

Women in the Mountain Societies of Central Asia.

S F Starr
Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
sfstarr@jhu.edu

The status and condition of women in the mountain societies of Central Asia today are in a state of flux, as is the study of women in these settings. Shortly after the collapse of the USSR a host of studies focused on the fate of women in post-Soviet societies. Nearly all identified difficulties in the path of women in the newly independent states, especially from the reduction of education and health services and the abolition of many jobs connected with the Soviet system. Except for Kyrgyzstan, where new forms of empowerment were predicted as a result of an influx of females into higher education, these studies tended to be gloomy. While all considered the condition of women in the different countries as separate problems, and while some distinguished between urban and rural women, hardly any differentiated between the conditions and prospects of women in mountainous areas and in other zones.

Today this is no longer possible. Defying gloomy projections of a decade ago, urban life in Central Asia, especially in the capitals, has flourished. Mass emigration from the countryside (mainly mountain areas) has doubled the populations of most capitals, yet renovation and new construction abound. Rural life lags, of course, yet the privatization of land in the Kyrgyz Republic has stimulated farming there, and emerging transport links between countryside and urban markets have boosted valley agriculture in Tajikistan as well. Meanwhile, mountain zones have become a backwater, lagging ever further behind both the urban centers and productive agricultural zones. Whether measured in terms of income, access to services, housing, education, nutrition or health, the gap between mountain populations in general and female mountain residents in particular and their urban or even lowland agricultural counterparts has widened.

The following observations are based on visits to mountain settlements adjoining the Ferghana Valley in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan in the area of Osh and Khojent in the autumn of 2006 in connection with a major study of the Ferghana region being carried out by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. They also draw on extensive conversations with male laborers from the mountain areas of Tajikistan who travel regularly between Dushanbe and their places of employment in the Moscow and Ekaterinslav regions.

The overwhelming impression one gains from these conversations with men and women in and from mountain zones of Central Asia is that their high-altitude economies are in a state of both relative and absolute free-fall, as compared with other geographic zones of their region. Were it not for money from the narco-economy the situation would be worse still. The reasons are not hard to find:

First, many factories created in district and provincial capitals in Soviet times have died. However grim their conditions, these had long constituted a major source of female employment. Some succumbed to the reality that they were never competitive in terms of cost or quality and continued only as a kind of subsidy from the Soviet system. Of those that survived the initial collapse, many have recently died, the victims of competition from Chinese goods, which tend to be cheaper and better.

Second, the renewal of roads and the expansion of regional networks in highways and railroads, has not reached many secondary markets, let alone the more remote mountain areas. This places a kind of transport tariff on all goods coming from the mountains and makes them less competitive. At the same time, the spread of private truck ownership has enabled both urban and rural entrepreneurs to make money by bringing produce and goods from towns and provincial centers to remote mountain settlements. In doing so they generally replace local merchants.

Third, while levels of access to education and health facilities vary by country, the best access is everywhere to be found in the cities, especially the capitals. As elsewhere in the world, it is hard to recruit outsiders to serve in remote mountain areas and those from such areas who are trained in medicine or teaching increasingly prefer to take readily available jobs in the cities. This has caused the gap in education and health indicators of mountain and non-mountain populations to widen.

Fourth, government employment, which formerly constituted a major pillar of all employment in mountain areas, has greatly shrunk. The inability of governments to collect taxes leaves them relatively impoverished, even as individuals in their societies acquire wealth. This means cut-backs in the civil service rolls. Also, as central governments rush to provide basic services to the burgeoning and potentially destabilizing urban populations they are forced to reduce staffs elsewhere, especially in the mountains.

Fifth, decade ago many dreamed of stimulating agriculture, home industries, and eco-tourism in the high mountain zones of Central Asia, and believed that this might provide a solution to the vexed economies of the region. This hope is still alive, and those who share it can point to many successful enterprises that not only fit this general profile but which are organized by women or employ them. However, the overall impact of these initiatives, however laudable they may be, remains limited. The reality is that agricultural products grown above certain altitudes are uncompetitive economically, the market for home industries is limited, and even eco-tourism requires a substantial support infrastructure (beginning with regional air links) that does not exist. Many of these fledgling enterprises depend on direct or indirect subventions to survive, and as a group they do not exhibit any pattern of robust growth.

