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► **To cite this version:**

Lucia Direnberger. Becoming Gender Expert. Trajectories and Strategies in Tajikistan. Ioana Cîrstocea; Delphine Lacombe; Elisabeth Marteu. The Globalization of Gender. Knowledge, Mobilizations, Frameworks of Action, Routledge, pp.20-39, 2019, 9780367785789. <10.4324/9780429200045-3>. <halshs-04988826>

HAL Id: halshs-04988826

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04988826v1>

Submitted on 13 Mar 2025

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HAL Authorization

Lucia Direnberger, 2019, « Becoming Gender Expert: Trajectories and Strategies in Tajikistan » in Ioana Cîrstocea, Delphine Lacombe and Elisabeth Marteu (dir.), *The Globalization of Gender. Knowledge, Mobilizations, Frameworks of Action*, London, Routledge, p.20-39.

Becoming Gender Expert Trajectories and Strategies in Tajikistan

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In the post-Soviet context, international organizations, national development agencies and philanthropic organizations play a major role in the construction of “civil society,” establishing a capitalist economy, and strengthening state structures in Central Asia (Atlani-Duault, Poujol 2008). Tajikistan has been a privileged field of intervention for these organizations in Central Asia; in the context of civil war (1992-1996) and then the peace process (Heathershaw 2009). As a country bordering Afghanistan, Tajikistan has also been a strategic space for these organizations in the context of the “war against terrorism” and the “fight against radicalization.” While these organizations don’t have the same funding sources, and don’t develop the same political agendas or intervention practices in Tajikistan, they share the goal of transforming relations between men and women or reducing sexual inequalities and improving the status of women. Tools of intervention vary: production and dissemination of knowledge about women or inequalities between men and women, dissemination of knowledge about gender and women, translation of international norms, development and implementation of programmes specifically targeting women or gender, funding non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and events.

Experts have a specific role in the production of knowledge about gender or women and in the development, dissemination, transfer and/or appropriation of international norms (Cirstocea 2012 ; Prügl 2013). Most of the gender experts work for a “feminist strategy” within international organizations (Prügl 2013) using strategies and mobilizations documented in studies which often highlight their limits (Campbell and Teghtsoonian 2010) and their failure (Cornwall, Harrison, Whitehead 2007) to produce the transformations expected.

In the past twenty years, gender expertise has specifically developed in the framework of *gender mainstreaming*, a principle for public action in the Beijing Conference’s (1995) Platform for Action and adopted by the European Union and members of the United Nations committed to putting it into practice in order to attain gender equality. To do this, it is necessary for example to develop gender expertise in decision-making, and developing and carrying out institutional projects and programmes. For more than twenty years, gender experts have participated in the development and implementation of gender mainstreaming and they have contributed to broadening the fields of action of gender expertise within international organizations (True, Parisi 2013). Studies have shown the absence of precise goals and guidelines in gender mainstreaming, which make it an effective tool for international organizations who exploit it to “modernize” public policies while avoiding a clear political agenda (Daly 2005: 440). Both the concept and the practice of gender mainstreaming are criticized by feminists (Daly 2005, Walby 2005). According to Susan Hawthorne, gender mainstreaming contributes to overshadow some feminist research, practices and movements, in particular, lesbian struggles. To her, the institutional use of feminist discourses and concepts is accompanied by a depoliticization of

feminist issues (Hawthorne 2004). Studying the consequences of gender mainstreaming in the specific context of programmes implemented in Mumbai, Vandana Desai shows that gender mainstreaming results in new gender hierarchies and the homogenization of women's experiences in the development of programmes, to the detriment of the analysis of other social relations such as class, ethnicity, place of residence (Desai 2005).

In this chapter, I will focus on social and professional trajectories of Tajikistani gender experts. While my objective is to expose the power relations these experts face in their practices in collaboration with international organizations, this chapter also highlights the strategies legitimization of their status as gender expert and of gender as a field of intervention. Their socio-professional trajectories thus must also be grasped by analyzing social and political power relations around the production of gender knowledge and practices in a national context marked by processes of globalization.

For this research, I define gender experts according to three non-exclusive criteria: presenting themselves professionally as a gender expert; designated by employees of international organizations as a gender expert; on the email lists of the UN Women's Gender Team Group (GTG), which is dedicated to circulating information among gender experts working in Tajikistan. While they define themselves, and are designated as, "gender experts" (a term used in conversations held in Russian and Tajik), they are involved in gender activities¹.

