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WOMEN IN THE RURAL EMPLOYMENT SCENE IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN: EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS

While a great part of rural labour in Central Asia is conducted by women, only few women participate in paid labour or employment: Too few women obtain a suitable education or are able to leave the traditional field of female duties, to participate in greater numbers in the process of employment. Scholars have so far devoted little attention to the question of the integration of Central Asian women into the employment scene. However, the main reason there has been little scientific interest in this question, is no doubt the critical situation prevailing in most of the area. Since the breakup of the Soviet state system, no current figures or facts are available about the life of women in Tajikistan and the other now independent Central Asian states; civil war and impoverishment may have destroyed much of the former structures which gave women a greater chance of participation in family-independent employment as opposed to other parts of Central Asia. The population of Afghanistan keeps struggling for bare life through the ever-lasting chaos of war; the Chinese province of Xinjiang, submitted to Beijings' rule, has until now not been open to foreign scientists for research.¹

In comparison to Central Asia in general, the situation of the rural population in the Northern areas of Pakistan seems privileged, albeit with many smaller and greater difficulties. Decades of continuous attempts on the part of the people in conjunction with numerous religious, governmental and international organisations to improve their standard of living have changed the face of the region. One of the most outstanding examples of such a development is the Hunza valley. Through long-term development efforts pursued by the greater part of the male population, a standard of education has been achieved that surpasses the national level in many respects – especially noteworthy is the high percentage of literacy among the residents.

How far does this improvement in the standard of living and education concern the female part of the population, and if it does, what influence does this have on the traditional life pattern of women in the rural areas?

Women themselves are rarely asked about their personal experiences with and evaluations of the changing circumstances to which they are subjected. In order to discover which factors motivate women to seek employment outside the home or not, it is not enough to evaluate figures and official statements. Moreover, the women's assessment of their own capabilities and opportunities should be considered within the social context in which they have to live.

The following paper attempts to give an account of the attitude of women towards employment based on research conducted in Gojal in 1990 to 1992. Whereas the status of a classical labourer does not exist here for women, a slowly but steadily growing number of well-educated females participates in the employment scene of the valley.

The interviews from which the statements and comments quoted below are extracted were conducted in the upper Hunza valley (following: Gojal) with female residents during various stays in different villages between 1990 and 1992. Comments on and revelations about the employment and educational situation were isolated from the general context of conversation, which reveals another remarkable feature of many interviews: no matter what the original discussion was about, it seemed to be an ever-present topic with which every woman, independently of her age and status, felt herself involved – the personal prospects for women that could result from employment. It is an urgent matter of discussion for women of all ages and in every life pattern.

Since the early nineties, it has become clear to critical observers that many "development achievements" have not improved the situation of women, but on the contrary caused various difficulties for them.² What might be the consequences of the current social changes for Gojali women? Their struggle to define a position for themselves between different demands of their social environment will be the central concern of the following pages.

The women's own statements are given in order to shed light on this question. All quotations from recorded interviews are given in translation as well as in Wakhi, in order to let them speak for themselves. All the cases described have been chosen to represent a significant pattern of women's life in Gojal's society.

1. Literacy, Education and the Anticipation of Progress

Sejihat Begim, thirty-year old dweller in the high mountain village area of the Wakhi settlement Ghulkin, puts her disappointment in plain words:

"Yav řat: Tuy yow carən can yow ki kum-ər reřt ki joyd. Yav ke yandi

ne joyovd yan yav-r marzi, zega? Yandi maḷ tuy-əv ce kert, də yav-r xun-əm tu maḷ ne joyovd, də xun-əm aldə. ʒi, kam-əm joyde. Maḷ-ər skul ɣa xuʂ tu, joydəm baf. Panʒumat-əm joyd, tuy maḷ ce kert. Xun-ə xalg-ə maḷ band kert, yan. ɣal də ʒû pûzûv ha ya tey, wuz-m nârâz sk-a."

(They³ said: "We will marry her off, after that she may go anywhere to learn." When after that they did not let me learn, it was up to them, wasn't it? Then, when they had married me, I was in their house (and) they did not let me learn, I stayed at home. Therefore, I have learned little. I liked school, I was good at learning. I was in the fifth class when they married me. The family stopped me, yes. This is on my mind even now, I am discontented with this.)

