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Donor-Funded Women's Empowerment in Tajikistan: Trajectories of Women's NGOs and Changing Attitudes to the International Agenda

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Abstract
This article investigates internationally funded women's empowerment initiatives in Tajikistan. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent Tajik civil war (1992–1997), this newly independent, Muslim-majority country has experienced an influx of foreign aid, including in the field of women's rights. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, the article analyzes the growth and diversification of local, Western-funded women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) between 1991 and 2020, paying attention to their leadership and aims, as well as changing perceptions of donors' interventions. It is argued that, initially, local activists were supportive of international projects, which promoted gender equality by supporting women's integration into the new, capitalist economy. In the last decade, however, an increasing conditionality of funding and deteriorating donor-NGO relations has fueled local contestations of the international agenda. The donor-enhanced women's empowerment model, which fosters individual responsibility and self-reliance, is increasingly criticized for aggravating the conditions of local women in the context of a growing economic insecurity characterizing the local capitalist economy. Against this resentment, an alternative women's empowerment model, advancing gender equity based on complementarity of male and female social roles and stressing the importance of family as a safety net against economic precarity, is gaining prominence locally.

Keywords Tajikistan · Women's empowerment · Gender · NGOs · Former Soviet Union

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Introduction

> Donors look at us and see oppression. They think that we do not have any values, that only they can give us values.[1]

This article scrutinizes donor-funded women's empowerment in Tajikistan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the consequent Tajik civil war (1992–1997) between pro-government secular forces and an Islamist-dominated opposition, this newly independent Central Asian country experienced a massive influx of aid. Since the early 1990s, international, mainly Western, donors have been implementing a variety of development projects on the ground (Heathershaw 2009; Kluczewska and Foroughi 2021). These projects are aimed at facilitating post-conflict peacebuilding and a simultaneous transition from a centralized, socialist government and command economy to democracy and capitalism. In accordance with international development trends worldwide as well as across the post-Soviet space (Sundstrom 2002; Ishkanian 2007; Pares Hoare 2016; Lazda 2018), women's empowerment was also high on donors' agenda in Tajikistan.

Donors conceptualized women's empowerment as fostering gender equality through providing women with the same rights and opportunities as men, including equal treatment in the political, social and, in particular, economic sphere (see, e.g. Hotkina and Rabieva 2003: p. 5). In the specific context of post-Soviet, post-civil war and Muslim-majority Tajikistan, women's empowerment projects aimed to help increase women's economic productivity, against what donors perceived as the persistence of a communal, patriarchal and religious lifestyle, which hindered gender equality (MacKenzie 2009). Tajikistan demonstrates many similarities with other post-socialist Eastern European and post-Soviet countries, where after the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, which led to a rampant economic crisis, donors also aimed to help local women deal with unemployment and integrate into a new capitalist economy (Gal and Kligman 2000: pp. 55–58; Hotkina and Rabieva 2003: pp. 8–9). The situation in Tajikistan, however, was even more acute: fighting, which took place during the civil war displaced at least 680,000 out of 6 million people, resulted in 20–60,000 deaths and nearly led to a total economic collapse in the country (Akiner and Barnes 2001: p. 6). What also differentiates Tajikistan is that donors additionally justified their interventions in the country with the excuse that, to use Lila Abu-Lughod's (2002) term, "Muslim women need saving", not only from communism, but also from patriarchy and oppression which they associated with the rising role of Islam after the Soviet collapse. To justify their intervention into local social relations, donors resorted to drawing images of the particular vulnerability of Tajik women. These were portrayed as passive victims of the war and religious resurgence, subordinated to Muslim men, and also as grateful beneficiaries of international aid (Simpson 2006: p. 20). These narratives also notoriously highlighted the new "status" of Tajikistan as the poorest country of the former Soviet Union (see,

[1] Interview with a leader of a Dushanbe-based women's NGO, May 24, 2017.

e.g. Falkingham 2000; ADB 2006). It is in this context that in the early 1990s, the first internationally funded local women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) appeared in the country to foster women's empowerment on the donors' behalf.

Donors did not discuss their women's empowerment strategies with the Tajik government, the general population or even with their main partners on the ground: the women's NGOs which they funded (Buxton 2011: pp. 113–116). By treating the country as an empty space where not only a new political and economic but also a social system could be designed from scratch, they ignored the fact that there might be pre-existing norms and values on the ground. Notably, this international women's empowerment imposition was not the first external attempt to enhance local women's rights. Starting from *hujum*, the unveiling campaign in 1927, the expanding Soviet state had launched its own women's liberation struggle in Muslim Central Asia (Northrop 2004). Back then, the Soviet Union had used the rhetoric of religious and patriarchal oppression of local women to strengthen its legitimacy in the region. But the Soviet state had also provided women in Tajikistan with education, employment and vast welfare, using these as the main means of women's emancipation (Mirzoeva 2004: pp. 24–29). This six-decade-long Soviet women's empowerment resulted in the emergence of a strong social group composed of educated and largely pro-secular women activists across the whole country. As this article shows, the ideas which these activists had about women's empowerment were fundamentally different from the Western women's empowerment agenda, and yet the two needed to be reconciled.

Against this backdrop, the article explores a contentious relationship between donor-funded women's empowerment and local social dynamics. It draws on conceptual insights from critical development studies (Ferguson 1990; Veltmeyer and Bowles 2018) and in particular the post-development theory (Escobar 1992; Ziai 2007). This theoretical strand starts with skepticism of neoliberal assumptions of contemporary international development, and rejection of a hegemonic, Western-centric understanding of what development is. Indeed, it revolves around "alternative(s) to development" (Escobar 1992: p. 22) and calls for a recognition of alternative, multiple visions of modernity and progress, based upon non-western normativities (see Gudynas 2011; Ziai 2017).

