law of the household

Mehrana got married to her cousin, Masoom, and moved to Russia soon after that. Her in-laws also lived with them. The family was struggling financially; she took a manual kind of job. Masoom and his brother did not have the courage to stand up against their domineering mother, who was also jealous of her daughter in laws. As *Mehrana* explained, “*she was so jealous of their wives, that she sometimes would not allow her sons to sleep with them.*” *Mehrana's* situation worsened when she became pregnant; her mother-in-law was almost starving her. She also started to experience both verbal and physical abuses not only from her husband, but also from Masoom's brother. *Mehrana* hid all these from her parents because she did not want them to worry. However, one day while she was putting the trash outside her workplace, one of her relatives saw her and called her parents. Her parents helped her move back to Tajikistan and to divorce Masoom.

Tanvir: Tajik Women Allow Themselves to be Humiliated

Tanvir's thoughts on divorce were illuminating:

“In Tajik society, once you are a divorced women, you become ‘beva’ – that term is derogatory of women. There is this another Tajik saying - ‘kurboka shu dorad obu ru doorad’, that translates into ‘the frog has a husband, so it has a status.’ This is basically saying that even an ugly woman (such as ugly as a frog) has a status in society if she is a married woman. So, divorced women have very low status or no status in Tajik society. However, these phrases give power to men, and they continue to abuse their wives with the idea that these women will dare to think about divorce.”

Meher: Men Continue to have second wives

Meher grew up in an educated and liberal family, she herself has a master's degree. She initially felt that she had a good marriage that was based on love and mutual respect. After three years in the marriage, *Meher* felt that something was different about Mizan – he was somewhat aloof. In an unexpected way, one day she met a lady holding a baby at a store. *Meher* observed something strange - the lady looked at her and then at Mizan and left the store in a hurry. Then one day, her world collapsed when her sister-in-law told her that she saw Mizan with a lady and that he was holding a baby. It all came together for *Meher*. She left her house immediately and went to her parents place. Mizan finally admitted that he has a second wife and a child. It took her a month to get over that emotional trauma and to file for a divorce. *Meher* explains:

“In Tajikistan, it is illegal to have multiple wives. But many men have multiple wives – they marry using the Sharia law. Sharia law allows men to have multiple wives. Dire economic situations in Tajikistan are leading many poor women, some are widows and divorced, to enter into polygamous marriages.”

Sabina: Tajik wife cannot show that she is tired

Sabina's marital problems started immediately after the marriage. Initially, it was verbal abuses from her mother-in-law for not bring enough dowries. As *Sabina* explained:

“In Tajik society, the expectation/tradition is that the bride will bring with her furniture, washing machine, TV, and carpets. My parents wanted to buy those for me, but Azim had told them not to buy those, since it would be difficult to bring those to Russia.”

Sabina continued:

“My mother-in-law was very clever. She was kind with me and would laugh with me in front of her son, but when Azim was not at home, she would be very rude and abusive. She would often compare me with Azim's first wife and make a point that she was more beautiful and nicer than me.”

One day, she had an argument with Azim, and he became very abusive and started to choke on her. She wanted to call the police, but Azim told her that they were living illegally in Russia and did not have the legal documents. *Sabina* feels ashamed to let her parents know about all these. Her dad also had a stroke recently. *Sabina* is now in her fourth month in marriage. She summarized her marital experience in a painful way:

“My four months of marriage seems like a bad dream to me. Sometimes, I cry all night. I do not want to look at the mirror- if I look at the mirror, I see a tired woman. Every day I regret marrying Azim. I feel that I am dying inside slowly.”

Alina: Domestic violence is a part of Tajik women’s lives

Similar to many others, *Alina* started to face abuses from her mother and in-laws immediately after getting married. The initial complaint was that her parents did not give her enough dowries. Then she started to face abuses (verbal and physical) from Riaz (her husband). One day she tried to commit suicide by cutting her wrist. Her father took her to the hospital and advised her to divorce Riaz. But *Alina* could not and still cannot find the strength to divorce Riaz. Her main reason is her two daughters and two sons – she feels that she could not support them if she gets a divorce.

Aliya: My life is a living hell

Initially, *Aliya* felt a loving relationship with her husband, *Zayen*. Things slowly started to change when she experienced had multiple miscarriages, and *Zayen* left for Russia to work. *Zayen* returned to Tajikistan after a year. *Aliya* started to notice that he was a different person; he started to drink and was aloof. She later realized that he was having affairs with more than one woman. One day, *Aliya* confronted her with cheating, and that’s when the physical abuse started. *Aliya* became pregnant again. During her pregnancy, she endured multiple beatings from *Zayen*. She was worried about how that might affect her fetus. Her worst nightmare became a reality – her son was born with some serious brain damage. *Aliya* had thought of many times to divorce him, but coming from a poor family and without any education, she is scared of that. In her words:

“I tell my husband quite often that people get scared thinking about going to hell after death, but I am not afraid of that because he has already made my world a living hell. There were times when I had thought of committing suicide, but then I think – who will take care of my son? I have learned to manage my emotions– I do not even talk to him. It is like two strangers living under one roof.”

