



BRIEFING | NOVEMBER 2021

Tajikistan

Peacebuilding through a gender lens

Tajikistan, lying in the heart of Central Asia, is bordered by Kyrgyzstan to the north, China to the east, Uzbekistan to the northwest and Afghanistan to the south. Tajikistan's society is deeply patriarchal, with harmful gender norms limiting women and girls' access to education, economic opportunities and political participation. Gender-based violence (GBV) is prevalent, particularly domestic violence (DV), which includes intimate partner violence (IPV) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

Women and girls often have limited education and few economic opportunities, placing them at greater risk of abuse and exploitation. While Tajik law mandates that women have the right to access GBV services such as shelters, social services and legal aid, in reality poor implementation, lack of information and awareness, fear of retaliation and stigmatisation, and a scarcity of services, particularly in rural areas, are serious barriers to access. In fact, in a country of nine million with widespread DV, only three women's shelters are in operation¹ in addition to a small number of women's crisis centres, which are often connected to time-limited funding.

INSIDE

Methodology | Context | Gendered impacts and drivers of conflict and violence | Recommendations

Methodology

In the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, Tajikistan ranks 137 out of 153 countries with a score of 0.626, which constitutes a decline from its 2014 score of 0.665 (129 out of 187 countries). While scores for women's health and survival can be considered mid-range, scores for economic participation, education and political empowerment are significantly low, putting Tajikistan in last place for the Europe and Central Asian (ECA) region.²

Along with other laws protecting women's rights and security, such as combating human trafficking, preventing DV and IPV and guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities for men and women, the national gender policy on enhancing the role of women in the Republic of Tajikistan was adopted in 2010, and is directed toward improving women's participation in education, the labour market, entrepreneurship and political spaces.³

This briefing aims to present the findings of Saferworld and partners' analysis conducted as part of our community security assessments and gender-sensitive conflict analysis (GSCA)⁴ to provide an in-depth overview of the context in Tajikistan in respect to gender and conflict in the selected locations (Isfara, Vanj and Rasht). It explores the power dynamics and the norms that drive conflict and insecurity, which disproportionately affect women and girls. It also provides recommendations for authorities, international donors and civil society to improve policies and develop interventions and services geared towards improving the safety and security of communities using a gender lens and conflict-sensitive approach.

Primary data was collected using the gender-sensitive conflict analysis methodology, and secondary data was collected through a review of available literature, such as national development policies, strategies and reports. This secondary data was used to outline the context and locally specific dynamics of conflict and gender.

The empirical analysis of the brief lies in the GSCA which was conducted in Dushanbe with Saferworld staff and members of the Civil Society Platform (CSP) who possess strong knowledge of the context. In 2018, Saferworld established the CSP, an informal network focusing on improving security responses. Made up of 30 organisations, the platform aims to unite civil society, build knowledge and skills to enable members to work on peace and security, provide financial support and mentorship, and lobby national and international governments and experts to provide a conducive environment for policy debate and public input. Two participatory GSCA workshops with Saferworld staff and CSP members were held in 2020, between 25 and 28 February and between 17 and 20 March. In total, 39 people (14 staff and 25 members from civil society organisations) participated in the workshops, of whom 23 were women.

Isfara is a district in the northern part of Tajikistan, with a diverse ethnic composition (Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz), lying near disputed territory. For example, of the 971-kilometre border territory between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, only 519 km are agreed by both sides. The rest of the border is disputed, which often leads to clashes between residents of Isfara on the Tajikistan side and Batken on the Kyrgyzstan side. The situation is further complicated by two enclaves, the Tajik districts of Vorukh and Western Qalacha, which are located within the Batken region and are completely surrounded by Kyrgyzstani territory. These areas see periodic conflict involving civilians, security forces and state officials.

Rasht district (formerly known as Garm) is an eastern district in the Districts of Republican Subordination region in Tajikistan. In the 1920s, Rasht was a centre of anti-Soviet resistance in Central Asia, which was later suppressed by Soviet forces. Yet the people continued to have their district clan identity (known as 'Gharmis'), and when civil war broke out in Tajikistan in 1992, many Gharmis joined the Islamic opposition against the new regime led by current president Emomali Rahmon; they were later defeated and demobilised. The end of the civil war disrupted the social order: young men are often seen as potential threats to the regime, and become objects of government scrutiny.

Vanj is a district in the north west of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO, as it is known by its Russian abbreviation), with the administrative capital at Vanj town. Unlike other districts of GBAO, the majority of the population are Sunnis. Over many years of working in the district, Saferworld, through the community security assessments and GSCA, identified a number of issues affecting community security, such as unemployment, corruption, young people joining violent groups, and DV. As in Rasht, Vanj also received attention from the government after a large number of young people originally from Vanj joined violent groups in Syria and Iraq, having previously moved to Russia for work. Since then, the government has intensified its security presence, which has affected both women and men.

Context

Background

In the context of modern Tajikistan, debates around changes in social norms arose with the incorporation of Tajikistan into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which had a significant impact on transforming gender norms and roles.

