TAJIK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH ARRANGED MARRIAGES

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Abstract

The standard causal approach to understanding and explaining Tajik women's lives, especially in matters concerning marriage and family life, leaves them as agents out of the picture. Thus, Tajik women often disappear as agents of their own lives from the more general context of events occurring to them.

The aim of this thesis was to explore Tajik women's experiences with arranged marriages and identify the ways in which they exercise their individual choices and deal with a variety of "oppressive" situations related to their marriage. With this purpose, I interviewed eight women from Tajikistan, ranging in age from twenty-two to sixty eight and from different social and economic backgrounds. The main questions this work attempted to answer were: how do Tajik women deal with arranged marriages? What are the ways in which they exercise their agency? What coping strategies and techniques do they use in order to resist dominant power structures that tend to oppress them? How do they manage to (re)establish their power in situations that are basically turned against them? In order to answer my research questions and provide an in-depth account on Tajik women's agency, I have placed my study into a conceptual framework based on Giddens' structuration theory and Meyer's approach to reconstructing women's agency. This thesis therefore, was an attempt to challenge the victimization discourses about Tajik women and investigate the coping strategies and techniques that these women adopt and use in order to obtain (more) power.

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2005 I met Sadbarg. This cheerful, energetic young Tajik woman was working as an Office Manager/Translator in an international consultancy project where I was also employed and was supposed to assist Sadbarg in her work. Sadbarg was very kind to me from the very beginning. She tried to teach me all she knew about office work and also helped me here and there. In a while we became very good friends. We used to spend lunch breaks together talking about life, discussing things, exchanging opinions, laughing, sharing problems. I knew that Sadbarg's marriage was arranged for her by her parents and she was not the only woman I knew who had been married in that way.

One day during the lunch together with our "International" colleagues the conversation turned to family life and I remember Sadbarg mentioning that she had not dated her husband before the marriage, and that her marriage was arranged by her parents. I saw how many faces expressed sadness when she said it. I knew that some people pictured Sadbarg as a poor victim who is living a life that is not her own. On the one hand I could clearly understand why some people might think so, but on the other hand I also knew that there is something wrong about thinking this way. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Sadbarg was the last person I would imagine having no power over her life. I knew that Sadbarg had a lot of difficulties and problems in her life, just like many other women around the world, but I could also clearly see that she didn't perceive herself as a victim; neither did I see her as one. In this contradiction the idea to learn more about women's experiences with arranged marriages captured me and motivated to write the present work.

The objective of this piece of work is to explore the diversity of Tajik women's experiences with arranged marriages. This thesis, however, is not an attempt to analyze or judge the advantages or disadvantages of arranged marriages in Tajik society. My particular interest is to explore Tajik women's agency in order to see how and what forms it takes when women face the pressure to accept a marriage and afterwards. I approached this issue with the hypothesis that Tajik women, being structurally subordinated, still manage to exercise their agency by mobilizing the available recourses and transforming the situation to work to their advantage. Therefore, in this work I am particularly focusing on women's experiences in order to identify the ways in which women exercise their individual choices and deal with a variety of "oppressive" situations related to their marriage.

My research question is: what are the ways in which Tajik women exercise their agency and what coping strategies and techniques do they use in order to resist dominant power structures that tend to oppress them? What kind of strategies do they use to (re)establish their subjectivity and power in situations that are basically turned against them? I will argue that, situated in the context of unequally distributed power, Tajik women nonetheless manage to mobilize available resources in order to act rather than being acted upon, which distinguishes them as active social actors capable of exercising their agency. My analysis will also attempt to answer the question to what extent Tajik women's agency is constrained by different factors such as the dominant gender discourse, family pressure, economic constraints and possibly others.

In the first chapter of this thesis, that is before turning to the analysis of women's narratives, I will try to shed light on the dominant gender discourse existing in Tajik

society. I think in order to grasp the dynamics of life in Tajikistan, it is necessary to know something of the country's history and also of the conceptual frameworks around the Tajik family and its connection to the dominant discourse on gender relations. This section of the thesis provides a brief background of Tajikistan and of women's lives during the Soviet times, and examines the impact of transition on the changing role of women within the family and the household. One important point relevant to this research has to be considered as well, namely violence against women and recent trends in poverty and living standards in Tajikistan. Although violence during the civil war[1] (992-1997) is most obviously outside of the domestic sphere, in combination with other difficulties it has been a major factor influencing women's choices and decisions.

The second chapter of my thesis provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the agency of Tajik women. This chapter will briefly outline existing theories that address gender relations in Tajikistan, while also introducing Gidden's definition of human agency (1984) and Meyer's approach to reconstructing women's agency (2004) on which the conceptual framework of my thesis is based. I will also discuss there the methodology used to conduct the research and will position myself as a researcher.

Chapter three is the central part of my thesis. There I will try to analyze the stories narrated by Tajik women by means of *operationalizing* (i.e. makeing definable and identifiable) the concept of Tajik women's agency. I will try to explore women's narratives in order to see how they become actors in the world in their own terms, and how they construct themselves as such in their narratives. This chapter, therefore, is an attempt to challenge the common opinion that Tajik women, just as other historically

[1] More information about the civil war in Tajikistan on page 10 of this thesis

marginalized groups, such as the "colonized subaltern", lack individual as well as historical agency.[2]

Finally, bringing together the results of my research, I will conclude with a discussion on the issue of Tajik women's agency. It is my hope that this work will add a new perspective to research about Tajik women's lives, which has previously mostly depicted Tajik women as powerless and helpless in decisions about marriage. Through reviewing and interpreting women's testimony about their experiences of living in arranged marriages I will theorize the ways women act *behind the scenes*, exercise their agency and affect outcomes. I also hope that this thesis will contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of Tajik woman's agency, its capacities and limitations, as well as contribute to further studies of *subalternized* women's identities.[3]

[2]Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty" Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture,* Chicago: Uni. of Illinois Press, 1988: 271-313.
[3] Here I use Spivak's terminology.

Chapter I: Setting the background

1.1 Cultural-Historical Background of The Status of Women in Tajik Society

1.1.1 An overview of Tajikistan[4]

Tajikistan is a small mountainous country located in the South-Eastern part of Asia. It borders with Kyrgizstan, Uzbekistan, Afganistan and China. The capital of the country is Dushanbe. The majority speak Tajik, and follow Sunni Islam. The territory of the country is 143,000 sq. kilometers of which 93 per cent is covered with mountains. The number of population according to recent census is 7,320,716 (July 2006 est.).[5]

The highest executive body is the government, headed by the President and formed out of 18 ministries and a number of governmental committees and agencies. Administratively the country is divided into four regions – *viloyatho* – and 75 districts and towns. All the ministers are appointed by the President. Emomali Rahmonov, the president of the Republic of Tajikistan, came to power in 1992, and continues to rule to this day.

The Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic was created in 1924 as a part of Uzbekistan, but in 1929 it was made a separate constituent republic. In the 1970s, dissident Islamic

[4] The description of the gender relation in Tajikistan here is necessarily brief, it is only meant to introduce the basic factors shaping Tajik women's lives. For a more detailed treatment of this topic see:
Corconan-Nantes, Yvonne; (2005) *Lost voices: Central Asian women confronting transition;* London: Zed Books;
Tett, Gillian "'Guardians of the Faith?' Gender and Religion in an (Ex-) Soviet Tajik Village" in Camillia Fawzi El-Solh and Judy Marbo (eds.) *Muslim Women's Choice: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, Oxford: Berg Publishers.
For a discussion of women's positions and their strategic options within the framework of the traditional descent and household structure see Harris Colette, (2004) *Control and subversion: gender relations in Tajikistan*; London: Pluto Press.

[5] Yearbook of the Republic of Tajikistan/State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Tajikistan. – Dushanbe. 2003.

underground parties began to be formed and by the late 1980s Tajik nationalists were calling for increased rights. Real disturbances did not occur within the republic until 1990. The following year, the Soviet Union collapsed, and Tajikistan declared its independence. After the independence, the nation almost immediately fell into a civil war that involved various groups fighting one another.[6]

The end of the Soviet Union and the civil war that followed put an end to even the remotest feeling of stability, leaving violence and economic collapse in their wake. Worst of all, however, are the serious economic problems that have closed state enterprises, caused massive layoffs and brought most people's monthly earnings down to considerably less than the lowest amount needed for survival. It was already one of the poorest republics in the former Soviet Union and had the lowest GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita.[7] As major food shortages occurred, for a long time, bread, the staple food of most Tajiks, was severely rationed and many people suffered significant hunger over a period of many months.[8] Per capita income decreased by around 50 per cent; in 1997 for instance, the average pension fell to US$ 1.50 per month and many state wages

[6] The civil war in Tajikistan began in May 1992 when disenfranchised groups from the Garm and Gorno-Badakhshan regions rose up against the national government of President Emomali Rahmonov. Democrats, liberal reformists, and Islamists fought together and later organized under the banner of the United Tajik Opposition. By June 1997 fifty to one hundred thousand people had been killed. President Rahmonov, UTO [United Tajik Opposition] leader Said Abdullah Nuri, and Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General Gerd Merrem signed the "General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan" and the "Moscow Protocol" on 27 June 1997 in Moscow, Russia, ending the war. For more information about the civil war in Tajikistan see: Emomali Rahomonov, *Tajiks: the past and the present*, Dushanbe, September 1996; "War and peace in Tajikistan" at <www.svoboda.org>; Azizi Niyazi "Tajikistan: regional aspects and conflict" at < www.ctaj.elcat.kg>.

[7] Akiner, Shirin and Barnes, Catherine (March 2001), "The Tajik civil war: causes and dynamics" at <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/tajikistan/causes-dynamics.php>, last accessed on 03.05.2007.

[8] Harris, 2005: 28.

were less than 10$ a month.[9] Although things have improved in the last few years, making ends meet remains a constant struggle for all but a fortunate few.[10] The non-Muslim population, particularly Russians and Jews, fled the country during this time because of persecution, increased poverty and better economic opportunities in the West or in other former Soviet republics.

1.1.2 Gender discourse before the Revolution and Emancipation Experience of the Soviet Period

The subchapter will provide more detailed information on the status of women in Tajikistan. Something all communities have in common is pressure to conform to the social norms, of which the most important are usually gender norms.[11] Indeed, it might be said that those who do not conform may even be unintelligible to the community. Just like in each country, the nature of gender norms in Tajikistan has its specifics. Historically women's place was generally behind the scenes. They inspired men to deeds. Women created an environment in which their children developed, women transformed them from biological essences to cultural subjects and were responsible for their

[9] According to official data, (from 2002) 86% of the population in Tajikistan live below the poverty line. A public opinion poll conducted by Sharq (Scientific Research Center) in 2002 showed that 34% of families spend from 50 to 100 somoni (US$ 18-40) per family each month. The same number of families spend from 100 to 250 somoni (US$ 40-100). Only 9% of families spend from 250 to 375 somoni (US$ 100-150). Poverty is increasing. During 2001, the financial situation of 18% of families improved, while for 29% of families they worsened and for 52% they remained unchanged (Sharq, 2002) in Human Development Report 1995: 16-17.

[10] Harris, 2004: 2.

[11] My usage of the term "gender norms" stems from the ideas of Butler. I define gender norms as: culture-specific ideals, varying over time, that males and females are supposed to live up to in order to become intelligible to, and accepted members of, their own communities. It is an ideal that remains tenuous because it is never full internalized, never quite lived up to. Repetition gives such sedimentation the appearance of something normal and natural and once this stage has been reached it is only a small step before what seems natural acquires regulatory force. Such norms are established "through a stylized repetition of acts" See Butler 1995: 31-32 and 1999: 140.

socialization. In doing this, women poured their creative forces into society's development and into the intellectual flow of their time.[12]

As Harris describes it, in Tajik society, virtue and obedience have always been the main characteristics of women.[13] In the pre-Soviet times such gender discourse promoted developing wide charitable activity that, probably, was the only area where the public and social role of women were sanctioned and allowed them to do everything possible so that their voice was heard by others.[14] Soviet ethnographers identified the Tajik family as patrilineal and patrilocal.[15] Parents chose their children's spouses. Girls could be betrothed at birth or married very young, although the marriage usually would not be consummated before puberty.[16] Only adult men or independent divorced or widowed women could decide on their own partner. Among wealthier Tajiks divorce and were frequent.