Tajikistani gender experts can be distinguished from three groupings of agents who are also involved in gender programmes in Tajikistan. The first grouping consists of Tajikistani women who work in local women's NGOs as psychologists, jurists, social workers, and accountants, are trained by gender experts in seminars and do not have access to political decision-making spaces. A second grouping is constituted by non-Tajikistani employees of international organizations hired for short-term missions (trainings, drafting reports, support to develop projects) or longer-term missions (one- to four-year posts to develop an international organization's gender programme). Some of these identify and are identified as gender experts. The third grouping is composed of Tajikistani state employees who implement gender-specific policies. At the national level, the Committee for Women and the Family is primarily in charge of these issues. The ministries, particularly Health, Education and Defence, also employ people to work on these issues and coordinate with the Committee for Women and the Family.

Tajikistani gender experts interact with these three groupings which develop and implement gender-specific policies.

To analyze the trajectories of Tajikistani gender experts, I mobilize an analysis of in-depth interviews, interviews and participant observations, as well as grey literature (essentially reports and awareness-raising materials) produced by international organizations and NGOs. While my research was focused on NGO employees, I have met some "gender experts". The research presented here is based on two research stays in 2015 during which I carried out twenty interviews and ten in-depth interviews with gender experts and made fifteen participant observations; primarily in the capital, Dushanbe, but also in two other cities in Tajikistan. Interviews were held mainly in Tajik, but some were in English with Russian-speaking Tajikistanis, and one took place through Russian-French translation for a non-English speaking Russian-speaking Tajikistani². For various reasons arising from the specific situations of the interviewees, anonymization of interviews involved modifying the date and place of the interviews. For some cases, I also changed the precise title of the post held by the interviewee and some biographical details to maintain their main social characteristics while preserving their anonymity.

The analysis of the social and political power relations structuring the trajectories and practices of gender experts will be presented in four parts. The first analyzes the professional and social trajectories of those who became gender experts in the 1990s and 2000s. The second part presents the subjective positions of the gender experts and discusses their motives for becoming a gender expert. The third part examines barriers to gender expertise within and outside international organizations and also examines strategies deployed by gender experts. Finally, the fourth part analyzes inequalities between national and international experts in the gender expertise market. This part also examines the growing difficulties gender experts face practising in a context of reduced funding for gender programmes and the strengthening of the authoritarian regime.

Trajectories of Gender Experts

Three main trajectories of Tajikistani gender experts can be identified in Tajikistan. The first is embodied by women who mobilize experiences, networks, and skills acquired during the Soviet era. These experiences are varied in type and some have accumulated them: directors of state structures for women and the family; members of parliament who implemented policies for women; researchers at the Academy of Sciences or academics producing works on women. After the fall of the USSR, they founded the first women's NGOs, after some of them had lost key government positions because of their political orientation. Guljahon Bobosodiqova is the author of several books published in the Soviet time such as *Our Glory*, which examines the participation of Tajikistani women in the struggle against religious practices and for the education of women. She held many positions heading up programmes to promote women's rights under the Soviet system. After the fall of the USSR, she was part of a group of former leaders from the Khujand region who openly opposed President Nabiev, elected in September 1991, and supported other political figures from the Khujandi elite, such as Rashid Alimov. The civil war only exacerbated the logics of power differences; the groups strengthened by the conflict emerged from Soviet troops in the Kulob district (Dudoignon, Jahangiri 1994). In this context, women identified as Khujandi were set aside in favour of women from the Kulob region close to President Emomali Rahmon, who came to power in 1993. Women involved in the democratic opposition during the civil war also did not participate in state structures and turned to NGOs and international organizations.

State salaries decreased dramatically after 1991. During the civil war, they had often been paid irregularly and sometimes pay was suspended for several months without ever being caught up afterwards. After the civil war, salaries for civil servants in charge of women's programmes remained particularly low. Women who left state institutions thus hoped for higher and more regular salaries from international organizations. Finally, some hoped that at NGOs they would be able to continue doing the work they had been trained to do during the Soviet era:

“After the fall of the USSR, I worked *in a bank*.³ But as I had previously worked in the social sector [specifically, activities to support the education of girls], I couldn't stand this job. I sat from morning to evening in the same place. *Firuz*a came up to me one day and told me she wanted to open an account for an organization [one of the first organizations to set up programmes for women in the Khatlon region]. *Firuz*a and I had worked together at the Komsomol [communist party youth organization]. That was in 1997. No, it was well before 1993 ... 1994. I helped them open an account for the organization. She knew me well and she said to me, ‘but why are you working here?’ I said, ‘but where do you want me to go?’