Had she been born only ten years later, her dream of becoming a literate girl would never have been an obstacle. As it was, since she belonged to the middle aged generation of Gojal's womenfolk, her dream would not become true.

Sejahat was not the only Wakhi girl who had been deprived of a basic education by decision of her family, most of her generation shared that lot. Girls' education was scarcely seen as a valuable investment in the family's future. A girl, married then at the age of eleven, twelve, if late fifteen years, was clearly expected to be a perfect housewife and mother and, above all, an obedient and quiet helper to her mother-in-law. What virtues, comparable to these, would she be taught in school? And who would do the work at home, while she was attending school? With these and other reserves in mind, many people kept their daughters away from school, even when the formerly poor educational infrastructure slowly changed into a perfect network of basic school facilities over all of the rural area.

The development of education for all Wakhi children of the valley, enforced by the religious leader of the Ismailiyya to which all Wakhi belong, has taken place since the nineteen eighties, when the newly built highway gave access to the formerly secluded villages. As a result of a tremendous financial effort and religiously legitimated influence, by 1990 almost all the school children had achieved literacy. Schools were built in every single village of the valley, generously equipped with teachers, books and all sorts of adequate materials. Yet this would probably not have been enough to overcome parent's resentments towards the education of their daughters – the more valuable argument was, and probably still is, the powerful order – *farmân*⁴ – of the religious leader of the Ismailiyya, Karim Agha Khan, sent regularly to his followers. It was his will and order that girls should at least have the same educational opportunities as their brothers, and when at the same time people saw benefits in their educational system due to the programmes initiated by the *Agha Khan Educational Service*,⁵ every member of the community had to accept it.

This as such is a fascinating phenomenon, yet will not be the central subject of this paper. The struggle for basic literacy is already over in the case of the Gojali girls. During my visits in the early 1990's, everybody younger than eighteen spoke Urdu more or less fluently, and the first female students were sent to an Islamabad college with the support⁶ of the village communities.⁷

Other questions arose: What would come next for the well-educated young women? Would they marry in time (which nowadays means: at the age of sixteen, eighteen or at the latest twenty) and soon have children, or would they attain a different lifestyle? And would these achievements lead women into employment as in the case of many well-educated young men?

Considering the speed with which the educational innovations had been successfully enforced on women, everything seemed possible within only a decade.

This had caused a certain instability in many older women's feelings about their own life and personal value; especially those who felt that simply by the virtue of belonging to their generation, they had missed the chance to participate in the blessings of education, and also often sought an excuse and an understanding for their deeply felt uneducatedness. Asked about their personal wishes, a frequent answer, nearly a stereotype, was given by many women: "X̣ū-n-ən heç zâq-i nast. Ẓ̌û zâq sirf a yem tey ki ẓ̌û ðeÿd-v-ər-əp x̣û zindəgi cə maž-ən baf wost: Jald tuy-p mə carən, baf ejukešen yav-r wost. Yandi hoquq yav-r wost, a zerəng ẓ̌u rang šak ət ksif yark šak yav-r zərurat mə wost." ("I do not have any personal wishes. I only wish that my daughters may have a better lot than I had: They must not marry so soon, they shall have a good education. Then they will earn money, so they will not have to do such hard and dirty work as I do.")

Many hopes and illusions are tied to the magic word *education*. It seems to have such an aura of wealth, never-ending progress, and social prestige, that just the mere mention of education had a sort of purifying effect on the troubles of daily work and misery.

Had not the male students shown what modern life would bring for the females? Indeed, those young men who had visited school, proceeded to college and university, did not come back unchanged. Many of those who had temporarily left their villages, irrespective of whether they had been able to find adequate job for themselves, were no longer peasants. Only exceptionally could they be seen working on the fields or doing other than off-farm work.

