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A sound family for a healthy nation: motherhood in Tajik national politics and society

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Since independence in 1991, Central Asian countries have put great effort into creating their respective national narratives, which are often based on an ethnic imagination. In Tajikistan this included the idea of shaping society via the family unit. Increasingly, motherhood became the focus of attention, which was made possible by merging two concepts. On the one hand, women are considered as "cultured" and educated people who the Soviet Union freed from "backward" traditions. On the other hand, traditions were reinvented such that the woman is considered the ultimate mother of the nation and the backbone of tradition. This article examines the changing status of motherhood in society and politics through efforts to create a sound family and a healthy nation.

Keywords: Tajikistan; family; motherhood; nationalism

A society that cares for its mother-women, cares for its future. A country that behaves indifferently towards mothers – the source of life and an eternity of human generation – gives away its future. (E. Sh. Rahmon, President of Tajikistan)

Introduction

The above quotation opens "Dastur oid ba za'limi huquqi zanon" (Instruction on the rights of women), a book on women's rights edited by Sangin (1998). The issue of women's rights, usually referred to as "the woman question" (Kamp 2009), is nothing new in Tajikistan, but is rather the continuation of Soviet politics with a new national flavor. Today in Tajikistan the very term "woman," *zan*, means that a female is thought of first as a mother, *modar*, and wife, *oila,* which also means family, and thus a "woman" can never be the same as a man because of biological determinants. By understanding the (popular and political) cultural constructions of the notion of "woman," we can understand the dynamics of motherhood in Tajik politics since independence.

The mother, *modar*, is the ultimate woman, *zan*,[1] and in this role she holds a sacred place among Tajiks. As the Tajik president formulates it, the mother and the nation cannot be separated and thus both the nation and the mother require the same attention and care (Gulnoz 2012). More than 500 songs produced by Tajik popular singers have

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been dedicated to motherhood alone (not to women generally) in no more than a few years, as have an uncountable number of poems. These songs on motherhood are emotional and sung by popular singers who, as sons, express the sacredness of motherhood. I have seen many mothers crying when they hear such songs, for instance, about migrants leaving their mothers back home. Similarly, young men in Russia gladly listen to these songs and remember their mothers with tenderness and emotion. In these songs and poems, the authors do not engage with the conflicted side of kinship and social relations but idealize the mother as an unquestionably caring and loving figure.

Throughout the last century, a rich body of literature was produced about women in Central Asia since the 1920s. Due to space constraints I cannot engage with all of it and have instead selected a few pieces of discourse in which the question of motherhood and family in culture appears. Since independence, the Tajik state, which otherwise has few successes to celebrate, has been most "successful" in cultural politics. The term culture is, however, problematic due to its Soviet references. Consequently, "being cultured" in Central Asia is often thought of as one's educational attainments, and "a civilized person" is one who consumes "Russian culture." This is compared to the "traditional person" who is bound by old-fashion traditions and backward religious beliefs that hinder technical and cultural development. The task of the post-Soviet Tajik state was thus to reharmonize the concepts of culture and tradition, and the mother, in her role as an educated woman and the "traditional heart" of the family, was the right symbol with which to accomplish this. Kandiyoti (2007, 603) has summarized this process well, saying that post-Soviet gender politics is not a simple return to traditions, but "constitute(s) a strategic redeployment of notions of cultural authenticity in the service of new ideological goals."

In this sense the present article departs from Kandiyoti's (2007) argument, and from Tett's (1995) observation that women under the Soviet Union were able to live up to both role expectations, that is, that of the cultured woman and the traditional mother. On the one hand, women participated in Soviet life and economic production, while on the other hand they remained solely responsible for the household and the children. This double burden was commonly accepted as a Soviet reality, but became criticized by some with the end of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, this burden is accepted as normal by others and has increasingly become a subject of negotiation among couples today. I argue that it is precisely because both domains and discourses ("tradition" Rus. *traditsiia;* Taj. *urf-u odat* versus "culture" Rus. *kul'tura*; Taj. *madaniyat*) were separated, that motherhood has become such a successful concept in post-Soviet political efforts to shape a Tajik national ideology.

Confusion about the (social and political) roles of woman and mother is persistent not only in Central Asia. Under the cover of gender, much scholarly attention has been paid to "women" whether in Islam, law, the labor market, tradition, etc. (Acar and Günes-Ayata 1999; Haarr 2005; Hämmerle et al. 2008; Harris 2004; Kamp 2006; Kandiyoti 2007; Massell 1974; Northrop 2004; Tlostanova 2010), but while motherhood is not excluded per se from this post-Soviet western literature, it is only one of the roles (usually not the main role) that women can hold. The view that women in Central Asia were caught in patriarchal structures dominates Soviet literature, whereas Soviet politics gave them "a chance to free themselves from this subordinate role" (Kisliakov 1969; Kisliakov and Pisarchik 1976; Monogarova 1992; Monogarova and Mukhiddinov 1992; Zikrioeva 2001). In contrast, post-Soviet domestic gender politics have focused primarily on women in their role as glorified mothers. Along with a revival of Islam since independence, motherhood has been reinforced as a sacred status by both the government and the Islamic opposition, albeit in

different ways. In this article I argue that politics in Tajikistan have adopted the mother as the ultimate woman of the nation by tying the different discussions about woman, mother, and family together into a concept of the sound/healthy family, *oilai solim*. Note that *oila* means family, and in colloquial language it also means wife.

