

Imagined Women: Bearing, Rearing and Wearing the Tajik Nation

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Abstract: In contemporary Tajikistan, the onus of national identity (re-)production has been disproportionately placed on women. Decisions about female bodies, way of dress, and duties and limits of the women's roles in the public and private spaces, all serve as important differentiation markers and mobilization tools for the competing ideological forces. Using the insights from the scholarship on nation-building and gender, this paper explores the official (government) narrative on women in Tajikistan. Based on content analysis of various primary data: official documents, government publications, official speeches and media sources, I argue that contemporary nation-building has become about tangible lifestyles. Thus, nationhood in Tajikistan has acquired a recognizably gendered character. In this state-promoted imagination, women encapsulate the Tajik nation by performing three major tasks that continuously reproduce and represent the nation: they bear, rear and wear the Tajik nation-state.

Key Terms: Tajikistan, women, gender, nationalism, nation-building, Islam, authoritarianism, identity politics

Introduction

In the tumultuous first years since independence (September 9, 1991), women in Tajikistan and Central Asia in general, were often described as being caught between the anvil and the hammer of the competing gendered regimes – systems of gender-specific norms of social and familial behavior. In particular, the remnants of the “secular” or “modernizing” female emancipation project promoted by the Soviet state were often viewed as being incompatible with the ever-tightening grip of the ethno-religious imagination centered around the, so-called, “traditional” female roles.¹ Such existential symbolic antagonisms proved instrumental to facilitating the emergence of a vibrant political space where secular, communist, Islamist and nationalist forces competed for domination.² Thus, by demanding the observance of certain gendered cultural traditions, various political movements attempted to construct imaginations of the greater political ambitions and social development models.³ In this manner, the emotive

¹ S. Akiner, “Between Tradition and Modernity: The Dilemma Facing Contemporary Central Asian Women,” in *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*, ed. M. Buckley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 261-304; D. Kandiyoti, “The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (December 2007): 601-623.

² See T. Epkenhans, *Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).

³ S. Tajbakhsh, “Between Lenin and Allah: Women and Ideology in Tajikistan,” in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, eds. H.L. Bodman and N. Tohidi (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 163-185; G. Tett, “‘Guardians of the Faith?’: Gender and Religion in

idealized images of women anchored abstract political ideologies to everyday life and, at times, to mythical historical past, as well as provided a cohesive set of indicators of success for the competing political forces.

Needless to say, local women's daily lives were always more complicated. As Tadjbakhsh argued, far from being defined by the one-dimensional categories of "Muslim woman" or "(post-) Soviet woman" the, lives of the Central Asian women were rather "shaped by a symbiosis between the word of Allah, the word of V. I. Lenin, and that of the men."⁴ Similarly, in contemporary Tajikistan, in addition to the waning "Lenin" and waxing "Allah" discourse we can safely add a third one of "Rahmon." This third factor squarely places women in the context of the contemporary, post-Civil War Tajikistan, where, since the consolidation of political power following the civil outbreak (1992-1997), the authoritarian regime of President Rahmon increasingly encroaches upon every aspect of the public and private sphere.⁵ In this

an (ex) Soviet Tajik Village," in *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, eds. C. F. El-Solh and J. Mabro (London: Routledge, 1994), 128-151.

⁴ Tadjbakhsh, "Between Lenin," 164.

⁵ For post-Civil War politics in Tajikistan see for example: E. Lemon and H. Thibault, "Counter Extremism: Power and Authoritarian Governance in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 1 (2018): 137–159; H. Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan: State-Building and Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018); S. Roche, *The Faceless Terrorist: A Study of Critical Events in Tajikistan* (Cham: Springer, 2019); S. Nozimova and T. Epkenhans, "The Transformation of Tajikistan's Religious Field: From Religious Pluralism to Authoritarian Inertia," *Central Asian Affairs* 6, no. 2-3 (2019): 133-165.

context, women in Tajikistan have to negotiate and reconcile their loyalties, roles, and duties. And in this process, women find themselves at the center of an ideological battle over who and in what terms gets to define the Tajik nation.

In post-Civil War Tajikistan, there were, at least, a couple serious attempts to engage in symbolic politics and develop national identity projects. In 1999, Tajikistan, a nation state that has not celebrated a first decade of its political sovereignty yet, took on the millennium-old mantle of a historical statehood as it celebrated the jubilee of the 1,100 years of the Tajik statehood. The epoch of the Samanid Empire rule (819-999 AD), personified in the mythologized representation of one of the rulers of the dynasty – Ismail Somoni – became the centerpiece of the Tajik national imagination.⁶ The intellectual underpinnings of the Samanids national project were borne out of the Soviet historiography, in particular the works of Bobojon Ghafurov (1908-1977).⁷ In general, scholars who studied the Samanids national project in post-Soviet Tajikistan agree on several points: 1) the project created an idealized myth about strong Tajik state under a strong Tajik ruler; 2) the Samanid epoch was represented as largely secular socio-political and cultural project, with a particular emphasis on the arts, science and trade that flourished during the rule; and 3) an emphasis on the Tajik (Persian) language, which laid the

⁶ H. Blakkisrud and S. Nozimova, “History writing and nation building in post-independence Tajikistan,” *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 2 (2010): 173-189

⁷ See B. Ghafurov, *Tojikon: Ta'rikhi qadimtarin, qadim va asri miyona*, Vol. 1 (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1983); B. Ghafurov, *Tojikon: Okhirhoi asri miyona va davrai nav*, Vol. 2 (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1985)

foundations for a strong claim for the autochthonous imagination of the Tajik nation.⁸

In the new millennium, while not abolishing the “Samanids’ successors” references, the Tajik elite doubled down on the claims to an Aryan ancestry. In 2001, along with the tenth anniversary of Independence, the Tajik government mandated the celebration of 2,700 years of “Avesta” – Zoroastrianism’s holy book, presented as the most ancient example of Tajiks’ Aryan scriptural heritage.⁹ The Aryan theme had occupied the center-stage in the intellectual discourse of Tajikistan’s academia and political leadership in the early 2000s and ultimately culminated in the proclamation of 2006 as the year celebrating the Aryan heritage of the Tajik nation. President Rahmon argued that “[t]he multi-millennial civilization of the Aryan race” was able to survive and reach present-day humanity “solely due to the beautiful and comprehensive” Tajik/Farsi language, which should serve as point of pride and immense responsibility for the successors (heirs) of this ancient civilization.¹⁰

⁸ See E. Marat, “Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: The Creation of National Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 1 (2008): 12-24; M. Laruelle, “The return of the Aryan myth: Tajikistan in search of a secularized national ideology,” *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 1 (2007): 51-70; Blakkisrud and Nozimova, “History-writing.”

⁹ See “Sukhanroni bakhshida ba 10-solagii Istiqloliyati Jumhurii Tojikiston,” *Khadamoti Matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, September 8, 2001, <http://president.tj/node/15140> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

¹⁰ “Sukhanroni ba munosibati 12-solagii Istiqloliyati Jumhurii Tojikiston va 1000-solagii zodruzi Nosiri Khusrav,” *Khadamoti Matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, September 8, 2003 <http://president.tj/node/6643> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

However, while these historical projects lingered on, their lasting impact on the public's national consciousness remained debatable and elusive.¹¹ Scholars saw the shortcoming of these largely secular events in their inability to engage the religious identity inherent to the post-Soviet Tajik public sphere.¹² Since 2009, the Tajik government's new nation-building approach has been to embrace the religious identity but maintaining that there is an authentic Tajik way of practicing Islam. Gender normativity, an expected social behavior and demeanor based on one's gender, is a quintessential aspect of the nation-building project in Tajikistan. To this date this normativity has not been systematically studied. In this paper, I analyze the Tajik ethno-religious nation-building project with its distinct emphasis on a set of the particular national gender norms.