Before the Revolution of 1917 the nuclear family had been practically non-existent in Tajikistan. The goal of the Soviet government was to establish there the nuclear families in separate households. The idea was that their resultant liberation from parental control would open them to persuasion to abandon their traditions "in favor of a more rational modernized and *Sovietised* way of life".[17] Inevitably such policy had some effect on the independence of the younger generation, but very often the effects remained

[12] "Tajikistan on the way to gender equality" Report, carried out with the support of UNDP, UNFPA, UNIFEM and SCO, Tajikistan, 2003.
[13] By saying that "virtue and obedience are the main characteristics of Tajik women" Harris refers to the dominant gender discourse in Tajikistan which tries to impose these images on women. However, she does not want to imply that Tajik women are indeed "submissive" and "obedient" in their every day lives. See Harris, 2004: 34, 134-172.
[14] From "Tajikistan on the way to gender equality" 2003: 17.
[15] Gafarova, M.G. (1969) *Duhovny oblik zhenshchiny Sovetskogo vostoka (The spiritual image of a woman from the Soviet East).* Dushane: Irfon.
[16] Harris, 2004: 36.
[17] Harris, 2004: 37.

slight. Furthermore, nuclear families are still in the minority even today and major decision-making for almost all families continues to be carried out in the family council.[18] In other words the Soviet state clearly failed in its efforts to remove the younger generation from the influence of their elders and in this way to decrease the power of tradition.

Massive education has always been at the center of Soviet policy. The new state established universal schooling, a major function of which was the *Sovietization* of the nation's younger generation. Indeed the involvement of Tajik women into the educational institutions was one of the most impressive achievements of communism. However, the share of women in specialized technical and higher education was considerably lower in Tajikistan, compared with other former republics of the Soviet Union. Specialized technical education was a route to jobs that were perceived as unacceptable for women in Tajikistan. The majority of women who entered these educational institutions were Russian, Ukrainian or other nationalities. The share of Tajik women was extremely low. A study conducted in the early 1960's revealed that only 31.4 percent of the total number of women enrolled in higher education, including specialized technical education, were Tajiks.[19]

By the end of the 1930s the impact of women's increased education was already evident as the first generation of female lawyers, doctors, scientists and professors graduated from tertiary institutions.[20] Women in Tajikistan entered formal employment in the 1930s after the emancipation campaign, initiated by the Soviet government. The

[18] Corcoran-Nantes, Yvonne; (2005) *Lost voices: Central Asian women confronting transition;* London: Zed Books: 66-69.

[19] Norton T. Dodge, *Women in the Soviet economy*, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1966: 144.
[20] See Corcoran-Nantes, 2005: 66.

political campaign "Hujum" ("Offence") in 1927-1928, gave freedom to local women from the ritual veil (faranjy), opened opportunities for employment outside their homes and access to education.[21] However, traditionally women's employment was "naturally" within the household. Therefore, employment outside their households was disgraced by women's families and *mahallas* (neighboring communities) which were the two most important institutions shaping the life of everyday member of the Tajik society for centuries.

In the Soviet Union marriage was a civil affair and it had to be registered in the civil registry office (ZAGS). In Tajikistan this was one way the government tried to control both the age at marriage and . Tajik practices, however, made a mockery of this. The "traditional" practices, including the practice of arranged marriages continued their existence throughout the Soviet period. Special consultant to UNESCAP, Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, who was one of the first researchers to undertake substantial research in the republic of Tajikistan, describes how arranged marriages were the norm rather than an exception. Parents sought partners for their children from within their social class and ethnic group. "Traditionally" as Corcoran-Nantes puts it, "women rarely married non-Muslim and only when men allowed to do so".[22]

So, social and cultural norms continued to shape gender relations in Tajikistan throughout the Soviet regime. Socialist attempts to "manipulate" gender relations have only hardened passive resistance on the part of the Tajiks. At the level of conscious discourse they continued to construct "ideal" feminine and masculine identities for themselves not only in sharp contrast to one another but also to those the socialist state

[21] Kasymova, Nargiz, (1999) "Gender and access to education", in D.Gulyamova (ed.) / Report on the Status of Women in Uzbekistan, Tashkent: RBEC/UNDP.
[22] Corcoran-Nantes, 2005: 36.

was pushing for Soviet men and women.[23] Various methods were used by the socialist state to enforce the new secular laws, which were consistently subverted at every turn. For instance, while the Soviet authorities recognized only marriages enacted under civil law, the indigenous population of Tajikistan would recognize only those marriages solemnized according to Islamic law. Other traditional practices, such as seclusion, the use of veil, polygyny and the payment of bride price, despite constituting social crimes under the new laws, continued unabated.[24]

However, even though it is clear that the Soviet commitment to gender equality rested entirely on the question of establishing female economic independence and that real gender equality was never achieved, women's lives in many respects were easier during Soviet times than before or after. Women had an opportunity to travel to other cities of Tajikistan or even to other republics to receive higher education in various fields. They also attended various professional schools such as medical, industrial and technical schools, to name just a few. Their parents could afford sending their children to other republics of the USSR to receive a good education or to work. Women in the rural areas could be employed in district governmental offices, hospitals, schools and shops, or they could stay in cities and work there in various institutions, factories, hospitals etc. The majority of rural women had only secondary education and worked in state or collective farms. They made enough money to support themselves and their families. Although not too many women held high-ranking positions, they were nevertheless included in

[23] Harris, 2005: 207.
[24] See Corconan-Nantes, 2005: 40.

decision-making bodies on the regional and district levels. Furthermore, the state provided women with various social benefits.[25]

However, despite socialism's achievements in improving women's situation and protecting their rights, there was no true gender equality in Soviet Tajikistan.[26] Women's full participation in the labor force did not provide the instant solution that was envisioned in socialist ideology. This was nowhere more apparent than in Tajikistan, where social and cultural mores strongly continued to shape gender relations.[27] However, the position of rural women was more difficult compared to that of urban women, especially in terms of their relationships with husbands and other family members. This can be explained by the fact that religion, although generally prohibited during Soviet times, influenced people in rural areas, who followed religious rules, rites and ceremonies, which are now practiced throughout the country. Thus, a man was considered the head of the family, and it was the husband who would take any decision without even consulting his wife or wives.[28]

1.1.3 The Contemporary Status of Women in Tajikistan: Stereotypes and Reality[29]

[25] "Poverty in Countries of Central Asia", prepared by Amarakoon Bandara, Muhammad Hussain Malik and Eugene Gherman, Economic Affairs Officers, Poverty and Development Division, at <http://www.unescap.org/pdd/publications/bulletin04-05/bulletin04-05_ch7.pdf> last accessed on 04.05.2007.

[26] For more information about this issue see: Bobroff, Ane (1974) "The Bolsheviks and working women, 1905-20" *Soviet Studies*: 540-67; Pierce, Richard A. (1960) *Russian Central Asia, 1867 – 1917*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press; Buckley, Mary (ed.) (1997) *Post-Soviet women: from the Baltic to Central Asia*/ **C**ambridge: Cambridge University Press

[27] See Corconan-Nantes, 2005: 64.

[28] Harris, 2004: 34-36.

[29] The present analysis of contemporary gender roles in the Republic of Tajikistan and their influence on women's social relations was not studied in a greater depth and was intended to provide the most basic information on the current situation.

The fall of communism has had a profound impact on all layers of society in Tajikistan. The break-up of the Soviet Union was followed by a major reversal in both economic and social development. The transition has had a severe impact on the employment of both men and women. The civil war further exacerbated the situation. It was followed by economic impoverishment, a long period of unrest and restricted mobility for the majority of population due to fear of violence by armed groups and the police.[30]

Women were among the first to lose their jobs. The transition and the civil war have severely affected the industries, which usually employed a high proportion of women (agriculture, textiles and manufacturing). Moreover, other sectors, which have also employed women, such as health and education, now offer the lowest paid jobs. At the same time, the increase in family poverty, the drastic reduction of children's institutions' network and the increase in household utilities have resulted in increasing the domestic labor load on women, to serve their families and educate the children. This has further alienated women from paid work and social life. Increased poverty and insufficient resources for children's education cause parents to choose to provide education for boys rather than girls.[31] Gender analysis of the educational situation in Tajikistan has identified a decrease in the educational level of women, especially with regard to higher education.[32]

The post-civil-war period was difficult in many ways. For many people the post-war years became a constant struggle to find ways to feed themselves and their families. Many top professionals in every field emigrated, including the best doctors and teachers.

[30] Harris, 2004: 28-29.
[31] Kasymova N, "Gender and access to education", in D.Gulyamova et al. eds/, Report o the Status of Women in Uzbekistan, Tashkent: RBEC/UNDP, 2004.
[32] For useful information on the involvement of women into the educational institutions in Tajikistan see Tajikistan Development Gateway: < http://www.tajik-gateway.org >; last accessed on 05.004.2007.

The economic situation has become so bad that a high proportion of men and a good few women now migrate regularly to other parts of the CIS countries,[33] especially to Russian Federation, for work purposes.[34] A growing migration of men from Tajikistan has resulted in an increase of the share of women in employment, especially in agriculture.[35] The burden of survival of families lies primarily on the shoulders of women and girls. During this period the informal labour market has considerably grown. In other words, more people are now working in the burgeoning private sector, family based production and market trading. More people are now busy on their household plots, which are the only source of income especially in the rural areas. Women constitute the majority in the family businesses based on trade. Many of them are engaged in the sale of goods, food or other products, which they produce in their households or import from other countries for resale. A study conducted in 1998 shows that women make up from 45 to 85 percent of all traders in the markets.[36]

As is indicated in a variety of reports on the status of women in Tajikistan, a whole number of measures and state strategies have been developed that are directed at increasing the role and status of women and providing equal rights and opportunities for men and women. However, because of the influence of settled stereotypes, the

[33] CIS – The Commonwealth of Independent States.

[34] In 1992 and 1993, every fifth citizen of Tajikistan became a refugee or internally displaced person (IDP). Between 1991 and 1995, 284,600 people emigrated from Tajikistan. The lowest rate of migration was marked in 2000, when 15,100 immigrants entered the country and 29,500 left, amounting to a total migration of 44,600. But migration has been on the increase since 2001, when 17,000 immigrants arrived and 31,100 left. Net migration from Tajikistan was 14.100, and the total scale of migration was 48,100 (State Statistical Committee, 2002: 36). According to the IOM report conducted in July 2003, 85% of those who left the country to look for a job in 2002 were male and 15% female. Women are highly represented in the shuttle trade, accounting for 39% of Tajik shuttles. 74.5% of all female Tajik labour migrants work as shuttles.

[35] The categorization of women as poor and unimportant workers, results in an increasingly economically inactive part of the female population (according to the results of the Census in 2000, 36.8% of able-bodied women.

[36] Agriculture Sector Assessment Report, Asian development Bank, August 2000, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

dominating patriarchal ideology combined with difficult social economic situation, many women are excluded from the social life. In the consciousness of the majority of the population, the ideal model of mutual relationships between a man and a woman is the traditional model, excluding woman's involvement in socio-political processes. Despite the democratic and market reforms that are taking place at present, the dependence of a wife on her husband and a limitation on women's activities by parts of the family, are seen as "natural" conditions of the social relationships between men and women. The lives of Tajik women are characterized by obvious contradictions between the declared state gender policy, directed at increasing the status of women in society, and traditional standards regulating gender roles. The transition period has not eliminated existing inequalities between men and women, but aggravated them even more.

While “sovietization” may have changed to some extent what people did in society, it could not fundamentally change the way they thought. This was nowhere more evident than in the post-independence period, when the backlash against the principle of gender equality revealed a long-held latent ideological resistance to it.[37] As Nargis Kasimova’s research has illustrated, the transformation during the last years has caused little change in the traditional practices. On the contrary, Kasimova states that it is “exactly at this period of the deepest social and economic crisis that traditional models of patriarchal family with the male head and a wife performing her natural duty began to regenerate”.[38] The intensification of the role and the significance of religion after the collapse of the Soviet Union strongly supported the return of women into the family, radically influencing their lives, strategies and practices. Thus, despite the gender policy

[37] See Corconan-Nantes, 2005: 64.

[38] Kasymova N, “Gender and access to education”, in D.Gulyamova et al. (eds.), Report o the Status of Women in Uzbekistan, Tashkent: RBEC/UNDP, 2004.

conducted by the state and the processes of transformation and modernization, women in Tajik society have a lower social status than men and the patriarchal model of mutual relations between men and women continues to exist.

Traditional gender norms, as Corconan-Nantes argues, which emphasize women's obedience, their role as mothers and confine them to household and child-caring activities, were preserved and indeed enjoyed resurgence during the years after communism.[39] New political parties inspired by nationalist and religious ideologies have also emphasized that Tajik women should adhere to traditional norms. Growing influence of religion has even resulted in the return of some traditions, which were considered to be forgotten or overcome, such as . Thus the revival of national and religious traditions in Tajikistan has caused a reversal of women's partial emancipation. Early marriages are now more common and high fertility continues to be a determinant of the status of women in society. A woman continues to obtain status almost exclusively through family. Evidence of the social pressure on Tajik women to be married can be traced in the following women's narratives:

> Usually when a girl is reaching her twenties and is not yet married, one of the questions she hears most frequently is whether she is planning to marry any time soon. I remember I was already 25 and still not married. Oh, I hated these questions. Every time my friends, neighbors, relatives, yes, especially relatives asked me why I was still not having my own family. I got married only when I was 28, but this is way too late for Tajikistan. Uncommonly late I would say (Zulfia, 68, widow).