This paper aims to examine the emergence of the concept of the (authentic) Tajik family by first analyzing "the woman question," second cultural politics, and third the medical system. I depart from discourses that expound upon the mother's role in politics and society, but I will reserve an analysis of the responses of mothers to this political environment for another paper due to space constraints. The three lenses used in the paper will not be dealt with in separate sections, but rather form the three foci in each section. These sections include a historical introduction, an analysis of the contemporary politics of motherhood through laws and medical practices, and a look into religious notions of motherhood. In an effort to mold a new society after independence, the political and public spheres have included ideologies that, according to the ruling elite, require an ethnic story, a linear history, an economic utopia, a drive for development, and control over demographic dynamics. The sound family in this context is the cradle in which the authentic Tajik person is raised, and motherhood is the pillar upon which the cradle rests.

Methods

This paper is based on long-term ethnographic work carried out in Tajikistan since 2002. The material presented here includes information collected through ethnographic methods that include participant and nonparticipant observation, interviews and discussions, as well as an in-depth analysis of academic and nonacademic literature produced about and in Tajikistan on this subject. Furthermore, I have collected a large data set of genealogies from which demographic data have been extrapolated. These data have shown that fertility has declined from an average of seven children per mother in the 1980s to about four children per mother, starting in some places as early as 2000 (Roche 2014). This demographic change reflects demography politics pushed forward by the state, which will be discussed below. Besides first-hand experiences in families within Tajikistan and among Tajik families outside Tajikistan, I have also visited birth houses (Russ. *rodnoi dom*, usually referred to as *roddom*; Taj. *tavalludkhona*), talked to midwives and gynecologists, and spoken to a female lawyer and male political activists of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP) of Tajikistan.

Soviet literature on family

The family as an academic subject was very much the realm of ethnographers under the Soviet research tradition. These ethnographers would collect material about the size and composition of the family and later organize the material according to "family typologies." Behind this exercise was the evolutionary concept that societies developed from larger families (clans, tribes, etc.) toward smaller families (nuclear family). Family here was defined as the number of people living together; in other words, a countable size was the basis of the concept of family and household (Abashin 1999, 3–16; Kandiyoti 2007). Consequently, for Soviet ethnography, statistics and descriptions of material possessions solved the question of where to situate ethnic groups on the ladder of evolution (Radzhabov 1974; Zikrioeva 2001). Tajiks were found to move only slowly toward "the socialist family type," as they were still busy getting rid of the "large patriarchal undivided family" (Bushkov and Mikul'skij 1996; Kisliakov 1969; Kisliakov and Pisarchik 1976). However, Soviet

influence was discovered to have successfully disrupted the "large patriarchal family," which was in its "last phase" (Monogarova 1992, 31) and already in "decline and decay" (Kisliakov 1969, 15).

Within this "patriarchal family" the woman was seen as subordinate to male power (the patriarch), and would gain liberty only within a nuclear family. Thus, the Central Asian woman was destined to serve her husband's kinship group (*avlod*) and produce children for his family. This idea, however, did not remain as solely a theoretical exercise but was accepted by many urban women as a possible interpretation of their own lives. Many young (urban) Tajik women wish for nothing more than to move out of the husband's family compound and into a flat where they can either work or realize their ideas of family (for instance, along Islamic lines) independent of their in-laws. While the extended family is seen as an important social network, it is also perceived as hindering young families from taking an alternative path.

From the woman question to motherhood

The subject of "gender," Northrop (2004, 30) has suggested, has long been used to legitimate imperial systems (McClintock 1995; Stoler 2002; Wollacott 2006; Zilfi 1997). Here, the Soviet Union is not so different from French colonies in Africa, or the Americans' efforts to "civilize" Native Americans; all of them used "women's problems" to articulate their *mission civilisatrice*. Sophie Hohmann (with Garenne 2005, 114; Hohmann 2009) argues that as with colonialists in Africa, the Russians (even more intensely since the establishment of the Soviet Union) were introducing medical centers and vaccination campaigns out of fear of parasites and diseases. The medical staff were hence actively contributing to a definition of the subject of treatment and establishing a power relationship based on concepts of cleanliness and culture. For the Bolsheviks, the women in Central Asia became the symbol of backwardness and inferiority, which had serious consequences for politics in the region. These policies went hand in hand with the installation of a modern medical system that backs the *mission civilisatrice* by fighting "backwardness."

With the medicalization of womanhood during the Soviet Union, we can observe the victimization of women because of "harmful traditions" and, at the same time, the celebration of "the liberated woman" in the context of the Soviet nation. The idea of dangerous traditions that were harmful to mothers' health found support as much among the religious authorities of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM)[2] as they did among ethnographers and politicians (Bushkov and Mikul'skiy 1996, 16; DeWeese 2011; Northrop 2004, 60–61; Penkala-Gawęcka 2013; Poliakov 1992, 62). While medical pluralism continued to exist in some domains more than in others, control over women's bodies in the capacity of reproduction considerably affected the traditional ways of giving birth. In the master narrative, women and mothers, respectively, had reached liberty through economic integration during the Soviet period (Alimova and Azimova 1999; Keller 1998; Kuniansky 1981, 26; Zikrioeva 2001). Setting aside the social background of the statistics many researchers have presented, which is rather misleading (in Central Asia, membership in a collective farm was a lifelong engagement, quite apart from the amount of time actually invested in farm work), the Soviet period successfully introduced lasting changes in the region and in the life of women, while at the same time providing the necessary framework for the continuation of certain practices such as early marriage and the high esteem for motherhood. Women received education, participated in the economy, engaged in political careers and participated in Soviet cultural production such as theater.