For example, during the Soviet period, polygamy, child marriage and the wearing of full-body *paranji* or facial veils were all forbidden. Soviet rule was also accompanied by a process of relative modernisation and urbanisation, especially in the later stages of the union, with an attendant increase in education levels for both boys and girls. These years also witnessed an increase in women's social and economic participation in public life. This was done to supplement the labour force by bringing women into economically productive roles, but had the unintended result of increasing gender equality: expanding the labour force to include women was accompanied by free education, healthcare and extensive social services.⁵ Despite significant progress made toward gender equality, women continued to be responsible for raising the children and doing the housework as part of their social and culturally constructed roles. While the public sphere saw rapid transformation (especially in urban areas), this was not always reflected in home life, where women were still expected to conform to more traditional gender norms. In remote areas, most women remained at home, and most girls did not gain literacy. Some of the progress toward gender equality also provoked a strong backlash, with a huge increase in cases of domestic violence and murders of women in the early days of rapid social change.

The situation rapidly started to change for women and men after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Tajikistan's independence, which plunged the country into a brutal five-year-long civil war between 1992 and 1997. The civil war brought with it socio-political

tensions and economic vulnerability, which further weakened women's position and status in society, making many vulnerable to displacement and forcing many into informal or exploitative income-generating activities, including sex work. The civil war created an environment of increased violence, where women were subjected to different types of GBV, including rape, torture, verbal abuse, harassment and CEFM. Civil war and societal breakdown led the country into a socio-economic crisis, resulting in an escalation of criminality and violence during, and immediately after, the conflict.

Over a third of women in Tajikistan have experienced physical, psychological or sexual violence in their lifetimes.⁶ Violence against women and girls (VAWG) during the conflict hardened patriarchal norms, with young girls being forced to get married early due to lack of economic resources (marriage is often seen as the only recourse for economic safety).⁷ This led to a vicious cycle of women with less education than their mothers pressuring their own daughters into marriage at an early age, before they finish education or pursue other goals.⁸ Consequently, since the outbreak of the civil war in 1992, both CEFM and polygamy have increased, and women have participated less and less in public life. The war left around 25,000 widows, 55,000 orphans, and 700,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), who have since returned to their pre-war locations. Given the restricted resources that the government possessed, it struggled to accommodate IDPs in a manner that promoted economic and social stability. Authorities, with the support of both local and international institutions (including [international] non-governmental organisations ([I]NGOs)), directed the bulk of their effort toward facilitating IDP returnees. Local NGOs that address women's issues have been among the most active in reintegrating IDPs, among whom many are widows and orphans, and advocating for greater women's participation in political, economic and social life.

Why a gender-sensitive conflict analysis?

A gender-sensitive conflict analysis (GSCA) can increase the inclusivity and effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions.

Traditional conflict analysis methodologies often ignore gender or create false binaries. A GSCA supports policymakers and practitioners to understand how men, women and sexual and gender minorities from diverse backgrounds and with different intersecting identities (such as race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or age), experience and interact with conflict, peace and violence in different ways, both in terms of how they are affected by conflict, but also how they drive and/or are impacted by conflict as a result of gender norms and roles.

By identifying gender norms and underlying gendered power relations in a specific conflict or context, we can identify some of the ways in which these norms influence behaviours towards violence or conflict, better anticipate the gendered impacts of conflict, and help generate assumptions or theories of change for engagement and conflict prevention, as well as for the promotion of gender equality and inclusion (of all minorities) through peacebuilding.

In this case, we have used the **gender-sensitive conflict analysis facilitators guide** developed jointly by Saferworld and Conciliation Resources. The guide is intended to support facilitators to undertake a participatory gender-sensitive conflict analysis (GSCA).

It seeks to:

- explain how to design and facilitate a context-based and participatory gender-sensitive workshop
- provide step-by-step guidance and participatory tools to analyse gender, peace, violence and conflict for any given context
- position practitioners to apply this analysis to policy thinking and programme design and implementation, which can range from gender-sensitive to gender-transformative peacebuilding practices

Tajikistan remains the poorest country among the post-Soviet republics. Even though the country has made slow progress since the civil war, the economy remains volatile and heavily dependent on remittances sent by those working abroad – usually men who have migrated to Russia. In 2008, 33 per cent of the economically active population were sending remittances from abroad, accounting for 50 per cent of GDP, making Tajikistan the most remittance-dependent country in the world at the time.⁹

By 2019 this proportion had decreased to 29 per cent of GDP,¹⁰ but Tajikistan still remains one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world. The gender pay gap is wide, with men's wages on average 30 per cent higher than women's; this rises to 50 per cent in rural areas.¹¹

The main governmental body responsible for implementing gender policy and promoting gender equality is the Committee for Women's and Family Affairs.¹² Much of their work on gender tends to focus on the most immediate and symptomatic issues, such as DV and family reconciliation, with less attention paid to the underlying negative gender and social norms that lead to such problems. While interventions to address GBV are crucial, it is also important to understand and address the gender inequalities in women's participation in the socio-economic and political spheres, and to tackle the gender norms, biases and expectations preventing women from accessing these spaces. Compounding the problem, gender is not being treated seriously enough across ministries and governmental departments. While other ministries have programmes on gender equality, many of these are not unified and/or coordinated across government. Government policies do not take a comprehensive intersectional approach, considering the multiple ways that systems of power such as ethnicity, race, age, socio-economic status, religion, disability, sexual orientation or geographic location interact with gender to shape how different people are affected by conflict and engage in peacebuilding and political processes and decisions.¹³