This article analyzes the trajectories of donor-funded local women's NGOs, and their changing perceptions of donor-funded women's empowerment. These organizations are locally known as *zhenshkie NPO* (in Russian) and *tashkiloti zanona* (in Tajik), and are headed by local women activists. By focusing on their leaders, goals and relations with donors, this article identifies four types of women's NGOs, which correspond to time periods that partially overlap. These are elite women's NGOs between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s; rural women's NGOs from the late 1990s to the late 2000s; professional women's NGOs from the late 2000s until now; and NGOs mainstreaming gender from the early 2010s until now. The article shows that the field of women's empowerment in independent Tajikistan was largely dominated by international donors, both through funding and an accompanying, rights-based normative framework. Importantly, the case of Tajikistan differs from many other post-Soviet countries in terms of local perceptions of donor-funded projects. Elsewhere, in the 1990s, an initial resistance on the part of the

public and local NGOs to donor-funded women's empowerment could be observed, but over time, local reactions normalized and NGOs became more accommodating towards donor-promoted frameworks (see, e.g. Ishkanian 2007; Lazda 2018). In Tajikistan, a reverse trend took place. In the 1990s and 2000s, the public and the government remained largely indifferent to donor-funded women's empowerment, but local NGOs were welcoming towards such projects. However, in the last decade, an increasing conditionality attached to international funding and deteriorating donor-NGOs' relations made local contestations more vocal. The donor framework, which relies upon values such as self-reliance and individual responsibility, was criticized by NGO leaders for aggravating the condition of local women by stripping them of their only remaining safety nets, i.e. the family unit, which they have in the context of economic insecurity accompanying Tajikistan's integration into the global capitalist economy. These contestations are additionally strengthened through an alternative women's empowerment model, supported by the Tajik government, which is gaining prominence in the country. It advances a heteronormative family model (Tajik: *oila*) and relies upon an assumption about gender equity, unlike the donor-promoted framework which favors gender equality. It thus envisages distinct, biologically determined social roles of men and women, which are seen as complementary to each other—with men as providers and women being responsible for the upbringing of children, who in future will take care of aging parents. In the almost total absence of a state welfare system, many local NGO leaders see this framework as the only feasible women's empowerment model.

Following this introduction, the next section describes the methodology of this research. It then explains how donor-funded women's empowerment arrived in Tajikistan and analyzes the trajectories of women's NGOs in the country and changing views on the donor agenda. The article concludes with a reflection on a coexistence of donors' and local women's NGOs' interests over the last three decades.

Methodology

This article draws on my long-term research in Tajikistan between 2013 and 2019. For a total of two and a half years, I used to be a practitioner in the aid sector in Tajikistan, working for one of the international organizations operating in the country and a local internationally funded NGO. It was during my work as a manager of a project discursively aimed at enhancing the rights and opportunities of local women that I was first exposed to the complex dynamics of donor-recipient relations, and the multi-level and multi-actor processes of promoting donors' normative frameworks on the ground. I could observe these dynamics both in Dushanbe, the capital city, where networking and fundraising take place, and in rural areas of the country, where sub-contracted rural NGOs are implementing internationally funded projects at a very local level. I took part in many high-level conferences and seminars with the participation of government bodies, international donors and what I describe as professional women's NGOs based in the capital city, and also in information campaigns and mobile consultations conducted by local NGOs for women living in rural areas. These experiences allowed me to become familiar with various perspectives

on donor-funded women's empowerment, from donor agencies to rurally based organizations down the NGO chain. In turn, while working for a local NGO, I was, among other tasks, developing project proposals for calls from several international donors. This helped me better understand the NGOs' complex positionality at an intersection of donors', beneficiaries' and their own interests. These experiences of being an "observing participant" (Mosse 2011) of donor-funded women's empowerment provide the sub-text of this research.

The article also draws upon my doctoral and postdoctoral field research on development aid in Tajikistan. I specifically refer to semi-structured, in-depth interviews with both leaders and employees of 13 women's NGOs in the country, nine of whom are women and four are men. Seven of these organizations are based in urban areas (Dushanbe and Khujand) and six in semi-urban and rural areas (in Istaravshan, Konibodom, Kulob, Panjakent districts and the Rasht Valley). In addition, I draw on interviews with three officials from government bodies which work on women's issues (Committee on Women and Family Affairs and the Ombudsman's office), and four representatives of international organizations and international non-governmental organizations providing grants to local NGOs in the field of women's empowerment. I conducted the interviews using Russian, Tajik and English languages. These field data are complemented with secondary sources, such as donor-funded publications on the situation of women in Tajikistan, which exemplify the donors' point of view (Falkingham 2000; Hotkina and Rabieva 2003; ADB 2006), and writings of local scholars on the condition of local women after the Soviet collapse (Mirzoeva 2004; Kasymova 2008; Lysyh 2007; Sharipova 2008; Mamadazimov and Kuvatova 2012). The analysis is also situated in literature on women's empowerment promoted by Western actors in the broader post-socialist and post-Soviet space.

Donor-funded Women's Empowerment Arrives in Tajikistan: Antecedents and Superimpositions

In the early 1970s, Western liberal feminists, mostly upper-class, white female American scholars, coined the concept of "women in development", which created the basis for the future women's empowerment framework (Escobar 1995: p. 178). Seeing patriarchy as the main enemy of women, the supporters of the concept advocated enhancing gender equality, especially through women's access to the labor market on the same conditions as men (Gal and Kligman 2000: p. 809; Ghodsee 2004: p. 732). Notably, Western women's empowerment emerged largely in reaction to the Soviet Union, that Tajikistan was once part of, which identified the capitalist system as women's biggest enemy. It was the Soviet support for the international women's movement on anti-capitalist terms that made the USA adopt an antagonistic approach to women's empowerment by integrating them into the capitalist economy (Ghodsee 2010). Over time, women's empowerment became one of the most popular normative frameworks of contemporary western-funded development aid. The dominant framings shifted from "women in development", through "women and development", "gender and development" (Crewe and Harrison 1998: p. 51), to, more recently, "gender mainstreaming" (Moser and Moser 2005).