Soviet documentation, Gregory Massell has argued, carefully ascribed Muslim women's inferiority vis-à-vis men in Central Asia. Both Islam and customary law appeared to be factors that hindered women from fully joining the Bolshevik revolution. Thus, women were identified as having "a greater revolutionary potential" (Massell 1974, 126) and hence were more suitable for the new society that the Bolsheviks were seeking to construct. In the absence of clear-cut class structures, women became the "surrogate proletariat" of the Bolsheviks.

In the two early decades of the Soviet Union (1920s and 1930s), two parallel developments took place that I consider crucial for understanding post-Soviet Tajikistan's choice of elevating the mother to the center of the nation: on the one hand, women's conditions were depicted as representations of the backwardness, dirt, disease, and the general ignorance that gripped Central Asian nations (Northrop 2004, 60). In this way, national identity became tied to women and family (which paradoxically turned into a bulwark of resistance against Soviet policy in the writings of academics (e.g. Bennigsen and Lemercier 1967)). On the other hand, the new Soviet mother needed to be protected from lower/traditional/national, etc., influences, as she was the one producing the Soviet citizens needed for the survival of the Soviet nation. Women were rewarded with medals (Rus. *mat'-geroina*) for the work of raising children and thus were celebrated as heroines.

A shift in the discussion from the "woman problem" to motherhood took place during World War II (the Great Patriotic War). In light of a war that had created a gender imbalance of 20 million more women than men,[3] the woman question turned into a motherhood question linked to the reproduction of the Soviet homeland (*vatan*) and the "cultured" or "civilized" Soviet person. Books on education in the Khrushchev period propagated this strategy of producing a father who provided an intellectual upbringing in tandem with a mother who taught cultured behavior (Field 2007, 88). The politics of motherhood remained tied to demographic dynamics, especially after WWII and its tremendous human losses. This led to stricter laws against abortion in 1944, along with a one-time payment for the birth of a child (Harwin 1996, 19–23). Motherhood awards, medals, were introduced for all women with five or more children, and eventually the "mother heroine" award, a gold medal, was bestowed on mothers with 10 (sometimes eight) or more children (Harwin 1996, 20). Jones and Grupp (1987, 275) have mentioned that depending on the monetary value of the award at a given time, these payments offered quite substantial support for families. While it may not have been an incentive to mothers in Russia, it certainly was for rural Tajik mothers, who reported in interviews to have viewed this payment as an increase in the value for their work as mothers. Thus, fertility increased almost continuously from the 1950s in the southern tier of the Soviet Union until the mid-1980s.

Since independence, international actors have entered the field of health and have introduced practices and methods with a similar civilizing agenda inherent to the western machinery of development.[4] Gender issues are an important pillar of this machinery, which pays less attention to local individual concepts of "womanhood" than to general concepts of society. Most remarkable is the acceptance of new biomedical practices and theories by doctors and medical staff as well as by the local population, not only during the Soviet period but, even more, since independence. While medical staff educated during and after the Soviet period appear rather open to NGO workers, western medical advice, new technologies, and governmental orders to increase health control, the strict distinction between the few remaining "traditions" and the doctor's point of view has softened very little (this applies to traditional birth practices, herbal medicine, healers, and many other practices that are considered by doctors as harmful to the health of women).

Similarly, the post-Soviet state's legal actions on women's issues have become intertwined with the western agenda seeking gender equality. Since independence, the topic of women's rights has become a major subject for legal scholars and activists. "Dastur oid ba ta'limi huquqi zanon" (Instruction guide for women's rights) edited by Sangin (1998) was published by the League of Women of Tajikistan, an NGO supported by the United Nations (the UN logo appearing alongside the Tajik national symbol). The book is one among many that provides information on the legal code of Tajikistan and its interpretations. These booklets contain one central message, namely the equality of the wife and the husband (emphasized in Article 33 of the constitution) which condemns violence against women and even unequal treatment between husband and wife (Sangin 1998, 37). Similarly, the book "Ahdnomai nikoh" (Marriage contract) by Mahmudov and Khudoyorov (2001), funded by the Open Society Institute Tajikistan, and the Soros Foundation in cooperation with the League of Women Lawyers of the Republic of Tajikistan, provides an interpretation of the legal development of marriage and women. This pamphlet has a similar action-oriented style, and seeks to educate people to respect one another in the family. At its heart stands Tajik law, which places men and women on an equal level from which gender activism is built.

Medical authority in Tajikistan

In every political period that has shaped Central Asia since the turn of the nineteenth century, women have appeared central to the "new society." The politics of women never remained a domestic issue during these periods of change, but instead were central to public debates and more than once became the flagship of political transformation.

Along with the political framework and its propaganda, doctors and medical authorities became the main agents defining and encouraging the Soviet mother in Central Asia. In 1924, maternal healthcare was established and spread into all administrative units by the 1950s. Doctors were given the authority to define ages of children (for marriage, for military service, for military recruitment, or for birth certificates), even if their mothers knew their children's birth dates, and the doctors decided about the conditions of pregnant women or mothers "objectively." According to interviews, the doctors were often far from easing the lives of these young and future mothers, as they often delivered incorrect diagnoses, forced pregnant women to work until birth, failed to take certain diseases seriously, etc. This triple burden led to women becoming infertile early and kept the child mortality rate high. Accounts of these kinds were common up to the 1960s in the remote regions of Tajikistan. The "objectivity" of the doctor was valued over local knowledge, which led to a general forgetting of former practices and a blind acceptance of doctors' analysis and treatment, as well as medical techniques.

Russian practices of giving birth in birth houses (*roddom*) were introduced in the early 1930s, along with campaigns fighting the practices of traditional doctors (*tabīb* and others). Indeed, medical doctors were part of the team who "designed" the new Soviet woman: "The power of medical authority here is remarkable," Northrop remarks (2004, 255). Doctors were active in the most isolated areas long before any proper infrastructure was established and they helped facilitate the political changes of the Soviet Union.