> Here in Tajikistan a girl who has reached the age of 18 without her hand being asked in marriage is considered an old maid. My girlfriends say that brides over 23 look so awful. All of my girlfriends are either already married or wish to get married as soon as possible (Safarmo, 23, married).

[39] See Corconan-Nantes, 2005: 135.

So, a girl unmarried at the age of 23 must have something wrong with her. Such restrictive nature of the normative "ideal identity" not only constructs marriage as the most significant thing in life for any Tajik woman but also makes it very difficult for Tajik women to develop identities outside the familial domain. The following citation from *Tajikistan on the Way to Gender Equality*, carried out with the support of UNDP, UNFPA, UNIFEM and SCO, can confirm this strong emphasis on the nuclear family and specific stereotypes concerning the status of women in Tajik society:[40]

> According to the results of monitoring achievements in education, conducted in 2000 by ADB, [Asian Development Bank] 57% of respondents agreed that education for boys is much more important than for girls. 40% of questioned girls themselves agreed that education is not important for their future success in life. The increasing illiteracy of women and girls and their economic dependence on men with higher incomes and traditional stereotypes make women sexual slaves, victims of violence, early marriages, pregnancy and prostitution.

Summarizing the above stated points, the lives of Tajik women have not been easy since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such factors as increase in family poverty, the drastic reduction of social welfare services, increased domestic labour load on women and their alienation from the public sphere have aggravated the inequality between men and women even more. Moreover, the traditional image of women has intensified. The patriarchal way of thinking based on established stereotypes, combined with social and economical difficulties made the choices of women even more circumscribed. The dominant discourse on gender in Tajikistan imposes on women the identity of wife as the

[40] By saying stereotypes I imply the definition of Gender stereotypes, as defined by the UNDP. Gender stereotypes - a report of commonly accepted norms and opinions, concerning the existing condition of men and women, norms of their behavior, motives and needs. Gender stereotypes strengthen the existing gender differences and put obstacles to changing the condition in the sphere of gender relations and the realization by women of their rights and promotion of their interests. The quotation is taken from *Tajikistan on the way to gender equality*, Dushanbe, 2003: 18

most necessary. Thus, marriage, preferably at an early age, remains the "natural goal" for Tajik girls.

1.2 How are marriages arranged?

Given the importance of marriage and family life in Tajik society, by far the most important decision for any woman is the choice of marriage partner. But this decision is not always taken with the welfare of the couples themselves in mind. The vast majority of Tajik marriages are arranged by parents.[41] It is the young man's family who feel their needs to be paramount here. A *kelin* [42] will spend her life with her marital family and thus affect all family members, so her selection is considered far too important to leave to an immature young man.[43] How much parents in Tajikistan insist on making their children's choice of spouse themselves and how much leeway they are willing to allow their children will depend partly on the individual family, but even more on the parents' perception of their own needs.[44] The extent to which young Tajiks are able to have an input into major life decisions affecting them depends on many factors, including how their gender/ethnic performances interact with other modalities such as their educational level and locality, as well as the dynamics within the individual family. This is, for instance, illustrated by the relatively greater freedom of young people in the mountain village, studied by British social anthropologist Tett Gilligan, to choose their own marriage partners than even the young people from the capital of Tajikistan - Dushanbe,

[41] Harris, 2004: 6.
[42] Kelyn - Daughter-in-law or bride. From the Uzbek word to come (in), thus literally incomer. It carries the implication that the new member is not an accepted family member. Furthermore, the term does not specifically "attach" her to her husband but suggests that she belongs to the entire family. There is no fixed point at which woman stops being a *kelyn* and becomes a member of the family, although usually this happens some time before she is ready to welcome her own first *kelin*.
[43] Harris, 2005: 100.
[44] Harris, 2005: 103.

whose stories will further be narrated in this thesis.[45] It is a man's family, most usually his mother, who is the one to take the first step in arranging a marriage. The reason why the main mover in arranging a marriage tends to be the mother of the groom is because it is she who has the chance to meet young women and decide on their suitability, something that is very difficult for her husband or other males relatives to do. Even more important, it is she who will have most contact with the *kelin* after marriage, especially when the young couple will live with her.[46]

Pre-marital stages/rituals/events

Generally speaking, women from the groom's family seem to be most interested in the choice of *kelin* due to mostly practical considerations. Having a "good" daughter-in-law is especially important to rural women, whose *kelins* will be vital for carrying out chores both in the house and on the land, so they need willing girls capable of good hard work. Many Tajik families expect their sons and, thus, their *kelins*, to live with them all their lives, which makes the choice doubly important to the family. All this most likely accounts for the fact that so few rural parents, at least in some areas of Tajikistan, permit their children any say at all in the choice of their spouse. There are, as Harris puts it, "far more important considerations at stake than the personal relationship between the young couple. The welfare of the entire family will ultimately depend on its *kelin*".[47]

The choice of bride

[45] Gillian Tett "'Guardians of the Faith?' Gender and Religion in an (Ex-) Soviet Tajik Village" in Camillia Fawzi El-Solh and Judy Marbo (eds.) *Muslim Women's Choice: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994: 128-51.
[46] Tett, 1995: 106.
[47] Harris, 2005: 104.

A man is usually asked by his family whether he has a bride in mind. If not, then his parents and close relatives (older sisters, aunts, grandmothers – predominantly women) start "suggesting" him girls from the circle of relatives. If there is no suitable cousin available or if a family prefers not to marry their son to a relative and does not immediately have a potential bride in mind for him, a candidate will be sought among their friends, acquaintances and neighbors. Urban families, and even some rural families, may allow a son to suggest his own candidate and if she is found suitable, will propose to her. Such factors as social standing, the reputation of the woman and age are taken into account. Women from the groom's family initiate an active information search on the potential bride by inquiring information about her through relatives, neighbors, teachers, friends etc. As Harris explains, what the groom's family will consider is how this young woman would suit the family, and, second, how the two families will be likely to get along.[48]

Among the desirable characteristics of a bride that a groom's family is usually looking for are a good reputation, submissiveness, purity/virginity, chastity, health/fertility. Appearance and age are also taken into account. These criteria are crucial for choice and, as Mahkamova suggests, constitute a serious and active tool of social control over women, which is implemented long before their marriage.[49] Premarital feelings or relationships are not allowed to women, which again shows how women's bodies and their sexualities are controlled not only in marriage but long before it. Higher education, as Mahkamova's research illustrates, is in many cases considered

[48] Harris, 2004: 105.

[49] Mahkamova Gulbahor, "Lokal'nye tradicionnye praktiki I obriady I ih vliyanie na formirovanie gendernyh otnosheniy" и (Local traditional practices and rituals and their influence on the construction of gender roles), Tajikistan, 2005: 7.

"unnecessary" for a future wife. The author shows how the dominant gender discourse has contributed to the widespread idea that education is not necessary for a woman, since it does not bring her the same economic return as it does for men, nor guarantees woman's economic security or equality with men. As a consequence, the idea of ineffectiveness of the investments into women's education has deeply rooted in many people's minds.[50] The same point is illustrated in Harris' work:

> At the end of the eighth grade, if not earlier, many parents, especially in rural areas, remove their daughters from school. For her marital family a *kelin* is useful to provide household labor, not financial support, which should be left to the men, so what use will education be to her? This attitude has changed a little with the economic difficulties of the late 1990s but is still generally maintained in the Khatlon villages and even to a certain extent in Dushanbe. Moreover, daughters are big responsibilities for their parents, as they need constant watching to ensure they never disgrace the family. This is one reason they are rarely averse to marrying them off young.[51]

Mahkamova's research illustrates the direct connection between the bride's age and her chance to receive secondary, technical or higher education. Leaving their parents' house and going for study threatens girls' reputation and their "good name" and therefore can become an obstacle for a good marriage. As for the rural girls, Mahkamova states that "the only possible career for them is a successful marriage".[52]

The choice of groom

[50] Mahkamova, Gulbahor, "Lokal'nye tradicionnye praktiki I obriady I ih vliyanie na formirovanie gendernyh otnosheniy" ("Local traditional practices and rituals and their influence on the construction of gender roles") Tajikistan; 2005: 25.

[51] Harris, 2004: 99.

[52] Mahkamova, 2005: 24.

When marrying a daughter, parents are caught in the bind of a very narrow window of opportunity in looking for a marriage partner. They cannot simply go in search of a boy they like, but must wait for the suitors to come to them.[53] Therefore, in comparison with men, women's opportunities of finding a suitable partner are much more limited. However, in those cases that a girl has a boyfriend who wishes to marry her and who is able to persuade his parents to propose to her, she will try to see to it that this offer gets precedence (as it will be illustrated by the women's narratives).

Mahkamova's research shows that, in comparison with men women's opportunities for obtaining information about their potential partner is very limited, since usually their networks and social connections are weak.[54] Women, according to the author, generally rely on the information obtained by their parents and relatives, who in their turn receive this information from the sources close to the potential groom which are not always objective. Young men tend to obtain information independently. They can contact the classmates of a bride, her school teachers, neighbors, distant relatives, etc. Therefore, according to Mahkamova, the choice of women is often based on superficial information coming from sources which they cannot control. However, I do not completely agree with Mahkamova on this issue, and suppose that the input of women into the process of obtaining information about the potential spouse is much greater than it may seem.

[53] Based on my personal experience, I believe that women's parents (or relatives) are not as passive in arranging their daughters' marriages as it is often described. My personal opinion is that women's families do not just passively wait but do take initiative and mobilize available networks in order to find a suitable candidate. However, due to impossibility to find evidence of this in the literature I provide a description of the process of arranged marriages as it is reflected in the existing literature. See, for instance, Mahkamova, Gulbahor, "Lokal'nye tradicionnye praktiki I obriady I ih vliyanie na formirovanie gendernyh otnosheniy" ("Local traditional practices and rituals and their influence on the construction of gender roles") Tajikistan; 2005.

[54] Mahkamova, 2005: 32.

On the day when suitors arrive:

Female relatives (or in rare occasions men) go to propose a marriage into the house of the woman they would like to see as their *kelin*. Through a third party they notify the woman's family in advance of their arrival. The family of the bride starts thoroughly preparing for the expected visit. Women diligently clean the house – especially such places as the kitchen ("sari deg" - *a family fire*) to demonstrate the housekeeping skills of women living in this house. During this meeting visitors try to depict the potential groom and his family and ask the bride's side to think over the proposal. Before agreeing to the wedding, the bride's side asks about an opportunity to get to know the potential groom closer. A young man may come to this meeting alone, but the woman will necessarily be accompanied by someone else (an aunt or sister). At the appointed time they may meet, talk and try to get to know each other better.

***Hagun* – (Consent)**

The consent for the marriage is given by the bride's side after the second or third visit of "the suitors". During several preliminary meetings important questions are being talked over, such as whether a woman will be allowed to continue her education after being married. A comparatively new phenomenon, as Makhmudova puts it: "is a special interest from the bride's side towards the religious views of the groom and his family."[55] As she explains, this is particularly important for the bride, since it determines certain codes of behavior, including dress code (whether she would have to cover her head, etc).

[55] Mahkamova, 2005: 34.

During these discussions both sides touch upon issues of a very sensitive nature – such as the future living conditions, family principles, norms and values. That's why both sides try to attract an experienced authoritative woman to the discussion with good diplomatic and oratorical skills. During the negotiations, when trying to characterize the groom or the bride, both sides in fact provide an extended characteristic of all the family members of the same gender. At the end of the ceremony, if a family decides to agree upon their daughter's marriage, they serve "*plov*" to their guests (a traditional meal made of rice and meat), which symbolizes their agreement. The suitors then go home and say that they have eaten "plov", that is, they got an agreement for marriage.[56]

[56] There are many more "traditional" rituals associated with the arranged marriages and following the agreement from the bride's side such as "*Fotehatui*" (engagement) when both sides exchange gifts, "*Chokburron/nonishikanon*" (bukv. breaking the bread), "maslihat oshi" (when men from both sides meet to discuss all kinds of organizational issues), "*tuibieron*" – (the exchange of the wedding gifts) and others. For more information useful information on this topic refer to: Mahkamova Gulbahor, "Lokal'nye tradicionnye praktiki I obriady I ih vliyanie na formirovanie gendernyh otnosheniy" - ("Local traditional practices and rituals and their influence on the construction of gender roles"), Tajikistan, 2005.

CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical background

Since the focus of my research is on the agency of Tajik women, I find it necessary to define what I see as agency. In my study, I will mainly refer to the definition given by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, who has been acclaimed for his theory of structuration.[57] According to Giddens, "agency concerns the events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently".[58] Giddens argues that "whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened".[59]

What is the nature of the logical connection between agency and power? Giddens argues that: "to be able to 'act otherwise' means being able to intervene in the world or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs".[60] Therefore, Giddens presumes that to be an agent is to be able "to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of casual powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others".[61] Agency, as characterized by Giddens, depends upon the capability of the individual to "make a difference" to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. In his work Giddens refers to the definition of an agent as it is

[57] "Structuration" according to Giddens is: "the structuring of social relations across time and space, in virtue of the duality of structure […] One of the main propositions of structuration theory is that the rules and recourses drawn upon the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction". Giddens, Anthony (1984) *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration;* Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] Berkeley and Los Angeles: Polity Press University of California Press 1984: 376.
[58] Giddens, 1984: 9.
[59] Giddens, 1984: 9.
[60] Giddens, 1984: 14.
[61] Giddens, 1984: 14.

given in the Oxford English Dictionary, as "one who exerts power and produces an effect".[62] Based on this definition, Giddens argues that: "action logically involves power in the sense of transformative capacity"[63] This is why, for Giddens, agency implies power. Power, according to Giddens "is the means of getting thing done and, as such, directly implied in human actions".[64]

What is also very important is that Gidden's approach centers around the influence of structure on agency and visa versa. He argues that situated within a structure, an individual is capable of exercising agency by mobilizing available resources even in an environment with unequal access to and distribution of power and knowledge.[65] Giddens approaches "agency" as the capacity of individual humans to act independently and to make their own free choices. By "structure" Gidden's means those factors which seem to limit or influence the opportunities that individuals have. In my work I will follow Giddens' theory by deploying his concepts of agency and power when analyzing Tajik women's experiences with arranged marriages. Based on his theory I will try to analyze how women in Tajikistan, though being structurally strongly subordinated, nevertheless manage to exert power and affect outcomes.

My argument has been influenced by Diana Tietjens Meyers' work. In her *Essays on Identity, Action and Social Life*, Meyers approaches the question of women's agency

[62] Giddens, 1984, 9.
[63] Giddens, 1984: 15.
[64] Giddens, 1984, 283.
[65] According to Giddens' definition, structure implies: "Rules and resources, recursively implicated in the production of social systems. […] Structure thus refers to the structuring properties allowing the 'binding' of space-time in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them 'systematic' form. To say that structure is a 'virtual order' of transformative relations means that social systems, as reproduced social practices do not have 'structures' but rather exhibit 'structural properties' and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents". Giddens, 1984: 19, 377.

and emphasizes that it is very important not to overlook "the staying power of institutionalized norms and values".[66] Meyer analyzes how stereotyping and established cultural norms can interfere with women's self-determination and argues that discursive and institutional practices need to change in order to ensure everyone's equal right to autonomy. By saying this Meyer points to the existence of social rules which restrict women's agency and also emphasizes the importance of economic positions which afford more opportunities to some women and constrain others.[67]

However, Meyer's main argument is that repressive regimes cannot completely crush women's determination to their own lives, a point that has been crucial for my analysis of Tajik women's agency. I completely agree with Meyer that there is enough sociological evidence that women are less able to exert control over their lives than men. At the same time, I support her claim that traditional feminine socialization[68] does not altogether exclude women as autonomous agents.[69] What she argues for is an account of individual agency which "comprehends the experiences of traditional women but which also acknowledges the liabilities that curtail these individuals' autonomy".[70] I absolutely agree with Meyer, and express a very similar argument throughout my work when analyzing Tajik women's agency.

So, in my analysis I will follow Meyer's feminist thought and apply Giddens' theory of structuration when analyzing Tajik women's agency. Based on these two works I will seek to account for Tajik women's agency through their experiences with arranged

[66] Meyer, 2004: 4.
[67] Tietjens Meyers, Diana, *Essays on Identity, Action and Social Life*, Rowman and Littlefield Pulishers, Inc., 2004: 5.
[68] By "Traditional feminine socialization" Meyer means "the set of practices which instills in girls the gentle virtues of femininity along with homespun feminine goals. […]According to many feminist scholars, feminine socialization is crucial to the persistence of women's subjection". Meyer, 2004: 4.
[69] Meyer, 2004: 5.
[70] Meyer, 2004: 6.

marriages, while simultaneously following their experiences of obstructed agency. I think that the principal advantage of the view of the women's agency I will try to present in this work is that it acknowledges the impact of institutionalized domination and subordination without altogether denying women as individual agents.

Much has been written about Muslim women in the Third World. Women's experiences of socialism have also been well documented, both during the Soviet period and in a growing literature relating to the effects of transition on the women. The study of the experiences of Tajik women with arranged marriages, however, is underresearched, even though it presents a good opportunity for comparative thinking. In this work I only begin to look at the historical experiences of women of Tajikistan while hopefully opening a path to the development of analytical thinking on this neglected topic.

Moreover, Tajik women are often seen by the outsiders as involuntary victims of the system, trapped in a vicious circle of dependence and self-sacrifice and their apparent "apathy" is often regarded as a sign of 'backwardness', from which they need to be liberated. In my thesis I will try to explore Tajik women's experiences with main emphasis on the idea that these women have more individual agency than one might suppose if one never examined the details of their lives. I have made the issue of women's agency a priority in my analysis since women's agency is necessary for women's emancipation. Meyer in her work, for instance, argues that "whereas classic accounts of human agency take the moral experience of privileged men as paradigmatic, feminists insist that diverse women's experiences as agents be taken equally seriously, though not endorsed uncritically".[71] Following this feminist thought, in this work I will

[71] By saying that women's agency must be "endorsed critically" Meyer refers to the works of feminists and critical race theorists, who argue for the importance of acknowledging women's diversity and

attempt to integrate the concept women's agency into a more general approach of gender relations and women's lives in Tajikistan.

2.2 Research Design and Methods

I started my fieldwork going back to Tajikistan, the place where I was born and lived my entire life. I went there with the goal to personally talk with Tajik women and learn about their experiences with arranged marriages.[72] I decided to limit the number of interviews to eight, because it was not the quantity that I was looking for but the meaning women attribute to certain events that I hoped to acquire while listening to their stories. Taking into account the sensitivity of the subject as well as the time required for conducting each interview (all of the interviews lasted between three-four hours) I chose to conduct unstructured interviews. This format allowed me to keep the interview focused on a topic, while giving my respondents the chance to define the content of the discussion. Moreover, by using this type of interview I somehow encouraged my informants to express what they thought was important. Unstructured interviews have certainly facilitated the process of starting the discussion and helping women to open up.

"intersectional identity". The idea of intersectional identity, as Meyer puts it: "is premised on the general philosophical thesis that who one is depends on one's social experience". This approach emphasizes the complexity of identities in so far as they are constituted, as Meyer argues: "according to sexual orientation, race, class, and ethnicity together with gender" See Meyers, 2004: 16.

[72] I find it important here to clarify here who exactly is under investigation and which groups of Tajik women is being considered. For although I was dealing with Tajik women who were living in the capital of the country at the period of my research some of them arrived to Dushanbe just recently and had previously lived and grew up in the rural area. While there are many differences in the rituals, and traditional practices associated with arranged marriages, regional variations in the main patterns of this practice are very minor and the basic model of arranging a marriage as well as gender relations in general are similar all over the regions. Indeed, women themselves suggested this when they prefaced every discussion with the phrase "We, Tajik women…" while the rest of the time they would reject the national label and insist on identifying themselves purely by locality. Therefore, I believe I am justified in grouping women from different regions of Tajikistan under the single name "Tajik".

Moreover, as my practice showed, this interview technique was the most appropriate for "talking to informants who would not tolerate a more formal interview".[73]

However, the fact that the interviews were unstructured does not mean that they were completely informal. As Russel puts it: "There is nothing at all informal about unstructured interviewing […] the idea is to get people open up and to let them express themselves in their own terms and at their own pace".[74] For this type of interview I had prepared a list of questions and thought over the main topics I wanted to be discussed, however, I didn't feel the need to strictly follow the sequence of the questions and structure of the interview, because it was of particular interest to me to see what my respondents themselves emphasized as more important to them. So, having raised the topic, I mostly listened to women's stories, their opinions and knowledge of other cases they have observed. I have followed their reactions and emotions in order to understand their attitude to and interpretations of certain events.

As for the formalities, such as setting up the time and duration of the interview, explaining the purpose of the research, discussing the issue of anonymity of women's participation etc, I have arranged all of these issues in advance. The language of the interviews was mostly Russian (which is being widely spoken in Tajikistan), however, since I speak the local language as well, I offered women to talk in the language they preferred (either Russian or Tajik). Most of the women preferred to speak in Russian, since they could speak it equally well; some women used the two languages interchangeably.

[73] Russell, 1995: 213.
[74] Russel, 1995: 209.

After the data had been collected and based on the subset of research questions which guided me throughout the interviews, I have coded the texts of the interviews in order to identify certain themes and be able to break my analysis into several levels. The method of coding has helped me to draw my conclusions and make some generalizations in the process of analyzing the empirical data.

2.3 The sample and my position as a researcher

For locating my informants I have used the snow ball method. Contacting women and arranging interviews with them was not difficult at all after I had conducted my first interview with a woman from my neighborhood. Her assistance was of great help to me in terms of identifying further respondents and arranging meetings with them. Relationships with the respondents were constructed on a personal basis. All of the interviews took place either at my home or in the yards outside their houses. I could not always record my interviews, since only two of my respondents agreed to have the interview tape-recorded, other women said that they would rather prefer me to take notes. So I took notes during the interviews and read these notes later together with my respondents.

Being strongly convinced of the effectiveness of the "intersectionality" approach, I found it useful to look at a variety of experiences by interviewing women with different levels of education, and a different economic and social status. I have tried to do a maximum variety sampling by deliberately selecting a heterogeneous sample and observing commonalities and differences in their experiences. As Morse argues, this

method of sampling is the most useful "when exploring abstract concepts".[75] Using this particular method of sampling allowed me to not only to provide a better description of women's experiences, but also to identify the uniqueness of some cases and shared patterns of commonalities existing across participants.

Taking into account the abstract nature of the concept that I am operating with ("agency"), I was very concerned about the risk of producing the "distortion effect" which comes from seeing what you want to see, even when it's not there.[76] In relation to this it is important to mention that in this work I am not trying to suggest that a Tajik woman is somehow an ideal exemplar of individual agency. Nor do I want to over-romanticize the agency of women in their experiences with arranged marriages. Quite the contrary, as far as my analysis allows me to judge, Tajik women's agency is seriously curtailed in a number of ways. I do want to insist, however, that the standard doubts about women's credentials as autonomous agents do not warrant the conclusion that woman altogether lack agency. Moreover I tried to avoid looking at women's agency as an all-or-nothing phenomenon, since it would be misguiding in several respects. On the contrary, in my analysis of Tajik women's agency I followed Meyer's argument where she says that "despite the compelling incentives to accede to social norms, it must be possible for women to adopt some projects and policies autonomously without having control over the basic directions of their lives".[77]

As I have mentioned earlier, my research is focused on the country where I have lived all my life. Therefore, some women I came to interview happened to know me personally, some of them were either my friends or my family friends. Although many

[75] Morse, 1994: 229.
[76] Russell, 1995: 233.
[77] Meyer, 2005: 8.

researchers, such as Mary K. Zimmerman, believe that it is better not to study women they know, out of respect for the women's privacy, in my case I believe this was not an obstacle but rather an advantage. Initially I was afraid that women that I was previously familiar with, might find it strange if I would ask them questions which they might find obvious or already known to me; or even worse, I anticipated that they might feel insecure or intimidated about sincerely opening their lives to me since in some way I am a member of the community they belong to. However, in practice this didn't happen. First of all I understood that the fact that I am ethnically Russian made these women expect a certain degree of unawareness from my side about the Tajik traditions and rules regarding marriage, even though they knew that I grew up in the country. Being "the other" for the women I interviewed (Russian, educated, studying abroad), at the same time I was not a complete outsider to them. They could see that I had a good understanding of the things we were discussing, however, at any given moment I could ask them to explain me something I did not quite understand or knew very little about. The women were very patient and enthusiastic in filling in the gaps in my knowledge by describing the actual procedures, the rituals associated with the arranged marriage and the roles of men and women in the whole process. When describing certain things to me the women constantly related to their own experiences, which was of great interest to my analysis.

I felt that there were certain advantages about my position as a researcher, since I was on the one hand "other" due to my ethnicity, religious and educational background, while on the other hand this "otherness" did not seem to be perceived by my interviewees as an obstacle to on open and sincere dialogue. What I think was of more importance to the women I talked to was the fact that I was not yet married and that's why they were

very willing to share their stories with me, or in the cases of the older women, they even tried to give me some advice. Most of the women asked me to be careful about making quotations that could make them recognizable through some contextual reference. I have done my best to conceal the identities of all the subjects of this research and to this end have given them pseudonyms, as well as changed some details of the women's lives which could make them easily identifiable.

A question that frequently arises when one presents a body of ethnographic work is how far the researcher herself has influenced those whom she researched.[78] It seems to me inevitable that the flow of information cannot be unidirectional but must to some extent represent an exchange. With most of my interviewees I had relatively little discussion of my own points of view, although I am sure they must have sensed my basically feminist standpoint and this must have influenced the ways in which they framed their stories. I cannot know how much I influenced the women whom I met during my visit to Tajikistan, but my contacts with them certainly profoundly influenced my own views. I will forever be grateful to my interviewees for letting me into their lives, and sharing with me such profound experience as well as their wisdom.