She said, ‘at this time, NGOs are forming. The work that was done in the Komsomol, well, it’s the same work that is now being done in the NGOs (...) I became a volunteer for this NGO. (...) Then in 1997, I started my own.’⁴

These NGO pioneers became gender experts and the favoured interlocutors of international organizations during a period when the latter were not yet investing in “gender” training for Tajikistanis. They participated in international conferences such as the fourth world conference on women in Beijing in 1995 and they were thus the first to spread the norms and international programmes on women’s rights in Tajikistan.

A second trajectory corresponds to teacher-researchers trained in gender after 1997 in Dushanbe in seminars and panels offered by international organizations, notably the Open Society Institute (OSI). A first panel on gender was organized at the National University of Tajikistan by the OSI in 1997, followed by several training seminars initiated by Zuhra Halimova. Professor in the department of oriental studies at this university before the fall of the USSR, she left Tajikistan for an anglophone country during the civil war. She became a Russian teacher at the university and learned English before returning to Tajikistan in 1996 and applying to the OSI.

“When I began [to work at the OSI], the goal was to find a job to survive. And afterwards, it was necessary to figure out what could be done in these circumstances. Because it was 1996 ... The peace accords hadn’t even gone into effect. It was really hard. It was not safe. And we talked to so many people in the intelligentsia, people around Dushanbe. I remember as well an extraordinary professor from New York University. We were seated together. She asked us a question: ‘What needs to be done in Tajikistan?’ and everyone in the group answered, ‘we must support education, education for our children, they need education, they lost it.’ That is how the first educational programmes began. And afterwards women’s rights.”

The first training seminars took place at the State University in 1997. Zuhra Halimova invited researchers she was in contact with in the academic network in Tajikistan and whom she describes as having been active in society. During the same period, a centre for gender resources, trained by the OSI, opened at the State University. Other international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women – which became UN Women in 2010 – also organized gender training seminars and workshops with speakers from Europe or North America.

Supported by international organizations, a very large majority of these women created NGOs whose objectives incorporated a gender dimension. Some continued to teach and/or carry out research at their universities; others stopped teaching and doing research at universities and the Academy of Sciences to devote themselves entirely to NGO activities. Very quickly, they were requested by international organizations to produce reports. Drafting documents explicitly dealing with gender guaranteed their recognition by international organizations as gender experts. While they might have been approached again for other studies and reports, they were not employees of international organizations, but only hired for short-term missions as external experts. They were also asked by international organizations to represent ‘civil society’ in negotiations with the State and invited to participate in international events on gender.

Finally, a third group followed another trajectory. These women became “gender experts” by first occupying a position at an international organization. From such positions, they came to know different international actors in Tajikistan and developed a good understanding of how they function. Some took positions as secretaries or receptionists, though overqualified for these

posts (doctor in sociology, engineer, etc.). They took advantage of this first contact with anglophones to learn English, which enabled them to subsequently apply for more important positions. Others worked in refugee, health, elections or other programmes. They were very often first hired for positions outside Dushanbe, in regions (Kulob, Khujand, Qurghon-Teppa) where most of them came from. These positions were considered difficult because of the material conditions (frequent cuts of electricity, rudimentary housing, limited internet access, lack of security, difficult access to quality hospital care, etc.) and a representation of the “country” as a space of resistance to change and to international programmes. Because of their familiarity with the “field” and their experience in these regions, Tajikistanis were almost systematically hired for these positions. They thus learned of announcements that circulated in gender departments or gender-specific international organizations such as UN Women and highlighted their simultaneous knowledge of “the field” and international organizations.

Why become a “Gender Expert”?

As previously noted, within a very difficult economic situation, numerous women underscored the importance of the financial aspect. Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in Central Asia and the ex-USSR and women are particularly affected by the situation. On one hand, shortage of electricity, difficulties in accessing water, health services and education and male migration have resulted in an additional burden of non-remunerated work for women. On the other, both the formal and informal labour markets are structured by strong gender inequalities, meaning that access to a salary, even for a limited time, represents a significant benefit for their families.

Numerous gender experts describe their motivation and attest to their commitment to denouncing inequalities between women and men in Tajikistan when they carry out studies on gender funded by international organizations.