Gender roles and norms

The **distribution of roles** across all the selected locations was similar: a 'real man' was characterised as courageous, physically strong, brave; the breadwinner, decision-maker and problem-solver in the family and in society. Women are responsible for unpaid housework (such as preparing food, cleaning or sewing) and the care and wellbeing of household members, which usually includes extended family members, including in-laws. Women are expected to be 'good' wives by being outwardly presentable in both dress and manner (submissive, obedient and quiet), upholding the family's honour, serving her husband and respecting his family. There were also physical expectations for women – for example, she had to be 'good-looking' and wear traditional clothes. To be educated was identified as an unnecessary attribute for women in rural areas, as there were no familial and societal expectations for women to earn an income. Men are responsible for managing activities in the society (earning money, paying for bills, solving problems, contributing to political affairs), and women are responsible for coordinating the activities within the household – with the consent of men. Women also undertake small-scale economic activities and subsistence farming activities, including animal husbandry, growing vegetables in kitchen gardens, and some more physically demanding activities, like mowing the grass – tasks they usually share with their husbands.

In cases where men have migrated, women take over all of the work related to animal husbandry, farming and growing vegetables. Widows and women whose husbands have migrated and/or who have been abandoned face heightened economic

vulnerability, as well as vulnerability to eviction, which often results in women's dependence on their husband's extended family. This can lead to DV from these relatives (both women and men) who may see themselves on top of a hierarchy. The lack of a comprehensive, adequate and functioning social security system worsens the situation: with no safety net for single, widowed and abandoned women, these women have no choice but to be dependent on their family.

Key decisions and expectations are made by men. Gendered expectations for men are also rigid: if a man is not able to fulfil his expected role he will lose the respect of his family, friends and wider society. This can also decrease his voice and decision-making power within the home and his circle of influence, and can also lead to him being reprimanded and verbally abused by his wife for not earning enough. Where a woman is unable to fulfil gendered societal expectations, she may be socially excluded in society, will lose the respect of her relatives, be forced out of her home, and might experience physical and psychological violence from her husband, his family and/or other relatives. No one spoke openly about sexual violence; DV is seen as normal within a marriage and it is likely that the subject is therefore not discussed. The biggest fear for women as highlighted during the workshop is 'the fear of being left alone with the children', because many women do not have skills, education and experience to work beyond the household and find a place to live. This can put her and her children at risk of social exclusion and poverty. Acceptance of gender norms that drive inequality has increased due to the rise of conservative Islamic interpretations and practices, especially in rural areas, since Tajikistan's independence in 1991.¹⁴

“

The biggest fear for women as highlighted during the workshop is 'the fear of being left alone with the children', because many women do not have the skills, education and experience to work beyond the household and find a place to live.

”

During the civil war, with many men away fighting and with poverty increasing, there was a change in gender roles. Women began carrying out roles traditionally performed by men, such as protecting children, getting jobs and in some cases, migrating for work. On top of this, women still had to perform their traditional domestic duties, which meant that they undertook both paid and unpaid work. Most women only had access to precarious, informal and low-paid work, with men still holding the more formal, stable and better-paid jobs. While this was due in part to a poorly performing job market, it is also true that women have a hard time accessing such a male-dominated sphere. This is still the case even if the economy has picked up since the end of the civil war, particularly when it comes to higher-qualified positions and decision-making related jobs. Despite the lived experiences of negative impacts of patriarchal norms on women themselves, women continue to pass them down onto children, especially girls, and enforce them on future daughters-in-law. Contrary to the assumption that most women who have themselves experienced many hardships due to rigid gender norms would want to treat their daughters-in-law or daughters differently and provide more opportunities for them, in fact the opposite often happens. Mothers' fears that their daughters will face persecution, and the custom among mothers-in-law to exercise authority over their daughters-in-law, result in norms being passed down within families.



Members of the community policing partnership team discussing community security concerns as part of a cross-border initiative between Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic.
© Saferworld

Gendered impacts and drivers of conflict and violence

Inside the home

Inequality in education and early marriage

The enrolment of women in secondary and higher education (university), particularly in rural areas, is significantly lower than that of men – only 37 per cent of women attend university and, among those who do, few work outside the home after graduation.¹⁵ This is in line with gender norms that expect men to be the sole income providers, whereas women are expected to perform household tasks (which are not considered a form of work). Such tendencies only reinforce the patriarchal attitudes within families that diminish women's autonomy and control over decision making, and which also enable violence against women. This is particularly the case for women who are less educated. Even though by law all children must attend school until 9th grade (15–16 years old), girls often drop out of school earlier. One of the participants of the workshop highlighted that girls often drop out and join vocational schools; even if they had gone on to higher education, there would be no jobs for them after graduation. Vocational skills training for girls is usually very gendered, consisting of activities like cooking, sewing and sometimes nursing – to take care of older relatives. Many parents therefore don't see girls' education as meaningful or worthwhile. This can cause tensions between parents and daughters, many of whom would like to receive an education.