The effects of this medicalization of motherhood that occurred in the Soviet Union are impressive: birth rates increased rapidly from the mid-1940s onwards and continued far into the 1980s (Blum 1994), and traditions were pushed back to the extent that the traditional midwife profession was no longer handed down to younger women and seemed to have almost completely come under the control of state medical education by the 2000s.

However, a reinvention of these traditions following independence has also occurred in the sphere of medicine. Based on the medieval philosopher and thinker Ibn Sīnā (980–1037) and his scientific encyclopedia of medicine, Tajik academics have revived a notion of "traditional medicine" that celebrates him as a hero. The study of Sīnā's books had previously remained limited to academic interest. Hohmann (2010) has stated that the Institute for Traditional Medicine in Dushanbe has no real influence on medicine.[5] Thus, outside of this institution, Ibn Sīnā is more a national hero than a medical expert whose medical guides are valued. Changes in maternity practices are (re)introduced via medical staff from birth houses and hospitals, while traditional midwives continue to be considered dangerous to the health of mother and child.

Since 2002 the Tajik president has repeatedly called for smaller families. While this was not a law in a proper sense, it was nevertheless called for by the president. Very few laws, resolutions, and rules are implemented across Tajikistan. More often, each village community, each district, and each city finds its own way to implement more or less radically the new law or resolution. This leads to an enormous diversity of practices, including the control of childbirth. In a 2002 village meeting, I witnessed how state workers urged villagers to reduce the number of children in their families to four. This call came to be taken more seriously and today gynecologists are actually asked to abort a pregnancy if a woman is pregnant with a fifth child. Usually doctors directly insert an intrauterine device or "offer" tablets to a mother once the fourth child is born. Discussions have even started about reducing the number to three children. A woman's new reproductive path is supposed to change from one child each year with some voluntary abortions in between, to one child every two to three years and stopping at the fourth. This way, as the medical logic dictates, the mother's health benefits considerably as she avoids regular abortions and instead bears healthy children that she is able to look after, thanks to her good health.

The success of the national program rests on the medical staff, who consider themselves to be builders of a healthy society. Still, some traditions are seen as dangerous; here, little has changed since the Soviet period. The new Tajik state has considerably invested in a national ideology that accompanied the creation of an "authentic Tajik tradition." It is in the course of this development that motherhood was rediscovered as a way to actively shape this new society. This has led to an interesting decrease of age at first marriage over the last 10 years with many girls being married off between the ages of 14 and 16 years.

In recent years numerous NGOs have worked in the domain of health, and specifically on the issue of birth. The gynecologists with whom I have spoken have reacted very positively to this work and have integrated the NGOs' suggestions into their treatments. In the *roddom* of Shahristan and even in Khujand, for instance, the medical staff no longer induces birth but allows birth to progress "naturally." Thus, along with forced reproductive regulations, a healthy family program that integrates advice from the outside (by NGOs) occurs in villages.

Integrating the mother into the state's ideology

Today the Tajik constitution – to a large degree inherited from the Soviet period – is characterized by a strong emphasis on the equal status of men and women. The new constitution of 1994 has changed little in this regard, whereas the rights and duties of a husband and wife are clearly articulated (*zanu shavhar*). Article 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan also considers family as the foundation of society and declares "wife and husband" equal before the law (Mahmudov and Khudoyorov 2012, 14). This is taken over from a law

articulated in 1966 that places the family under the protection of the state. This protection is formulated explicitly in Chapter 2, Article 10 of the Family Code of the Republic of Tajikistan (RT) (Mahmudov and Khudoyorov 2012, 8), which was adopted by the Supreme Assembly on 13 November 1998. The articles on the dangerous customs and traditions that are harmful to the family remained as laws (particularly regarding the criminal code) that specifically punish forced marriage, payment of bride price, polygamy, and underaged marriage. Many of these issues have remained areas of concern and have been addressed further in the new law (e.g. Labor Code of the Republic of Tajikistan, Article 163).

The constitution demonstrates the emphasis of Soviet and post-Soviet politics on women's rights. While these laws read like a well-developed constitution, in reality only very few women have access to legal actions. My own research on the legal system, conducted in 2002 and 2003, has shown that not only are women hardly accorded such rights, but also even the League of Women's Advocates of the Republic of Tajikistan could, in most cases, only bring a legal case through the legal system with bribes, if at all. As one woman put it, "the law of women is their husbands' word." Without considerable support from their male relatives, women are unable to gain access to courts and justice.

These examples suffice to demonstrate that the law is a representation of how government officials at the very top imagine women to be mothers of the nation. Obviously, these laws would turn many a custom on its head, and the obligation to secure maternity payment of 100% would be impossible for companies that struggle with economic survival anyway. In reality, women hardly fight for their rights, which appear inaccessible anyway. Instead, we have to understand the law in the context of the opening quote, that is, as an integral part of the president's "hymn to motherhood, family and nation."

With this assertion of the distinction between the law as a way to celebrate motherhood and family and the much less glorious reality of mothers' lives, I shall continue to develop the concept of motherhood as a national ideology. An example of how Soviet women were turned into Tajik mothers is the celebration of 8 March, International Women's Day, which became part of the Soviet canon of rituals after Clara Zetkin's active efforts in the early twentieth century. Since the 1960s in Tajikistan, Women's Day has been connected to Army Day, which falls on 23 February and is thought of as men's day. On Army Day women give presents to men, and in return they receive presents on Women's Day. Until recently this exchange of gifts was independent of the kinship codex and was often initiated by girls giving a present on 23 February (field work in 2006 and 2007). In 2009 the president declared 8 March to be Mother's Day (Kaplan 1985; newspaper vatan.tj, 5 March 2010) and 15 May the Day of the Family (*rūzi oila*) (Ayubzod 2011). In this way he has disconnected 8 March from 23 February. Mothers have now been fully integrated into the politics of ritualization and national ideology.