My work complements the growing body of scholarship and research, which looks at gender issues and nationalism in the context of Central Asia, by providing a detailed analysis of the official narrative on women in Tajikistan. Some of the notable studies in this area include Roche's work on the Tajik government's policies and narratives on motherhood, Suyarkulova's research on the gendered aspects of national clothing in Kyrgyzstan, Kudaibergenova's work on nationalization of bodies and representations of femininity and so on.¹³

¹¹ See Marat, "Imagined Past."

¹² See for example: K. Nourzhanov, "Nation-building and Political Islam in Post-Soviet Tajikistan," in *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia*, ed. M. Omelicheva (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 71-90; J. Heathershaw and E. Herzig, "Introduction: The Sources of Statehood in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011): 5-19.

¹³ See: S. Roche, "A sound family for a healthy nation: motherhood in Tajik national politics and society," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 207-224; M. Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the

In the following sections I provide an overview of the ethno-religious nation-building project that is currently being promoted in the post-Soviet, post-Civil War Tajikistan. Then, I outline a theoretical framework on nationalism and gender and analyze the gender-specific aspects of the contemporary ethno-religious national project by zooming in on the three dimensions (a biological, political and cultural) in which women in Tajikistan are (re-) producing the Tajik nation. My analysis presents gender as an intersection of nationalism and models for a patriotic womanhood and authentic religiosity expressed through tangible reproductive, behavioral, and sartorial practices.

This research is based on qualitative content analysis of various primary data, such as official state laws and government documents, speeches of the President and other state officials, and state and independent media publications. While this approach makes it possible to identify some central themes in the official discourse, the reception aspect, which could be improved through an ethnographic research, remains outside of the purview of this research paper. I recognize this limitation. Hence, my findings are not representative of the whole population of Tajikistan. Indeed, by providing a window into a current discourse on national gender norms and roles, my paper demonstrates that critical issues and local identities in Tajikistan, as elsewhere, are being constantly contested, negotiated, and reframed.

nation: gender and politics of dress in contemporary Kyrgyzstan,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 247-265; D. Kudaibergenova, “Between the state and the artist: representations of femininity and masculinity in the formation of ideas of the nation in Central Asia,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 225-246.

Ethno-religious national project

In the early 2000s, the Tajik government's nation-building politics had been pronouncedly divorced from Islam, the self-professed religion of the predominant majority of the country's population.¹⁴ This period, described as a "domestic détente," witnessed the development of the Tajik religious field into a heterogenous and vibrant space with a salient measure of intellectual (religious and political) diversity.¹⁵ At the time, the state officials and government operatives regarded Islam neither as an ally nor as foe, but mainly as a nuisance. For example, Safarov (then the Deputy Director of the Center for Strategic Studies, a government think-tank) stated that national projects had to be mobilizational, and did not need to have an Islamic seal of approval:

We have a different approach. We do not compare it with Islam and do not wait for what Islamists have to say. It's not important to us what they have to say. We do what we have to do: develop our nation and national statehood. We don't care if that's something that the imams want. We don't ask them [for approval], [it's] they [who] must modernize their religious outlook [and adapt] to new realities in Tajikistan.¹⁶

By the late 2000s, the official approach has changed as it became obvious that the influence of Islam within the society of Tajikistan was not only not waning but, by most

¹⁴ On the analysis of the earlier nation-building projects see: Laruelle, "The return"; Marat, "Imagined Past"; Blakkisrud and Nozimova, "History-writing."

¹⁵ See Nozimova and Epkenhans, "The Transformation."

¹⁶ See P. Shozimov and R. Khaydarov (eds.), *Dinamika razvitiya nacional'nykh proektov v Central'noy Azii: Materialy Seminara* (Dushanbe: Irfon, 2006), 127.

measures, growing. Realizing the consequences of promoting non-Islamic, and at times anti-Islamic narratives, the state shifted its approach. The explanations for the change in state politics were laced with the narratives of Islamist danger, as demonstrated, for example, by the following excerpt written by Kholiki and Rakhimov:

Experience shows that ignoring of the “Islamic factor” is fraught with the explosion of Islamic extremism and terrorism and can lead to renouncing of any ideology but Islamic fundamentalism and to attempts of overthrowing of constitutional order and establishment of Sharia law and Islamic government. By being the religion of the majority of the country’s population, Islam turned out to be a significant factor in the life of the state, which presence can’t be ignored. Thus, starting from 2000s the Government of Tajikistan took on the course to better relations with Islam.¹⁷

Kholiki and Rakhimov, assert that there was an emergent need to make a “sensible use of” and harness a “positive potential of the Muslim religion,” especially in the spheres of “peacebuilding, culture-creating and politically-stabilizing power of Islam” and to implement this potential in the “moral-spiritual education/upbringing of the nation.”¹⁸ The authors identified this turn as *novyy ‘etap* (new stage) in the formation of the Tajik national identity.¹⁹

¹⁷ A. Kholiki and N. Rakhimov, “Novyy ‘etap formirovaniya nacional’noy ideii v

Tadzhikistane,” *Vestnik Tadzhijskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta prava, biznesa i politiki. Seriya gumanitarnykh nauk* 38, no. 2 (2009): 106.

¹⁸ Ibid, 107.

¹⁹ In addition to the translation provided in the text, the word *‘etap* in Russian (a French borrowing) has another meaning referring to destinations along the transportation route of the

In 2009, the Tajik government began to fuse the Tajik ethnic identity that hitherto was predominantly defined in cultural, linguistic and historical terms, with the religious one. This process of integrating a sanitized and ideologically conservative Islamic narrative with the historic national project included, among others, a spectacular year-long events to celebrate the Year of *Imomi A'zam* (refers to Abu Hanifa – 8th century scholar of Islamic jurisprudence and founder of the Hanafi Sunni school of law) and the adoption of the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations in 2009. The law spelled out a special recognition of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and its role in the “development of the national culture and spiritual life of the people of Tajikistan.”²⁰ Since then, the Tajik government had taken considerable measures to impose a standardized experience of Islam throughout the country by strengthening the role of the Committee on Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions and

prisoners to the prisons. Hence, by using the phrase “*novyy etap*” the authors gave way to an unintended double entendre, suggesting that the nation as a prisoner was *en route* to another ideological prison.

²⁰ See Zakon Respubliki Tadzhikistan o svobode sovesti i religioznykh ob'edneniyakh (from January 2, 2018 edition, No. 1497),

http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=197 (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

Rituals. Additionally, the Islamic Center achieved a considerable monopoly over the practice and interpretation of religion in both institutional and discursive areas.²¹

The emergent narrative of the ethno-religious national project legitimized the patriarchal political order centered around the figure of the President Rahmon.²² This narrative created explicit categories of domestic enemies (often with some unidentified “foreign masters”), who supposedly practice and/or interpret Islam differently from the state-sanctioned interpretation, a Tajikistan’s version of Sunni Hanafi Islamic normativity, and therefore become harbingers of subversive intents aimed at depriving the Tajik nation from its sovereignty and peace.²³ Hence,

²¹ See: Nozimova and Epkenhans, “The Transformation”; H. Zainiddinov, “The Changing Relationship of the Secularized State to Religion in Tajikistan,” *Journal of Church and State* 55, no. 3 (2013): 456-477.

²² Here I follow Sylvia Walby’s definition of public patriarchy, which “is based principally in public sites such as employment and the state.” S. Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 24. This process culminated in the adoption of the Law on *Peshvoi Millat* (The Leader of the Nation) in 2015. Related constitutional amendments were adopted in 2016. A. Sarkorova “Prezident Tadjikistana Rakhmon provozglashen liderom nacji,” *BBC Russian*, December 10, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/12/151210_tajikistan_national_leader (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

²³ See: Nozimova and Epkenhans, “The Transformation”; E. Lemon and F. Roberts, “Tajikistan: From Reconciliation to Post-Reconciliation,” in *Political Regimes and Neopatrimonialism in*

on the part of the governing elite, there had been a significant turn from viewing Islam as an inconvenience to realizing that Islam could be instrumental in peace-building and ethical upbringing, to Islam becoming the very foundation of the Tajik national identity.