Another factor, observed for example in Chorkuh village in Isfara, is early marriage. Stemming from long-established customs whereby boys and girls are betrothed as children, early marriage keeps girls in the home and away from places of education. This tradition, called 'gakhvorabakh' (meaning 'commitment from the cradle') is practised in Isfara and in other districts, and was discreetly maintained during the Soviet period. Girls are promised in marriage, usually at the age of 12 or 13 but sometimes at birth, to acquaintances or the sons of distant relatives.¹⁶ In such cases, girls usually agree with their parents' choice, despite not knowing or seeing their future husband. As noted by one of the participants of the workshop, "girls are raised with the idea that the main purpose of their life is a successful marriage and giving birth to children. As the girls grow, they see their primary purpose as a wife, and do not take school seriously". According to the Head of the Department of the Committee of Women and Family Affairs, of the 661 schoolgirls in Surkh, Isfara in 2020, 200 were already engaged as arranged by their parents.

“

Girls are raised with the idea that the main purpose of their life is a successful marriage and giving birth to children. As the girls grow, they see their primary purpose as a wife, and do not take school seriously.

”

Gender norms in these communities mean that girls who are not engaged until 11th grade (17–18 years) are looked down upon with pity and disapproval by community members. As a result, and encouraged by their parents, most girls stop going to school when they reach 7th–8th grade (13–15 years), which severely compromises their prospects of finding a job outside their home and results in their being economically dependent on their parents first and then on their husbands. In addition, early marriages often lead to adolescent pregnancies, which are associated with high levels of maternal and child mortality. After a break-up, it is common for women to have sole responsibility for their children, with men often wanting nothing to do with raising them.

Similar issues were also observed in the Rasht valley. For example, a survey conducted by the Asian Development Bank of 1,300 women and girls across the Rasht valley demonstrated that 80 per cent have no knowledge of their basic rights. Moreover, almost 50 per cent of the respondents thought that the ‘nikkah’, a purely religious marriage ceremony, is sufficient for marriage.¹⁷ Their marriages not officially recognised, women who are later abandoned have little or no resource to take care of themselves and their children. This is particularly the case in rural areas where low levels of education play a significant role. In 2011, Tajikistan adopted a law ‘On Parents’ responsibility for Children’s Upbringing and Education’. As a result, in 2017, 16,000 charges were drawn up against parents who violated the law and the total

finest levied amounted to 1.3 million somoni;¹⁸ as well as policing early marriages, the law also holds parents responsible for their children’s truancy and being out late at night, among other behaviours.

The results of the GCSA in Vanj and Rasht are very similar to those in Isfara. Gender inequality is perpetuated by strong conservative patriarchal norms, where the man is designated as the breadwinner and absolute decision-maker. The role of women is, by contrast, to bear children and look after the home. As a result, CEFM is widespread, resulting in education for girls and young women being deprioritised. Consequently, young girls fall into the lowest level of social and household hierarchies. In this hierarchy, the top spots are occupied by the older generation (predominantly men and some mothers-in-law), who establish and reinforce gender norms in the family and identify rules and behaviours. This leads to young girls having very low confidence, limited access to employment, and little say in their lives, particularly in the household and in society. In addition, they become fully dependent on their husbands, and have few options other than to justify and/or tolerate violence inflicted on them by their husbands and parents-in-law, all of which can result in life-long low self-esteem and poor mental health. As seen in Isfara, this results in an increased number of divorces, especially among the young – usually initiated by the husband.



Vanj district working group during the outcome harvesting workshop.
© Saferworld

Domestic violence and intimate partner violence

According to a Human Rights Watch report, ‘violence against women in Tajikistan is pervasive, although exact figures do not exist due to underreporting, the lack of a government-organised system of data collection, and a lack of disaggregated data designating the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim’.¹⁹ Certain government agencies, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Office of the President of Tajikistan and the Committee of Women and Family Affairs, along with a number of civil society organisations, each track their own statistics. This leaves room for the data to be contested and makes it difficult to have accurate data on survivors and victims of DV and to use data to design and implement programmes to combat DV. However, according to the 2017 Demographic and Health Survey of Tajikistan, 31 per cent of married or formerly married women and girls reported having experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence by a spouse or partner and 80 per cent of women respondents said that they were subject to psychological violence in the family.²⁰ Similarly, the community security assessments and GSCA carried out by Saferworld show that DV is prevalent across the whole country, including in the three selected locations.