“I returned to Tajikistan with my family from Moscow where we were refugees and members of the opposition group which supported the peace process. During my stay in Moscow, I discovered the concept of the NGO, which was new for the Soviet people (...) When we went back in 1997, I registered the organization in which I was active with the Ministry of Justice and we supported the peace process as the “Open Asia” Research Centre. Our first project was a pilot study of war-affected zones, called the “stages of peace.” As a sociologist and scientist in a department of the Academy of Sciences (where I resumed working after returning from Moscow), L.M., from the UNDP, proposed I write a study on violence against women in Tajikistan. It was the fall of 1997. I didn’t know exactly what I expected from this study. (...) Of course, it was a project that all sociologists dreamed of. I wanted to attract the attention of the international community to my sisters, in my country and my region. I hoped that, in one way or another, we could stop violence against women or at least reduce it. I hoped that ordinary women would start to organize and break the silence, to fight the political system and conservatives who maintain the subordination of women and the phenomenon of violence against women.”⁵

While some gender experts took opportunities offered by non-Tajikistani staff of international organizations to produce knowledge on women and/or gender (like this first study for WHO), other contexts show the role of Tajikistanis in the emergence of “gender expertise” and the necessity of establishing international programmes to fight inequalities between men and women. Zuhra Halimova thus explains that the fact that women’s rights figured in OSI’s programmes is linked to the public demands by women that the consequences of the civil war be addressed, both during and after the war. She explains that she was aware of women’s groups

mobilizing to demand ceasefires on radio and television and also reports that women stood in front of tanks to prevent them from attacking Dushanbe. According to Zuhra Halimova, women played a very important role during the civil war, especially in selling and supplying food. Many men having joined the armed forces, women took over markets and trade which had been largely controlled by men up to that point:

“From the moment that they had access to some trade, they became more independent. They began asking about decision-making. And this led to a debate over rights. Women raised the question of rights because they were financially independent. (...) As soon as a woman has financial independence, she can even divorce and still survive. And she thus becomes very aware of her rights. She will insist, fight, do something. (...) And this is the phenomenon that took place. That is how the question of rights arose: access to finance, access to inheritance. (...) On one hand, the war made them [women] more vulnerable, but on the other, they became more visible.”⁶

This position, affirming the role that women’s movements played in putting gender on the agenda of international programmes, conflicts with another version of events, supported by international gender experts. The latter explain that gender is taken into account in the programmes of international organizations because of the general orientations of the highest decision-making circles in international organizations or international events such as Beijing, which took place outside Tajikistan. While this position obscures the link between gender expertise and women’s movements, it is nevertheless the case that gender experts see their actions as continuing demands made by women during and after the civil war.

Like many other women⁷, gender experts may be subject to violence against women. Access to work, even of limited and short-term duration, represented the possibility of leaving homes where some of them were subjected to daily violence. In fact, several experts testified to the importance of the mobility afforded by their work in international organizations to escape situations of violence. Distance from violent homes became an additional incentive to join international organizations. This was the case for the following national expert, a victim of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence by her partner:

“My plan was to leave and go to *a country at war*⁸ and build my career and never return to this family [her family-in-law]. This was my decision but I didn’t know I was pregnant. (...) I told my husband that I was leaving for *this country at war*. Of course, there was a big scene: ‘No. I decided that you would not go. And my parents also decided that you would not go.’ And I answered that no, ‘I have taken very few decisions in my life but when I take one, I stick to it.’ (...) And my salary in *this country at war* was triple, even more, than what I earned in Tajikistan. That was what interested my husband. (...) My contract was only for six months. I found out that I was pregnant [before leaving]. (...) That was also a huge fight [with my husband] but I said, ‘No. I will go. I signed the contract.’ But the most important reason for me to leave was not the money but to leave this situation and get far away from my husband. When I found out that I was pregnant, I didn’t want my child to endure all that. (...) Even if *the country at war* was not safe, I still wanted to go. I was much safer there.”⁹

After 10 years of domestic violence, this woman left her husband three months after giving birth. Her father asked her to leave the country – or at least the area – so that he didn’t have to undergo the dishonour, as he called it, that a divorce represented for this family, belonging to the highest social classes. She took advantage of the possibility offered by the international organization to change city and region within the country. Professional activity thus grants some gender experts a major resource to escape a situation of violence and increase their financial autonomy, the physical separation from the family and step-family effectively authorizing them to keep all or part of their salary for themselves.

Moreover, some gender experts, victims of violence, mobilize their experiences as women victims of violence to explain their desire to work as a gender expert. They assert that they are more competent to share and understand the difficulties encountered by these women, as they have themselves been victims of violence. Some also argue that they are more qualified to bring to light the social, economic and legal barriers to equality in their country because, as Tajikistani women, they have experienced and/or live these situations.