Since 2009, the Tajik state has been on a steady course to claim monopoly over the personal practice of Islam and religious interpretations and implications of Islamic practice on social and political life. Below I present a case that demonstrates how women became the symbolic repositories of the government's ethno-religious narrative. In the state-promoted national project, women's bodies became a canvas to demarcate both ethnic/cultural and religious/ideological boundaries.

Theoretical Framework: Gender and Nation-building

In the scholarship on nationalism, women and gendered aspects of national narratives have often been overlooked. For example, Gellner asserted that “two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation... nations are the artefacts of men's convictions and loyalties.”²⁴ Similarly, Anderson argued that it is the bonds of “fraternity” that made (self) sacrifice for the nation possible.²⁵ Thus, Thapar-Björkert convincingly argued that the distinguishing feature of the established theories of nationalism has been in the fact that those discussions “have been primarily *by men about men*” (emphasis in the

Central Asia: A Sociology of Power Perspective, eds. F. Izquierdo-Brichs and F. Serra-Massaansalvador (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 199-247.

²⁴ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7.

²⁵ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections in the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 7.

original).²⁶ The much-needed intervention in the theorization of the women in the nation-building processes began in the late 1980s. Since then, the research and writing by Yuval-Davis, Anthias, Walby and Kandiyoti, among others, significantly advanced our understanding of the national projects as inherently gendered constructs.²⁷ Such works provided insights into how women become physical, ideological, and cultural (re-)producers of national boundaries. They also exemplified how women can use national projects to carve out ways for a greater participation in the national politics. Importantly, this research direction also contributed to conceptualizations of the relationship between masculinity and nationalism.²⁸

Yuval-Davis argued that nationalism and gender were mutually informative and proposed to view national projects as “multiplex,” where “different dimensions would be emphasized in particular historical moments or by particular segments within the national collectivity.”²⁹ The author identified three dimensions of nationalist projects and argued that specific gender

²⁶ S. Thapar-Björkert, “Gender, Nations, and Nationalisms” in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, eds. G. Waylen et al. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), p. 806.

²⁷ See: N. Yuval-Davis and F. Anthias, *Woman-nation-state* (London: Macmillan, 1989); N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: SAGE, 1997); S. Walby “Gender, nations and states in the global era,” *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 4 (2000): 523-540; D. Kandiyoti, “Identity and its discontents: Women and the nation,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1991): 429-443.

²⁸ See: C. Enloe, *Bananas, beaches, and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

²⁹ N. Yuval-Davis, “Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations,” *Nar. umjet.* 40, no. 1 (2003): 11.

relations can play an important role in their shaping. These dimensions include: 1) a genealogical one – centered around “the myth of common origin or shared blood/genes”; 2) a cultural one – focused on “symbolic heritage provide by language and/or religion and/or other customs and traditions [that] are constructed as the ‘essence’ of the ‘nation’”; and 3) a citizenship-related one – as factors “determining the boundaries of the nations and thus relat[ing] it directly to notions of state sovereignty and specific territoriality.”³⁰ Further analysis of Tajikistan’s national project that emphasizes not only the ethnic but also the particular religious heritage, demonstrates the salient role the gender plays across all three dimensions.

In the context of Central Asia, there is a long history of the strategy to connect political loyalty, ethnic and religious identity with female personal space and behavior. In particular, this process became most evident starting from 1927, that Shoshana Keller called “[t]he watershed year,” when Bolsheviks’ party, determined to end Central Asian “backwardness” and resolved to “put Muslims on the path to Communist enlightenment,” launched the initiative by mass public unveilings.³¹

Douglas Northrop argued that in the process of creating the Central Asian nationalities by the Soviet leaders, it was paramount to come up with some checklist of features that

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ S. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), xv; A. Edgar, “Bolshevism, Patriarchy and the Nation: the Soviet ‘Emancipation’ of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 252-272.

distinguished one nation from another.³² Language had proven to be a bad indicator, as most Turkic nations were linguistically similar and in the multilingual centers, like Bukhoro and Samarqand, people often spoke both, Turkic and Persian. Thus, eventually the spotlight fell on women and “gendered patterns of family behavior”.³³ In particular, Northrop argues that “[h]aving long served as cultural emblems, women became the normative figures for each nationality: they stood for the inner domain of family, home, and spirituality, where the roots of cultural identity were taken to lie.”³⁴ Yet, because Communist party leaders declared these gendered customs and behaviors as “primitive and oppressive” they reasserted the view that indigenous people were uncivilized and in need of transformation through women.³⁵

Unsurprisingly, in the post-Soviet Central Asian national narratives, women and gender roles occupy a central role. Observing the emergent political trends in Central Asia, Deniz Kandiyoti noted that the recently independent states launched sweeping “nationalizing” campaigns “ranging from language policies and revised national histories, geared to consolidating the hegemony of their respective titular nations, to new iconographies for successor regimes,” and calls to bring back “traditional families” were part of these efforts, as well.³⁶ Observing Uzbekistan’s particular turn to “conservative gender ideologies,” Kandiyoti

³² D. Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 50.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58

³⁶ Kandiyoti, “The politics of gender,” 610.

suggested that it was a part of multifold strategy: on the one hand, it was a display of true adherence to the gender ideals of Islam, which was regaining moral ground. On the other hand, it was an effort to delimit a “national and therefore benign” Islam from the militant, foreign, translational “and therefore perilous” forms of Islam.³⁷ Noting that exactly what qualified as authentic traditions in a nation-state created by the Soviet (colonial) state was problematic in itself, Kandiyoti maintained that:

... national traditions are being actively reinvented and self-consciously deployed to serve new ideological purposes [of the newly independent political regimes]. Discourses on national independence can be seen to perform a dual function. They attempt to distance new regimes from their Soviet past by casting it as a colonial encounter that repressed a national essence that is now being revitalized. They also strive to create new imaginaries of the nation that enhance social solidarity in increasingly fractured societies. Gender plays a central role in both these processes.³⁸

Using the insights from the gender and nationalism theories, I argue that in the state-sanctioned ethno-religious national project women carry the burden of national (re-) production by becoming repositories of the Tajik nationhood. This form of nationhood combines not only a particular historical, cultural and linguistic heritage but also a specific practice and regulation of Islam. Women in Tajikistan have become instrumental to defining the particular contours of the genealogical, cultural, and citizenship dimensions of the current ethno-religious national project.

³⁷ Ibid, 611.

³⁸ Ibid, 616.

In the following paragraphs, I analyze how and in what ways, women in Tajikistan are tasked with bearing, rearing and wearing the Tajik nation.

Bear the Tajik Nation

In Tajikistan's contemporary political imagination encapsulated by the ethno-religious national project, not only the nation is seen as a woman, but also each individual woman is seen as a national possession. As a result, the matters concerning female bodies, especially in the areas concerning the reproductive issues, are highly politicized. Yet, women's political activism is highly discouraged. For example, the state's transformed the International Women's Day, celebrated annually on March 8th, into a Mother's Day. In Tajikistan (and the former-Soviet space), the International Women's Day has lost the political connotation it had in the Soviet times. Rather, it had turned into a cultural celebration of femininity, a hybrid between Mother's Day and Valentine's Day. In Tajikistan, the formal change is not only about semantics, but also reflective of the national project where Tajik woman's role as a mother had become a cornerstone of the official state's narrative on women as a part of the contemporary ethno-religious national project.