For the middle-aged, overworked women, witnessing this clearly led to the above stated wishes for their young daughters, whom they wished to protect from the hardships of a peasant's life.⁸

On the other hand, hardly anybody could imagine the loss of daughters-in-law and mothers-to-be for the next generation. Mothers searching for the best

of two worlds for their daughters often expressed their hopes for their future in terms such as the following:

"Tuy yow carən, lekin cəbas zerəng Ƴafč paisa ya-r worst ki xət-ər kû çiz dūrzd-əp woz zəmin-ə yark xək-er nawkar xət-ər dūrzd-əp. – Zman ya-r kam hûmût, sirf cəbûr/ sirf buy zman)" ("We will marry her, but then she will earn enough money to buy all the goods and to pay other people for the agricultural work. – She will have very few children (only four/ only two).")

2. The Young Women's Expectations and the Face of Reality

What would the protagonists of their mother's dreams themselves say to all that?

Gûlnâz Begim, a girl of seventeen who had just finished her last year in village school, told me frankly about her feelings and plans concerning her future life:

"Ektobar žû tuy...tuy-i tik, lekin xowf bə tey. Maž də skol-əm Ōas sâl-əm joyetk. Wuz-əp reçəm xə, tuy-əm ki kert xə, ki ta-p ce xənak-r yi xəş. A yaw-Ōast-əp çiz carəm: Yark carəm, xrâk-v-əv tiyâr carəm. Zman, kam zman baf. Bu petr, bu Ōeŷd, kifč brâbar xoş." ("I will be married in October...it is good to be married, but there is also grief in it. I have learned in school for ten years. When I go there, when I will be married, then there will be, well, a mother-in-law. For her, I will do such: I will work, I will cook the meals for them. Children, it is good to have few children. Two sons, two daughters, both equally cherished.")

This statement was one of the few openly made to me; it does not conform to the modesty and quietness expected of a young girl to reveal such opinions to strangers.

Gûlnâz was looking optimistically toward the totally traditional life that was awaiting her. It seemed clear what her duties would be and that she would be able to fulfil them. Going to school, achieving a basic education, had not at all affected her self-esteem or created unfulfillable dreams for further studies or personal wealth. She would go to live with her husband's family and try to do her best in becoming a good daughter-in-law and mother.

Others of the same age had different aspirations. Robina Begim, then fifteen years old, was the best student of that year's matric class in her village in 1990. After having shared her family's hospitality for several months, I had developed a closer friendship to her and two of her girlfriends of the same age. While the others mainly dreamt of a chance to leave their village, to experience town life in Gilgit or other places, Robina's plans were different. One day, she confided them to me: "Amid žû-n tey ki xû tatnan ijazat ma-r randən, wuz reçem keçmi-er, Krimabâd-en. Xə cəbas kalij-er wocem, yan cəbas unvərşti-er, daqtar-i wocem. Žû şawq a yem tey ki xûynan-v-ər daqtar-i wocəm xə yandi woz Gojal-

er wâpas xû yark-er wezyəm, xûynan-v-er imdâd-əṣ carôm." ("I hope that my parents will allow me to attend the girl's *Academy* in Karimabad.⁹ Afterwards I will proceed to a college, then attend university and become a doctor. I want to become a women's medical doctor, so that I can come back to Gojal to work here and help the women.")

On my return to Gojal in 1991, I was invited to the wedding of Robina, who was going to live in a far off village in the side-valley of Ćûpûrsan. I attended the wedding and saw her for the last time, as a bride; the next morning, they were already off for the groom's village. Her two friends were married a year later.

Leading a useful life for Wakhi society still means primarily to fulfil not one's own, but the wishes of the parents and the family. It is therefore rather exceptional to meet a Wakhi girl articulating wishes that differ from the duties and the role that her family has chosen for her. Every member of the joint family has to fulfil her or his special duty in order to make the community prosper, and it is not considered necessary for a young girl to have plans of her own, especially not when her future household is involved.

In between the illusions and ideals of the above cited mothers and reality, the girls may have a certain imagination of what will be the personal advantage of their education, but this does not so far have the slightest influence on women's role in Gojals society.

The attendance of the girl's academy, founded and built by the Agha Khan's educational service institutions, was the first step out of the family, towards college and university, which would tendentially alienate the student from the traditional female values of her society. The strong fear, in what way the higher education of young women would afflict their obedience towards the family as well as her and the whole family's reputation in the village community, had existed since the very first efforts of education had reached the area.