Resistance to Gender and the Legitimization Strategies of Experts

As in many other contexts, gender experts are faced, both outside and within international organizations, with indifference, contempt, and reluctance to develop and implement gender-specific activities. According to my data, the work of gender experts is especially discredited by their colleagues in reaction to the conditions of implementation of gender mainstreaming policies within international organizations. In line with recommendations of the Beijing world conference, numerous organizations such as the OSCE, the UN and their agencies have developed gender mainstreaming policies. They adopted numerous resolutions – since the end of the 1990s for the UN and the middle of the 2000s for the OSCE – to integrate a gender perspective and gender analyses into all stages of the development, implementation and evaluation of projects, policies and programmes. In Tajikistan, implementation of gender mainstreaming has meant that agencies and departments not specifically identified as intervening on this issue have had to take gender into consideration. However, as in other contexts, some resistance was expressed:

“Gender projects, well, whatever. We are forced to put them because we are pressured by international institutions who do not leave us alone about it, but frankly we couldn’t care less. So, we sprinkle gender everywhere, it’s like a cliché.”¹⁰

Even without the resistance, employees lament the lack of resources to implement *gender mainstreaming* and the lack of commitment of many officials:

“Every year we have to do a Program on Project Implementation Plan, PPIP, in which we have to describe what we want to do the following year. This includes horizontal questions. Well, we are never happy doing this because we are already in the midst of doing our projects and we have to do the PPIP for the following year. The *senior management* knows the request is not popular. (...) And so, to sweeten the bitter potion, he tells us, ‘Don’t worry about the whole horizontal part, context, it’ll be fine if you cut and paste from last year’s, just focus on the detailed budget.’ (...) Gender issues are in that part. Last year in the PPIP, I had proposed doing gender disaggregated statistics to show inequalities in agricultural cooperatives. But my boss thought that was too technical. Instead, I was asked to cut and paste a splendid paragraph, completely theoretical like a Wikipedia article on gender, the philosophy of gender. (...) At the IO¹¹, gender is the kind of thing where you talk with your colleagues, they say, ‘Honestly, it’s stupid, it’s whatever, it’s a joke, it’s cliché.’ Gender mainstreaming, you just have to say it and everyone laughs, everyone knows it’s phony, it’s like the incarnation of hypocrisy.”¹²

They must thus face resistance from many employees who see it as a minimal constraint, or even a simple requirement for a superficial display. In this context, they build arguments to justify a gender approach to their colleagues. Many put forward utilitarian arguments, as indicated in this interview with a gender expert who conducts programme seminars for the staff of an international organization:

“At the beginning, they didn’t understand. But I did role plays and presented experiences in other projects. I took the example of a project that had failed and I asked them to explain the cause of this failure. (...) The staff [in charge of the programme] arrived in a village, met with male representatives and told them about the project. It was a reforestation project. They came to an agreement and began to carry it out. But the project failed. (...) It failed because the women had not been included in the process although they played a major role in the division of labour. (...) Growing and watering the saplings were women’s responsibilities in the villages. (...) Thus, the men did not know how to do it properly. (...) The next time, the staff [in charge of the project] came to the village and invited men and women, and explained the goal of the project to them. The project has worked well ever since because women were taken into account and did their share of the work: watering and taking care of the plants. And the men did their work. And the project was a success.”¹³

Many non-Tajikistani gender experts from international organizations coming to Tajikistan encourage and support this utilitarian construction of gender with the aim of ensuring effective implementation of the programmes. This can be seen in the following excerpt from an intervention by an OSCE “gender expert” during an event to present the National Action Plan to implement a gender policy in Tajikistan, which took place in Dushanbe in April 2011:

“What does the participation of women in politics mean? Why is it so important? It is a matter of equality of rights and also a social justice issue. We understand it as a democratic issue, as a representation of needs, interests and the diverse and specific priorities of men and also of women. And we can also understand it according to a utilitarian argument. It is effective governance. We take into account and use the capacities, resources, talents and skills of women as well as of men.”

From these uses and definitions, emerges the production of a “gender” which, in many cases, refers to sexual complementarity. Taking the “specific needs and characteristics of women” into account, international organizations may help to reproduce, even strengthen, sexual inequalities. For example, in the context of a meeting about the implementation of UN Resolution 1325, many employees of international organizations, including some gender experts, asserted that women were less corrupt than men for various reasons. Notably, this assertion was backed by essentialist arguments (as mothers, they were more “pure”, women take less risks). Including women in police forces and border control was thus described as a policy of equality between men and women as well as a solution to the problem of reducing corruption. However, other gender experts noted that these jobs were poorly paid, living conditions at the border posts were extremely difficult, that it was high risk work and did not constitute an advance for women. This example shows that in this context, utilitarian arguments are justified in practice by essentialist representations and that arguments for women’s rights are made to counter arguments presented as egalitarian.