[78] Reinharz, Shulamith, *Feminist methods in social research* Oxford UP. 1992: 263.

CHAPTER III: WOMEN'S OWN STORIES

This chapter explores Tajik women's biographical accounts about their experiences with arranged marriages as evidence of their agency, and identifies the extent to which the strategic use by women of the existing norms and gendered stereotypes allows them to exercise individual choice and personal agency. When conducting my interviews with Tajik women, I was particularly interested in stories that reveal women's agency. In the corpus of my analysis I will be using interviews with eight Tajik women. Throughout the chapter I have chosen to quote women when they talk about significant moments of their lives and therefore in the process of narration construct themselves as agents capable of making choices and holding responsibility for their actions. This analysis attempts to oppose the stereotypical image of Tajik women as powerless and helpless in decisions about marriages. Based on the stories I have collected I will try to provide evidence of Tajik women acting as agents of their own lives and resisting the structures that tend to oppress their rights to choose and to act.

Interspersed into my discussion of Tajik women's agency is the literature on gender relations in Tajikistan, according to which the majority of Tajik women live in the social systems that keep them systematically subordinated.[79] My argument is that despite the very real subordination, these women are exemplars of autonomous agency - no matter how limited their space for agency is. Horrible as they are, social and economic structures that fuel individual women into a preordained status, that regiment their life

[79] For useful information about gender relations in Tajikistan see for instance: Harris Colette, (2004) *Control and subversion: gender relations in Tajikistan*; London: Pluto Press; "Women in Tajikistan. Country Gender Assessments", 2000, <Quat.www.abd.org/Documents/Books/Country Briefing Papers/Women in Tajikistan>, last accessed on 11.04.2007.

trajectories, and that penalize nonconformity, certainly limit women's agency to a great extent. However, as my analysis will attempt to show, this does not mean that women are completely deprived of agency.

Nevertheless, I find it important to point out, before I continue with my analysis, that I approach Tajik women's agency with a full awareness of its limitations. That is why I leave a more demanding[80] understanding of agency aside and focus on the question of how agency is possible for individual Tajik women whose identities are shaped by structures of domination and subordination. Breaking up my analysis into several levels allowed me to operationalize the concept of Tajik women's agency into concrete terms and at the same time to explain the deficiencies or limitations of the forms of agency available to these women.

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[80] According to Young, for instance, more demanding modernist theories of human agency require:
1) an emancipated subject who would have goals above and beyond those activities preprogrammed by genes, or by 'primitive society' or by those mapped by preexisting norms, laws, customs and morés common to the society in which the person was socialized. To take on preexisting goals is not, in modern understanding of agency, an act of autonomous Will.
2) a knowing subject who would have precise and positive knowledge about the dynamics of that part of the natural and social order s/he wished to shape in their own interest.
3) a creating subject who would be able to provide self with all the tools essential to a task. Use of others as instruments of one's own will is permitted.
4) a rational subject who would have to use instrumental reason with sufficient skill such that the probability with which goals are achieved routinely surpasses chance.
5) A 'principled' subject who would apply scientific or moral principles rigorously and uniformly over the raw material at hand. And finally,
6) a willful subject, some would say ruthless, others would say goal oriented, who would not be deterred by sustained opposition, adversity or defeat.
For many postmodernists, it would be fair of modernists to posit human agency only if the acting person embodied these most stringent standards above. But, as Young puts it, few can meet these standards (Young, 1992, 5). I completely agree with Young, and relying on all of these standards in my analysis of women's narratives wasn't my goal either.

3.1 Caught within a Language "which is not their own": Women's Agency and Language

Being a linguist by training I could not but pay attention to the ways in which women used language in their narration. It is through self-narration, as Anthony Paul Kerby argues, and through language usage, that the self is constituted.[81] My linguistic inquiry, however, was limited to the simpler task of exploring the verbs used by women in order to see whether these words do or do not impute agency to the women who used them. It was very interesting to see that initially (at the beginning of the conversation), when the women I interviewed were trying to generally recollect the main events that had happened to them, they often tended to deprive themselves of any agency and to refer to these events as an influence external to them. Most of the women positioned themselves in a subject position in the passive tense. I found this peculiar and worth paying attention to, since the usage of these kinds of passive constructions shows that the interviewee did not see herself as an agent of the event occurred. Here is, for instance, how Zulfia has started telling her story

> My parents have married me away into a big family of eight sons. I was not even asked if I want it or not... it was just so: my husband saw me, he liked me and came to my family to ask me in marriage. Then our parents met, discussed everything and arranged a marriage. Yes, this is how it was. (Zulfiya, 68 years old, widow).

> Our mothers were friends. They arranged our wedding when I was eighteen and he was 21. I didn't want to marry their son, I even knew that he dated another girl. But I was simply forced to. Nobody listened to me. (Nigora, 47, married).

These types of responses were what I got through my direct questions (such as, how did you get married? Or "please, tell me your story of how you met your husband"). But it

[81] Paul Kerby, Anthony, "The language of the Self" in *Memory, Identity, Community*, eds. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2001: 125.

would be misleading to make any generalized statements based on the answers to these direct questions. Very often, a sentence, or even a couple of sentences, will reflect just an episode in the life of the speaker and leave us in the dark as to whether, or to what extent she was actually involved into the event that occurred to her.

As the interviews continued, the women began to add crucial new bits of information. All of my respondents for instance emphasized the specificities of Tajik "traditions" which, while allowing marriages based on "love", do not encourage them. Colette Harris in her work refers to such reiterations as "'the magic formulas' of 'official' discourse" which produce the impression of strict adherence to gender norms. In this way women are announcing their acceptance of the traditions, their willingness to abide to them.[82]

> Some girls nowadays find their husbands by themselves. They go to study to the University and start dating somebody there. It depends on the family; some parents may allow them to marry later if a guy is from a good family. But if, after dating, this guy refuses to marry her, it will be much more difficult for her parents to arrange a marriage for her. A girl's reputation will be spoiled. That's why some parents will never allow their daughter to date someone. It is okay for a man to have relationships before the marriage, he can still take a wife from a good family, but for a girl this will be a big problem. It has always been so, even when I was young. I was always afraid of my parents but I also respected them. I didn't date before my marriage. I decided I would better choose from the serious men who come to propose me. (Zulfiya, 68, widow).

The importance of respect towards parents came up in most of the interviews and the women referred to it as something specific to Tajik "culture" and "tradition":

> I was not surprised when my parents told me that they want me to marry a man from our neighborhood. Neighbors gossiped and I heard that he liked me. His mother and aunt used to come to our place quire frequently. My parents liked that family very much. They are all very nice, honest, respectable people. So, I said to my parents that I will do whatever they decide. […] but this is our Tajik tradition. My mother's

[82] Harris, 2004: 134.

> marriage was arranged. My older sister's marriage was arranged two years ago. She now lives well with her husband. This is how we do it here. This is our Tajik tradition. (Nigora, 34, married).

When women started adding some more information explaining what motivated them to marry (whether it was a Tajik "tradition" or respect for their parents), they pointed to the specificities of their lives which are shaped, as Harris puts it: "by the constraints of power relations laid on them and institutions provided for them".[83] I was able to learn to what extent woman's own actions were involved in the events briefly described by them only after I knew more than the verbs in the first couple of sentences could tell me. Only by considering additional information was I able to answer the question of what makes a bit of biography narrated by a woman into an act of individual agency.

To hear a woman say that: *"I agreed with a marriage because 'this is how we do it here; this is our tradition'"* is automatically to deny her of any agency regarding the events that happened in her life. These women made decisions and chose strategies - frequently the strategy of accommodation to the existing social order - considering the specificities of the society they live in. For Tajik society, as Colette Harris puts it, the code of honor and shame is central. Family honor is seen as resting mainly on the purity of its girls and women, and shame lays in any aspersions cast on this. Purity means not only virginity for girls and fidelity for wives, but also the impossibility that an honorable woman should think or say these were in doubt.[84] Honor-and-shame societies, as Harris named them, encourage marriage, because leaving a girl unmarried - which was especially the case in Tajikistan during the civil-war - period could - create a situation in which she might be violated or impregnated.

[83] Harris, 2004: 41.
[84] Harris, 2004: 73-39.

No wonder that the social order in which women live, shapes the way they narrate their live experiences. Some feminists, such as Spender and Catherine MacKinnon would argue that male power over language has allowed men to create reality.[85] French feminist psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray, who examined the uses and misuses of language in relation to women, argues that history and culture are written in patriarchal language, which excludes women's needs and desires. Women, therefore, even when speaking about and for themselves, use the language produced for them by the structure which oppresses them.[86]

However, as my interviewees proceeded with their narration, the structure of their sentences began to change as well. This change could be characterized by the prevalence of more and more verbs in the active voice. Their stories revealed that asserting certain "traditional gender roles and sentiments" does not prevent them from exercising their individual agency and making personal choices. Below, I will provide evidence of how women were struggling with and resisting decisions they did not like; and how they were trying every strategy and healing technique they knew to avoid oppression and pain and to make situations work to their benefit.

3.2 "Subalternized" Tajik women and resistance in their own stories: agency on the level of concrete acts

[85] Spender, D., (1985), *Man Made Language*, 2nd edition, NY: Routledge in MacKinnon (1993) *Only Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[86] Irigaray, Luce, (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One.* Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.

As Davidson puts it, "a person is an agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what s/he did, that makes true a sentence that says s/he did it intentionally".[87] The comprehensive meaning of women's agency requires that they be ready "to resist the unwarranted demands of other individuals along with conformist societal pressures, and that they be resolved to carry out their own plans"[88].

Safarmo was only fourteen when she received her first proposal. At that time her parents rejected the suitors by saying that the girl was too young and immature for a family life. Safarmo's parents have never hurried with marrying her off, however, when the girl turned nineteen, they started talking about arranging a marriage for her more and more often.

> Of course I knew that the day will come when my parents will finally have to marry me. I was mentally ready for it. I often talked to my mother about it. I remember I would often threaten her and my sister that if they try to marry me to someone I don't like I would run away and forget about them, or even worse I will do something bad to myself. They promised that they would never marry me to a man I don't like and that they would arrange a marriage only with my consent. But just to be on the safe side, I kept on threatening them. (laughing) (Safarmo, 23, married).

Several times a month Safarmo had to meet new suitors. Many families who came to propose were of a good origin and respectable social position. Taking into account that many families belonged to a social status and income level much higher than that of Safarmo's family, her father was getting more and more upset about the fact that Safarmo rejected them all. Once he conducted the negotiations without Safarmo even knowing about it and even went as far as to slaughter some sheep, the practice that seals the marriage agreement. Safarmo cried, protested, went to bed without eating, threatened her

[87] Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1980: 46
[88] Tietjens Diana Meyers, *Essays on Identity, Action and Social Life*, Rowman and Littlefield Pulishers, Inc., 2004: 10.

parents that she would run away and that she would never forgive them. Safarmo's younger sister took her side and always supported her. She said that if they made Safarmo marry the person she didn't like, she would also run away, because she also wanted to make her own choice. Finally they persuaded the farther to change his decision. Safarmo shared with me several more stories about her parents' failed attempts to arrange marriage for her, episodes in which she did more of the same: she cried, protested openly, threatened and refused to eat. Safarmo's story was an example of direct and open resistance to decisions she didn't like and a vivid illustration of the fact that young women are not just passively waiting until the moment when their parents decide to marry them off, but they do plan, develop strategies, set certain goals and reflect on how these goals could be achieved.

Shahnoza, another interviewee, was in her third year of Medical University and in love with a fellow student of hers who also loved her, when her parents announced that they wanted her to marry her cousin from Dushanbe. Sahnoza was shocked, she was totally set against this marriage. She didn't want to marry anyone except her boyfriend with whom she has already made plans for the future. To her parents she motivated her rejection by saying that she was unwilling to marry a relative. She said she was worried about the physiological problems it might cause to her future children and was very upset to see that this didn't seem to bother her mother at all, although she was a nurse by profession. It took a hard fight but finally Shahnoza was able to convince her parents that she would never accept her cousin. Before anyone else had a chance to do an offer, she informed her parents that they would be receiving an offer from her fellow student. He was from a different region, which upset her parents and set them very much against the

marriage. As Harris puts it: "Control over children is most important of all at the crucial moment of their marriage, when a family must be able publicly to demonstrate its mastery of the correct gender behavior".[89] At that time there is a great deal at stake, and the family's honor can be severely damaged if things go wrong. The regional belonging of this guy would have affected the family's honor very negatively. That's why, when her boyfriend's parents made a proposal, Shahnoza's parents refused. Shahnoza fought bitterly with them but to no avail.