Within the tradition of the family as the nucleus of society, the law on Parental Responsibility in the Education of Children, decreed in 2011, cemented this relation (Milli 2012). Among journalists this new law has primarily been discussed because of the many restrictions it places on religious education and practice. Yet this is only part of a larger effort to closely tie the family to the government and its ideological-cultural project. In this project, the family needs to be safeguarded from "backward" and "dangerous" elements coming from Islam: note the similarity of the discussion with that of the 1920s. However, it is not socialism, but rather authentic Tajikness that enforces this concept of family reproduction. Tajikness has a limited set of Islamic attributes, but its family function is founded in pre-Islamic Tajikistan (Dzhurabaev 2009).[6] Redefining Tajik national culture has been one of the greatest efforts of the current government, and the family has played a key role in this process.

This academic literature goes along with political statements that resonate in the political sphere, for example, the Year of Aryan Civilization celebrated in 2006 (Laruelle 2007). The following interview with Amirshoeva (2013), deputy of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan, gives an idea of the debate. When a reader asked the following question of Amirshoeva: "Tajiks increasingly marry Chinese citizens whether because of poverty, or lack of [Tajik] men. Doesn't this threaten the gene pool of the nation?" Amirshoeva replied:

> Your question is justified. Indeed, today we see that our girls in the pursuit of wealth and money, marry men of other nationalities, which we Tajik mothers observe with great regret. We Tajiks, being Muslims, have no right to marry representatives of other faiths. As a deputy I promise you that although the Constitution guarantees freedom of marriage, I, God forbid [such practices], I will try to take action against this phenomenon.

In a healthy nation marriage with men from other faiths should be banned, Amirshoeva believes. In her perspective, "Muslim" does not refer to Islam as a global community (*umma*), but rather to "cultural Islam" that developed out of Soviet concepts of nationality (Hilgers 2009).

The practice of law on the healthy family

This process of establishing motherhood as the center of the Tajik nation does not rely on imagined laws alone. Indeed, the activation of single aspects that are reinforced by resolutions or simply by public speeches of the president forms an important tool for exerting power and putting the idea of the healthy family into practice. According to gynecologists that I interviewed, a law was passed (or was possibly only reinforced by doctors) in 2010 demanding that every young person about to be married must pass a medical examination to secure the production of an *oilai solim* (sound family). In this section I will describe these laws and show how they have been used by medical staff to help form the new Tajik family. The Family Code of the Republic of Tajikistan of 1998, Chapter 2, part 3, deals explicitly with marriage (*aqdi nikoh*). In Article 14 of this Family Code we learn under what conditions marriage is forbidden. The reasons given are, for instance, mental disease, excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs, being close relatives (brothers, sisters, mother, or father), or foster children. The lawyers Mahkam Mahmudov and Bakhtiyor Khudoyorov argue that, "the reason for forbidding these people to marry is for the health and wellbeing of the newborn child" (2012, 45). To ensure that parents are healthy, each party can ask the other for medical checks. Article 15 even orders the medical check to secure a healthy family, and thus ensures that health issues are known to the future partner prior to marriage. Hiding any diseases from a partner can be a reason to take the other to court: "The reason for issuing this article is above all – to prioritize the healthy family (*oilai solim*) and the birth of healthy offspring" (Mahmudov and Khudoyorov 2012, 47). A first case discussed in the press was a girl who had "hidden" her handicap from her future husband and was fined $400 by the court because of this (centrasia/tjru 2013).

How has this law been understood and put into practice by medical staff? A women's doctor explains the following:

> The registration of legal status (ZAGS, *Zapis Aktov Grazhdanskogo Sostoyaniya*, Record of Civil Status Act) has decreed a law to which we doctors have agreed upon. Young people have to undergo a medical check with the gynecologist, with the surgeon, the eye specialist, the ear, nose, and throat specialist. From head to toe they are checked medically.

"What if for instance, a young woman is slightly deaf in one ear?"

> We have to fully explain to the (future potential) husband "this girl is hearing impaired, do you agree to take her anyway, or not?" Then if he likes her, he has to make sure himself that she

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> receives the right treatment, or if they prefer, her own father and mother take care of that – they negotiate together. (Interview with Lola, 4 August 2013)

The aim of the law is to create healthy families and ensure that only healthy children are born. The medical check takes place a month before the wedding, and marriage registration at the ZAGS office is only possible with this document. It is expected that a girl will become pregnant right after marriage and therefore any medical treatment should be completed by the day of the wedding. While the law refers to both husband and wife, it is the woman that is more closely checked. Men easily buy their way out of this obligation but are interested to know the biological quality of their future wife. It is also at this point that the future husband learns whether his future wife is a virgin or not (Sarkorova 2014) – traditional ways of checking virginity have become unnecessary.

For the doctors this is not only a way to gain a new source of income but also to retain their positions within village communities as the judges of good and bad living. The idea behind this reflects the national ideology that the government has put forward in which the mother becomes the center of the healthy nation.