In the state-promoted official discourse, women in Tajikistan continue to be almost always, singularly, defined by their biological, reproductive role. For example, the expression “*zan – modar*” (woman – mother) is a recurring collocation in President Rahmon and other officials' speeches and addresses. Moreover, in this narrative, women, not just as individual mothers but as communal noun, as in national mothers, have to “secure the production of an *oilai solim* (sound family).”³⁹ As Roche observes, national legislation has been amended to allow

³⁹ Roche, “A sound family,” 215

extensive state measures with the aim “to create healthy families and ensure that only healthy children are born.”⁴⁰ These measures included the state’s policies on reproductive control, mandatory pre-marital virginity and health checks, and prohibition of marriages among close relatives, carriers of certain genetic diseases or mutations, as well as, persons with drug addictions or some forms of viral diseases (e.g., HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis C).

Having a healthy nation in this state narrative means to be free of disabilities, which are seen as an immense social and familial burden. Notably, individual disabilities are necessarily seen as female-borne: such narratives almost always specify *nuqsu illathoi modarzodi* (deformities and deficiencies borne by mothers) and preventing those is considered as being of paramount importance for the state policy.⁴¹ For example, President Rahmon justified the policies of pre-marriage mandatory medical examinations, including virginity checks, by claiming that they will prevent genetic diseases. He argued that potentially millions of his compatriots suffer *zindagii ma ’yusonavu talkh* (a life of misery and hopelessness) because of the 165 thousands of *ma ’yubon* (persons with disabilities).⁴²

The president did not limit his arguments only to medical and genetic fields. To satisfy the religious aspirations and sensibilities, he also presents evidence from Islamic traditional sources meant to support his arguments. He used a vague reference to an Islamic source, a verse from Persian ruler and poet Keykavus, and an unspecified statement from the Al-Azhar

⁴⁰ Ibid, 216

⁴¹ “Sukhanroni ba munosibati Ruzi modar,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, March 6, 2015, <http://www.president.tj/node/8349> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁴² Ibid.

university's ulama.⁴³ Therefore, he argued that Tajik people should draw appropriate conclusions from the medical evidence and the counsel of the ancestors to make sure that “the *genofond* (gene pool) of our dear nation is protected and healthy generations keep making our families happier.”⁴⁴ Following the president's urging, the amendments stipulating mandatory and extensive medical examinations, which include virginity checks before marriage and a ban on marriages between relatives, were adopted.⁴⁵

A woman's role as a national mother could only be fulfilled if she bears male children and devotes them to the Tajik nation, since only males can be worthy representatives of the nation. In a typical speech the president praised Tajik mothers as those who have birthed the nation's *farzandoni farzona* (sage offspring), such as Rudaki, Ferdowsi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ismail Somoni to Jadidist Ahmadi Donish and Soviet-era names as Ayni, Ghafurov, and Tursunzoda, most renowned cultural, scientific and political dignitaries. Rahmon also mentioned that there were also “thousands” of other “honorable and glorified men who are now considered

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The practice of performing of pre-marital virginity checks as part of pre-marital medical examinations has already led to fatalities. See: M. Ahmadi and M. Muhammadrajab, “Nomi zanu shavhare, ki khudkushi kardand, ma'lum shud,” Radioi Ozodi, July 16, 2018, <https://www.ozodi.org/a/tajik-couple-committed-suicide-tajikistan/29367203.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021); also “Virginity Tests Spark Debate in Tajikistan After Tragic Deaths,” RFE/RL, August 14, 2018 <https://www.rferl.org/a/virginity-tests-spark-debate-in-tajikistan-after-tragic-deaths/29433097.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

our – Tajiks’ – pride.”⁴⁶ Thus, when the national gene pool is discussed, it is implied that the most worthy representatives of the nation can only be male; females are recognized only (if at all) as those who have endowed the nation with their glorified, homeland-loving sons.

The flip side of the discussion around the issue of preserving the Tajik gene pool is a growing call to prevent Tajik women from marrying foreigners. In 2011, the country’s Family Code was amended to require foreigners who want to marry Tajik nationals to live in the country for at least a year, sign a marriage contract, and provide their Tajik spouse with the means of existence and a place to live (e.g., purchase an apartment).⁴⁷ These legal provisions have been subject to a criticism by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) as violating the norms stipulated in the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, including the right to choose one’s own spouse, to which Tajikistan is a signatory.⁴⁸ Representatives of the Ministry of Justice of Tajikistan continued to give positive

⁴⁶ “Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo namoyandagoni zanoni mamlakat,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, March 7, 2006, <http://president.tj/node/313> (last accessed March 10, 2021).

⁴⁷ A. Sarkorova, “Tadzhikistan vvodit ogranicheniya na braki s inostrancami,” *BBC Russian Service*, January 27, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2011/01/110126_tajikistan_curtails_foreign_marriages_anora (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁴⁸ M. Ahmadi, “SMM khostori sabuki dar izdivoji dukhtaroni tojik bo khorijiho shud,” *Radioi Ozodi*, August 29, 2017, <https://www.ozodi.org/a/un-tajikistan/28702732.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

assessments to the decreasing rate of the Tajik women's intermarriage with the foreigners, arguing that it is an effective measure to prevent human trafficking.⁴⁹

Some state officials argued that restrictions preventing Tajik women's marrying foreigners were a way of maintaining cultural, biological, and religious purity of the Tajik nation. For example, Saodat Amirshoeva, the only woman to hold the rank of General Major, and two-time member of *Majlisi Namoyandagon* (lower chamber of the Parliament), argued that allowing women to marry foreigners, especially of representatives of religions other than Islam, would be to the detriment of the Tajik gene pool. She said:

I am against of Tajik girls marrying men of other religions, or representatives of other nations – Russians, Chinese or others, that will not bring benefit to our traditions and customs... I am of opinion that Tajik Muslim men can marry women of other religions, but I am against of Tajik Muslim girls marrying men of other religions, especially the Chinese... We have our own nation, our own traditions, customs and rituals. Sharia and Islam, that we are developing today, if other people do not follow those, they should not be allowed to marry [Tajik women].⁵⁰

Another media outlet reported Amirshoeva promising to restrict the possibility of marriages among Tajik women and foreigners. She said, “[w]e, Tajik women, as Muslims do not have the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ F. Umarzoda, “S. Amirshoeva: tadjichki dolzhny vykhodit’ zamuzh tol’ko za musul’man,” *ASIA-Plus*, July 3, 2013, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20130703/s-amirshoeva-tadjichki-dolzhny-vykhodit-zamuzh-tolko-za-musulman> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

right to marry men of other religions. As a member of Parliament (deputy), I promise you, that although the Constitution guarantees the freedom of marriage, I, God willing, will try to take measures against this phenomenon.”⁵¹

Similar views have been expressed in the larger public sphere. For example, the editor-in-chief of *SSSR* (USSR) newspaper, which has a large audience (reportedly, around 50,000 readers) and is considered independent, Sayyofi Mizrob (aka Sayf Dostiev), has recently expressed his outrage to the “fashionable trend” of Tajik women – whom he called *jalabho* (whores) – marrying *shavhari begona* (alien husband). He wrote, “I know [it’s] democracy, freedom, and so on. But for me, it is an affront when a Tajik woman marries a Russian, an American, a European, an Afghan, an Iranian, a Chinese or a Pakistani... Death to *javonmardone* (honorable men) that allow their women to marry *ghayritojik* (non-Tajiks).”⁵² Recalling the

⁵¹ “Saodat Amirshoeva: Tadzhihiki ne imeyut nikakogo prava vykhodit’ zamuzh za nemusul’man,” *Ozodagon*, July 1, 2013 <https://catoday.org/public/index.php/tjru/saodat-amirshoeva-tadzhihiki-ne-imeyut-nikakogo-prava-vykhodit-zamuzh-za-nemusulman> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁵² S. Mizrob, “Mo va jalabhoi mo,” *SSSR*, July 25, 2019, http://cccp.tj/tj/component/k2/item/6308-mo-va-jalabhoi-mo.html?fbclid=IwAR1FwoWJY_rFJL82zQVaVkbUIlc5rp9CWXN4aE-agfV3hkwzfTvTd23_iEc (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

legends of the *Childukhtaron* (forty girls) mountain range in Khatlon region of Tajikistan,⁵³ Mizrob concluded that “Tajik ladies fought the invaders and demanded from God to be turned into stones, so that they won’t become subjects to sexual violations of Alexander [Alexander the Great], mongols, tatars and Russian... A Tajik woman would rather turn into *but* (a lifeless stone figure) than become a wife to a foreigner!”⁵⁴

Moreover, Mizrob’s nationalist vitriol also carries a particular racial narrative that is pronouncedly anti-Mongol. “The beautiful faces that we have, my dear Tajik readers, are thanks to the vow made in Avesta,” writes Mizrob, “to maintain kin-only marriage... If it wasn’t for that vow... our faces would resemble those of Mongols or Chinese.”⁵⁵

Such concerns about the racial and ethnic purity and the nation’s quality centered around its physical reproducers make women crucial in defining the boundaries of nations. As the assumptions of who belongs to the nation and who does not are often passed from one generation to another, and often, especially in ethnic discourses, the most common way to join a community is to be born into it.⁵⁶ Therefore, the nationalist projects that emerge from such hegemonic discourses can encourage or discourage either having children or not, or having children of certain sex and excellent health, or having children only with approved partners.