> I cried, argued with them, tried to explain that it is my life and that I am the one who has to live with that person all my life. But when I saw that my parents wouldn't change their minds, I talked to my boyfriend and offered him to run away. I had an aunt in Dushanbe who I knew loved me a lot. So we went to her, explained what our problem was. At first she was so scared, she wanted to send me home, but in the end I managed to persuade her to take my side. My aunt was so kind as to organize a wedding for us. Only after the wedding we returned home and told our parents that we're already married. My farther refused to talk to me and has forbidden me to enter the house. It was only almost 9 years after, that he again addressed me… (Shahnoza, 32, married).

Shahnoza had set herself a goal and was not afraid to do anything to realize it. Eventually, she got things her own way, even if this seriously threatened her reputation, damaged her relationship with her father, and made things difficult for many years. However, this was only possible because Shahnoza could rely on her aunt's support and her boyfriends parents agreed to provide them accommodation. In other cases many women wouldn't be able to exercise their agency in the same way simply because of the lack of opportunities.

Madina shared a story of a different kind, depicting her personal strategies of dealing with "undesirable" choices of her parents:

[89] Harris Colette, *Control and subversion: gender relations in Tajikistan*; London: Pluto Press, 2004.

> After the negotiations our parents would allow us to meet and have a look at each other. I would always put on a headscarf, so that it covered my entire face, moreover, I would stay as far from him as possible, I didn't want him to see my face. So, this way I get to see a guy pretty well without allowing him to have a slightest look at me. If I don't like a guy and he didn't see my face he probably would not like me that much and it would be easier for my family to refuse. May be even he would change his mind. I did the same when my husband came to propose. But when he entered the room I liked him so much! From the first second I felt like I knew him for ages. […] Yes, I showed him my face when he asked me to…I didn't want him to go… (Madina, 35, married).

Further Madina brought up several more examples of how she managed to manipulate her relations regarding the potential candidates without irritating her parents. All of her actions consisted of little tricks that would allow her to express her will and attitude towards the potential groom without transgressing the limits of what is considered to be respectable behavior for a Tajik woman. Given the importance assigned by Islamic law to women's dress code as a symbolic representation of their modesty, honor, and of their belonging to Islamic culture, the veil is particularly significant in its being considered "as ameans of protection against the menacing eyes of male strangers".[90] Thus, adopting certain elements of clothing allows Tajik women to position themselves as "upright honorable women" and this way to obtain some power and an opportunity to act.

Anora's marriage was arranged for her when she was nineteen. Her father agreed to marry her to a relative. The decision was announced and no objections were accepted. Her father did not even want to discuss this topic and Anora knew the reason why. She understood that he had somehow found out that Anora was secretly dating a guy and was very much in love with him. Anora said that she was trying to hide their relationships, but neighbors saw them together, gossip was spreading and finally reached her father. Anora decided not to put up with the situation and let her father ruin her life. As she described it,

[90] Ahmed, L. Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992: 165.

she argued, cried, tried to persuade him to let her marry the man she had chosen, but he stuck to his decision. Moreover, he did not hesitate to beat Anora. Yet, after another fight Anora managed to run away, when her father had left the house. She ran to her boyfriend's place (he owned an apartment of his own) and returned home only on the next morning.

> When I returned my father was not there. I told my mom what I did, I said that I was no longer a virgin and that I did it intentionally. She cried, she was so afraid that my father would simply kill me. I asked my mom to talk to my father and tell him what I did. […] He was furious, I don't even want to remember what I experienced on that day. But I expected it. I said that after I have disgraced the family his relative would not take me or if he did it would be a shame for the rest of our family. It is better, I said, to let me marry Shams. Otherwise no respectable man after would want to take me as a wife… […] and now I am married to the man I love. (laughing) (Anora, 43, divorced).

Anora's story exemplifies that women's agency is can be creative and innovative in its attempt to challenge the existing institutions. Anora in her story exploited the socially constructed meaning attributed to "virginity" as a tool necessary for a marriage and this way turned the situation to her advantage.[91] Her agency can be seen in the effort to challenge the practices and gender specific stereotypes that exist in the restrictive and oppressive society and are used as a tool to control women's bodies and sexualities.

Anora did not know how her life was going to be in the future, but at the moment when the interview was conducted, she considered herself to be a lucky woman, who was able to control her own fate. However, not all women in Tajikista, as Anora acknowledged, have similar opportunities for influencing their parents' decision. She recounted several cases in her memory when women would not be even able to date

[91] As Colette Harris puts it: "the successful start of marriage is dependant on woman demonstrating her femininity through bestowing her virginity on her husband, a symbol of her willingness to belong submissively to him only. […] correspondingly, the most compliant woman who cannot prove her virginity at the appropriate time is shown up as a failure". Harris, 2004: 149.

someone, because they were basically not allowed to go outside without someone from the family accompanying them. One of the most dramatic stories that Anora shared with me occurred to a neighbor of hers.

> We were in the same school, but she quitted after the ninth grade. Dilya's father was very strict with her, he didn't even want her to study. She stayed at home day and night. She even didn't go for a walk with us in the yard or something. We met rarely, usually I went to her place just to chat but when we talked, most of the time she had nothing to tell, nothing happened in her life at all. I heard from my farther that Dilya was supposed to marry soon. I was so surprised. I went to talk to her. Dilya was so unhappy. She said she didn't really mind getting married but she absolutely didn't like the man her father had chosen for her. She said he was absolutely ugly and disgusting. I felt so sorry for her. I saw him later on the wedding day. He was indeed very ugly. After the wedding he took her to his parents' house and in two days we found out that she had killed herself. (Anora, 43, divorced).

The story of this young woman who committed suicide in response to injustice committed against her is just like a drop in the sea. There are indeed many more stories of a similar kind, which reveal how much injustice and violence is committed against women in Tajikistan. The limited space for this research did not allow me to develop a deeper analysis of this form of resistance by Tajik women. However, I could not simply ignore this issue either. The problem exists, it was voiced by women I interviewed, and is officially recognized by NGO's as well as by the governmental agencies.[92] As Tahmina Khakimova in her research on the self-immolation of Tajik women indicates: "a significantly large number of young women in Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, forced into marriage attempt suicide by setting themselves alight".[93] In an attempt to explain the reasons of this phenomenon, the author emphasizes the very high level of

[92] For reference see: http://www.monitor.upeace.org, last accessed on 20 May, 2007.
[93] Tahmina Khakimova, "Self-immolation in Tajikistan" at http://www.monitor.upeace.org/archive.cfm?id_article=228#_edn1, last accessed on 07.04.2007.

violence against women in Tajik society. Moreover, the problem is that very often violence in the family is not recognized as violence but is considered to be normal. The number of female suicides, particularly self-immolations, is enormously high in Tajikistan.[94] The personal opinion of Khakimova on this issue is that the main causes of suicides are violence against girls and women by men and older women. Women who commit suicide sometimes leave a note explaining why they decided to do it. I completely agree with Khakimova's argument, that this way, women try to stop the violence which was committed against them and to stop this violence being committed towards other women. Many women before committing suicide indicate in their notes the names of their perpetrators in order to have them punished for their deeds. Khakimova also emphasizes the role of the mass media as being quite significant in provoking suicides among women: "since after women know what other women in their situation did they want to do the same".[95] I cannot disagree with this statement. Women in a similar state of despair can probably see that other women failed to find the way out of an oppressive situation and therefore they chose to kill themselves, in order not only to escape the violence but also to get the perpetrators punished. In her conclusion Khakimova states that the act of self-immolation "as a method of non violent struggle is a failure".[96] Women, as the author argues, "should not kill themselves but fight for their

[94] According to Khakimova: "in Central Asia self-immolations are the most wide-spread practice of committing suicides among Muslim women. In the Samarkand region alone according to the official data around 35 women burn themselves annually. Most of representatives of relevant NGOs consider that in reality, the real figure could be 2-3 times higher. Official statistics of Tajikistan show that in 2002 there were 200 suicides in the country as a whole. The state body in charge of statistics says there are, on average, four to seven suicides per 100,000 people. Independent observers believe the true figure is even higher".

[95] Tahmina Khakimova, "Self-immolation in Tajikistan" at http://www.monitor.upeace.org/archive.cfm?id_article=228#_edn1, last accessed on 07.04.2007.
[96] Tahmina Khakimova, "Self-immolation in Tajikistan".

rights" and I partly agree with her. This way of fighting is very tragic. Protesting this way, the women die or if they survive, often remain disfigured. However, the question is in what other ways can some of these women really influence their lives and achieve some change? Did these "sulaltern" Tajik women have a lot of room for agency? In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[97] Gayatri Spivak discusses the acts of self-immolation committed by women as a form of resistance and self-expression in situations when women do not see another possibility for exerting their own agency and resistance.[98] To understand why some Tajik women chose this way of resistance it is important to locate this phenomenon in the Tajik context. Tajik women are "subalternized" (according to Spivak's formulation) and silenced to a great extent by the patriarchal power surrounding them. There are a lot of aspects of Tajik women's subalternity, such as a lack of proper education or employment of many women, family oppression, and restricted mobility which in turn greatly limit the possibilities of their agency. In no way do I want to suggest that I support suicide as an "acceptable" way of resistance. All I want to point out that this form of resistance is sometimes chosen by women who find that all other forms of agency are not available to them. I will not go further in discussing the issue of suicidal resistance, but I found it crucial to emphasize that women in Tajikistan do struggle and try to express their protest against the violence they experience, even though their agency is often greatly limited.

[97] Spivak, 1998: 271-313.
[98] Spivak, 1998: 312-313.

3.3 Women's moral agency

To be a moral agent is to be sensitive to certain standards.[99] But being "sensitive" according to Taylor's understanding, means: "not just that one's behavior follows a certain standard, but also that one in some sense recognizes or acknowledges the standard".[100] Moral agency, in other words, as Taylor puts it, "requires some kind of reflexive awareness of the standards one is living by (or failing to live by)".[101] According to Donald Davidson's understanding, attributions of moral agency are typically "accusations or assignments of responsibility".[102] In their narratives, my interviewees intentionally constructed themselves as agents who invest a moral component into a given situation.

For instance, Tahmina described a situation which was a consequence of a decision she had taken, she felt obliged to apply value judgments to the consequences of her decisions, and to hold herself responsible for those decisions. When I met Tahmina she lived and worked in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, although she was born and grew up in the South of the country – in the Khatlon region. Tahmina was married at age nineteen in 1993, when the civil war was at its height and rape an everyday occurrence. Her widowed mother, Safarmo, had decided it was better to marry her rather than risk anything happening to her. At the beginning, when Tahmina had just learned about her mother's decision, she was totally set against marriage. It was not what she wanted, her dream was to leave her small village after the war was over and to go to study at the

[99] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge University Press 1985: 101-103.
[100] Taylor, 1985: 101.
[101] Taylor, 1985: 102.
[102] Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1980: 48.

Medical University in Dushanbe. She was successful in her studies at school and already envisioned herself as a surgeon in a good seven years. Her mother did not even want to listen to Tahmina, even though she had previously encouraged her to study and obtain a good profession. Without even informing Tahmina she negotiated a bride price, a comparatively good sum of money with a man from a neighboring village who had a nephew in Dushanbe. They agreed to marry Tahmina to this man in Dushanbe under the provision that he would take her to Dushanbe and allow her to study. Safarmo informed Tahmina about the deal only after she had already made it. Tahmina was deeply depressed at being forced to marry. However, she said that she did not explicitly refuse or protest against her mother's desicion:

> Of course I was sad. No, even desperate. All my dreams were ruined in a minute. I didn't even want to see the man I was going to marry. I cried day and night. Didn't even want to talk to my mom. I was mad at her, but on the other hand I was old enough to understand why my mother had made this decision. The war was around, anything could happen. It was a very difficult time to survive, we were afraid to go outside; there was no food…There were days when we were basically starving… So, I knew that my mother was right in a way; this marriage would not only be some kind of protection to our family because we had no men, but it would also save our family financially. (Tahmina, 33, married).

So, Tahmina accepted the marriage and left for Dushanbe. Her life was not easy there. Tahmina has experienced a lot of hardships living there in a family of seven and being basically a servant in this big family. She has suffered a lot of emotional as well as physical violence from her husband, who did not let her even go outside without his permission, left alone fulfilling his promise to allow Tahmina to study. After seven years of living in misery and having given birth to two children, Tahmina decided that the time had come to take charge of her own life. She took the children and returned to her mother's home, in spite of her awareness that she would be labeled as immoral and would

probably never get another husband afterwards. Although she was not able to become a full time student at the Medical University, she decided to take short term courses funded by the International NGO's in the region and earned a certificate as hairdresser. She is now working in a hair salon in Dushanbe and earns her own income, small as it is. Tahmina returned to her husband after he promised her that she would be able to continue her work and that they would have their own household, separate from the rest of his family. She said that she changed her mind to divorce him thinking about the future of her two daughters, for whom it would be much better to grow up with a father, although she had no feelings for this man at all.