Together, these factors have undermined the viability and comparative attractiveness of mountain economies in many parts of Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz

Republic, and even East Kazakhstan. Rising indicators do not help in this situation. Paradoxically, the gap between life in these regions and the capitals has broadened as per capital GDP has risen nationally, for the growth is overwhelmingly concentrated in urban areas with ready access to regional transport. The inevitable consequence is to cause productive elements of the labor force in mountain communities to consider emigration.

There is nothing surprising about this. Impoverished Swiss mountaineers emigrated to America in the nineteenth century, farmers from West Virginia and eastern Kentucky flocked to the steel mills of Pittsburgh and Cleveland in the twentieth, and Guatemalans and Mexicans from mountainous Chiapas head north by the thousands. But the scale of the current out-migration from the Tien-Shan, Alatau, Pamir, and related mountain ranges of Central Asia surely ranks as one of the major demographic shifts in the entire history of these regions.

The migrants are overwhelmingly male. 135 out of 140 people surveyed on a recent Tajik Air flight of migrants from Dushanbe to Moscow were males, all between the ages of 17 and 30 and only a few older than this. 60% were married and had wives back home, but nearly all had at least one other relative in Russia. Most important, approximately four out of five of the total were from rural areas in Tajikistan, meaning that they were from the mountains. Some had worked for months or years in the capital and were moving in search of better prospects.

What do these figures signify? That mountain areas are being denied their most vigorous young males at precisely the age at which they should be building up their communities, marrying and starting families. Many have indeed married and have started families, but they do not see their wives for months or years on end and speak openly of the fact that their children do not know them.

We will turn shortly to the fate of male workers in the North and the impact of their experiences on their mountain homes. For now, let us ask how the women

cope with this situation? Those who are married often seek to step into their husband's former roles, even to the point of taking their former marginal jobs. Others engage in entrepreneurial activity, selling or trading in the markets or even producing goods for sale; some even learn to drive trucks to further this work. Some find employment with NGOs, the civil service, or local businesses. Most, however, and especially those with young children, have no choice but to get by on the remittances they receive from their husbands.

Over the past decade both the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan have become remittance economies. There are several notable effects of this. First, it monetizes life in remote mountain areas at the expense of simpler exchanges of goods and services. As this occurs, the things that are most valued in the mountain community become precisely those things only obtainable in a remote metropolis. Second, since some of the remittances are in the form of goods available only in the areas where the males work, it strengthens the view among those still in the mountains that they exist on the outer margins of "normal life" and are greatly deprived thereby.

In spite of generous remittances from husbands and relatives in the North and in spite of the heroic efforts of many women and relief agencies, employment abroad as migrant labor does not bring net gains to the mountain community. It may bring generators, power tools, television sets, video games and even computers, but at a big price. After all, a community with a hole in its 17-30 year-old male labor force loses not only these males' paid employment but also their evening and weekend work on houses, playgrounds, community buildings, roads, and schools. No less important, it loses their active participation in every aspect of the community's life, both religious and secular.

The absence of young males breaks down traditions in their mountain homes in which they would otherwise have figured. Women fill the breach, and in come

cases become a family's sole element of cultural continuity. But they cannot pretend to fill the role of both parents, especially for their male children. Village police all speak openly of a rise in rural crime by young males whose fathers are working elsewhere. More alarming is the growth of rural crime by females, including young wives, which is widely discussed in the national press of both Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. Both reflect the reality that mountain communities are strained to the point of complete rupture.

This is scarcely surprising since the absence of males through migrant labor renders difficult the lives of mountain women, whether or not their absent menfolk are good providers. Many respond with heroic exertions, and prevail against all odds. Others sink gradually and noiselessly as they labor against unequal odds. And still others make the compromises they must in order to survive. For many this means placing themselves and their families under the protection of another male, whether a relative, friend, or acquaintance. All such arrangements are readily subject to abuse by the nominal protector. This can take the form of extortion, theft, or sexual exploitation of the mother or her offspring.

Under such circumstances, the decision to enter into a polygamous relationship is quite understandable, although illegal in every country under consideration. Much has been written about the recent revival of polygamy in Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan. For our purposes it is not inappropriate to consider it as a form of alternative insurance provided at a price which many women see as either appropriate or unavoidable. Closely related to the rise of polygamy is the decision of many rural mountain women to become sex workers in provincial capitals or in the cities of Central Asia and beyond.