⁵³ On *Childukhtaron* mountains and legends see: T. Rasul-zade, “Nepokorennye. I pochti nedostupnye,” *Fergana*, October 26, 2019 <https://fergana.news/articles/111780/> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁵⁴ S. Mizrob, “Mo va.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Yuval-Davis, “Nationalist Projects,” 12.

These narratives link Tajikistan's national project to a Eugenicist discourse, where the nation's most important element is its quality.⁵⁷ In such discourse, the quality of the nation is not to be ensured by improving the quality of life of adults and children, rather the goal is "to pre-determine the quality of the nation via 'nature' in the way of selective breeding."⁵⁸ Hence, the efforts to control Tajik women's marriage choices is an attempt to maintain the quality and the purity of the ethnic blood, religious belonging and particular cultural/racial heritage.

Gendered national realities refer to a socio-political context, where an ethno-religious national project implies a distinct set of gender-based expectations. In Tajikistan, these realities also indicate that an important part of maintaining a pure gene pool and quality of the nation has to do with the control of female sexuality. Instead of addressing economic and social drivers behind the problem of prostitution and sex trafficking, the Tajik government emphasizes the moral incompatibilities of such practices with the role of women as bearers of the nation. By implication, the women who "taint their wombs" by participating in sex out of wedlock or sex for money certainly cannot be seen as good mothers to the nation's future generations.⁵⁹ Although prostitution is not criminalized, it is punishable as an administrative offence by heavy fines (USD 150-250) and/or up to 15 days of detention.⁶⁰ Frequent morality raids conducted by

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 13.

⁵⁹ See for instance: I. Sharifjonzoda, "Jurmi modar – dardi farzand," *Haqiqati Sughd*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.hakikati-sugd.tj/index.php/social/3553-urmi-modar-dardi-farzand> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁶⁰ The charges for solicitation and procurement are criminalized in Tajikistan.

the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), bring in sex workers into police stations, where they are photographed, fingerprinted, and registered as *zanoni badakhloq* (immoral/bad behaving women) involved in *jinoyathoi akhloqi* (crimes of behavioral nature).⁶¹ In 2018, reportedly, the MIA had a list of around 6,000 sex workers.⁶²

The objective and goal of this list are not clear. Yet, in 2014 when the practice of the sex workers registry was initiated, Ramazon Rakhimzoda, the Minister of Internal Affairs, expressed concern about the high rates of divorces among young couples, and suggested that grooms-to-be could use the database to investigate and verify the moral standing of their potential brides.⁶³ Increasingly, social media are become fertile grounds for harassment of women who are seen as inappropriate (not only sex workers); the images and videos of women are being published on

⁶¹ “Amaliyoti ziddi zanoni fohisha dar shahri Khujand,” *Akhbor.com*, January 5, 2018, <http://akhbor.com/-p4734-117.htm> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁶² S. Ruhulloh, “Ruykhat” – i taqriban 6000 zani “badakhloq” dar Tojikiston,” *Radioi Ozodi*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.ozodi.org/a/29650444.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁶³ “Pulisi Tojikiston fehristi ‘elektrunuki ruspiyonro omoda mekunad,” *BBC*, June 5, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2014/06/140605_mm_prostitution (last accessed on March 10, 2021). While the registry hasn’t been made public, the Ministry of Internal Affairs regularly publishes the pictures and names, as well as details of the cases of the men and women implicated in “amoral” behaviors. See M. Ahmadi, “Nashri aksi muttahamon. Shevai islohi jomea yo angushnamo kardani onho? Radioi Ozodi, August 20, 2020 <https://www.ozodi.org/a/islohi-jomea-yo-angushtnamo-kardani-bozdoshshudaho/30793508.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

Instagram and Telegram channels along with their personal and their families contact information.⁶⁴

In the official national discourse, women necessarily belong to a particular ethnic group – Tajik – and practice Islam within the state-defined religious parameters. The state promotes a sanitized interpretation of Hanafi Islam version that is vetted by the Committee on Religious Affairs, *Markazi Islomshinosi* (Center for Islamic Studies) and *Markazi Islomi* (Islamic Center). In March of 2015, a news report on the state TV claimed that local sex workers started wearing *hijab* (female Islamic head covering), to make them more attractive to potential clients and increases their fees.⁶⁵ Such rhetoric fits well into the greater framework of the ethno-religious narrative stipulating that *hijab* is a foreign (inauthentic) sartorial practice (see below). The women who wear *hijab*, therefore, are seen as (re-)producing foreign ideas and practices uncharacteristic of the Tajik women. In 2017, Idigul Qosimzoda, the head of the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, said that she personally witnessed women who were wearing *hijab* to be involved in solicitation. Qosimzoda felt “disgusted,” and concluded that

⁶⁴ M. Tursunzoda, “Kto i pochemu uchit tadhichek pravil’no zhit’?” *ASIA-Plus*, January 23, 2021, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20210123/kto-i-pochemu-uchit-tadhichek-pravilno-zhit> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁶⁵ “Islam-Fearing Tajikistan Says Hijab Is for Prostitutes,” *Eurasianet*, April 1, 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/islam-fearing-tajikistan-says-hijab-is-for-prostitutes> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

“when women are following ideals that are *chuzhdye* (alien) to the Tajik culture, then even *razvrat* (harlotry) becomes a norm for them.”⁶⁶

These multifaceted observations indicate that in the contemporary ethno-religious national project in Tajikistan, women have to carry the burden of physical reproduction of the nation. Women’s bodies and their role as mothers are further exploited to maintain ethnic and religious boundaries, enforce Eugenicist policies aimed at creating a disability- and disease-free society, and ensuring belonging to a particular religious heritage. To guarantee the “quality” and “purity” of the Tajik nation’s racialized concept(-ion), the state has initialized official institutional/medical examinations, morality registries, and created barriers preventing women from marrying foreigners, all the while cementing into the national consciousness a view that women are, first and foremost, the carriers of nationalized wombs tasked with (re-)producing glorified and patriotic Tajik sons.

Rear the Tajik nation

In the official state rhetoric of contemporary Tajikistan, women – mothers are depicted as physical reproducers of the nation, and more importantly, as transmitters of the national identity. Women are expected to link the generations and channel the historical heritage and proper cultural traditions and practices to their offspring through their breastmilk. In this section, I

⁶⁶ “Glava zhenskogo komiteta otkrovenno vyskazalas’ o zhenschinakh v khidzhabakh,” *ASIA-Plus*, January 27, 2017, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20170127/glava-zhenskogo-komiteta-zamolvila-slovo-o-zhentshinah-v-hidzhabah> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

investigate the state's discourse on Tajik women as instillers of the Tajik national identity and sense of patriotic duty in the future generations.