Tahmina in her story constructed herself as a moral agent who is a member of a moral community, and therefore responsible for her own decisions and its impact on their lives of others. Tahmina in her narrative explained what enabled her to reflect on certain problems, to take certain decisions and to participate in moral relations, taking responsibility not only for her own life but also for the lives of others, in this case the lives of her daughters. Tahmina constructed herself as a person who engages in different forms of moral interaction and considers the impact of her decisions on the lives of people she feels responsible for. Such moral responsibility, as Meyer puts it, is characteristic to "intentional agents, who hold themselves and one another responsible for what they do".[103]

3.4 Reflective agency

[103] Meyers, 2004: 161.

When the women narrated their experiences and tried to explain why they did what they did, they were not simply saying that a particular action appealed to them. Whenever they described something they did they explained that they did it for reasons which came about in the process of reflection. This process of reflection included desires, urges, promptings, aesthetic principles, social conventions, public and private goals and a great variety of moral views and economic considerations. According to Davidson's definition, "to the extent that women survey their options guided by their self-scrutinized feelings, values, goals, and moral judgments, and then marshall the determination to follow their own counsel, they act as individual reflective agents".[104]

A variety of vivid examples of how the Tajik women constructed themselves as reflective agents were present throughout their narratives. The women have provided a lot of evidence of how they reflected on the decisions others tried to impose on them and how they finally ended up dealing with the oppressive reality by choosing this or that strategy. Women reflected about the "tools" available to them for the implementation of their goals and planned their actions correspondingly.

Religion, for instance, was not included in the questions I was planning to raise; however, this issue came up in a good half of my interviews. The women who considered themselves religious tended to quote the Koran on the issue of women's rights in marriage in general and arranged marriages in particular. It was very interesting to see that they referred to their knowledge of the Koran as a "tool" which allowed them to establish their rights in certain situations. Referring to the rights of women as they are in included in the Koran, these women constructed themselves as reflecting and knowing

[104] Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1980: 38.

subjects who have precise knowledge about the dynamics of the social order they wished to (re)shape in their own interest.

One example is the story of Karomat, who got married in summer 1986, and her marriage has been arranged for her. The two families were not acquainted and Karomat had never seen the man whom she was being asked to marry, but having reflected about the proposal she still agreed to do it fore several reasons. First of all, she said, that the last thing she wanted to do was to marry for love. She said she didn't trust any men. She had seen enough to know how badly most men treat their wives, whether or not they had married for love. Moreover, as she considered herself to be very religious, she brought up the issue of religion several times.

> I know that the Koran encourages parents to arrange their children's marriages. I also think this is right. If I choose my own husband, then he'll be my own responsibility. If he treats me badly I will have nowhere to turn. My family will say: "You chose him, you have to put up with him". But if my family chooses him and then something goes wrong I will say "You chose him, so now do something, protect me!". But I also knew from the Koran that parents have to ask the daughter for her consent. I know sometimes it happens that a girl does not even see her groom until they are married. She would stay in another room and wouldn't even see his face when they ask for her consent. Somebody can answer instead of her. That is so wrong! But it happens. It should never be like that. I read the Koran, I know it. A girl must always see her groom. Koran allows meeting three times before she can decide. She needs time to think everything over. (Karomat, 42, married).

Karomat met her potential husband three times, just as it is allowed by the Koran. She liked his behavior, and also that he was educated. She agreed to a marriage, mainly, it seems, because of her awareness of the social system she was living in. She perfectly knew that some women have the freedom to make their own choice, and that if she wanted she could also choose, but she also knew that this freedom implied a great deal of responsibility. In the first place, responsibility for herself. So, it was her reasonable decision to allow her parents to take the responsibility. If her parents did this, she

believed it would absolve her should things go wrong. This way of exerting agency derives from Karomat's relatively constrained position, since it is difficult to imagine how she could take responsibility and exercise her individual agency in such a way as to change her situation according to her own wishes and yet to remain within the boundaries acceptable to Tajik society.

I found it telling that many of the women I interviewed referred to the Koran as a source of justice. They interpreted the Koran in a way that women's rights should be protected within the family and marriage. They knew that according to the Koran women should not be forced into marriage; their consent is always necessary. The strong similarity in the way women talked about their rights in the Koran reflects to my view an important point: Tajik women's lives have been so much shaped by the constraints laid on them and the institutions provided for them, that religion has become one of the few tools available to women in order to exercise their own agency. Karomat's story about growing up in need and poverty are congruent with the stories told by other women in Tajikistan's rural areas. They show how the lives of women have been circumscribed, especially in the villages, where women spent most of their time enclosed within their houses. Their greatest pleasure lays in receiving visits from relatives and friends, or going to the market which provided almost the only contact with the outside world. Few of my respondents from the rural area were educated, or most of the study they received revolved around secondary school. Some women explained that their motivation to accept the marriage stemmed from considerable poverty in which they and their families lived. Women described how tough their lives were, especially during and after the civil-war period. Poverty was a major cause of early marriage for girls. At the same time as

reducing the number of mouths to feed, parents could earn *kalym* by giving a daughter in marriage to a wealthier family. Generally, the poorer the family, the earlier the marriage.[105] Given the situation most rural Tajik women live in, accommodation to the social norms may bring them real benefits. What is crucial here is to understand that Tajik women's agency, therefore, is strongly restricted by the social reality they live in. The story of Subhia was a good example of how these restrictions work.

When I first met Subhia I was deeply impressed because I met a woman who was not only very beautiful, educated, traveled around the world, spoke several languages, and knew how to present herself, but also seriously challenged the dominant gender norms and was very proud of doing so. Subhia was not married at the moment and, as she said, she did not even want to have any affairs with men. She had left her husband nine years ago which, as she said, was the best decision in her life. After she left her husband she dared to do what most other Tajik women do not: she lived on her own with her son, earned money through her own initiative, traveled and had business relations with men. I admired Subhia and she could obviously see it. She explained to me later, though, that her life had not always been like that and it is only nine years after she left her husband, that she was no longer financially or emotionally dependant on her own family and on public opinion. When she was younger, unmarried and lived at home with her mother, she was subject to strict control. She constantly heard about the importance of taking good care of and preserving her reputation. Any stain on her reputation might have made it impossible for her to make a good marriage. She hated that her parents were strict and never allowed her to go anywhere except to school. And Subhia always had a lot of

[105] Harris, 2004: 35.

ambitions. There was so much of the world she wanted to see but she was barely allowed to move around the town. Sometimes, which as Subhia described was quite frequently, she together with some of her girlfriends would skip the whole day of school and take advantage of this to have some fun. They might go to the café, to the market, stroll around the downtown looking in shop windows or sit in the park and chat with other girls. This was how she obtained at least a little bit of freedom, managed to learn about life and to resist in this way the oppression she experienced.

Nevertheless, when Subhiya was in her fifth year of University, her mother said that whether she liked it or not she would have to marry her off, since if she didn't people would say that something was wrong with this girl. Subhia didn't want to marry but decided that it would be better to agree. She thought over the opportunities to escape the marriage, but she had no where to go and no money of her own. She decided to look at the man and if she didn't find him disgusting, would accept the marriage. She didn't want to choose a husband for herself and was afraid that parents wouldn't take her back if something went wrong. She met her potential husband several times, and having thought it over, she decided to accept the marriage. The most important thing for her was that this man did not mind, and even encouraged Subhia to work. She had planned for herself a career as a lawyer and this marriage seemed not to cause obstacles on her way to this goal.

On another occasion, Subhia kept mentioning that in spite of the fact that she liked her potential husband, she thought when she was younger that it would be nicer not to marry at all, and to have a house and work just for herself, to live with a girlfriend or

two and may be even to adopt a child. But then she laughed and added that it would be extremely difficult to do so in Tajikistan, for this kind of life she had to be born somewhere in the West or at least in Russia. In Tajikistan this option did not seem available to Subhia, at least not at that age.

> It was lucky that I was able to study and got a good degree. By the age of twenty-six I already received one of the highest salaries in Tajikistan. My husband and I didn't get along together very well, and once, when he was drunk and attempted to hit me with a knife I took my son and left. By that time I could already easily afford leaving without such burden as a husband (laughing). Yes, but it took me a lot of pain and sufferings until I became the person I am now. (Subhia, 41, nor married).

No matter how independent Subhia was at the moment, she acknowledged that when a woman is young and financially dependent on her parents she has very little room for agency and is very unlikely to have any choice about deciding not to marry (although of course it depends on the family). All she can is to manipulate the situation to some extent, for instance to postpone her marriage or to insist on a specific person she likes. But escaping marriage as such would be very difficult or almost impossible for most women. As Subhia's story demonstrates, the potential for Tajik women's agency significantly increases with age; it has also a lot to do with financial opportunities which determine how much leeway a young woman has.

The price of value: "Religious" practices in defense of women's rights

Religion was not on the list of issues I intentionally wanted to raise. However, it was very interesting to observe that a number of women in their narratives brought up and defended the same Islamic practices that the Soviet discourse identified as degrading to women. It was ironic, for instance, to see that not all Tajik women view as a crime.

Some women, who were well familiar with Islamic laws, maintained that was better than divorce for an infertile woman. Many women said they would defend the practice of polygyny as long as women shared equal treatment. The attitude of Tajik women to polygyny is best summarized in Tadjbakhsh's work, in which he quotes Bobonazarova, head of the law faculty at the Tajik State University in 1992, who declares:

> Let us face it, polygyny exists in Tajikistan. If we make it legal, then the husband would have to be responsible, morally and financially to the second and third wife he already has.[106]

The women whom I interviewed also had an original view on the question of the bride price, which the Soviets criticized as immoral. According to the Soviet ideology, such things as the bride price reduced women to the status of a thing. The woman who had been bought through a bride price became the full possession of her husband, who had the right to punish her and even kill her for adultery. It was interesting that many women I talked to considered *kalym* (the bride price) as a deposit in case husband and wife were separated by death or divorce. The women remarked that men generally tend to underestimate the importance of the bride price for the future of a young woman and added that the importance of *kalym* has actually increased during the post-independence years. Women who were well familiar with the religious laws and regularly attended religious meetings raised the question of "makhr" (the valuable present to the bride).[107] Although the payment of *makhr* is not practiced in Tajikistan, they explained that women in religious circles actively discuss the economic aspects of this issue and support the

[106] This quote has been taken from Tadjbakhsh's work: Shahrbanou TAdjbakhsh, "Between Lenin And Allah: Women and Idology in Tajikistan" in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity /* ed. By Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Tohibi, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 1998: 177.

[107] *Mahr* should be distinguished from kalym. Mahr is the maintenance that the bridegroom provides for the bride, all of which remains the bride's personal and exclusive property. Kalym is distributed in three parts: one part to the fiancée, another part to her parents, and the third to be used by the fiancée's family for the wedding expenses.

increase of the religious meaning of this tradition. It would offer women economic protection if men were obliged to follow this tradition:

> According to our religion a groom must give his bride a valuable present. It can be a definite sum of money, a property, or real estate, but it should necessarily be something valuable. Unfortunately it is not practiced at the moment. When my parents married me away I only received a ring from my husband, which costs nothing in comparison with "makhr". But I think that if a woman received such present as "mahr", in the future it would give her some security. (Zulfya, 68, widow).

After marriage many men were unable, or unwilling, to provide sufficient recourses for their wives and children to live on. They might spend months or even years away from their families without providing adequately for them. This is one of the grounds for which women are allowed to sue for divorce. However, in order to be able to take such a step a woman needs an alternative refuge and source of income. For that reason it is likely that someone from a poor family can only afford to ask for a divorce if she has already found another man willing to marry her afterwards. Women abandoned without financial support might have no recourse but prostitution.[108] If women could receive "mahr", they would have more financial security. Zulfiya's statement is the best example of such opinion:

> Women are entitled by the religious law to receive marital gifts without limit and to keep them for their own security, even after marriage. No married woman is required to spend any amount at all from her property and income on the household. (Zulfiya, 68, widow).

[108] Harris, 2004: 45.

Religion when it came up in the narratives of my interviewees represented some kind of a tool which they used to establish the rights of women in marriage and family life. This is how Zulfia, for instance quoted the Koran on the issue of marriage and divorce:

> A woman has the right to accept or reject a marriage proposal. Her consent is a prerequisite to the validity of the marital contract, according to the Prophet's teaching. It follows that if an "arranged marriage" means the marrying of a woman without her consent, then such a marriage may be annulled if the woman so wishes. (Zulfiya, 68, widow).

Women also quoted the Koran on the issue of violence towards women within their families. Those women who considered themselves religious demonstrated a precise knowledge of what the Koran says on this issue. Newly-wed Safarmo said that she has discussed this issue with her husband prior to giving her consent to the marriage. She informed him that she studied the Koran and knows what rights women should have. The most important thing, she said, was to make sure that her husband clearly understood that in no way was he allowed to abuse her physically:

> I have many times personally witnessed the scenes when husbands physically abused their wives. I read the Koran a lot, I used to explain women that under no circumstances does the Koran encourage or allow violence from men towards women. In extreme cases it allows a husband to administer a gentle pat to his wife that causes no physical harm to the body nor leaves any sort of mark. (Safarmo, 23, married).