As one participant of the GSCA workshop from Rasht remarked, women in rural areas have limited knowledge of services, including healthcare and legal services, which in their turn have limited resources to support survivors of violence. If women approach their neighbourhood police officers and ask for support, the police usually recommend resolving the issue with their husbands as they see it as an internal family matter – an idea shared by many in Tajikistan, including service-providers (as noted by one representative of a civil society organisation during a workshop). Sometimes the police might issue a protection order, but the majority of women refuse as that would complicate their circumstances even more and put them at risk of stigmatisation or retaliation from the husband and his family. Where they do seek a protection order, they often encounter delays and costly fees in the court. The protection orders are not adequate for many women, particularly in rural areas, as many women survivors do not have anywhere to stay other than their marital homes. In many cases husbands force women to withdraw the complaint. As a result, most survivors do not report. The Demographic and Health Survey found that three in four women neither sought help nor told anyone about the violence they had suffered.²¹ One participant also highlighted that there are very few shelters where victims of DV could receive support and temporary housing. Often, when young girls cannot find help, they commit suicide. Such cases have significantly increased, as reported in the media in the recent years.

“
If women approach their neighbourhood police officers and ask for support, the police usually recommend resolving the issue with their husbands as they see it as an internal family matter
”

If there are tensions or violence between family members, society directs the bulk of its efforts towards the reunification of the family, as dictated by social norms. These actions put a lot of pressure on women, who are supposed to ‘tolerate’ DV

committed by the husband and his relatives. According to one of the participants of the GSCA, “such behaviour is justified by two main narratives in the society: [the] **societal narrative** which envisages women to be [a] tolerant and submissive wife, and from men to always listen to his parents and not contradict their view, and [the] **public narrative** which emphasises the importance of family values and family unity, advocated by respective government bodies”. These bodies include those responsible for the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.²² The agencies which are responsible for the prevention of family violence and ‘strengthen[ing] family ties’ place a stronger emphasis on keeping the family unit together than they do on the protection of victims.²³ Such narratives are commonplace from the national to the local level. Often their responses focus on the “reconciliation of families, preventing divorce, keeping the family together – even if the woman is in danger”, as stated by another member from a civil society organisation during the workshop. However, such frameworks put women and children at risk and further perpetuate and promote violence in the family.

Some progress has been made in building the capacity of police officers to provide services to the survivors and victims of DV but more needs to be done at the national level.

Outside the home

Economic inequality

In a country with a high rate of poverty, women’s access to education, resources, microcredit, social protection and income-generating activities is more limited than men’s, predominantly due to gender norms that assume that men are the main breadwinners. The data on the gender pay gap is telling: in 2011 (the latest year for which there is data) there was a 51 per cent difference – the highest among Central Asian countries (for example, Kazakhstan had 34 per cent and Kyrgyzstan 24.6 per cent).²⁴ This leaves the majority of women very vulnerable if they need to look for a job. Women are usually only able to secure work in the informal sector or in low-paid jobs, principally in agriculture (84 per cent) and, to a lesser extent, in healthcare and education. This is largely because 72.5 per cent of women in employment are unskilled; and after getting married fully occupy themselves with household work and raising children.

As shown above, Tajikistan’s economy is highly dependent on remittances, which make up more than 25 per cent of its GDP.²⁵ It is worth noting that labour migrants are predominantly men, which reinforces the economic dependence of women and girls on men and has increased women’s workload in the household, as they remain alone with their children. In many cases the mother and her children face violence from the extended family of her husband, or end up abandoned. For others, husbands don’t return and remain in Russia. It is not uncommon for men to stay in Russia permanently, where they sometimes marry someone else and stop providing financial support to their families in Tajikistan, leaving women to run the household completely. For example, in 2009 there were 300,000 households where the man had decided to stay abroad. 70 per cent of those cases involved women with children;²⁶ being left with no income, they were forced to go out and look for jobs – mostly informal or exploitative jobs – to feed their children and find temporary shelter, while at the same time taking care of the household. As a result, the highest risk of poverty in Tajikistan is in households headed by women with children, accounting for 20.9 per cent of households in 2017, according to World Bank data.^{27, 28}

Lack of women's political participation

Another important factor to consider is women's participation in decision making at the public and political levels. Even though Tajikistan has ratified international commitments on women's political representation, including the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,²⁹ the Beijing Platform for Action³⁰ and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),³¹ in practice we see that the situation has not significantly changed. Despite seeing a slow increase in women's representation in parliaments, which grew from 3 per cent in 1995 to 24 per cent in 2020,³² the political space continues to be dominated by men. Only two ministries are led by a woman (the Minister of Labor, Migration and Public Employment, and the Minister of Culture), and one deputy prime minister is a woman. Unlike neighbouring countries including Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which have established quotas for women in parliament of 25–30 per cent, Tajikistan lacks such targets. At the municipal level, women's inclusion in public office is even lower. On average across Tajikistan, the share of women deputy heads at the *jamoats* level (a community-level administrative role) is 15 per cent, while the average for township³³ representation at the municipal level ranges from 13 per cent in the District of the Republic Subordination to 21 per cent in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous region.³⁴ Despite the general numbers being higher than in other contexts, the role of deputy heads in this context is best compared with the role of assistant, meaning they lack meaningful decision-making power and autonomy. Consequently, the increase in number of women deputy leaders fails to ensure that women's needs are considered and integrated into developing government policies or strategies. In addition to a lack of measures for supporting women's political participation, gender stereotypes that discourage political participation continue to be perpetuated. As highlighted above, putting women in a subordinate position compared to men prevents women from playing more meaningful and active roles in the public sphere and achieving connections and social capital for running for election and promoting their careers.³⁵ This is amplified by the masculine/patriarchal norm at the family and community levels, where often instead of support they face additional discouragement or stigmatisation.