Both outside and within international organizations (Direnberger 2016), experts confront the argument that gender is foreign to Tajik culture; even that it is a western influence contributing to social destruction. This argument that “gender” and/or “feminism” is foreign has been broadly documented since the 1980s, as shown by Jayawardena in India (Jayawardena 1986) and Rouse in Pakistan (Rouse 2004). To counter this argument, gender experts use strategies to ground “gender” locally. First, they appeal to religion or culture. Awareness-raising documents are produced about family planning, the father’s responsibility, and protection against HIV based on interpretations of the Koran. Programmes to prevent domestic violence involve close collaboration with religious leaders (Direnberger 2014). Some of these are employed by NGOs,

others are invited to training workshops on preventing domestic violence. A Tajikistani “gender expert” at the OSCE asserts that references to Islam make it possible to reach more people about improving the status of women and can lead to a change of practice:

“Resource centres for women involve religious leaders to talk about repudiation to husbands, to men, to say it is not a solution. For example, Islam doesn’t say that we can divorce just by saying ‘*taloq, taloq, taloq*’, it isn’t true. So, we have to talk about that. (...) When employees at women’s resource centres present a domestic violence prevention project, they say that some mullahs completely understand and they give in this way an interpretation of the Koran, the hadiths. [Domestic violence] is prohibited in Islam. To parents who don’t prohibit but are indifferent to girls’ education, the mullahs say: ‘the Koran says that the education of girls is necessary and that it is even more important than that of boys.’ Many times, parents change their minds. And in this context, women’s resource centres enable girls to continue their studies, at least to the end of high school. Afterwards to university, it depends.”¹⁴

For their part, UN gender experts have also developed arguments around the Koran and collaborations with religious representatives and the Islamic University of A’zam to produce documents such as a booklet circulated by the Council of Ulemas of the Republic of Tajikistan on the initiative of Tajikistani gender experts from UN Women. Published in 2000, this booklet, called *Mas’uliyati mard dar buniyodi binoi oila az nigohi islom* [Responsibilities of the man in the foundations of the family from the perspective of Islam. Tool for the *imomkhatib* of the mosques of Tajikistan], maintains that the oppression of women is connected to the cultural, social and economic context and that Islam does not tolerate it. This interpretation of Islam denounces forced marriage, divorce by SMS message, and supports schooling girls:

“In our elder-led society, girls are engaged at 17 years old. But they [fathers who arrange their daughters’ marriage before the age of 18] forget one important point, that marriage requires responsibilities and they [youth] must also have an independent life.”¹⁵

In this interpretation, youth must be responsible and educated to start a family, personal development being necessary for a stable and happy home. Figures of pious women, active in Muslim society, are given as examples of the role of women in society:

“In the family, the woman and the man have been equal under the law. Since the beginning of Islam, women have been very active in society. They participated in wars, they treated the wounded, they studied and taught. The best of them was Aisha, the daughter of Abubakr and wife of the prophet.”¹⁶

This set of arguments about Islam can also be mobilized in the fight against violence. For example, the slogan of a campaign by UN Women, created by a Tajikistani gender expert for the “16 days against violence” in 2015, was “respect for women, it’s our culture.” The goal of this gender expert was to “show that young women and young men can be proud of their culture.” She believes that there is a lot of respect for women in Tajiki culture and women have a very important place in Tajiki society. She thus maintains that youth must become aware of the importance of their culture and the place it gives to women.

Numerous gender experts also justify “gender” by discrediting “feminism,” presented as a strictly “western” practice and theory. Many explain their position against “feminism” which they describe as a war between women and men or a movement which is too “violent” or “extreme” for Tajiki society. They insist on the necessity of transforming mindsets in a gradual

way, contrary to feminism. Some emphasize the importance of the role of “mother” in society, which “feminism” would deny. They also cite the necessity of working with men and dealing with inequalities between men and women in mixed groups, which “feminism” would not allow. In this, they adopt a position shared by non-Tajikistani “gender experts”, as in this interview with a European “gender expert” working for an international organization in Tajikistan for many years:

“One day we were in a class [‘gender’ training by an NGO at the end of the 1990s in Italy], and it really shocked me. But it was something that I also heard here [in France]. I was in a class, the door opened, there were boys who had made a mistake [wrong door]. They [her colleagues] got very upset that men had come in, I was blown away by this reaction. I have four brothers, my father is dead. I found this aversion to men astonishing. It is ridiculous to me, I don’t understand it. This is not the way to move forward. I remember being completely disconnected from their arguments because to me the progress of women’s rights, you can’t do it without men. You need them, that’s all. You must do it with them. I didn’t have this culture of feminism and I immediately realized that something was wrong and that I didn’t agree with them. I think that 2 or 3 of us worked with international organizations. The rest remained in *an Italian city*, as Italian feminist activists.”¹⁷

Tajikistani gender experts particularly supported campaigns which showed and encouraged the participation of men in the implementation of gender programmes, such as the UN *He for She* campaign. In this campaign, a Pakistani gender expert established a collaboration with a Taikwondo club to train girls, to show that men could use their strength to support the equality of women and men.