However, not all laws and decrees are implemented in the same way in each district. In some villages this law has remained irrelevant and is just one more administrative requirement that one must purchase at the nearest clinic. However, in many other places doctors have been very strict on this issue, which has led many girls to be even more scared of marriage than ever – at least in the north of Tajikistan. As a young girl told me, they would avoid making any complaints about health because each visit to the doctor would be carefully registered. In Khujand, for instance, it is common for a young man or his family to check at the nearest medical center about the health of the girl the young man intends to marry. Each citizen is required to be registered at the medical center to which his or her street or quarter belongs; thus, the medical network has become one of the strongest networks for controlling the population.

What materializes is a traditional practice in which a girl's moral behavior is carefully checked before marriage, but which today serves the medicalization of the female body for political purposes, namely to create sound families and a healthy nation. There is therefore no more secrecy or intimacy surrounding a girl's body, as she is judged by her physical quality through medical checks. Unlike moral examinations – which were an integral part of matching couples during the Soviet period[7] – the apparently "objective" medical check is irreversible and stigmatizes a girl for the rest of her life.

I venture to claim that all these processes have developed against the background that one has to care for the mother as much as for the nation. This complements the national ideology that the government has aimed for since independence (merging "culture" and "tradition"). Citizens are no longer just members of an imagined community, as this community (headed by a government body and administration) has become a tangible reality of biological reproduction that can be molded at will. "Commanding right, forbidding wrong" is a religious notion (Epkenhans 2011) and a strong motif of how Tajiks imagine progressive development. In this sense, politics are not so much arbitrary or unusual but continue to integrate the tools of political rule that have been in existence over the last century.

Notions of cleanliness, purity etc., have appeared in many political systems; they relate physical dirt to national or "ethnic" mixing and derive strong ideologies from this. The mother, as the one representing both "dirt" in the village (and all that is associated with it) and national development and progress, becomes the focus of politics. The mother has the responsibility of producing and maintaining a sound family. Poverty among mothers, especially in single-mother households, shows how far this ideology reaches. Female

street cleaners (whose husbands often have gone missing in Russia, are alcoholics, or for any other reason hardly support their families) were interviewed after the presidential elections in 2013. The interviewees spoke of the president as a leader and father, and of themselves as mothers of the nation despite having only been paid just prior to the elections after several months without payment, as well as having to experience terrible working conditions and a salary too low to send their children to school.

The Criminal Law of Tajikistan says that a person who urges a woman to abort commits a criminal act. However, the new rules of the healthy family allow exactly this.[8] The following story was narrated by a women's doctor in the north of Tajikistan. During the interview a young woman arrived for treatment and the woman's doctor explained that the young woman had already been pregnant twice but lost her children. Now she had become pregnant with a third child:

> She just had a medical check – the child has hydrocephalus … We have now admitted her in order to medically induce labor (sun'i tavallud). She cried, because she wouldn't be able to have this third child, she doesn't have healthy children. I told her that she has to rest and receive treatment for three years. It has now been seven years since she married.

"Did she lose the other children?" "No, we took them through the medical induction of labor, all of them." "What is the position of the religious authorities?"

> We explain that this child will not be healthy, it does not have the strength to survive, it will die after birth. … Our religious authorities understand this. Who wants more ill people in a society? Nobody wants that, everybody wants the healthy population to increase.

Note that in Tajikistan abortions can be carried out up to the third month of pregnancy. Later abortions are carried out by forcing prenatal birth. This is possible up to six months as it is expected that the child will die shortly after birth anyway.

The woman's doctor justified the abortion in the context of a national mission to create a healthy and sound society that depends on healthy mothers and their healthy children. It is first and foremost the hospitals and birth houses (*roddom*) that are able to secure this healthy family. This assumption includes the idea that the mother who has just given birth needs to be isolated from the rest of society: society is full of dirt, backward thinking, dangerous traditions, and risks to the mother's health. Consequently, a law was passed that mothers have to deliver their babies in birth houses, and if they do not manage due to the sudden onset of labor, relatives have to get her to the next birth house within 18 hours. In many villages traditional midwives no longer exist, as they have all been successfully marginalized and died of old age. Birth outside of medical control is punishable by a fine, and traditional ways of delivering children have been abolished, which this women's doctor says is the fulfillment of Soviet efforts, albeit under a new era.

Birth houses in Dushanbe are built in such a way that only a small window permits contact between the mother who has delivered a baby and her relatives. During the Soviet period, this window even had glass in it to prevent dirt from entering the birth house. A former nurse from a *roddom* explained with pride how they managed tens of babies at a time during the Soviet period. For three days, the newborn was kept and fed independently of the mother who, it was believed, had no milk yet. Then the nurse would go around calling out each baby's family name, hand out each baby to its mother for nursing, and collect them half an hour later. She enjoyed this work and was proud of her responsibility "For me, it was like contributing to society's modern development."

Today, prestige has vanished and chronically underpaid nurses and doctors are forced to take bribes and are not afraid to neglect those who pay badly and devote attention to those who pay well. According to a mother who delivered her second child in the summer of

2013, treatment is dependent on the amount paid by the mother's family. She explained how some children and mothers would be neglected to the degree of lacking food and basic hygiene because no one from her family would visit her and assume the financial burden (food and medicine needs to be brought by the relatives), some even making efforts to run away without their child. Also, young mothers are released from *roddom* only upon settling all bills, plus a bribe – in total, birth costs between $100 and $500 in Dushanbe.

Here we can see that the effort involved with making and shaping the healthy family ignores social problems, poverty, and traditions (particularly the dependency of women on their husband's and even their own families), and elevates this practice to an arbitrary tool in the hands of doctors and the state. Thus, even if laws and decrees exist in written form, their implementation depends on doctors, law agencies, international organizations, and the population itself. This emphasizes the ideological character of those laws and decrees, many of them imagining a healthy society as something that can be molded and built at will; but these rules all depend on the loyalty of doctors and law enforcement agencies and their faith in this future healthy nation.