Inter-communal violence

As a result of our GCSA, we found that **competition and clashes near the border between Isfara and Batken provoke violence and worsen harmful gender norms**. Roles and power dynamics in both locations are strongly rooted in patriarchal norms. These norms are amplified by toxic masculinities which, in framing men as the protectors and breadwinners, lead to a readiness to use violence in the case of clashes. This is evidenced by at least a dozen clashes between Tajiks and Kyrgyz between 2019 and 2020,³⁶ with the most severe in April 2021, when over 50 people were killed and hundreds more injured within the span of a few days. About 58,000 people on both sides left their homes or were evacuated. In addition, dozens of houses and schools were destroyed.³⁷ The violence was the worst cross-border military conflict in Central Asia in many years.

These clashes escalated upon orders received by border troops from the central government, which is a male-dominated institution. Over the years (since the collapse of the USSR), the central authorities of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have blamed each other for destabilising the situation.³⁸ This has fuelled conflict and

created inflammatory narratives to maintain power or the status quo. Factors such as unfair distribution and access to resources, lack of capacity or unwillingness by the governments to peacefully intervene or cooperate with communities or consider their needs, as well as historical events attached to establishment of borders, have further fuelled conflict. In addition to land disputes, the immediate spark that set off the latest border conflict was a standoff over a water distribution facility. Water is a vital resource in the region, but a scarce one, which makes it a major source of tension and conflict.

Another reason for cross-border conflict is transnational crime, including drug trafficking. Organised criminal groups involved in drug trafficking from both sides deliberately fuel tensions or riots near the border. Many have an interest in ensuring that borders remain unregulated and unstable environments where the state's presence is less entrenched, to ensure the continued flow of goods. When it comes to discussing ways to address the causes of the issues, national authorities and law enforcement agencies give little to no space for voices of the local population, particularly women.

Conflict and insecurity have affected men and women differently. In response to some of the sources of tensions and conflicts highlighted above, men are expected to exhibit the stereotypically masculine traits of aggression and bravery. In addition, due to the difficulties they face in accessing income-generating activities to fulfil their masculine roles as breadwinners, young men also join criminal groups – in part to get money, but also to reassert their masculinity. The government sees such young men as potential threats to their traditional ideas of power and order so it subjects them to increased scrutiny and surveillance, reinforcing their feelings of frustration.

With high unemployment, job insecurity and stress affecting men, the pressures of managing household budgets, which usually fall on women, have significantly increased. Water scarcity has also resulted in additional unpaid burdens on women, who have to travel to fetch water. Poor water quality has led to water-borne diseases affecting communities, including women and children,³⁹ which, coupled with poor health infrastructure, has led to poor long-term health outcomes. Increasing crime has also affected women's mobility, which becomes extremely restricted at times of heightened tensions. Despite women filling the economic void and managing household finances and decisions, women's voices and experiences do not feature in dialogues and decisions on conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Parties to the conflict are predominantly led by men and those fighting are also most commonly men. Decisions undertaken by the authorities of both countries are usually made by men who do not take into account the impact of conflict on women and girls, or who have a poor understanding of these effects. International organisations and civil society organisations have made attempts to include women's voices through engaging them in dialogue events, trainings and awareness-raising meetings. Yet during times of conflict, women are still forced by their husbands and sons to remain at home and not interfere, because of socially constructed norms and cultural barriers. We also see that women in border communities do not have decision-making roles and are not brought to the table during the negotiations. Furthermore, even women whose husbands have moved abroad for work or who have been abandoned do not make decisions about their sons' participation in the conflict. It is therefore necessary to bring women leaders to peace talks or negotiations. It is worth noting that women can also reinforce harmful gender norms: there are cases of women pressuring men to go and fight in order to fulfil their role of 'protector'; in other words, to 'be a man'.



Young girls meet with one of Chorkuh's women leaders.
© Saferworld

Recommendations

Based on the result of our research, and of the GSCA workshop, there is a strong need for national authorities, international organisations and civil society to make the necessary changes to ensure that all levels of programming and policy are at least gender sensitive and ideally gender transformative, to allow for a more sustainable peace that fosters gender equality.

National authorities

- Conduct participatory, gender-sensitive conflict analysis to understand the gender drivers and impacts of conflict in Tajikistan overall and in specific regions, and undertake meaningful public consultation, including with women's rights organisations (WROs), women activists and gender experts, to inform and shape national action plans, public programmes, and laws and policies.
- Develop and roll out ongoing (not one-off) gender- and conflict-sensitive training, with support from WROs, to government officials at all levels, including those at local government, as well as senior/high-level officials. Enhance women's participation and decision-making in public institutions, take affirmative action to increase the number of women elected representatives, and support women elected representatives to carry out their roles and responsibilities.