The rise of both polygamy and prostitution reflect the process of social erosion that is ongoing in mountain communities of Central Asia, even as they are

benefiting from remittances. This erosion is vividly and tragically reflected also in the spread of drug use and drug-related disease. Kyrgyz and Tajik women have been involved in the drug trade for nearly two decades, usually as couriers who use their ample skirts to conceal refined or raw opium. The same two governors mentioned above speak of a growth of women as drug couriers and also as consumers. The reason is obvious. Couriers are paid in kind, which they must then sell to others in order to turn into cash. With opium or heroine readily at hand, more than a few are tempted to try it.

Inevitably, their husbands who travel back and forth to cities in Kazakhstan and Russia are also engaged as couriers. Every provincial police command in Kazakhstan and the metropolitan police forces of Moscow and Ekaterinburg today have special units devoted to migrant laborers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Their main concern is with drugs. Rare is the Muscovite who cannot regale you of tales of Tajik workers selling opium to high school youth after school. Whether or not this occurs, it is undeniable that the incidence of drug use among Tajik and Kyrgyz workers in Kazakhstan and Russia is high and growing.

The ever-closer involvement of migrant laborers in drug trafficking and use advances the criminalization of the southern mountain communities which are the source of the drugs they sell in northern cities. Worse, it brings little compensation in the form of profits fed back to families in the mountains. For the Central Asian drug trade, unlike that of Colombia, is not vertically integrated. More than 90% of the profits go to invisible "mafias" from Russia, the Balkans, Turkey, and even Nigeria, with only pittance going to the low-level couriers, whether male or female, from the region.

With the growth of drug use among both the male migrant workers in Kazakhstan and Russia and among their women back home comes the spread of HIV. Again, it is not our purpose to detail the extent of this phenomenon, which

is being closely studied. Rather, let us note that the cultures of rural Central Asia in general and of the mountain regions in particular are peculiarly resistant to normal medical interventions. Having been under- and badly- served by Soviet doctors, many Central Asians in the countryside are deeply skeptical of formal medicine and prefer to turn to traditional healers, most of whom are quite ignorant of HIV. Males returning from work in the north are loath to admit they have had sexual relations with many unprotected partners, and generally do not realize they are themselves HIV carriers. Mountain women, for their part, are equally disinclined to accept the possibility that they are HIV positive, let alone take the relatively public step of getting treatment for it.

Yet however grave the threat of expanding drug use and spreading HIV in the mountain communities of Central Asia, the psychological turmoil engendered by returning migrant laborers is scarcely less worrisome. The rituals of their periodic return are by now well-established. Before leaving they buy lavish presents as a means of impressing folks back home of their hard work and success. Whatever cash remains is either carried back or sent back through hawala-like intermediaries, the spread of which undermines normal inter-state banking. One of the few positive achievements of Central Asian governments (especially Tajikistan's) has been to expand and improve the state saving banks to the point that they can make inroads on this illegal transfer, which they are now doing. With all arrangement made, they buy their ticket and usually a bottle of vodka to drink on the plane, and head to the airport.

Many family reunions are warm and happy, with everyone enjoying the fruits of hard work and sacrifice. Many others are not. Whether they are registered or unregistered (i.e., "illegals"), immigrant workers from Tajikistan and other countries of the Central Asia and the Caucasus do not have an easy time in Russia. The fact that some of them engage in criminal activity makes it difficult for all, fanning racial prejudices that are never far from the surface. Fights are

frequent, not only with much-publicized Russian "skin head" groups but with ordinary Russian workers and youths. Immigrant laborers who date Russian women come in for special treatment.

All of this could be ignored if it did not leave many Tajiks and even mild-tempered Kyrgyz in a fighting mood when they return home on their periodic visits. Police in Badakhshan and Batken speak of frequent brawls involving returning laborers. More to the point, they speak of the frequent beatings to which such returnees subject their wives and girl friends. The latter, meanwhile, have had to develop the skills of independence and resourcefulness needed to survive on their own in a tough environment. Whatever gratitude they may feel towards returning men folk is tempered by their unwillingness to return meekly to the passive role which the men expect of them. It is a perfect formula for discord. Such problems are only exacerbated by the tendency on the part of the males to reassert often willfully their authority over children whom they have not seen for a half-year, year, or longer. Both the women and children have changed in the men's absence, and neither is able or willing to return instantly to the status ante quem.

The forgoing picture is not a happy one. Against this grim story one might cite the many instances of mountain women, families, and whole communities successfully handling the new remittance economy and all its side effects. Unfortunately, these positive case are more the exception than the rule. Worse, they tend to put to one side the huge demographic impact on mountain societies of the out-migration of labor. Precise data on populations in mountain regions of Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic are lacking. However, the governors of the Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan and of Batken Province in the Kyrgyz Republic both speak of population losses from mountain areas of 40% and more over the past half decade. Bearing in mind that this lost population is

overwhelmingly comprised of men from the most productive age groups, it is no exaggeration to call the impact devastating.