Holding on Despite Inequalities, Precarity and Strengthening of Authoritarian regime

Tajikistani gender experts have been subject to some violence within international organizations and many report sexual harassment by male colleagues. In some instances, they have even been excluded, laid off or dismissed from the international organization by the perpetrators. But, they generally do not report it out of fear of reprisals or of not being hired in the future. Gender experts have been particularly affected by the decrease in international funding for “gender” programmes since the end of the 2000s. Following ten years of developing and “building capacity”, they see a reduction in the demand for reports and programmes on gender and/or women. Due to lack of funding, some have stopped working for NGOs and can only find work with great difficulty. Reduced material resources and fear of income loss leads to increased competition among these experts, who report numerous tensions, making collaboration difficult, if not impossible.

Moreover, there are significant inequalities between international and national gender experts. The contracts of national gender experts working at international organizations may be renewed but this is not systematic. When their contracts are not renewed, there are far fewer opportunities than there are for international gender experts, who can apply for many positions overseas. They face great difficulty obtaining higher positions, the latter generally being reserved for non-Tajikistani gender experts. National gender experts are hired on the basis of so-called local salary, unlike international gender experts. According to data available to me, these salaries

respectively reach maximum 2200\$¹⁸ and 8800\$¹⁹. Similarly, international experts hired to do a report, workshop or training, or to help implement a gender and/or women's programme are better paid (up to \$900 per day according to data available to me) than national experts (\$100 per day). While this salary remains much higher than women working at women's organizations (around \$20 per month), the professional space of gender expertise is marked by heavy inequalities, which many women denounce in informal exchanges.

Finally, gender experts face increasingly strong resistance from the state. Muborak Sharipova, who carried out the first study on violence against women, funded by the WHO at the end of the 1990s, observes:

“At this time, the government didn't control all regions of the country and it was a good time to carry out such a project. Also, during preliminary discussions about the project, it was agreed to present it as a project on health issues, given that violence against women was a sensitive topic for political authorities in the country.”²⁰

At that time, they had already developed strategies to have programmes about violence against women accepted and argued that their activities benefitted from the limited control of the government over the territory. They also drew advantages from the introduction of the term “gender”, which had not yet been defined by state actors:

“I will tell you a good joke dating from the beginning of our work. It was in 1997-98. It was a very big event on gender issues at the National University. (...). Everyone was sitting, waiting for the president [of the university] to open the event. And he didn't start. We looked at him. He was looking around. Finally, I went up to him and asked, ‘But why aren't you starting?’ And he said, ‘I'm waiting for Mr. Gender’ [laughter].”²¹

Over several years, they introduced gender courses in the universities and held seminars in many academic institutions. While their work continued in the 2000s, their demands weren't always realized, or at least not in the way they demanded. Starting in 2005-2006, a great many gender experts mobilized for a legislative reform to recognize and fight against violence against women. They participated with state structures and international organizations from the “National Report on the Status of the Implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in the Republic of Tajikistan” published in 2005 and drafted the first CEDAW shadow report in 2006. They then mobilized to have the recommendations implemented and for several years they lobbied parliament to ratify a bill they had drafted with the support of international organizations. Members of NGOs in Dushanbe and other areas supported them in this demand. However, they failed to have the bill passed. In 2012, an international organization lobbied to pass a law on “the prevention of domestic violence.” This work was carried out by Tajikistani intermediaries who were not gender experts nor showed any interest in the issue, but were hired for their knowledge of the networks and political practices in Parliament, which was increasingly controlled by the government during a period when there were only two opposition members. One of the main arguments the intermediaries used with the deputies was that they had to meet some of the expectations of international organizations, who had just published several extremely negative reports about prison conditions, torture, and child labour in Tajikistan. Corruption involving the intermediaries and the parliamentarians was also reported. Gender experts were excluded from these “negotiations” and the law on the

“prevention of domestic violence” was passed by Parliament and ratified by the President on 13 March 2013.

Gender experts involved in the lobbying efforts in 2006-2007 were extremely critical of this law.²² First, they denounced the marginalization of women’s associations – and the work they had done – in drafting the law, in negotiations with parliament to have the law passed, and in presenting the law. They asserted that without a mobilization by women’s associations, no awareness-raising or changes in practice could be expected in local state institutions. Secondly, they criticized the method chosen to fight violence against women. Third, they denounced the lack of material resources to implement the law. They argued that judges, police, health staff and social workers required training in order for the law to be applied and have an impact.