Milestones in the Western women's empowerment agenda included the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979; regular World Conferences on Women, starting from 1975; the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) and the Beijing Platform for Action launched in 1995. In 2000, women's empowerment and gender equality were included in the Millennium Development Goals, and in 2010 in the Sustainable Development Goals. Once established, the "UN theatres" including international women's conferences started having an impact on non-western states through material support from Western donors accompanied by the diffusion of an uncritical discourse of women's empowerment (Spivak in Simpson 2006: p. 14). Ironically, perhaps, after the Soviet collapse, Western women's empowerment started being promoted in the same post-Soviet space that had denounced it previously. As Kristen Ghodsee (2010: p. 9) posits, in 1995, women from the former Soviet bloc came to the Beijing conference empty-handed. Stripped of the communist agenda, which was no longer useful in the new capitalist reality, women leaders from post-Soviet countries could now be easily "re-educated into accepting Western feminist perspectives". This is particularly surprising given that in the Soviet era, Western liberal feminism was locally associated with a movement of bourgeois women. Yet, following the conference, with the push from Western donors, new gender laws and action plans were promoted across the post-Soviet space, including Tajikistan (see Hotkina and Rabieva 2003: p. 28; Mamadazimov and Kuvatova 2012: p. 65).

After the Soviet collapse, in Tajikistan, there was little academic interest in gender studies. During the civil war, 320,000 highly educated people, including many academics and teachers, left the country for good and settled mainly in Russia (Kluczewska and Korneev 2018: pp. 35–37). Local activists and scholars who remained, now working in an impoverished Tajik academia, did not develop their own vision of women's empowerment in the new conflict-stricken and capitalist reality. There were also no locally developed national strategies with regard to women, as this topic was not a priority of policymakers in a country going through a civil war. This additionally facilitated donors' influence in this field.

Overall, the Soviet collapse and the subsequent war brought about tremendous changes in the social, political and economic life of Tajikistan. Despite Soviet-era achievements with regard to creating economic and political opportunities for women, in the 1990s, women found themselves largely excluded from politics. As Muborak Sharipova (2008: p. 70) posits, "the political sphere in independent Tajikistan has been 'hijacked' by groups of men from specific regions or by criminal clans". Available statistics show that while in 1989, women occupied 25.8% of high-level positions in Soviet Tajikistan, in 1995, this fell to 3.3% (Mamadazimov and Kuvatova 2012: p. 63). Employment in the public sector, anyway, did not provide the opportunity to secure a sufficient income. In the late 1990s, after the war had officially ended, about 35% of formally employed people in Tajikistan still did not receive salaries on time, and many public sector employees were on an equivalent of what we call today "leave without pay" (Hegland 2008: p. 52).

While unemployment had been rising fast in the 1990s, the data from the State Committee on Statistics pointed to an increase in the women's official share of the labor market from 40% in 1991 to 46% in 1996 (Kasymova 2008: p. 37). Most

probably, however, the actual participation of women in Tajikistan's economy was much higher due to an informality of the local economic sector. This happened despite the rising role of orthodox Islam after the Soviet collapse—a process which was gradually tying women to the domestic sphere. Feminization and informalization of the labor force was caused not only by the deaths of men in the war, but also by a growing economic instability (see Mukhamedova and Wegerich 2018). While the labor emigration of men to Russia was steadily rising (Kluczewska and Korneev 2018, pp. 33–35), women took over several sectors of Tajikistan's economy, such as the bazaar trade and agriculture. On the one hand, this process advanced women's role in households and furthered women's participation in economic activity. On the other hand, it exposed women to the inequalities of the new market economy in a country located at a new periphery of global capitalism, and characterized by extremely low earnings and scarce social protection.

Following the arrival of international donors in the early 1990s, Tajikistan became a new space of donor-funded women's empowerment. As in other countries in the post-Soviet space, the rise in the number of women's NGOs in Tajikistan was a result of abundant donor funding, rather than an expression of a liberal movement of local women. While donors relied on NGOs to channel their funding (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: p. 203), in the absence of well-paid jobs, the NGO boom created new, safe, work places and provided women with salaries which were much higher than the ones in, for example, government, education or health sectors (Tadjbakhsh 1998: p. 182; Hegland 2008: p. 61). Nevertheless, women's NGOs should not be viewed as entirely donor-driven. As the next section shows, the NGO sector became a new arena where women leaders could exercise their pro-secular activism, against the rising religiosity of which they were critical. Moreover, once the space for women in the political scene had shrunk, the NGO work has allowed these women to use their previously acquired leadership skills.

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) prelude to the 2003 publication entitled *Tajikistan: On the Way to Gender Equality* sends a clear message: "Gender discrimination is a key factor and cause of poverty. Women are often denied access to such fundamental rights as education, employment, natural resources and financial assets" (in Hotkina and Rabieva 2003: p. 5). Arguably, the situation in Tajikistan was the exact opposite, as it was poverty which deepened gender inequality. Leaders of women's NGOs in Tajikistan did not question this and other assumptions underlying donor-funded women's empowerment initiatives in their country, even if the applicability of this normative framework in the post-socialist and Soviet space has been widely queried (Gal and Kligman 2000; Sundstrom 2002; Ghodsee 2004; Ishkanian 2007; Szikra and Szelewa 2010; Pares Hoare 2016; Lazda 2018).

Women's empowerment has also been widely denounced on conceptual grounds for its one-size-fits-all approach, as this agenda is reflexive of the Western context which produced it, rather than of the needs of non-western countries where it is being promoted. Other criticism pointed to Western arrogance reflected in women's empowerment projects, as well as prejudices underlying such initiatives, especially with regard to Muslim societies (Abu-Lughod 2002; Billaud 2015). This framework was thus criticized for not taking into specific account socio-economic and political conditions in which gender imbalances appear, as well as ignoring the influence

of global capitalism on inequality in peripheral countries, and instead promoting abstracted narratives about gendered power relations in "backward" societies (de Cordier 2010: p. 237). It was also argued that it advances neoliberalism through initiatives which privilege self-reliance and individual responsibility over durable family ties and social cohesion (MacKenzie 2009), and legitimizes expansion of the largely exploitative capitalist system under the guise of making lives of women better (Escobar 1995: p. 181; Gregor 2017). Another crucial question seems to be about who is the driving force of this framework (Crewe and Harrison 1998: p. 52). Depending on whether the quest for empowerment comes from international donors or from local women themselves, it will elicit different social reactions and lead to different outcomes. In many contexts, including Tajikistan, the fact that such initiatives are funded by Western donors and increasingly managed by westernized, urban NGOs only strengthens local perceptions that empowerment initiatives are not just distant from local realities, but also serve foreign interests (see also de Cordier 2010: p. 239).