A uniting feature of the previous historic national identity projects (e.g. Samanid or Aryan) has been their distinctly intellectual basis. It was the poets, writers, historians, and archeologists – the intelligentsia – who were considered to be the most responsible agents in defining the cultural heritage and properly transmitting and instilling national identity in the larger nation in a process of *khudshinosi*, a process of self-(re)discovery. In a 2002 speech, Emomali Rahmon, made it clear that the burden of nation-building is on the intellectuals:

I see each *fardi ziyoi* (member of the intelligentsia) as a particle of sun that by their self-burning, self-sacrifice and consistent efforts enlighten the world, warm up the hearts of the people for a better tomorrow, and light up the candle of hope. They start discussions about nationally important questions and counsel their contemporaries to act in a constructive manner for the betterment of the nation, Homeland and humanity. This is the main and unchanging mission of the true intellectuals in front of their nation.⁶⁷

In 2002, the very conception of the future direction of the post-Soviet Tajik nation was actively deliberated, created, and constructed. In such context, Rahmon made it clear that the works and words of the intellectuals literally define and bring into being the Tajik nation. Moreover, President Rahmon consistently repeated that the intelligentsia was responsible for creation of the nation and ensuring national unity. He insisted that “[i]t is imperative for the

⁶⁷ “Sukharoni dar muloqot bo namoyandagoni ziyoiyoni mamlakat,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, March 20, 2002, <http://president.tj/node/6697> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

intelligentsia to instill the importance of nation and state in the public consciousness” and that the intelligentsia should “propagandize people to value the state and national statehood.”⁶⁸

During the second decade of the 21st century, however, the task of channeling, protecting, and instilling Tajik cultural heritage, identity and loyalty to state and nation, previously an exclusive domain of the intelligentsia, was increasingly transferred to women. This task came to be represented as an essential part of a woman’s life-long mission of being a national mother in service to the Tajik state. In his 2009 speech delivered on the Mother’s Day, president Rahmon praised Tajik women-mothers as worthy of public respect because they responsibly fulfill their “motherly mission” and “duty as citizens” by “raising children in the supreme spirit of devotion to Homeland, instilling thinking and national essence, strengthening national self-realization and self-determination, as well as, patriotism and love for Homeland.”⁶⁹

While it is imperative for a Tajik woman to have and raise male, patriotic child(ren), her role in educating and raising proper daughters is also spelled out clearly. In one address, the President instructed Tajik women to educate their daughters in a framework of traditional gender roles and norms:

Dear mothers, you have an enormous role and impact in the act of upbringing of children, especially your daughters, in a spirit of patience and tolerance, respect for righteous

⁶⁸ “Sukharoni dar muloqot bo namoyandagoni ziyoiyoni mamlakat,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, March 20, 2004, <http://president.tj/node/6614> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁶⁹ “Payomi tabriki ba munosibati Ruzi baynalmillalii zanon,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, March 6, 2009, <http://president.tj/node/316> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

national rituals and traditions, including respect and admiration of elders, economy and frugality, counseling them to the virtuous path in life and advising to create a healthy and stable family.⁷⁰

The Tajik leader's rhetoric defines the true mission of Tajik women-mothers to be educators and transmitters of national identity, national language (mother-tongue), protectors of the true national values and culture, authentic practice of Islam, and instillers of patriotism. The following statement exemplifies the current national project: "[t]he greatness of the woman – mother, first of all, is embodied in that she is the guardian of language, history and culture of the nation."⁷¹ In this project, every woman's national and motherly duty and life mission is to raise proper ethnic Tajiks who able to speak the titular language, are aware of the national culture, and eager to serve the amalgamated conception of nation-state-homeland.

In 2011, Tajikistan codified official legislation about parental duties in the Law "On Responsibility of Father and Mother in the Education and Upbringing of a Child." This Law required parents to give their children "righteous names in accordance with national values," limit religious education, and raise children in the spirit of respect to Homeland, law, and

⁷⁰ "Payom ba iftikhori Ruzi modar," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, March 7, 2016, <http://president.tj/node/10858> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁷¹ "Tabriknomai Prezidenti Jumhurii Tojikiston, Peshvoi millat, muhtaram 'Emomali Rahmon bakhshida ba Ruzi modar," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, March 7, 2018, <http://president.tj/node/17199> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

national values.⁷² In 2019, the Law has been amended to require parents to raise children with the recognition that national interests prevail over personal ones. While this law does not necessarily place a greater onus on women as mothers, in the official state does. In the official rhetoric and public discourse, women-mothers' *risolati aslii khash* (most essential mission) is centered on the "upbringing of the future generation."⁷³ In 2019, Qosimzoda, head of the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, expressed this view saliently. According to her, the Tajik women with "*simoi zeboi tojiki* (beautiful Tajik faces)" and speaking in *lafzi shirinu nobi tojiki* (sweet and pure Tajik) are trying day and night to effectively implement the law on parental responsibility and raise healthy, conscientious, honorable representatives of the Tajik homeland.⁷⁴

In the official rhetoric, women's role as cultural reproducers of the nation includes their role as guardians and the most active participants of the national and ethnic rituals and traditions. For example, in a 2017 speech dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the Law "On Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations and Rituals," president Rahmon noted that "it is especially women and

⁷² Law on "Responsibility of father and mother in the education and upbringing of a child" (from April 4, 2019), http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=257 (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁷³ "Tabriknomai Prezidenti"

⁷⁴ "Idigul Qosimzoda: "Fazoi solimu orom va pur az muhabbati oila az sarishtakoriii zan vobasta ast," *Khovar*, March 6, 2019, <http://khovar.tj/2019/03/idigul-osimzoda-fazoi-solimu-orum-va-pur-az-mu-abbati-oila-az-sarishtakoriii-zan-vobasta-ast/> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

mothers, who can make a greater contribution in the regulation of rituals and traditions.”⁷⁵ The president also lamented that it is often women who are found to be the culprits of the violations of the said law.⁷⁶ Then, in a patronizing (and patriarchal) tone reflective of Tajikistan’s gendered realities, Rahmon called on women to value the work of their spouses and not cause their husbands psychological distress by overspending for the organization of celebrations. He further reminded women that extravagance is frowned upon in the Qur’an (Holy text in Islam), and the Hanafi school (school of Islamic jurisprudence and interpretation). Insisting also that the glorious and sage ancestors saw frugality and obedience as essential characteristics of the Tajik women, he cited a following verse from Sa’adi of Shiraz:

A righteous, obedient and frugal wife,
Will turn a *dervish* man into a *shah*.⁷⁷

In the contemporary ethno-national project in Tajikistan, women reproduce national identity in a number of complex ways. As the bearers of the collective honor, the state’s control of women’s sexuality and other aspects of their reproductive health and childbearing reproduces ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. At the same time, women-mothers are themselves cultural symbols. Tajik language is designated as *zaboni modari* (mother tongue), regardless

⁷⁵ “Sukharoni dar muloqot ba munosibati 10-solagii qabuli Qonuni Jumhurii Tojikiston “Dar borai tanzimi an’ana va jashnu marosimho dar Jumhurii Tojikiston,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, July 11, 2017, <http://president.tj/node/15749> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Zani khubi farmonbari porso, / Kunad mard darveshro podsho.

whether or not one's mother is indeed a native Tajik speaker.⁷⁸ Similarly, Tajik homeland, came to be ubiquitously equated with a woman in the common verbal construction of “*Vatan – Modar* (Homeland – Mother). Further, women's role as mothers includes an important task of being “intergenerational reproducers of the nation.”⁷⁹ In the state rhetoric, women-mothers are often described as *payvandgari naslho* (connectors/welders of the generations). Noteworthy, the state does not trust women with defining the national heritage. Rather, women's role is to be mouthpieces to voice, teach, and transfer the already defined by the state cultural norms, which are strengthened, for a sure measure, with a hefty dose of legal stipulations.