3. The Troubles of a Different Life: Choice and Challenge for Young Female Employees

Indeed, there were obvious changes in such girls' behaviour, which strengthened the rejection of unconventional ways in people's minds. An exceptional case happened in 1990, when a young woman petitioned for divorce at the Ismailiyya family court in Gilgit. The twenty-three-year-old Rehana made her claim on a right that so far had been reserved for men. She did so in such an open way that many people were shocked. Had she made her claim through mediation, by male members of the family, the offence would have been less; divorce as such is not a rare incident in Gojal society. But she had acted independently – and she had been divorced by the court at her own request. This

demonstration of her awareness of her independence must have had an alarming effect on the public. Yet it was not long years of studies that had given courage to the woman: her employment background was, more valuable than any certificate or elaborate educational background. She was working for the "Agha Khan Rural Support Programme". Travelling around in a white car from village to village, she earned a considerable monthly income, which was sufficient for the maintenance of an entire family. And in fact, it was this money which gave her enough security to exceed the limits of social convention. Her family being rather poor and depending on her income would vehemently criticize her, but did not intervene openly against her will. When asking her uncle if the family had given permission for her travelling around, he explained harshly to me: "Ijazat ya-r kuy ne ðet – ʒi rešt-š ʒat-er!" ("Nobody gave her permission – she just leaves on her own!")

Another sustaining support for her was the fact that she was working for the Ismailiyyan community. Even strongly opposing members of the community would not dare to utter criticism in public. When explaining her dilemma to me, she said:

"Žû tatnan zâq tu ki tuy ma carøn, c-a-n xû yark-er çawëm âzâd. Yašt-øv wezg maž-ër ce çilgetk, wuz-m qabul kert. Lekin yem kaš žû šawhar ce, də maž baf netu. Anpađ tu, ejukešen ya-r heč netu, yark bə ne kert. Skə žû hoquq-əš yav-r zindəgi, woz də maž šak-øv tu. Wuz či-r xur-ə rang sk-a wundr-øv-øv yark carəm? Maž-ër baf yark te y, hoquq ma-r wost, kûxt-er yem yark-š carəm, spo xalg-er dəstan žû sarwis. A sk-a-m Gilt-ər rečk, femli kort-er, jədâ-m vitk. Sma šak-er d-a šru vit ki: Wuz rihâ wocəm, haləm-əš ney. Wuz-m ʒlat ne kert, yav-r ʒlat tu. Tuy, digar tuy šak də žû fikr nast, či-r woz, sif masla sk-a-š wost."

("It was my parents' wish to get me married, then I could leave for my work, freely. When they (the groom's family) made the proposal, I agreed. But that fellow, my husband, was not good to me. He was totally uneducated and he did not work. They lived on my income, and still they treated me badly. Why should I work like a donkey on their fields? I have a good job, I obtain an income, I work for everybody, (I do) my job for our people. That's why I went to Gilgit, to the *family court*, I separated (from my husband). Thinking started here: I will be free, I won't stay. I did not do anything wrong, it was their fault. Marriage, I do not think about re-marrying, why should I, only problems will arise from it.")

When I asked the judge of the Gilgit family court about his opinion on this case, he told me that everybody at last had agreed that Rehana was right in her demand. The ensuing debate had further results: there was consent that the educational status of potential marriage partners could no longer be ignored. The matchmaking families should carefully choose bride and groom, "so that the bride is well-educated, but always one step behind the groom".

Consideration of such individual cases does not allow any final judgement as to the extent to which in future young women may in future become involved in public employment of any kind.

Yet such cases may foreshadow a development that can already be seen in Gojal as well as in other rural communities of the district.

So far, the number of professions open to a young woman in a Gojali village is limited to a few. A woman may try to become a teacher, a trainer for women who look after poultry, a health worker, or find some other kind of trainer's job for women in the *Agha Khan services*. Although these jobs have a highly respectable image, their practice entails many personal disadvantages, which the girls realize when looking at their own female teachers' lives.