- Increase coordination amongst government bodies on GBV response, strengthen GBV services, including in remote and rural areas, and ensure that local authorities and service providers, including, police and medical personnel, are adequately trained on the law and gender.
- Revise and amend laws, policies and guidance pertaining to GBV, including the National Law on the Prevention of Violence in the Family 2013, to enhance women and girls' access to justice and so that justice delivery is survivor- and victim-centred.
- Enhance women's access to formal jobs through skills development programmes, and provide economic support to access programmes of higher education, while increasing social and financial support to alleviate their caring responsibilities, particularly for women who are the heads of their households.
- Local government and law enforcement agencies should engage with communities in border areas, including with activists, women and youth groups, to support long-term de-escalation and peacebuilding, and implement gender- and youth-responsive programmes, including on employability skills.
- Develop programmes to support girls to complete higher education, including working with families to sensitise and incentivise parents to keep girls in school and enable girls to pursue higher education opportunities.

International organisations

- Conduct participatory, gender-sensitive conflict analysis to understand the gender drivers and impacts of conflict in Tajikistan overall and in specific regions, to inform and shape programmes and advocacy initiatives.
- Meaningfully embed gender equality within project design, implementation and monitoring, including through ongoing (and not ad-hoc) meaningful consultations with women in communities.
- Create and/or strengthen multi-stakeholder coordination platforms, comprising CSOs, NGOs, authorities in Tajikistan, INGOs and other stakeholders (such as the government of Kyrgyzstan), to improve coordination and collaboration between these groups and avoid duplication of programmes.
- Advocate to government and, where possible, facilitate the equal and meaningful participation of women and WROs in political decision-making spaces, as well as in all public institutions.
- Conduct advocacy with authorities, policy makers and security agencies to ensure that donor-funded government programmes and joint programming adequately embed a gender lens at all levels and contribute to gender-transformative outcomes.
- Work with WROs and CSOs to raise awareness amongst men on harmful gender norms and masculinities, which have the potential to fuel conflict and violence, including GBV.
- Adopt a partnership approach that is based on the principles of solidarity and accompaniment, by building mutual, equal, respectful and committed partnerships with WROs/CSOs and focusing on strengthening each organisation's capacities, giving up space for WROs/CSOs to lead the change they and the communities they work with want to see.
- Prioritise and fund WROs to deliver comprehensive programming and advocate to government to improve laws, policies and their implementation.
- Work with women activists, CSOs and WROs to promote women's economic empowerment and advocate for the government to increase support to single and abandoned women, widows and women heads of household.

Civil society

- Raise awareness among communities, including through partnership with youth groups, of harmful gender norms, gender roles and their impact on conflict.
- Engage and intensify work with prominent and influential religious leaders who are (or can act as) gender equality advocates and support them to help prevent CEFM.
- Support the establishment of gender-balanced, intergenerational platforms, including women-only ones and ones where women and girls lead, where people from different generations come together to share their concerns and transform conservative norms.
- Raise awareness about the conflict-sensitive gender analysis findings and advocate for a more comprehensive approach toward unpacking the issue of gender in conflict. When working with communities and authorities, depart from the traditional approach of gender programming with a DV lens toward programmes focusing on gender equality and gender empowerment.
- Work with women activists and WROs to conduct community awareness campaigns about harmful gender norms using radio, TV, community dialogue and theatre.
- Invest in scaled-up, gender-sensitive conflict analysis at all stages of needs assessments carried out as part of planned projects, including through the use of Saferworld toolkits and guidelines, or those produced by other organisations that specialise in gender-sensitive analysis of conflict. These analyses should provide further insights into locally specific contexts, especially those not covered in other analyses, and should help feed into greater understanding of gender and conflict dynamics across the country.