Against this, it is popular to claim that the impact is temporary, because the migrants will return as soon as they have made sufficient money. Officials in mountain areas, staff members of international NGOs, and even some mountain people themselves like to repeat this piety. Often, they strengthen it with the argument that mountain societies, after all, are unique, preserving ancient mores and even languages that bind its members together so tightly that even those males who are absent for years will eventually return and reintegrate themselves, healing whatever short-term social and cultural problems may have arisen.

Some undoubtedly will return, and some actually have done so. But the evidence of migration elsewhere suggests that this is likely to remain the exception, not the rule, and that the demographic loss will be permanent. This does not prevent mountain communities from eventually rebuilding through high birth rates and lowered death rates. But even if this happens in a few cases (and their number is bound to be limited), the communities will never be the same, for they will have been drawn one and for all into the larger economies. Those who change their cultures to the extent necessary to survive may do so. Many others will not.

But what of the example of Switzerland, whose mountain communities were once shrinking and dying but are now prosperous? It is an attractive scenario but unrealistic and unlikely for Central Asia. Switzerland, after all, is a decentralized federation, with self-rule extending to the smallest commune. All Central Asian governments are highly centralized, with all key officials appointed by the presidents and all key decisions taken in the capital. Significantly, all greatly fear decentralization as a step that could lead eventually to breakup. Mountain

communities in Central Asia will continue to be the stepchildren of national governments for the foreseeable future.

Beyond this, it must not be forgotten that Switzerland developed its mountain communities through enormous subsidies and transfers, none of which are likely in Central Asia. And even if such subsidies should miraculously come from sources other than the national government (co-religionists, aid organizations, well-wishers, etc.) will the resulting mountain economies actually be sustainable? Many examples, from the Appalachians to the Altai Mountains, from northern Scandinavia to the Upper Indus, suggest that the only way to maintain remote mountain communities and their unique ways of life is through sustained subsidies.

These thoughts bring us back to the possibility that the mountain communities of Central Asia do not face a glowing future. If one's concern is with people rather than cultures in the abstract, this may not be a bad thing. The men and women from Central Asia's mountain regions who move to provincial towns and national capitals do so because, under the circumstances, these present better prospects for them and their children. Modern life has always been linked with urban life.

Central Asia's greatest contributions to world culture have been made through its great urban centers situated on lowland oases. Indeed, it might be argued that large segments of the mountain populations of Central Asia—Kyrgyz tribes in the mountainous south, Ismaili Muslims in Badakhshan, and Slavic Cossacks in East Kazakhstan—did not choose to settle where they did but were forced to do so by larger and hostile neighbors. Having done so, they then proceeded to suffer in poverty until subsidies arrived from the Soviet government. But these subsidies were a double-edged weapon, requiring mountain people to continue to live as herders when others were becoming physicists, and having as their ultimate purpose the goal of pinning mountain populations to their place, where they

could not interfere with the more important work of building up Soviet life in the cities.

Acknowledging all this, could there nonetheless be a chance for improving the life of Central Asian mountain women in their traditional places and settings, rather than in district and provincial capitals? Her is useful to put aside the distorting lens of Soviet experience and to look at Central Asia as a whole, which means including its ancient and traditional heart, Afghanistan. The fate of Afghan mountain communities and their women has been even more harsh than that of their immediate neighbors to the north. Yet in the past five years more than two million women, along with a like number of men, have voluntarily returned from refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran in order to rebuild their homes and lives. Mountainside orchards have been replanted and irrigation systems rebuilt by hand, schools and clinics have been built in remote mountain areas, and roads are beginning to connect isolated mountain communities with secondary markets. New laws protect women in ways that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. And while there is large-scale migration to Kabul, Herat and Kandehar, mountain populations are more than holding their own, if only because of the possibilities of self-sustaining small-scale agriculture.

Will this pattern change if and when Afghanistan advances beyond abject poverty? It is impossible to say. Nonetheless, it raises the question of whether it would not be wise to examine all the diverse mountain people of Central Asia together, and not just the post-Soviet zone in isolation, and to consider the fate of all mountain women in Central Asia, and not just those who happen to have been born under Soviet rule. Otherwise, there may be lessons in both directions that will elude us.