The above summary of women's narratives and their tendency to refer to the Koran on issues of marriage and family life is not intended to imply that the whole community of Tajik women holds exactly the same beliefs. However, the aspects I have noted here seem to be adhered to by and large by most of the women I interviewed. As can be seen from this brief discussion, women are indeed aware that there is a significant gap between the scriptures and the everyday practices of the average Muslim man. They are aware that "popular" Muslim belief is often exploited by men and is, therefore, no more

than incorrect interpretation of the religious texts. Therefore, the use of religion as a mechanism for social control is not limited to men only. The interviewees, who considered themselves religious, benefited from religion as a potent weapon for control over their own lives and used it as a means to challenge men's "priveledge" to a hedonistic lifestyle.

In Tajik society, where marriage is the single most significant occurrence in the lives of the vast majority, and where young women "ideally" should not have input into the choice of partner, women do their best to deal with a system that tends to make them vulnerable. The women I talked to showed that they are indeed in the process of constant negotiation between the social ideals of gender performance, which favour male domination, and the reality in which women may be psychologically and physically protected, at least to some extent. Women's interpretation of the Koran is a conscious attempt to interfere into the sphere of male control and to change the situation to work to their benefit. The question of how much empowerment such interference brings women in real life is too complex to be covered here. My only aim here was to show that Tajik women are not merely passive victims of the circumstances but are agents able to exert some power in the way they find the most appropriate.

When my respondents said, for instance, that they decided to accept a marriage and justified that by their unwillingness to go against their parents' will, they must have some pro-attitude toward accepting the decision of their parents, but more information was needed to tell what the real reason of accepting their parents' decision was, whether she thought it was right, or a duty, or rather benefited them in some way. It is in the process of justifying and explaining an action that we can see to what extent women's

individual agency was involved in the whole process. As Davidson puts it: "justifying and explaining an action so often go hand in hand, we frequently indicate the primary reason for an action by making a claim which, if true, would also verify, vindicate, or support the relevant belief or attitude of the agent".[109] When I asked women why they acted as they did, I wanted to have their own interpretation of the events that occurred to them. And hearing women talk about their lives allowed me to learn their reasons, a new description of what they did, which I think fits into the image of a person who is indeed an agent in this world.

However, this analysis has also revealed the structural characteristics (economic, social and cultural) which undercut the position of women in Tajik society and significantly constrain their agency. Tajik women live in a society in which they are judged by how well they perform in this "dutiful drama", thereby validating and accepting the high value attached to them as brides and prizing their reproductive role above all others. Women often have little recourses, other than to make the best of their position through adapting to the system. Feminists have considered the way women conform to gender identities that appear essentially to benefit men as a sort of false consciousness, where women have been persuaded to be complicit with the 'enemy' against what are seen as their own best interests.[110] However, I do not quite agree that this is necessarily so. I think that given the situation most Tajik women live in, compliance or accommodation may bring them real benefits: "for older women in the form of status and power from their position as arbiters of social mores, and for younger

[109] Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1980: 9.

[110] See Firestone 1971: 249ff; Gardner 1970; Peslikis 1970.

women through being publicly labeled as 'good".[111] From this point of view, it would be fair to say that women's conduct is plainly heteronormative to the extent that they still remain within a system - which Kandiyoti named "patriarchal bargain".[112] Yet, I think that insofar as women succeeds in making the situation work to her advantage, they are exercising control over her life. The women's narratives illustrated that they indeed made happen or brought about or produced or influenced the event of which they were the agents.

The influence of such factors as poverty and social instability on the decisions made by women is especially acute and visible in contemporary Tajikistan, in which the civil war has widowed a lot of women who had to learn how to survive.[113] In connection with this the reason why some women accepted their marriages was the necessity to protect themselves and their families from violence and extreme poverty. Economic difficulties in the post-war period have also played a significant role. Throughout periods when social and economic shocks occurred, women chose the strategies that helped them deal with the situation in the best way possible, which distinguishes them as active social actors.

[111] Harris, 2004: 69.
[112] Kandiyoti, 1988: 274-290.
[113] In this context, it is important to indicate that it is rural areas which are mostly effected by war, statistically speaking: "more than 20,000 households in one war-torn region of the South are now headed by women".

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to explore Tajik women's experiences with arranged marriages and identify the ways in which they exercise their individual choices and deal with a variety of "oppressive" situations related to their marriage. With this purpose, I interviewed eight women from Tajikistan, ranging in age from twenty-two to sixty eight and from different social and economic backgrounds. The main questions this work attempted to answer were: how do Tajik women deal with arranged marriages? What are the ways in which they exercise their agency? What coping strategies and techniques do they use in order to resist dominant power structures that tend to oppress them? How do they manage to (re)establish their power in situations that are basically turned against them? In order to answer my research questions and provide an in-depth account on Tajik women's agency, I have placed my study into a conceptual framework based on Giddens' structuration theory and Meyer's approach to reconstructing women's agency.

The scholarly literature as well as the interviews with Tajik women show that women's realities in Tajikistan are quite harsh and full of negotiations. Their lives are shaped by a complex set of political, economic and cultural contingencies. Tajik women's opportunities are strongly limited in terms of their legal rights, access to education and labor market, their positioning within the social hierarchy and many other aspects in which they are discriminated against. The post-independence period was difficult for Tajik women in many ways. The break-up of the Soviet Union was followed by a major reversal in both economic and social status of women. The civil war further exacerbated the situation since it was followed by a long period of unrest and restricted mobility for the majority of population. The economic impoverishment and a growing

migration of men from Tajikistan have placed the burden of survival of many families primarily on the shoulders of women and girls. For many women the post-war years became a constant struggle to find ways to feed themselves and their families. Women's decisions regarding marriages and family life were strongly affected by all of these factors.

Moreover, Tajik women's opportunities are strongly limited by the dominant discourse on gender which privileges kinship and family life and assigns high value to the domestic sphere. Traditional gender norms emphasize women's obedience and submissiveness to the will of men and elders. The established stereotypes "naturalize" the role of Tajik women as mothers and wives and confine them to household and child-caring activities. The traditional practices associated with marriage and family life were preserved throughout the Soviet period and enjoyed resurgence during the years after communism. Thus Tajik women are still supposed to conform to a quite narrow range of opportunities.

Recognizing the various forms of oppression that shape Tajik women's lives, one might think that they do not possess any power to "make a difference," especially when it concerns marriage or family life, and when their marriages are arranged for them. Tajik women are often seen as involuntary victims of the system, trapped in a vicious circle of dependence and self-sacrifice and their apparent "apathy" can be (and is) often regarded by outsiders as a sign of 'backwardness', from which Tajik women need to be liberated. This vision of Tajik women can be found, for example, in the recent works of some researchers who attempt to describe the oppressive character of gender relations in

Tajikistan.[114] While I agree that it is important to acknowledge and fight against the structural inequality which restricts Tajik women's choices and opportunities, I think it is equally important not to overlook the agency of individual women. It would be absolutely misleading to regard Tajik women primarily as victims of the circumstances.

As this analysis has illustrated, Tajik women themselves view their situation in a rather different light. It is not that they see their situation as perfect – indeed, they have as many complaints and disagreements as women elsewhere. In Tajikistan, just as in any other part of the world, women's agency is strongly constrained by a variety of socio-economic and cultural factors, as well as by the established gender stereotypes. However, women's own stories about their experiences with arranged marriages have shown that, whether in rural or urban areas, women appear to be able to negotiate a position that they find unacceptable and change situations to their advantage. If they do not take a public stand to articulate their demands in marriage and family life, this does not mean that they are too weak or too ignorant to do so: it could equally well indicate that they believe they are able to operate more effectively by exercising their agency in an indirect way, using the social levels that are available to them within their families and their communities. I have argued throughout this thesis that Tajik women become empowered through making a difference in their own lives, and by influencing the lives of their families.

Despite being denied public prestige, Tajik women manage to maneuver behind the scenes and affect outcomes, often through manipulating men and elders — what Abu-Lughod has named "kin-based power" — characterized as "the quintessentially feminine

[114] See for instance Anna Temkina "Podchinenie starshim" vs razrushenie patriarhata: zhenskaya seksual'nost' v brake (Severyi Tadjikistan), ("Obedience towards elders" vs. destruction of patriarchy: women's sexuality in marriage: Northern Tajikistan), Dushanbe, 2004.

trait of achieving transformations in local power relations which upset patriarchal bargains".[115] The term "patriarchal bargain", introduced by Deniz Kandiyoti,[116] helps to explain why so many Tajik women choose to accommodate to a system that oppresses them. Some of my respondents have obviously transgressed the "socially approved boundaries" and successfully achieved the goals they had set for themselves. Others, who preferred to avoid open transgression, have described how they used various techniques which allowed them to somewhat distance themselves from their families' pressure in order to avoid a marriage, postpone it, or make a personal choice of partner. Those women who have opted to follow their parents' decision or accept certain elements of patriarchal gender relations have also constructed themselves as agents who have taken control of their lives. Accommodation allowed these women to "bargain" certain advantages which would be very difficult to gain otherwise.

This thesis therefore, was an attempt to challenge the victimization discourses about Tajik women and investigate the coping strategies and techniques that these women adopt and use in order to obtain (more) power. The major findings of my analysis are: no form of agency can escape the charge that it is socially conditioned – that its adherents are reared to act within structural constraints. The lives of women in Tajikistan are indeed quite hard and the nature of gender relations combined with socio-economic factors tends to restrict women's agency. All the above mentioned circumstances that shape Tajik lives on a regular basis create an impression of them as victims rather than agents capable of exerting power and producing an effect – fitting Giddens' definition of agency. However,

[115] Abu-Lughod, 1993: 13.

[116] Deniz Kandiyoti argues that women strategize within a set of concrete constraints. See Deniz Kandiyoti "Islam and Patriarchy: A Cooperative Perspective" in *Women in Middle Eastern History*: *shifting boundaries in sex and gender* by Nikki R. Keddie, Beth Baron (eds.), New Haven: Yale University Press. Kandiyoti, 1998: 40.

recognizing the oppressive character of gender relations and difficult life conditions in Tajikistan, many women still manage to locate a wide range of choices available to them even in a situation of unequal knowledge and power distribution. This ability to maneuver, to act rather than being acted upon, fits into Gidden's notion of *dialectic control*, according to which "all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors".[117] It proves that Tajik women are capable of exercising their agency and coping with the restricting conditions. Their ability to find ways to make the oppressive environment more tolerable, to recognize their potential to act within the patriarchal system in which they are given the lowest place, to make the socially constructed image of a Tajik woman as "pure" and "submissive" to work to their advantage and also to consider themselves responsible for the consequences of their decisions – all of these factors make it impossible to regard Tajik women as mere victims of the circumstances in which they live.

The stories narrated by my interviewees constituted only a partial account of the complexities of Tajik women's agency. Moreover, I acknowledge that the limited time of my fieldwork has influenced the depth and scope of my research. I do hope, however, that the present work has suggested the need for further exploration of Tajik women's agency. For example, a question that remained only partially covered by the present work was to what extent Tajik women's agency increases with age. Some of my interviewees indicated that the power of women and their ability to act within their families and communities increases with age, reaching its peak at the moment when women marry their sons off and accept their daughters-in-law in their families. Moreover, there are a lot of issues concerning Tajik women's lives which remained outside the scope of my work,

[117] Giddens, 1984: 16.

such as: What is the impact of male migration of Tajik women's lives? How does power within families shift in this cases when men leave and women have to carry the burden of the household? What strategies do Tajik women use in order to adjust to the new roles they take within their families?

To conclude, I hope this work will provide insights for further research on the lives of Tajik women, with a particular focus on investigating women's agency. Recognizing that being an independent agent is possible despite structures of domination and subordination is no reason for complacency. On the contrary to advocate the opportunities for women's agency is, in my view, to endorse significant social and economic change.

APPENDIX I: PROFILE OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Name[118]	Marital status	Place of origin	Place of Residence	Language of the interview	Occupation	Age	Date of interviews
Zulfiya	Widow	Khudjand	Dushanbe	Russian	Accountant	68	12.04.2007
Safarmo	Married	Kurgan-Tube	Dushanbe	Tajik and Russian	Unemployed	23	10.04.2007
Karomat	Married	Shaartuz	Dushanbe	Russian	Hair dresser	42	11.04.2007
Shahnoza	Married	Kanibodom	Dushanbe	Russian	Unemployed	32	13.04.2007
Tahmina	Married	Dushanbe	Dushanbe	Russian	Nurse	33	15.04.2007
Nigora	Married	Kolhozabad	Dushanbe	Russian	Unemployed	34	14.04.2007
Subhiya	Not married	Khatlon	Dushanbe	Russian	NGO sector: Project Manager Assistant	41	17.04.2007
Anora	Divorced	Dushanbe	Dushanbe	Russian	Unemployed	43	18.04.2007

[118] All names used in this thesis are pseudo-names.

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