Notes

- 1 YOUR.TJ (2021), 'Некуда бежать. Нет грантов — нет шелтеров для жертв насилия?', January (<https://your.tj/nekuda-bezhat-net-grantov-net-shelterov-dlja-zhertv-nasilija/>)
- 2 World Economic Forum (2020), 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020' (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf)
- 3 On State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Men and Women and Equal Opportunities for their Implementation (https://www.wconline.org/pdf/lawcompilation/Tajikistan_GE_Law_Revised%20E_Translation.pdf)
- 4 Saferworld (2020), 'Gender-sensitive conflict analysis: a facilitation guide', October (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1284-gender-sensitive-coysis-a-facilitation-guide>)
- 5 Asian Development Bank (2000), 'Women and Gender Relations in Tajikistan', April (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32601/women-tajikistan.pdf>)
- 6 International Alert (2016), 'Zindagii Shoista – Living with dignity: Preventing sexual and gender-based violence in Tajikistan', November (<https://www.international-alert.org/publications/zindagii-shoista-living-dignity-research-repo>)
- 7 As is evidenced in many countries, CEFM, in fact, leads to increased vulnerability to violence against women and girls and does not necessarily lead to financial stability or physical safety for many young girls and women.
- 8 Asian Development Bank (2016), 'Tajikistan: Country Gender Assessment' (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/185615/tajikistan-cga.pdf>)
- 9 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 'About Tajikistan' (<https://www.tj.undp.org/content/tajikistan/en/home/countryinfo.html>)
- 10 World Bank, 'Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) – Tajikistan' (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRFPWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=TJ>)
- 11 United Nations Economic and Social Committee for Asia and the Pacific (2018), 'Examining women's economic empowerment in SPECA countries', 23 April (https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/Gender/SPECA_WG_Gender/Meetings/2018/Background_paper-Women_s_economic_empowerment_EN.pdf)
- 12 Asian Development Bank (2016), 'Tajikistan: Country Gender Assessment' (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/185615/tajikistan-cga.pdf>)
- 13 Saferworld (2020), op. cit.
- 14 International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) (2017), 'Domestic violence in Tajikistan: Time to right the wrongs', March (<https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ENG-Domestic-violence-in-Taj-March-2017.pdf>)
- 15 HRW analysis of dv in tajikistna.pdf
- 16 Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (2018), 'Tajikistan: Early Engagements Warp Girls' Lives', 19 December (<https://cabar.asia/en/tajikistan-early-engagements-warp-girls-lives>)
- 17 Asian Development Bank (2016), 'Tajikistan: Country Gender Assessment' (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/185615/tajikistan-cga.pdf>)
- 18 Human Rights Watch (2019), "'Violence with Every Step': Weak State Response to Domestic Violence in Tajikistan", 19 September (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/19/violence-every-step/weak-state-response-domestic-violence-tajikistan>)
- 19 UNDP (2019), 'Strengthening Community Security and Prevention of Violence against women in Tajikistan', Tajikistan Project Document, 28 February (https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/TJK/ProjectDocument_CSDV_450K_latest.pdf)
- 20 USAID Demographic and Health Surveys (2018), 'Tajikistan', November (<https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr341-dhs-final-reports.cfm>)
- 21 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2020), 'National Review of the Republic of Tajikistan on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) within the scope of implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000) in the context of the twenty-fifth anniversary in 2020 of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action' (https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/Gender/Beijing_20/Tajikistan_ENG.pdf)
- 22 Human Rights Watch (2019), op. cit.
- 23 United Nations Economic and Social Committee for Asia and the Pacific (2018), 'Examining women's economic empowerment in SPECA countries', 23 April (https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/Gender/SPECA_WG_Gender/Meetings/2018/Background_paper-Women_s_economic_empowerment_EN.pdf)
- 24 World Bank, op. cit.
- 25 UN Women, 'Tajikistan' (<https://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/tajikistan>)
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 World Bank, op. cit.
- 28 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (1979), 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979', 18 December (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>)
- 29 UN Women (1995), 'Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action' (https://beijing20.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa_e_final_web.pdf)
- 30 United Nations, 'The 17 Goals' (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)
- 31 Radio Free Europe (2020), 'Число женщин в парламенте растет, но "у политики по-прежнему мужское лицо"', 8 March (<https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30475728.html>)
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 UNDP, UN Women (2017), 'Women's representation in local government in Tajikistan', June (<https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/country/tajikistan/women-representation%20undp%20oun%20women%20brochure%20june%202017%20english%20version.pdf?la=en&vs=4543>)
- 34 Foreign Policy Centre (2021), 'Low women's political participation in Tajikistan: Will the anti-discrimination law be a solution?', 17 May (<https://fpc.org.uk/low-womens-political-participation-in-tajikistan-will-the-anti-discrimination-law-be-a-solution/>)
- 35 Eurasianet (2019), 'Four killed in Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border clash', 17 September (<https://eurasianet.org/four-killed-in-tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-border-clash>)
- 36 Sultanalieva S, Williamson H (2021), 'After Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Conflict, Time For a Human Rights Agenda', 21 May (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/21/after-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-border-conflict-time-human-rights-agenda>)
- 37 Radio Free Europe (2020), 'Tajikistan Accuses Kyrgyzstan Of "Destabilizing" Border Situation After Another Shooting', 28 May (<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-accuses-kyrgyzstan-of-destabilizing-border-situation-after-another-shooting/30640211.html>)
- 38 UN Women (2017), 'Women's human insecurities across the Tajik-Kyrgyz borders: An assessment and recommendations by women activists' (<https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/country/tajikistan/womens%20human%20insecurities%20across%20tajikkyrgyz%20borders.pdf?la=en&vs=634>)



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Cover photo: Women meet outside in Chorkuh at the end of the school day.

© Saferworld

Acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Shamsiya Rakhimshoeva.

SAFERWORLD

Saferworld
Brick Yard, 28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK

Phone: +44 (0)20 7324 4646

Email: general@saferworld.org.uk

Web: www.saferworld.org.uk

 www.facebook.com/Saferworld

 [@Saferworld](https://twitter.com/Saferworld)

 [Saferworld](https://www.linkedin.com/company/saferworld)

Registered charity no. 1043843

A company limited by guarantee no. 3015948

© Saferworld, November 2021.