For many years, the conditions of their interactions with state structures have been deteriorating. A “gender expert” describes the situation:

“My course on *gender* at the University disappeared from the following year’s calendar without any warning, while I was in the process of developing partnerships with an *international* human rights *organization*. I was furious. I went to see the chair of the department who said, ‘what is gender? Why are you doing this? You want to destroy society? etc.’ They can’t stand this subject. I have no idea what I will do for the next year. I have really had enough of fighting against these people who understand nothing.”²³

Gender experts are now facing increasingly significant barriers to finding a foothold in negotiations between the state and international organizations, who continue to work very closely on issues of “international security”. Another indication of the deterioration of relations between gender experts and state structures is the fact that gender experts were not consulted in the preparation of the mid-term report for CEDAW, submitted by the Republic of Tajikistan in August 2015; previously they had always been consulted in the preparation of these documents.

In conclusion, an analysis of the trajectories of gender experts brings to light the logics of professional reconversion after the collapse of the USSR. Notably, these logics were shaped by international organizations which, from the end of the 1990s, massively funded gender programmes. But they were also structured by the logics of power of the political regime which took over in the mid-1990s. This chapter also shows the complex and ambivalent positions of Tajikistani gender experts at numerous levels. They develop strategies to build coherence between these two spaces, asserting a continuity among demands and seeking to ground gender locally. Contradictory positions in discourses articulating gender and Islam can then be observed within gender expertise. On one hand, a discourse constructs “culture”, religion, “traditions” as main factors in the oppression of women. On the other hand, “culture”, religion and “traditions” become a resource for women’s rights. The first discourse is generally used by international gender experts and some national gender experts. The second is strictly used by Tajikistani gender experts. These discourses need to be considered within the professional hierarchies at work in gender expertise, based on inequalities of salary and professional mobility between foreigners and Tajikistanis.

Finally, their work is increasingly undermined by a hardening of the regime. They face an increasingly significant resistance from the government which nevertheless has ratified programmes such as the National Strategic Plan to strengthen the role of women (2011-2020), ratified in 2010.

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¹ While some gender experts produce knowledge, develop and implement women-specific programmes, they emphasize their status as a 'gender expert.' For the sake of convenience and also the emphasis placed by the women themselves, I will not subsequently distinguish between knowledge about women and knowledge about gender, and just use the term "gender".

² I would like to thank Juliette Cleuziou, assistant professor in anthropology, University Lumière Lyon 2, for her participation and translation during this interview.

³ Italics indicate anonymization.

⁴ Tajikistani gender expert, NGO director, in the 2010s.

⁵ Interview with a gender expert, May 2014.

⁶ Interview with Zuhra Halimova, November 2015, Dushanbe.

⁷ 50% of women say they have been a victim of at least one of three forms of violence (sexual, physical, psychological) (Muborak Sharipova, Katalin Fabian 2010). Robin Haarr's study of about 400 women in the Khatlon region shows that 58% of women said they have been victims of physical or sexual violence by their husbands and 19.3 % say they were victims of both types of violence (Haarr 2007). Both authors assert that the increase of domestic violence after the fall of the USSR due to the context of civil war which resulted in a critical economic situation and political instability (Haarr 2007 ; Sharipova et Fabian 2010).

⁸ I use the term 'a country at war' to ensure the anonymity of the gender expert.

⁹ Interview with a gender expert in an international organization, 2010.

¹⁰ Interview with an employee of an international organization working on a project with the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, May 2010.

¹¹ IO is the acronym of international organisation. It is used here to make the international organization anonymous.

¹² Interview with a European employee of an international organization, 2010.

¹³ Interview with a Tajikistani gender expert, employed for a short-term project by an international organization, in the 2010s.

¹⁴ Interview with a gender expert working at the OSCE.

¹⁵Akademiai Mukalima, “ Responsibilities of the man in the foundations of the family from the perspective of Islam. Tool for the *imomkhatib* of the mosques of Tajikistan”, Dushanbe, 2000, p. 11.

¹⁶Ibid..

¹⁷Interview with a European gender expert in the 2010s.

¹⁸This expert has the highest position among the national experts we met.

¹⁹This international expert does not hold the highest position of international experts.

²⁰Interview with Mubarak Sharipova

²¹Interview with a gender expert, November 2015, Dushanbe.

²²Interviews with gender experts in the 2010s.

²³Interview with gender expert in the 2010s.