Afsoon: My beautiful sister

Afsoon shared the experiences of her sister, *Nabila*, who became pregnant within eight months of her marriage. She gave birth to a healthy boy, and it was around that time, things started to change. She started to face abuses, first neglect, then physical abuses. Her mother-in-law would ask her right after giving birth to wake up early in the morning (4 am) to work on household chores. There were days when *Aziz* and his mother would eat together, and they would not even ask her to join them. At some point, *Aziz* lost his job and incurred a huge debt. *Nabila* decided to pay off his debt with the wedding jewelries that her parents gave her. After a while, *Aziz* took away her phone, so she could not even contact her family. *Nabila* was on the edge; the final blow came when she found photos of *Aziz* with his girlfriends on his laptop. When *Nabila* confronted him, *Aziz* first had an argument and then started to beat her.

Nabila got a divorce soon after that with the support of her parents. *Afsoon* sadly shared her thoughts on how the abuse had affected her sister:

“After a couple of years after the divorce, when we talked with her friends at the university, they told us that during that time, when my sister went to the university, that she would behave almost like a

robot, did not express any feelings or emotions. All those psychological and physical abuses shattered not only her dream of a happy marriage but also led her to shut down her emotions.”

Salma: Rich and educated women also face domestic violence

Salma shared her mother’s experiences of domestic violence. Her mother was highly educated (had a Ph.D.) and from a rich family. But decided to become a home maker after marriage and tried to respect and love her in-laws. However, she continued to face verbal abuses from her in-laws. As *Salma* explained:

“My grandmother knew how to torture her daughter in law. For example, during dinner time, all of a sudden, she would start talking about another person’s wife (their neighbor), praise her beauty and her cooking, and how good she was as a wife.”

Salma felt that her father had also started to change slowly. She witnessed one day her father hitting her mother. Later on, she and others realized that he was having an affair with a neighbor. Then things changed drastically when her father married the other lady. That was the catalyst; her mother decided to divorce him.

What needs to be changed?

One of the questions focused on the informants ideas/thoughts on addressing domestic violence. Their answers ranged from “nothing will change” to “taking responsibility.”

For example, *Alina* thinks that women’s status in Tajikistan will not change and that domestic violence would remain a part of their lives. *Bahar* thinks the same as she mentioned: *“I do not know what needed to be done to change women’s status and condition in Tajikistan. I do not think such change will come any time soon.”* *Azin* is currently rebuilding her life and completing an undergraduate degree in education. Her career goal is to become a teacher and try to inculcate the values of respect (for both men and women), responsibility, empathy and develop critical thinking abilities in her students. According to her, *“changing the current societal culture in Tajikistan will take time, but I hope my students will spearhead the process to start changing some of the rigid traditions of Tajik society and to bring more gender equality.”* *Meher* also emphasized education. She explained that education did not have to be a college degree; it could include diplomas or training that would help women develop skills in sewing, weaving, running a small business and so forth. She also argued that Tajikistan needed more women in policy making positions. *Rezina* wanted parents not to allow their daughters to get married at an early age. As she mentioned: *“when you get married at 17 or 18, you are still a child and facing constant abuses breaks you and does not help in developing the strength or the maturity to deal with these issues.”* *Delfuza* echoed the same. She argued:

“If we want to prevent domestic violence, we (women) have to study, work and travel. We should see the world and learn about the cultures and society of other countries. We think, living in Tajikistan, that every women in every country are like us. It is like brainwashing, something that helps strengthen men’s power over us.”

Salma’s perspective on this was also similar, that having money and education do not always prevent domestic violence. In her words: *“we, women, need to wake up and realize that it is not normal that married women would face domestic violence. We need to become more conscious of our rights as human beings.”*

Aliya also puts the responsibility more on women as she argued that women need to change their way of thinking, and that they must break out from the fear mentality and try to remain financially independent. As she argued: *“That will give us the courage to leave our husband at the first instance when they start to abuse us. No women should tolerate these abuses, and humiliations.”* *Amrin* discussed the lack of adequate support structures for women facing domestic violence. She pointed out that there

were only four shelters for women experiencing domestic violence, and in some regions such as in Khalton there was no shelter. As she mentioned, *“there is no place for women to go and seek shelter or other support. So, the immediate need is to build more women shelters and other support systems.”* Tanvir offers a different perspective on that:

“I often time hear that women who suffer from domestic violence are uneducated and poor. However, that is not true of my mother. She is educated and a schoolteacher. I feel that Tajik women allow themselves to be humiliated. They think that since their mothers and grandmothers also experienced domestic violence, they should also learn how to tolerate those abuses (physical and psychological). Unless that mindset changes, nothing will change unfortunately.”