Wear the Tajik nation

On September 6, 2017 millions of mobile service users in Tajikistan received text messages (SMS) from their mobile service providers. These messages instructed users to “observe Tajik traditional clothes,” and show respect to national/traditional clothes. One of them, somewhat tautologically, stated “Let's make it a tradition to wear traditional clothes.”⁸⁰ These messages were sent out by the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs on the eve of the

⁷⁸ Tajik (and its different dialects) is considered native language for titular majority in Tajikistan. However, for significant ethnic and regional minorities, such as Uzbeks and Pamiris, Tajik is not a native language, making its categorization as “mother-tongue” presumptuous if not outright discriminatory.

⁷⁹ Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 80.

⁸⁰ “You've Got Veil: Millions of Text Messages Remind Tajiks to Obey New Dress Code,” *RFE/RL*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-text-messages-remind-obey-new-dress-code-hijab/28720266.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

annual Independence Day celebrations. In line with the policies of other official institutions, these messages heralded an important change that was going to affect the sartorial choices of all Tajikistan's citizens: the national dress requirements were going to be inscribed in the legal framework for the first time. Indeed, just days before this mass notification, the Law "On Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations and Rituals" was amended to introduce new responsibilities of individuals and legal entities "to protect elements of the national culture, including the state language and national clothing" during the weddings, festivities, and/or other communal events and gatherings.⁸¹ The law did not specify the details of these protections and left an ample room for bureaucratic interpretations, albeit resulting in significant financial penalties.⁸² While neither the law, nor the mobile messages specified women as particular targets of the campaign and restrictions, by implication, women became the wearers of the nation through Tajikistan's national dress.

The state's concern with the women's sartorial choices appears to be three-dimensional:

1) protection and representation of the national heritage; 2) control of sexuality and promotion of

⁸¹ See Law "On regulation of traditions, celebrations and rituals" (from August 28, 2017, no. 1461), http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=174&language=tj (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁸² See Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Tajikistan, Article 481: http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=4 (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

modesty and 3) warding off foreign/alien “radical Islamic” influences and ideologies.⁸³ Over the years, multiple state structures, including the Ministry of Education, Culture, the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, the State Committee on Religion and Regulation of Rituals and Traditions, and the Presidential Administration, were the vanguard of the wardrobe policing. Their active promotion of the issue indicated that female dress code and head-covering continued to occupy a centerstage in the contemporary national project.

As is the case in other Central Asian countries, in Tajikistan, the female national dress is considered a quintessential aspect of the national culture in contemporary Tajikistan. As a tangible symbol, a dress code demarcates the boundaries between those who belong or do not belong to the nation. In the official state rhetoric, the traditional female dress is a material cultural artefact that consistently reproduces the connection to the claimed historical heritage and feeds into the common origin myth.⁸⁴ Traditional clothing is often described as “*in'ikoskunanda* (a reflector/mirror) of history, culture, and traditions” that introduces the Tajik nation to the

⁸³ On politicization and contestation over female dress in Tajikistan see: S. Kasymova, “Atlas, chakan, khidzhab i mini-yubka...” *Fergana*, February 7, 2021

https://fergana.site/articles/121671/?fbclid=IwAR24SSAZo2uVjN9iA8sclYS9kQtKuCe3vqQmL LNT4Efe43KT0yo0BNuv_w4 (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁸⁴ Usually consists of loose kaftan-style dress made of colorful fabric with trousers made of matching fabric and some form of head-covering, usually a kerchief, tied at the nape of the neck, that leaves the neck and chin exposed.

world.⁸⁵ Hence, in the state’s national(ist) discourse, female traditional dress is conceived to be an unchanging cultural artefact, which has been preserved since the time immemorial: “national clothing ... [is] *yodgori* (relic) of *ajdodonamon* (our ancestors) that throughout *qarnho* (the eons) has not lost its charm and beauty.”⁸⁶ This connection to the ancestral heritage explains why in the recent years wearing of the Tajik national dress is mandated for women not only during the communal and or family-related celebrations and events but also in their places of work and study.

In 2018, the Minister of Education and Science, Nuriddin Said, signed an order that required all female teachers and female students to wear “typical national clothes” either made of *ikat* fabrics (*atlas* or *adras*) and/or containing *chakan* (traditional embroidery) for the whole month of March as a symbol of national pride. The order was sent out to all the regional sub-agencies of the Ministry, with the stated goal of “propagandizing traditional clothes, fostering aesthetics, reviving folk customs, paying tribute to traditions and values of the national culture and ancestors, and strengthening patriotic pride.”⁸⁷ By ensuring that the majority of women

⁸⁵ “Bozdid az Namoishgoi hunarhoi mardumi dar dehai Shahrinavi dehoti “Dehibaland”-i nohiyai Mu’minobod,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, September 10, 2019, <http://president.tj/node/21292> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁸⁶ M. Bobobekova, “Vaqte sukhan az libosi milli meravadd...” *Jumhuriyat*, January 15, 2019, http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=36533 (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁸⁷ Order of the Ministry of Education and science from March 2, 2018 <http://maorif.tj/storage/Dokument's/9ccb2179a8b01fe6f2659065d797d050.pdf> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

follow a traditional dress code, the state's nationalist discourse positioned women as the main object of national imagining. As a result, Tajik men would become a part of the nation only through an association with a woman who actively reproduces belonging to the national community by embodying its values through the dress code and performing other tasks, such as bearing and rearing the nation.

The Tajik national dress is also an appropriate symbol of both national and religious modesty. European dress, which sometimes is referred to as *rusi/urusi* (Russian) or *sovremenniy/hozirazon* (contemporary/modern) dress, is approved and often tacitly encouraged by the state officials as a professional (civil) uniform and an overt expression of political loyalty. Yet, the official rhetoric makes it clear that excesses in this respect will not be tolerated. In 2018 the Ministry of Culture produced the most comprehensive instruction manual for women, depicting age-appropriate clothes for the different occasions and settings (Figure 1). This manual lists the types of the clothes that are not appropriate for the Tajik women. These are as follows:

...European clothes that are half-naked, miniskirts, décolletage, tank tops, clothes from see-through fabrics. Also, it is not recommended [for women] to be in public places in *galoshi* (clogs) or slippers, underwear, house clothes (robes), form-fitting trousers, clothes that reveal curves, and those made of synthetic fabrics, as they are bad for health.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ R. Nur, “‘Dasturmali liboshoi tavsiyavi baroi dukhtaron va zanoni Tojikiston’. Riyoai on arjguzori ba sunnathoi milli va ‘ehtrom ba khalqu millat ast!’” *Khovar*, September 3, 2018, <https://khovar.tj/2018/09/dasturamali-libos-oi-tavsiyav-baroi-duhtaron-va-zanoni-to-ikiston->

For the majority of the population, including the urban intelligentsia and state-loyal religious authorities traditional dress represents *satri tojiki* (an authentic Tajik religious garb). For example, in 2018, while disagreeing with the U.S. State Department report that raised concerns over the violations of religious freedom in the Tajikistan, *Hoji Huseyn Musozoda*, the chairman of the Council of Ulama in the Sughd region, stated that the propaganda of the national dress cannot be a violation of the right to religious dress precisely because “in the course of the thousands of years the traditional/national dress has become our *satri milli* (national religious dress).”⁸⁹ In 2017, a similar view was expressed by *Mullo Haydar Sharifzoda*, the imam-khatib of the central mosque of Kulob, who stated that “the best *satr* (religious clothing) is the one that was worn by our mothers and grandmothers and the clothes that were worn by the blessed mother of Emomali Rahmon.”⁹⁰

[rioyai-on-ar-guzor-ba-sunnat-oi-mill-va-e-tirom-ba-hal-u-millat-ast/](#) (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁸⁹ M. Muhammad, “Mas’uloni umuri din: “Guzorishi Amriko ghayrivoqei ast,” *Radioi Ozodi*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.ozodi.org/a/tajik-officials-reaction-to-usa-annual-report-about-religious-freedom/28680059.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁹⁰ G. Ganj, “Mulloho guftand, ki zanho digar libosi tang mapushand,” *Radioi Ozodi*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.ozodi.org/a/tajik-national-dress-propaganda-in-tajikistan-mosque/25473550.html> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

In the official state rhetoric, traditional Tajik dress is also depicted as the antidote to the perceived threat of Islamic radicalism.⁹¹ *Hijab*, an Islamic head covering and clothing and modest religious dress, has occupied public imagination and considerable state resources for over a decade. The analysis of the official state discourse demonstrates that this particular form of modest religious clothing has become “the nemesis of [the] Tajik statehood.”⁹² The aforementioned manual on appropriate clothes discourages women from wearing “black clothes, black headscarf, *satr* and *hijab*.”⁹³ “Black clothes” in this quote refer to full body garments (usually black in color), such as *abaya*, *niqab*, *chador*, worn by some Muslim women.⁹⁴

Tajik state officials continuously warn the citizens, especially the youth, of not falling prey to the “web of lies of the dangerous extremist and terrorist movements,” which they can be

⁹¹ For the analysis of a similar discourse in the context of Kyrgyzstan see: E. Nasritdinov and N. Esenamanova, “The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek,” *Central Asian Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2017): 217-242.