Before proceeding with analyses of the trajectories of women's NGOs in Tajikistan, it is worth mentioning that the state-supported women's empowerment framework stressing the role of the family unit, which started emerging in Tajikistan in the last decade, appeared largely in response to these dynamics. As mentioned in the introduction, by promoting a—morally and physically—"healthy family" (Tajik: *oilai solim*), it places women-mothers (Tajik: *zan-modar*) at the center of society and tasks them with a mission to maintain Tajik traditions and raise future generations (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: p. 198; Roche 2016). It thus promotes gender equity, meant as a complementarity of two gendered, male and female social roles, as a way to maintain social cohesion against the existential insecurity in large part caused by the capitalist system. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss to what extent such a framework can "effectively" empower women, it is important to recognize that, as in several other post-socialist countries where similar family-centered models emerged (see Grzebalska and Pető 2018), such a normative agenda is presented as a local, more relevant articulation of women's empowerment.

Local Women's NGOs and Changing Attitudes to the Donor Agenda

Early 1990s to Mid-2000s: Elite Women's NGOs

The first women's NGOs in the country were elite organizations. They were formed around already established former Soviet political activists and intellectuals, who, as Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh (1998: p. 176) writes, often "were not properly in touch with the customs of women in the villages". These were urban, well-educated, pro-secular and predominantly Russian-speaking women, many of whom were from Soviet-era elite families, who, not rarely, occupied prominent positions in the political scene of Soviet Tajikistan. Clearly, they were not representative of the needs of more "ordinary" women, despite their intentions to support them. Because of their influential position, these women were also best poised to take advantage of the transition to the market economy after the Soviet collapse. Yet, they preferred to work

in the non-profit sector because of the negative connotations of business among Soviet-era elites. For example, the first women's NGO, which had already opened in 1991, was the capital-based National Association of Women with Higher Education (*Natsional'naya assotsiatsiya zhenshchin s vysshim obrazovaniem* in Russian, *Tashkiloti jam'iyatii zanoni ma'lumoti olidorì* in Tajik), led by the former secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, Guljahon Bobosadiqova.

The elite women's NGOs operated in the two major urban areas in Tajikistan, the capital Dushanbe and Khujand.[2] These organizations were not numerous, their number varied between 20 and 30, depending on specific years.[3] Proportionally, however, they amounted to more than one-third of all NGOs in Tajikistan in the 1990s (Fisher 2013: p. 124). The first donors of women's NGOs in Tajikistan were the US-funded Central Asia Regional Office of the Eurasia Foundation, and the Counterpart Consortium, both based in Tashkent in neighboring Uzbekistan. Donors often credited themselves with enhancing local women's activism. For instance, Ula Ikramova and Kathryn McConnell (1999: p. 199), who at that time worked for the US-based Eurasia Foundation and the for US government, respectively, wrote, referring to elite women's NGOs: "these small gatherings of like-minded colleagues first learned the basics of how to work as an organization from groups like American Legal Consortium and Counterpart Consortium". This, however, was not quite the case. While leaders of elite women's NGOs were only learning the Western language of development, they had already gained significant experience and organizational skills in Soviet times, and were now applying them in the new, NGO-centered activism (Kluczewska and Foroughi 2021: p. 254). It would be thus simplistic to say that Soviet-era women leaders turned into liberal activists. There were significant differences in how the elite women's NGOs and their Western donors conceptualized these women's activism. Local activists often viewed their work in the NGO sector as an extension of their previous activism within the Soviet state, which was not necessarily equal to accepting liberal values underlying Western women's empowerment, such as individual responsibility, self-reliance and entrepreneurship.

The two visions of women's empowerment—that of the Soviets and the donor-funded one—were fundamentally different. Many activists who later became involved in elite women's NGOs were previously active in Soviet flagship women's empowerment institutions, the women's councils (*zhensovety*). These organizations

[2] Although Khujand, located in the north of Tajikistan, was significantly less affected by the war than southern regions and as a result needed less international assistance, this city used to be a Soviet hub of *intelligentsiya*, with very high levels of cultural and organizational capital. In the 1990s, Khujand offered a fertile ground for NGOs to develop. Moreover, the proximity of Khujand and Tashkent in Uzbekistan, where several donor organizations had their field offices in the 1990s, further facilitated the NGO growth there. Khujand is only 160 km distant from Tashkent and the road is flat, compared to 300 km along a highly mountainous road between Khujand and Dushanbe.

[3] Besides Bobosadiqova's NGO, the other most active organizations in Dushanbe included Women's Association of Tajikistan; Association of Creative Women of Tajikistan; Association of Women Scientists; and Simo. In Khujand, these were Association of Business Women of Tajikistan with a microfinance institute Imon; crisis center Gulrukhsor; Association of Women and Society; and NGO Spring of Life.

aimed to integrate women into political and economic life, and were particularly widespread in Muslim-majority Central Asian Soviet republics such as Tajikistan (Mirzoeva 2004: pp. 35–38; Yusufjonova-Abman 2018: p. 300). With the loss of population due to WWII and declining birth rates accompanying Soviet modernization, their role was to, "help women combine the two roles [mothers and workers] successfully, rather than help women to raise their social and political concerns from the grassroots beyond" (Sundstrom 2002: p. 216). In 1980, more than 1,300 such organizations were active across Tajikistan (Tadjbakhsh 1998: p. 171). Another route to girls and women's participation in social and political life at grassroots level was the Soviet Youth Union, *Komsomol*, which provided a formative experience for future NGO leaders in Tajikistan. A strong secular orientation of Soviet women's empowerment is an important lens to understand why women leaders in Tajikistan decided to engage in the donor-funded NGO sector. They saw NGOs as spaces where they could maintain and further promote Soviet-inspired secular women's empowerment—against the element of the opposition that was Islamist in the civil war. My interviews with leaders of elite women's NGOs suggest that they feared the rising role of Islam in everyday life and believed that growing religious sentiments were threatening the achievements of Soviet-era women's empowerment and pushing women out of the public sphere into the domestic one (see also Tadjbakhsh 1998).[4] This position is perceptible in an interview with Bobosadiqova, conducted by a Tajik academic, Rakhmon Ulmasov:

> Ulmasov: Am I right to say that the women's issues are one of the most important themes in your life?
> Bobosadiqova: This is true. When I was the first secretary of the Central Committee of Komsomol [in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, 1961-1987], I proposed that the Central Committee of 'Komsomol' [in the Soviet Union] opened departments of work with girls and I managed to create them in all Central Asian republics. Girls' unions (Russian: *sovety devushek*) were active at all levels [in Komsomol]. Also in the 1960s, we tried to incentivize more girls to study at universities and we monitored their progress at schools. (…) Probably this work made me and the other women-activists (Russian: *zhenshchiny-aktivisty*) create the Association of Women with Higher Education in August 1991. (in Lysyh 2007: pp. 11–12, my translation)

How could these two hardly compatible understandings of women's empowerment, i.e. the Soviet-era one and the donor-funded one, co-exist in elite women's NGO activism? The answer is that it was possible, because in practice these two visions did not overlap.

These first women's NGOs were not as constrained by donors as their successors, as described in the next sections. In the 1990s, there was an abundance of international grants for local NGOs, with little conditionality attached to funding and no rigid enforcement of how donors' money was spent on the ground (Kluczewska and

[4] Interviews with four leaders of elite women's NGOs in Dushanbe, August 18, 2014; September 8 and 22, 2017; July 31, 2018.

Foroughi 2021: p. 253). The elite women's NGOs were tasked to mainstream gender into state policies, conduct gender analyses,[5] and generally try to improve women's status in society through increasing public awareness, participating in donors' training and in turn training rural women's NGOs that had been growing since the late 1990s, in how to "properly" empower rural women.[6] The content of their work was not further specified by donors. Furthermore, donors were not physically present in Tajikistan, but were in neighboring Uzbekistan, or administering grants directly from the USA and other Western countries. This offered elite women's NGOs even more freedom to implement projects the way they wanted. The Tajik government did not interfere in the activities of these NGOs either, and the aforementioned Tajik state's approach to women's empowerment, relying on gender equity, was yet to be developed.

While the optimism of Tajik female activists who headed the first elite women's NGOs should not be downplayed, these organizations did not fulfill a proper "empowerment mandate". They did not interact with "ordinary" women in Tajikistan and their activities rarely reached beyond urban areas. Instead, they used the NGO space and donor funding mainly to empower themselves and other highly educated women, even though they were already empowered. In the mid-2000s, however, because of changing modalities of donor funding, the number of elite women's NGOs started to decline. By 2010, they either reinvented themselves as professional women's NGOs, with a command of the English language and operating under a much stronger normative influence of donors, as described later, or they simply closed their offices. From the donors' point of view, elite women's NGOs could clearly be seen as unsustainable. Yet these organizations ceased to exist mainly because they had fulfilled their actual function, i.e. to provide intellectual spaces for like-minded, highly educated local women in the tumultuous times of the 1990s.

Late 1990s to Late 2000s: Rural Women's NGOs

Rural women's NGOs are the second type of donor-funded organizations tasked with women's empowerment in Tajikistan. They proliferated in the late 1990s outside the urban areas (Mirzoeva 2004: p. 54). Unlike elite organizations, rural women's NGOs were headed by more "ordinary" women. Nevertheless, many of these women still had a solid background in Soviet women's empowerment, for example, through their past activism in local branches of *zhensovety* or *Komsomol*. They were predominantly Tajik speaking, but also knew at least some Russian. Frequently, these women had suffered from the wartime destruction of their houses, death or disappearance of husbands, rampant poverty during the war and physical violence, including rape. The story of this female leader from the south of Tajikistan illustrates the dynamics in which rural women's NGOs were formed:

[5] Between 1995 and 2003, 35 research projects examining gender relations were ongoing in Tajikistan (Hotkina and Rabieva 2003: p. 71).

[6] Interviews ibid.

> I was an activist before the Soviet collapse. But I got married in 1991, and the war started soon after. Then I had children and stopped working. My husband did not allow me to work, and there were no jobs anyway. In the mid-1990s, he disappeared and never came back. (…) In 1998, I still remember that day, someone knocked at my door. I was surprised to see two old *Komsomol* friends. They said they had recently opened an NGO in Qurghonteppa – it had become trendy at that time (Russian: *eto togda stalo modno*), and they got a grant from the Eurasia Foundation in Tashkent to train new NGO leaders. They came to my town and were looking for former *Komsomol* activists; they knew that these would be the best NGO leaders (Russian: *NPOshniki*). (…) They invited me to come for training. When I entered the room and saw people working in groups and doing presentations, I ran away. I thought this was not a place for me. These were all active, intelligent people (Tajik: *odamoni boak'l*), and I felt that I did not fit there. But these women came back to my house and took me back to the training. One year later, I opened my own NGO to help other women like myself.[7]

Rural women's NGOs were located predominantly in the Khatlon province, in the south of Tajikistan, which was the area most affected by the war.[8] There were, however, many similar organizations in other regions, including in the centrally located Districts of Republican Subordination[9] and in the Sughd province in the north.[10] The vast yet scarcely populated and not easily accessible Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), in the eastern part of Tajikistan, hosted only a few rural women's NGOs.[11] Viloyat Mirzoeva (2004: p. 55) posits that as of 2001, there were 135 rural women's NGOs, although one activist estimates that 300 of such organizations were operating across the country in the early 2000s.[12] Apart from the aforementioned Eurasia Foundation, other donors who first turned their attention to women in the rural areas were CARE, Caritas and Counterpart Consortium, followed by UN Women (until 2011 UNIFEM) and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). With an increase of donors operating in the country in following years, rural women's NGOs quickly expanded their scope of activities. According to several leaders of rural women's NGOs, the time between 1995 and 2005 marked the most intensive period of their activism in terms of a multiplicity of donors and available funding.[13]

[7] Interview with a women's NGO leader from the south, September 17, 2017.