ANALYSIS & CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper shared some of the life stories of 16 Tajik women and one Tajik man who directly or indirectly experienced domestic violence in their lives. The stories are tragic, the abuses that they experienced are incomprehensible, and their narratives speak loudly of the severity of domestic violence in Tajikistan. The common threads of these stories are repeated abuses, neglect, hopelessness, fear, and the societal pressure to keep silent. One may think that these women are all poor and uneducated and hence have no other option but to endure these unimaginable abuses. However, as mentioned earlier, some of these women came from highly educated and financially well-off families. Those who chose to divorce their abusive husbands were able to do that with the support of their families; however, those who were from poor families continue to live in abusive relationships because they lack that support system. These findings validate the research findings of many authors (Haarr, 2007; Najibullah, 2022).

One of the authors of this paper, who grew up in Tajikistan offered her own perspective on this matter:

“When violence occurs, women often turn to their parents, siblings, or relatives for help. Yet, instead of receiving protection, they are frequently met with blame or pressure to remain in the marriage. Divorce does not provide relief either. Many divorced women avoid going outside due to constant scrutiny and criticism. That isolation creates deep emotional and psychological stresses.”

Many of these informants entered marriage at a very early age, which made it easy for the abusers to continue their abuses. Even though, the marital age was increased in 2010 to 18 for both males and females, in rural areas early marriage is still common. “Male out-migration to Russia has become one of the leading issues shaping the economy and social life in Tajikistan, especially in rural areas” (Wood, et al., 2021, p. 279). That caused a gender imbalance in rural areas. This imbalance has caused women particularly mother-in-law, to become decision makers at the household. In a highly patriarchal society such as Tajikistan, discussing domestic violence is considered a taboo (Pycckom, 2022). Many of the informants mentioned that it was expected that women would experience such abuses after marriage. As one of the informants mentioned, there is a lack of services for domestic violence survivors. The 2019 Human Rights Watch reports that most counseling session focuses on reconciling the women with her abusive husbands and often send the women back to the home where they continue to experience severe forms of domestic violence (p. 4). There is no provision for addressing mental health problems. While discussing approaches/strategies to address domestic violence, many of these informants emphasized the importance of education for girls, and the need to be financially independent. That is not a surprising finding. It takes lots of courage and confidence to take a stand against domestic violence, and more so to consider a divorce. Wood et al’s (2021) research on domestic violence in rural Tajikistan also found that education and employment were essential in building empowerment among women.

Very little changes have occurred to address domestic violence in Tajikistan. In the past, law enforcement agencies often found husbands responsible for domestic violence and driving their spouses

to suicide. But in recent years Tajik prosecutors have turned their attention to the roles that some in-laws play in bringing deadly ends to their sons' marriages (Najibullah, 2022). The first-known case targeting in-laws, was in the Sangvor district— one of the most conservative parts of the country – that sentenced Zuhro Jurabekova (63 years old) to five and a half years in prison for driving her daughter-in-law to suicide (Najibullah, 2022).

In 2023, the Equality and Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Act was enacted and it also established the Department for Government Protection of the Right to Equality and Freedom from Discrimination. Women's representation in the Tajik Parliament has increased from three percent to 27 percent over the past 25 years (OHCHR, 2024). However, not all women in power support women's rights either. Larisa Alexandrova a lawyer and a human rights activist argued (as mentioned by Asia-Plus, 2025) that some of the women who are in government are even more conservative than their male counterparts, holding traditional, patriarchal beliefs. Despite the government having taken some steps to address problems of domestic violence, the overall situation has not improved over the last decade, and there seems to be a lack of political will to spend money on tackling the problem. For instance, there is no earmarked funding for the State Program for the Prevention of Domestic Violence in Tajikistan. And, while work is underway to criminalize domestic violence in Tajikistan, the proposed revisions to the criminal code will punish only some types of violence – physical violence, isolation, intimidation, control and economic deprivation, and neglect – but overlook psychological violence, marital rape, and sexual assault.

Society does not change that quickly – however, as history showed us over and over again – minority groups in all different societies had to fight hard to earn certain rights. So, one can only hope that as more and more women join policy making positions in Tajikistan government, that gradually we will see new laws that would help address domestic violence. Societies could also change gradually from bottom up, meaning that Tajik women who could afford to gain education and have a career, could also step up against domestic violence (as a few of the informants did). However, individual actions can only go so far. The women's groups and human rights NGOs (both national and international) need to put more pressure on the government to take a strong stand against domestic violence.

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