Throughout the statements of six women teachers in Gojali middle schools, a similar pattern occurred regularly: all of them loved their occupation, but at the same time were more or less exhausted by the double burden of their work, now consisting of both their employment outside the family and their never-ending duties at home. Agricultural and household machines are practically non-existent, which means a tremendous work-load even for those who have already lessened their agricultural work by selling off land or cattle. Working capacities were drained throughout the years, especially for those female teachers whose families were not willing or wealthy enough to provide them with help in their housework, in their work on the fields, in the garden, with the cattle. Needless to say, with a growing number of children to raise, exhaustion reached an even higher level for some of the teachers. Even abandoning a great part of the agricultural work would not solve the problem, since a garden, some cattle and the house are in any case to be looked after to augment the meagre income of a teacher.

Explaining the disadvantages of her job, says Gûlnahâr Begim, a teacher of twenty-nine, mother of four daughters:

"Wuz-m də kû yark fasa vitk. Ney-m yi ktâ joyn-ər bas wezdey, ney-m yi ktâ də xun werÿney. ʒi trə miyâna wəreĕk. masla-ey ʔafĕ, lekin bardâšt carəm. Xû dūfî-r-əş wezyem, woz xû xun-ər rəçəm, rə xû xun-əş bə yark carəm, woz trə bar-əş ĕiz yark wost, wuz ya-r carəm. Kû jay. Kafkaf carəm, ney-a."

("I am trapped in all that work. Nor have I been able to study enough, nor have I had time enough to stay at home. I am stuck in the middle. There are a lot of problems, but I hold out. I come to my work, then I go home, I am also working in my house, as well as outside of it, if there is something to do, I do it. In every place. Well, I am drudging.")

She then confessed that if she had the possibility, she would stop working at school at once, but: "Spo-c-ən paysa nast." ("We do not have money"). Due to the lack of labour supply, she and her husband, who both were teachers, had sold off much of their land and cattle, so that they were dependent on their

salaries. Thus being obliged to buy food and goods that other families produced on their own (mostly by their female) labour supply, there was no option left but to continue earning money with her job.

The crucial role of money in the whole discussion about women's perspective on employment becomes obvious here. Expectations from and restrictions on a woman's status as an employee is closely related to the financial situation of the whole family.

As the above described individual cases show, a mother's (or even a father's) will is often not enough to lead a well-educated daughter into a well paid, adequate profession after having finished school or college.

There are several other obstacles to overcome:

1. Unemployment among young men is increasing with the ever-rising number of university graduates, which means decreasing chances for women to become employed. Except in the case of a restricted number of occupations such as that of nurse, midwife, teacher etc., men will be preferred when it comes to choosing a person for a free post because of generally accepted reservations such as: "A woman may not be free to act like a man in public – a woman may not be allowed to travel or meet people (e.g. men) in public – a woman will be biologically restricted by her social duty of bearing children".

2. Agriculture is fully accepted as the traditional way of life of in Gojal. Theoretically, it is even appreciated as a more valuable lifestyle than that of a city-dweller and employee, who is totally dependent on his salary and no longer *zemindâr*, an owner of land. Still it is agriculture that provides the families with basic goods and food – and it is the disproportionate workload on women which makes this possible. In most families, due to male migration women are responsible for agricultural tasks which in the past men used to fulfil. Women's labour is therefore highly indispensable for farming and housekeeping.

3. For many families, a daughter or daughter-in-law who, instead of leading a conventional woman's life, keeping her house and raising the family's children, strolls freely from place to place, talks to everybody in public and thus fails to represent the honour of her family in the appropriate way, creates a frightening vision.

These are restrictions which are likely to diminish the probability of employment for women.

How then, and why though, do some women already manage to obtain employment? The necessity of integrating women in the employment process in order to increase the family income clears the way for them.

In the striking case of the young employee who had sought a divorce indicates this most clearly. She did not belong to a wealthy family and it was she who had to support her mother, a widow, and presumably the rest of her family, with the money she earned. This, coupled with the fact that her employer was a

religiously founded and therefore highly reputed organization, was the prevailing reason for her family to let her go. As a consequence of this new and powerful position, she felt that nobody had the right to give orders to her about how to lead her own life, and she dared to leave the traditional status of a married woman behind in favour of the status and power that her profession and her income gave her.