Muslims' concept of motherhood

Being empathetic toward mothers is not restricted to ordinary people, musicians, and the president, but has become part of a political competition for the country's populations (due to the mass-emigration of men affecting mainly women, children, and the elderly), and hence is as much a part of the ruling party's discourse as that of the opposition. The website of the main opposition party, the IRP, Nahzat.tj, uploaded a video about mothers that was called "Farishta bo nomi modar" (An angel named mother, nahzat.tj 2011). The movie clip starts with a text saying "one mother can raise ten children but ten children cannot look after one mother." In this movie, which is based on a monologue accompanied by pictures and small video sequences, a child converses with God and is told who will care for it after it has been born. God explains that this will be an angel and at the end of the conversation the child asks, "What can I call this angel?" and God says "You can call her mother." The movie goes on to call for love and respect for the mother and to claim that "The mother is so great to the degree that … we can refer to the mother as the nation and the nation as mother." The mother is at the same time the most intimate "angel" as she is the symbol of the nation.

Severe regulation of birth as occurs in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan is at odds with Muslim views of children being a source of wealth and happiness. While religious authorities have not been opposed to the idea of the sound family per se, the line of conflict has been in the moral role of motherhood. According to these authorities, women's fulfillment lies in motherhood, which should be prioritized over any other "burden" on women. The sound family, however, is not achieved by doctors alone, but through beliefs and religious practices. Gynecologists and women's doctors have documented cases in which religious men refused to let their wives be treated by male doctors, even if they risked the death of their wives by doing so. While this is exceptional, it represents a countermovement that tries to protect the family from the state's hand. In other words, while the state celebrates motherhood as the gain of "the secular healthy nation" (in which Islamic identity is more symbolic than an influence that shapes the character of the state), Muslims' discourses claim that caring for mothers is inherent to Islam, which results in an orderly society.

In the context of the Muslim family, the mother is the loving, faithful angel that the film of the Nahzat (IRP) has painted. She holds a sacred place far beyond the reality of everyday

interaction among her and her children. She thus needs to be honored and glorified for sacrificing her life to the education and well-being of her family. There is hardly anyone in Tajikistan who does not know the hadith (an account of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet) that states "Paradise lies beneath the feet of your mother."[9] The sincere respect and love Tajik children have for their mothers are far greater than that in any other society I have worked with. Grown-up sons would call their mothers several times a day while in Russia, and they are ready to do anything – even divorce their wives – to comfort their mother. For instance, one young man promised to fulfill his mother's wish for Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). In response to my question of how he would manage his own children and family if he spent his meager resources for Hajj, he replied that he only had one mother but could make new children. Another example was a young man who upon his return from several months in Russia stopped at his wife's home before going to his parent's. As a result, he was disowned. Love and respect go first to one's mother and father before it goes to one's own children and wife. This social relation does not exclude real-life conflicts, but it does elevate the status of motherhood (and to a lesser degree fatherhood) beyond life's daily difficulties and realities.

Since independence, a large number of pamphlets written by religious authorities have flooded the market. These pamphlets target young husbands and wives. The struggle to define the sound Tajik family is thus not only a state effort, but first and foremost has been encouraged by religious personnel. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a complete overview of this literature, yet I will provide some examples from one pamphlet to underline the status of motherhood in contemporary religious discussions: "The place of father and mother in Islam" was written by Iskandarifar (2008) from Irfon (Dushanbe). "One of the most important services that each Muslim is required to pay attention to is the fulfillment of parental rights," (6). Furthermore, the authors write:

> Eh, Prophet of God! Who is most deserving of the good that I do? He replied: "Your mother." This person asked again: "Then whom?" He replied: "Your mother!" This person asked again: "Then whom?" He replied: "Your mother!" This person asked one more time: "Then whom?" And this time he replied: "Your father." (emphasis in original, 8)

Such examples from Islamic tradition fill the entire pamphlet, which emphasizes the superiority of the mother in religious terms above all other relationships. Efforts by religious authorities to shape a moral family in which the mother is the pillar have been interpreted as resistant to Soviet power (Tett 1995). Since independence, and especially fostered by the experience of the civil war, motherhood has been rearticulated as the most valuable moral form in women's lives. While such efforts have also been observed in other post-conflict societies (Kaser and Katschnig-Fasch 2005; Martine 2007), in Tajikistan the re-gendering of society along Islamic values has clashed with a nonreligious cultural program of the state (Roche 2012; Tadjbaksh 1994; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1995). This does not ignore that the state plays on the register of Islam when required for legitimacy, but it seriously restricts the dynamics that Islam had developed in everyday life.

In addition to this collection of pamphlets, numerous videos and music videos circulate that propagate a picture of Islam that is based on the idealized picture of the chaste and sound mother. However, as we have seen above, throughout the last two decades, Islam has been more and more marginalized by the current government for shaping the sound family. What started as a joint venture (Solehiyon 2011) increasingly turned into a relationship of opposition (Siddiqiyon 2011).