⁹² S. Nozimova, “Hijab in the Changing Tajik Society,” *Central Asian Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2016): 95-116, 96; See also: M. Miles, “Switching to Satr: An Ethnography of the Particular in Women’s Choices in Head Coverings in Tajikistan,” *Central Asian Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2015): 367-387;

⁹³ R. Nur, “Dasturamali libishoi”

⁹⁴ R. Goldman, “What’s That You’re Wearing? A Guide to Muslim Veils,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/world/what-in-the-world/burqa-hijab-abaya-chador.html> (last accessed on February 28, 2021).

exposed to by following “alien” styles of dress.⁹⁵ While such warnings do not exactly define what the foreign garb is, the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs in conjunction with the local police departments, conduct regular “propaganda raids,” where through *vospitatel'nye raboty* (teaching activities), they intimidate and harass women to change the style of their head-coverings.⁹⁶ Therefore, in the contemporary political reality, the Tajik national dress also means adherence not only to the particular gender regimes but also to the state-sanctioned Tajik Islam. The following quote from president Rahmon’s speech illustrates this point most poignantly:

Our women and girls should not forget that as *millati bostoni* (an ancient nation) we have our national head coverings and styles and ethics of clothing. Those who follow propagandists of the foreign ideologies and *mazhabs* (Islamic schools of jurisprudence) should keep in mind that we have our own tolerant *mazhab* and the *pir* (religious leader) of our *mazhab* [was] the prominent personality of the Islamic world – Imam A’zam Abu Hanifa.⁹⁷

In the paragraphs above, I discussed how women’s bodies and in particular their sartorial choices have become important demarcating identity markers in the contemporary ethno-religious

⁹⁵ “Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo rahbaronu fa’olon va namoyandagoni sokinoni viloyati Khatlon,” *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, May 13, 2017, <http://president.tj/node/15372> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁹⁶ I. Karmazin, “Platok – delo tonkoe: pochemu Tadzhiqistan voyuet s khidzhabami i borodami,” *IZVESTIYA*, December 24, 2018, <https://iz.ru/826721/igor-karmazin/platok-delo-tonkoe-pochemu-tadzhiqistan-voiyuet-s-khidzhabami-i-borodami> (last accessed on March 10, 2021).

⁹⁷ “Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo rahbaronu fa’olon va namoyandagoni sokinoni viloyati Khatlon”

national project in Tajikistan. In this this project, the female Tajik dress, legally or otherwise mandated, serves multiple functions. The nationalist discourse around the Tajik dress represents it as a time capsule that connecting multiple generations, namely the present-day Tajiks to the mythical ancestors. The ever-praised, sufficiently modest, and traditional Tajik dress caters to the patriarchal social imaginations, while its formidable distance from the Islamic *hijab* serves as a tangible token of political loyalty to the state.

Concluding remarks

In the literature on nation-building, women are rarely even an afterthought. The feminist scholarship on nationalism on the other hand places women and gender issues squarely in the center of the national projects. In this article, I combined the insights from both the feminist and nation-building literature by analyzing the evolution of the national projects in the post-Soviet, post-Civil War Tajikistan, and by analyzing gender aspects of the current ethno-religious national project. My analysis of the nation-building projects in Tajikistan demonstrates that there is a continuous evolution and transformation of the Tajik national project. This evolution is not a cessation of the national projects, rather it includes a complex layering of the elements that are emphasized or obscured at different times. Because nation-building projects, unlike other construction projects, are by definition Sisyphean, unending tasks, they require constant fine-tuning and modifications. Therefore, depending which national project is being promoted different elements of the national projects or amplified or dialed down.

During the second decade of the 21st century, women became central to defining the contours of the ethno-religious national identity project in Tajikistan. A disproportionate onus of the nation-building has been placed on women. Not only women's bodies came to be used for

biological, political, and cultural reproduction, they also serve for reification of internal and external ethnic (even racial), ideological, and cultural boundaries.

Current national discourse has inherent aspects that are controversial, if not outright dangerous. The discourse on *oilai solim* is not just a public health campaign for the health of the nation. It carries a message that mothers are solely responsible for the “defects and pathologies” of their children or that disabled children are only result of parental irresponsibility – kin marriage. Moreover, this language promotes ableism and further drives people and families, who have children with disabilities into invisibility, as those who do not represent a healthy and able nation, and, as a result, are not a part of it or worthy of its attention of its public services.

The discourse on normative national sexual behavior similarly creates a dangerous pathway for identifying any and all sexual transgressions as transgressions against the nation. Moreover, because what constitutes a sexual transgression is in the eye of a (any male) beholder, women face increased risks of being identified and harassed as sexually and, thus, nationally deviant for wearing certain clothes, makeup, engaging in social and political activism, etc. These risk factors are multiplied for sex workers who are, for all we know, permanently registered in some government registry as immoral women, unworthy of being a part of the nation.

Discourse on national gene pool is similarly dangerous for many reasons. It legitimizes a view that not only women are properties of the nation but that they are carriers of the nationalized wombs. In this discourse women and their bodies are used to reinforce national: ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries of the nation. Thus, women’s choices of marriage are reinterpreted as those with whom it is appropriate to procreate for the “benefit” of the nation. Foreigners, people of different religions or even interpretations of Islam, and people of different races are seen as those whom Tajik women should not marry and procreate with.

Discourse on men and only men being capable of being national dignitaries, limits women and girls' horizons of imagination and downplays the importance of women's contributions to the society and its development. It limits their national role to that of being mothers, and because they can only become mothers in full if they give birth to sons, this discourse legitimizes discriminatory sex preference, and prizing of male children.

Moreover, law on parental responsibility codifies parenthood not as personal and social role but as, foremost, a political duty. So even if we set aside the multitude of personal, familial and economic challenges that come with motherhood, in this state discourse motherhood becomes an impossible task on political socialization that begins with politically and nationally appropriate naming, inculcation of the language of power (Tajik), which regardless of mother's ethnic (and regional) background is universally designated as mother-tongue, and upbringing of politically docile citizens.

Discourse on national dress overtly and overwhelmingly politicizes women's sartorial choices that may be attributed to such factors as personal comfort, social and economic status, and fashion. Moreover, mandates on national dress creates new mechanisms of intimidation and exclusion of those who are seen as not conforming to it. It creates barriers for access of public goods and state services, becoming the impediment to accessing education, justice, and economic opportunities.

I argued that women bear, rear and wear the Tajik nation in its contemporary iteration. In certain ways this can be an empowering realization for the women in Tajikistan, since we may even conclude that the Tajik nation is a nation of imagined women, where men can find belonging only by their association to the women who belong to the nation. Whether or not

women will seize their ideologically central position within the Tajik national project to increase their social standing and redefine social and political status quo, will remain to be seen.

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