[8] The most active organizations in Khatlon included The Club of Businesswomen, Fidokor and Ghamkori in Qurghonteppa; Najoti Kudakon, Niso and Mayram in Kulob; the Community of Women in Qhuroson; and the Women's Center in Shahritus.

[9] Such as Maftuna and Bonuvon in Vahdat; Nilufar in Varzod; Oliha in Tursunzoda; and the Women's Social and Educational Center in Gharm.

[10] Women for Progress and Parastor in Khujand; Sakhovat in Asht; Yovor in Istaravshan; and Women of the East in Panjakent.

[11] With the most prominent Madad based in Khorog.

[12] Interview with a women's NGO leader in Dushanbe, August 18, 2014; and May 24, 2017.

[13] Interviews with NGO activists, July 22 and 27, 2014; June 9, July 9, August 14, September 11, 15 and 17, 2019.

Unlike elite women's NGOs, rural women's NGOs were more present on the ground. Initially, these organizations had been working with women and other groups who suffered because of war, displacement and poverty, such as widowed women and single mothers. These activities included distribution of humanitarian aid and delivery of basic services (Ikramova and McConnell 1999: p. 204; Freizer 2005: p. 227).[14] Because many donors linked women's issues with peacebuilding and democratization, conflict prevention and election monitoring at a grassroots level also became relevant areas of these organizations' activities (Fisher 2013: p. 140). Simultaneously, rural NGOs were actively working in a broadly defined area of women's empowerment based upon the notion of gender equality. Thus, as the donor base grew, rural women's NGOs were tasked with projects related to hygiene, family planning and reproductive health. These organizations were also running self-help groups, crisis centers and women's development centers offering medical and legal help to women, as well as organizing various cultural and educational events on women's rights.[15] In the early 2000s, almost ten years later than in other post-Soviet countries (Ikramova and McConnell 1999: pp. 202–203), donors also started supporting microfinance in Tajikistan. As a result, rural women's NGOs first trained themselves and then started training other women in marketing, accounting and management, in addition to distributing small grants for women to start their own businesses.

Ironically, although in Soviet times women leaders were taught that capitalism creates inequality in the world, now many of them came to terms with the capitalist system and accepted it as the only feasible way to empower local women in the new, post-Soviet reality (see Freizer 2005: p. 230, Ghodsee 2010: p. 9). This largely happened because of an extensive socialization process on the part of donors. Rural women's NGOs enjoyed less autonomy than elite women's NGOs. They have been extensively trained—or rather retrained, taking into account their past Soviet experiences—by donors, who believed that unlike elite women's NGOs based in urban areas, they "lack[ed] expertise and ha[d] little experience of project implementation or service delivery" (Falkingham 2000: p. 106). By participating in numerous gender and capacity-building training sessions in Dushanbe and abroad, extensively funded by the Counterpart Consortium and International Research and Exchange Action (IREX), leaders of these NGOs were gradually socialized into the donor-funded women's empowerment framework, and the language of "women and development", "gender" and "gender equality" became part of their everyday vocabulary. Economic co-optation was no less relevant. Given an economic decline in a post-conflict country, donors managed to bring NGO leaders on their side through economic incentives. As one NGO leader explains:

> At that time, almost every day in our district [in the south] there was a seminar or training session on women and reproductive health, land reform and

[14] Interviews with four rural women's NGO leaders in Rasht, Istaravshan, Kulob and Panjakent, July 22 and 27, 2014; September 11 and 17, 2017.

[15] Idem.

> women's rights, or women and elections… We used to teach women's rights to *jamoat* [local authorities] members and distribute leaflets. Every day, we would receive US$ 20 from our donors just to incentivize people to participate in our events, which at that time equaled a good local monthly salary.[16]

Nevertheless, while complying with the donors' framework, rural women's NGOs also managed to channel donor funding to provide essential services for women living in rural areas. Thus, it needs to be acknowledged that in the times of great uncertainty, these organizations performed an important social function, which the post-Soviet Tajik state did not fulfill. Comparing with elite women's NGOs, these organizations were also less skeptical about collaborating with religious institutions, recognizing their importance on the ground (see Direnberger 2014). This suggests that they successfully combined the donor-funded women's empowerment with both the needs of local women and local realities. Rural women's NGOs did not lead to the establishment of any bigger social movement of Tajik women, but that was never their aim. Importantly, in the absence of other spaces, they became important support and organizing venues for women in rural regions (Buxton 2011: p. 123), just like elite women's NGOs in urban areas.

Towards the late 2000s, the abundant funding for rural women's NGOs finished. Rural women's NGOs, similar to elite women's NGOs, had to re-profile their activities to survive. A small percentage of these organizations transformed into what I describe below as NGOs mainstreaming gender. The majority, however, closed down as a result of financial difficulties. This happened because many donors moved from allocating small grants to NGOs in specific countries towards providing bigger funding on a more competitive, international basis.[17] The majority of Tajik rural women's NGOs, with no command of the English language, were not able to compete in the new funding schemes. This shows that rural women's NGOs became unsustainable not because their leaders lost interest in working with rural women or became too critical of the international women's empowerment agenda, but because donors abandoned their own protégés by creating barriers for them to access funding.

Late 2000s Onwards: Professional Women's NGOs

The third type of donor-funded organizations in the women's empowerment field, namely professional women's NGOs, started developing in the late 2000s. Some of these organizations were founded on the basis of elite women's NGOs, which had to re-profile their activities with the aforementioned shifts in donor funding.[18] Other organizations, however, were created from scratch.[19] Professional women's NGOs

[16] Interview with a women's NGO leader from the south, September 17, 2017.