The Fatwa Department of the Muftiyat, as well as the IRP of Tajikistan, have actively led campaigns targeted at women in order to raise women's knowledge of their rights under

shari'a. The IRP even created a position for a female lawyer (Zarafo Rahmonī) who would answer and advise women online, by telephone or via newspapers. The education of women, according to Zarafo, is one of the key elements necessary to securing a healthy and moral family. Speaking of demographic politics, she explains:

> During the Soviet period having children was a challenge undertaken for the sake of future generations. If you had more than five children they gave prizes, gave money. If one had six to eight children it was like passing an exam, it was even better. This tendency emerged after the Great Patriotic War (WWII) when generations dwindled. … Some would give birth to ten or even 15 children; they would give birth to many children and still have good health. Furthermore, the state would help. However, today it is different; the state has again enacted a law stipulating that one may only have four children. According to the leader of the republic, the president of the country, with regards to the conditions that many face in their lives, people should not give birth to more than four children. (Interview 11 July 2013)

Zarafo's frustration about controlling the family via the mother is representative of many religious families. Today only *roddom*s are licensed to issue birth certificates, which are again important for future school certificates. Disregarding the complications that arise from this legal practice (for instance, children without a father or children from unofficial second wives), it is a method to completely control the reproduction of Tajik women. For many Muslim families this directly hinders their freedom to decide about their own family size and their religious self-realization as mothers.

Preliminary conclusion

The detailed description contained in this paper was not presented because I believe that gender politics in Tajikistan has been understudied, but rather because we face a classic topic in a new setting (i.e. more than 20 years since the end of the Soviet Union) and a careful evaluation of available sources is overdue. It has been stated elsewhere that national discourses in the region of Central Asia have increasingly gained an ethnic color since independence. This ethnic narrative is not only a textbook case but also part of a political effort to create a healthy society, with a sound family acting as the nucleus. In this context motherhood has become the flagship of the healthy society and nation promoted via national, legal, and religious gender discourses and put into practice by doctors. One may be tempted to see in this policy a eugenic agenda the likes of which shaped some parts of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, this is not fully the case here, as the Tajik government lacks the capacity to implement its policies systematically and nationwide, and moreover, lacks the academic foundation for such an undertaking. The systematic selection of one group over the other demands more systematic control and technology than Tajik doctors have: implementation of laws is punctual and situational. Furthermore, there is no clearly formulated concept of race selection for this practice; instead, the healthy nation refers to a vague idea of an ethno-national group that is put forward. This can be seen in the interview with Saodat Amirshoeva, who uses Islam to not only distinguish Tajiks from the Chinese, but also Tajikness (sometimes close to Zoroastrianism) against Muslims outside of Tajikistan.

And yet, a generalized eugenic undertone suggesting that Tajiks should become a healthy population resonates in national debates. It is my contention that this is a continuation of the Soviet ideology of population development along cultural lines (*kul'tura, madaniyat*). Despite its effort to gain full control over its citizens, the Tajik government has not had a strategy of demographic expansion – for example, migrants in Russia have never been part of this cultural family discussion and nationalistic propaganda. On the

contrary, the migration of young men to Russia is encouraged to lighten demographic pressure from the Tajik economy. This forces us to rethink the politics of family in dictatorships or authoritative states in Central Asia. Progress and eugenics appear to be closely related. There need not necessarily be a specific political strategy behind this dynamic, but the right context (political regime and historical period), international connectivity (international organization and the importation of medical technology), and concepts of progress can result in such dynamics.

The agency of women has been almost fully absent from this discussion. However, women are of course more than passive bearers of demographic politics and ideologies of motherhood as they shape their own lives and choices with countless subtle strategies (e.g. Fathi 2004; Turaeva 2010). My aim here was rather to show that throughout recent decades the politics of motherhood have become dynamic again with the support of state propaganda, opposition politics (mainly on Islamic values), and international organizations. The strategies women use while being made objects of that ideology is a subject for another paper. For now, suffice it to say that these politics do produce results whether women participate in the process by obeying (or with their individual motivations in their given situation) or feel victimized (like the young mother who was forced to interrupt her pregnancy for the third time). Demographic control through women from above is a strategy that several post-Soviet countries (e.g. Uzbekistan) have engaged with, and this political reality is embedded in a larger ideology that reevaluates the value of motherhood.

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Notes

1. A woman who has never married continues to be called *dukhtar* (miss), referring to her biological condition of virginity and the absence of social rights that are granted to a married woman.
2. The SADUM was the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, under which the Muslim clergy of the Soviet Union was officially organized, operating from 1943 until the end of the Soviet Union. The religious authorities of the SADUM repeatedly issued *fatwa*s (legal documents) against traditional health practices that they considered "un-Islamic" (Babadjanov 2001).
3. Harwin (1996, 19) speaks of 27 million people who perished between 1941 and 1945, and still there was a surplus of 20 million women over men fourteen years after the war, to which one must add the victims of the Stalin purges of the 1930s, most of them men (see also Conquest 2008 [1990] and Winter 1992).
4. I thank Sophie Hohmann for sharing her experiences with me during her work with Médecins du monde in Tajikistan in 2014. During her field trip to the region with this organization, she was struck by a kind of "colonial anti-Communist mentality" that assumed the Soviet Union had never cared for its citizens and only produced inefficient health care.
5. According to Sophie Hohmann's informants, since 1997 only 12 people have received certificates from this institute (2010, 13).
6. Today some Tajik ethnographers situate "free" women between the pre-Islamic period and Soviet time. Djzhurabaev (2009) goes even further, claiming that hygiene, comfort, and esthetics of life come from Zoroastrianism, which is responsible for all the "progressive elements in Tajik culture" (50).
7. A girl whose moral behavior was questioned in her own village would still have found a partner further from home.

8. Pushing a woman to abort her child is a crime that can lead to two years imprisonment "Dastur oid ba ta'limi huquqi zanon" [Guide to instruct on women's rights] edited by Sangin (1998, 39).
9. There are controversial discussions about the authenticity of the hadith, which in its correct version seems to read: "Be at your mother's feet and there is Paradise" (Ibn Majah, Sunan, Hadith no. 2771).

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