While many mothers in Gojal dream of their daughters leading a carefree life without hard and exhausting work through the new perspective of education and employment, most of them would reject the consequences on such aspects of traditional life as the joint family system and childbirth. The money earned should provide her with comforts, such as hiring servants, or buying modern machines for the household. The idea of improving one's own financial status by employment is still new for women, many of whom continue to regard marriage as the normal way to enhance their status.

The high education level does not necessarily mean a higher rate of female employees in public services or elsewhere. It may well be called an indispensable presupposition for such a development, but it is not more than that up to now.¹⁰

The conditions for obtaining higher education, which enables a young woman to qualify for well-paid employment, are today far better than about fifteen years ago. Even so, the opportunities for female graduates to be accepted as an independent employee in an adequate position are scarce. Only where female employees are specifically required – in social and medical tasks which deal with the female population and thus cannot be carried out by males – female applicants are welcome and accepted without difficulties. Wherever the money earned by a woman is bitterly needed by her family, it may increase her chances to be left out of her traditional role and be allowed to practise her job. Yet, in most cases, men have dominated the employment scene. As they provide the money, many families do not see any need to allow their daughters to leave the house to earn money or rewards other than for traditional female tasks.

Furthermore, the example of female employees of the first generation, as for example the teacher cited above, does not necessarily encourage young women to take such hardships for the uncertain benefits of the double burden of house and agricultural work and off-farm employment.

By looking at the typical statements of Gojali women concerning the reality of and the prospects for female employment, one can clearly see that through the higher educational level of girls which has been reached since the beginning of the eighties, great changes have taken place. Not only is there much greater willingness to accept the idea of women working in public positions, there are already a considerable number of women engaged in public employment. Nevertheless, there is nothing to indicate that in the near future a high

proportion of Gojali women will enter employment as it is for the respectable number of women who already fulfil this image. Yet no evidence can be seen for the vision of a high employment rate among Gojal's women for the near future. Women, be they educated or qualified in any field, are still the main part of the traditional working rural society, and as such, they are an indispensable labour force in the family.¹¹ Provided that the Gojali people cling to their rural or semi-rural way of life, it seems thus rather unlikely that women should obtain posts in public employment, leaving vacancies in rural labour and house work to men willing to fill them.

Notes

1. For a general analysis on the situation of rural women in the Soviet Union, China and other socialist countries at the beginning of the 1980's, see CROLL 1981.

2. For a general discussion of the issue see R.ROTT, 1987, and Maria Tekülve, 1993.

3. Her parents, her family.

4. Religious order that may concern all aspects of the followers' religious and profane life.

5. For a detailed survey on the organisation of the Agha Khan Foundation see KREUTZMANN 1996, p. 385.

6. By decision of the village organization, the community paid the cost for the educational development of extraordinarily gifted young women. This includes college fees as well as their expenses for housing, books and food.

7. Figures on the subject are published in the *1981 District Census Report of Gilgit* (Islamabad 1984). The report gives a literacy rate of only 23.10 percent among the female residents of Hunza, age 15 to 19 years for that year. The total rate for the Gilgit district for this group was then at 10.98 percent.

8. Women's complaints about peasantry were mostly focused on the lack of helping hands and agricultural machinery: this was, they felt, responsible for the excess of work which made their life troublesome and endangered their health. There was general consent among the women that city life would not be an alternative to the life they lead in the villages. Since many women had already shared their husband's or relatives' life in town for a time, the advantages of village life had become more obvious: in the village, a woman was free to move about, she could visit her relatives and friends on her own whenever she wanted; the water and air were not polluted as in the big cities.

9. The Agha Khan's academy for girls was founded with the intent to promote the female absolvents of the village schools and prepare them for higher educational levels, such as college.

10. H.HERBERS comes to a similar conclusion concerning the situation of women in the Yasin valley: "School education is neither the only prerequisite for female off-farm employment, nor is it a necessary one for all kinds of jobs." (HERBERS 1995, p.3)

11. In her description of the involvement of women in paid labour in the Yasin valley, Hiltrud HERBERS detects a similar situation: "To abandon the local subsistence economy would be another strategy to give women the opportunity to pursue a job. However, as long as agricultural production is indispensable to secure the family's livelihood and women play a pivotal role in maintaining it, it is highly unlikely that agriculture will be given up in favour of female off-farm employment in the near future." (HERBERS 1995, p.8)

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