[17] For example, while before the World Bank would regularly provide a larger number of grants amounting to US$ 5–10,000 only for Tajik NGOs, now they could apply for fewer grants amounting to US$ 300,000, allocated for all "developing" countries around the world.

[18] This was the case, for example, of the Association of Gender Equality and the Gender and Development, both based in Dushanbe.

[19] E.g. Panorama and Perspektiva Plus, both in Dushanbe.

are based in urban areas, mainly Dushanbe and Khujand, and are led by highly educated women from Soviet elite families. Like in the case of elite women's NGOs, some of these women started their career in high-level Soviet state bodies, such as, for example, the Ministry of Education. Other leaders of these organizations are children of women who headed elite women's NGOs in the 1990s and have now retired. In other cases, professional women's NGOs have previously worked for organizations such as UN Women. Importantly, what differentiates professional women's NGOs from elite women's NGOs is their command of the English language and also "fluency" in the language of international development. In Simpson's (2006: pp. 22–23) words, these organizations are "intimately integrated into material and discursive resources of globalizing gender politics". In this context, the adjective "professional" refers to these organizations' familiarity with the project logic and log-frames, as well as understanding of donors' expectations and ability to meet them (see Kluczewska 2019: pp. 365–366).

Professional women's NGOs are small in number. During my own work experience and later research on development aid in Tajikistan, I encountered no more than 20 of such organizations, with most composed of a small number of employees, usually between two to five people. Despite their high social capital, professional women's NGOs do not have much impact on the design of women's empowerment projects in the country and most often serve as service providers for donors and international organizations. In other words, they implement projects which were previously written and approved in the headquarters and country offices of these organizations. For example, professional women's NGOs are regularly commissioned with preparation of baseline studies, gender assessments and conducting monitoring of ongoing women's empowerment projects. They are also used by donors to lobby for the inclusion of the gender dimension into state policies.[20] For instance, in 2010, with the support of professional women's NGOs, the government adopted the National Strategy to Increase the Activity of Women in the Republic of Tajikistan (2011–2020) and a subsequent action plan (see also Mamadazimov and Kuvatova 2012: p. 65).

While professional women's NGOs found a common language with donors, they are not uncritical of internationally funded women's empowerment and the rights-based agenda. Often, they are more supportive of Soviet-era women's empowerment, with state-provided employment and social protection, which they and their families personally benefited from. As this NGO leader comments:

> Personally, I have to admit I am not a fan of [promotion of liberal] feminism (Russian: '*feminism-atsiya*') in our country – when women are told that they can do whatever they want because they have a right to do so. I am much more a supporter of Soviet-era responsible women's empowerment (Russian: *prodvizhenie zhenshchin otvetstvennym putem*), through promoting an active

[20] My own observations in 2014–2015 and interviews with leaders of two women's NGOs, September 11 and 22, 2017.

role for women in society and providing a material base for it to happen. But donors renege anything that 'smells' Soviet.[21]

Importantly, although these women realize the limitations of the donor agenda in the context of Tajikistan, they do not raise these concerns aloud. Participating in donor-funded projects provides them with honoraria which are up to ten times higher than salaries in government bodies (see Direnberger 2014: p. 80). Moreover, they see their alliance with donors as an effective way to influence national policies concerning women.[22] Finally, leaders of professional women's NGOs are pro-secular and thus their interests at least partially overlap with the agenda of international donors, who also consider the growing role of Islam in everyday life as an obstacle for women's empowerment in the country (see de Cordier 2010: p. 240).

Early 2010s Until Now: NGOs Mainstreaming Gender

The fourth and so far last type of local organizations involved in donor-funded women's empowerment are NGOs mainstreaming gender, which started dominating the field only in the last decade. While some of these organizations originated from rural women's NGOs, the majority are relatively new to the topic. These organizations are flexible in the way that they learned to adapt to changing donor demands and are able to simultaneously implement projects in multiple, diverse fields, ranging from agriculture and migration to climate change and healthcare. The rise of these organizations is related to new modalities of distribution of donor funding, characterized by a shift from women-specific projects to including the gender equality perspective, i.e. mainstreaming gender, into a wider variety of topics.[23] Drawing a single profile of leaders of NGOs mainstreaming gender is an impossible task, as these organizations are very diverse. Literally each of about 1,000 active NGOs in Tajikistan can be considered as such.[24] What these organizations have in common is their relative fluency in English and a broad portfolio. This allows them to apply for grants from multiple donors at once and increases their chances for economic survival.

Mainstreaming gender in everyday NGO work—what is often locally described in a mixture of Tajik and English as "implementing gender mainstreaming" [*gender mainstreaming tatbik' kardan*]—means that these organizations should ensure high representation and participation of women in all components of various development projects (see Moser and Moser 2005: p. 13).[25] However, in practice, women's empowerment through gender mainstreaming is often limited to, as one interviewee

[21] Interview with a women's NGO leader in Dushanbe, September 8, 2017.

[22] Participant observation in several high-level donor-funded conferences on women's issues in Dushanbe, between 2014 and 2019.

[23] Interviews with an employee of the World Bank, July 21, 2017, and a gender focal point in a UN organization, September 7, 2017.

[24] Including the local NGO I worked for in 2013 and 2016–2017, which has been implementing projects related to youth, small entrepreneurship and good governance.

[25] Interview with an employee of an NGO from Konibodom, July 9, 2017.

admits ironically, "involving women in projects for the sake of putting a tick (Russian: *radi galochki*) [in attendees' lists]".[26]

NGOs mainstreaming gender developed a largely instrumental approach towards gender mainstreaming, which is a reaction to deteriorating relations between local organizations and international donors in recent years. Tajik NGOs increasingly perceive that donors have adopted an extractive approach towards them and that the already limited space for dialogue has disappeared (Kluczewska 2019; Kluczewska and Foroughi 2021: pp. 257–259). The difficulty to win highly competitive international funding and growing conditionality attached to grants made local contestations of the donor women's empowerment agenda more persistent, although not vocal. The objections are framed in particular around the rights-based approach, which underlies donor-funded women's empowerment. Several women's NGO leaders, whom I interacted with and interviewed, have shared a belief that in the condition of precarity accompanying Tajikistan's integration into the capitalist economy, empowering women by making them aware of their rights is not enough when opportunities are absent. Reflections similar to the ones expressed by an NGO employee from the economically disadvantaged Rasht Valley are fairly common:

> What do the UN experts know about our life? They do not understand how we live. They do not know social nuances, the economic situation, but instead they want us [NGOs] to teach women about their rights. Is this empowerment?[27]

The underlying idea of such contestations is that lack of employment and miserable salaries pose a threat to the security of livelihoods, and thus women's empowerment without creating structural conditions for a dignified life cannot be effective. These conditions do not exist because, with Western donors' blessing, the post-Soviet Tajik state withdrew its protective function, placing de facto the responsibility for welfare upon individuals themselves (Kluczewska 2020).

In such a situation, the role of the family, as the only remaining safety net for men and women alike, increased significantly. This, in turn, resulted in re-traditionalization of social life in Tajikistan, which manifests itself in a widely perceived complementarity of male and female roles in households and society as a whole. As explained above, this complementarity relies upon the idea of gender equity, with men being primarily breadwinners and women responsible for the domestic sphere and upbringing of children, who in turn, in a nearly total absence of state welfare, will take care of parents once they grow old. In such circumstances, donors walk what Bruno de Cordier (2010: p. 234) describes as "the thin line between good intentions and creating tensions". Indeed, a common objection of donor-funded women's empowerment, which nowadays can be identified among Tajik NGOs, concerns the idea of gender equality that is at the core of the donor agenda. Donors' focus on empowering women *only* is locally perceived as deepening societal disintegration

[26] Interview with a gender focal point in a UN organization, September 7, 2017.

[27] Interview with a male employee of an NGO from the Rasht valley, July 22, 2014.

and by that feeding precarity.[28] As one of the female NGO leaders argues, commenting on common donor-funded projects which provide grants exclusively for women to start their businesses:

> Donors have been working in Tajikistan for almost thirty years and they still do not understand our country. They keep giving grants to women, they say women have fewer chances [than men]. Women and women, over and over again. And what about men, do men have it easier here (Russian: *A muzhchinam legko*, *chto-li*)? I feel sorry for men, especially for those from rural areas. Where can they work? [About one million] Tajik men are labor migrants in Russia, they can get deported from there at any time, their self-esteem is so low. But donors keep insisting on raising the status of women.[29]

This quote is indicative of a widely shared fear that promoting gender equality by increasing opportunities for women, but not for men, might contribute to gender misbalances in families (see Kasymova 2008: pp. 44–45). In other words, by promoting gender equality, donors believe they are fostering women's liberation from traditional social networks, which they consider oppressive. Local NGO leaders, however, fear that in practice, these efforts might become counterproductive and loosen families, the only protection networks which women have at their disposal since the Soviet collapse (see also Esposito and Mogahed 2007: pp. 118–119).

Although such contestations of donor-funded women's empowerment are common among local NGOs, they are rarely raised aloud in the fear of losing funding opportunities. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that NGOs mainstreaming gender, and thus the ones which are the least dedicated to women's issue per se in comparison with elite, rural and professional women's NGOs have been the most skeptical of donor-funded initiatives. Other women's NGOs have shared the same overarching goal with donors, i.e. to empower women, even if they understood the paths leading to empowerment differently. As a result, they were more accommodative to the donor agenda and attempted to find common points. Precisely because NGOs mainstreaming gender do not share this goal, they approach donor-funded women's empowerment projects with more distance and are more much more critical of them.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the trajectories of internationally funded women's NGOs in Tajikistan and changing attitudes to the donor-promoted women's empowerment framework. Since the Soviet collapse, Western donors have

[28] Such resentment is further fueled by local terminology to describe women's empowerment, which points to "raising women" [Tajik: *balandbardoshtani zanon*]. The term suggests that women are being elevated *over* others, rather than raised *to* do something, which contributes to the impression that advancing women socially and economically downgrades men.

[29] Interview with an NGO leader in Dushanbe, May 24, 2017.

exercised a huge impact in the field of women's empowerment in Tajikistan, both in terms of providing funding and promoting a rights-based agenda. Because of the influence that donors exercised in Tajikistan, it could easily be argued that the formation of a local movement of women in the new post-Soviet reality was largely dominated by Western donors. It seems that women leaders with former experience in Soviet-era women's empowerment were easily coopted by donors, who gave them space to continue activism, which meant that they simultaneously and significantly reshaped the agenda. This activism might appear to be largely donor-driven and, thus, from the donors' point of view, unsustainable. In fact, it appears from the trajectories of various local women's NGOs that once donors stopped supporting these organizations financially, because of changing modalities of funding, more often than not they closed their offices.

The picture, however, is more nuanced. In the 1990s, there was no actual local movement of women to be hijacked, given the fast changing role of women in the family, society and state as a result of the Soviet collapse and the civil war, and in the context of the state withdrawal from welfare provision and a transition to the market economy. Moreover, focusing on various types of Tajik women's NGOs, their leaders, their aims and their understanding of the donor agenda, allows us to realize that these NGO leaders took what they needed from donors—the NGO experience, funding and prestige associated with internationally funded projects—and reshaped it in accordance with their own beliefs and the needs of women whom they associated themselves with. Once the autonomy of local women's NGOs started to shrink, these organizations became more critical of donors.

The contestations of donor-funded women's empowerment, which have been growing in Tajikistan in the recent decade, offer a chance for local activists to develop their own vision of how to empower women in the new capitalist, largely precarious, reality. It is too early to say whether the new normative framework based upon gender equity can offer an effective homegrown alternative to donor-funded women's empowerment which favors gender equality. It is, however, safe to say that, with the Tajik government's support, this approach is gaining popularity on the ground. Therefore, it can be expected that contestations of donor-funded women's empowerment will further develop in the realm of a normative conflict between women's empowerment which promotes the individual rights of women on the one hand, and a collectivist vision which sees women as an indispensable, central part of the family on the other.

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