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Central Asian Survey

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713409859>

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Online publication date: 08 April 2011

To cite this Article Harris, Colette(2011) 'State business: gender, sex and marriage in Tajikistan', Central Asian Survey, 30: 1, 97 – 111

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2011.554057

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2011.554057>

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State business: gender, sex and marriage in Tajikistan

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This article examines the relation of the state to masculinity and sexuality by way of an exploration of the sexual problems of a young man and his wife in Tajikistan at the end of the Soviet era. It suggests that the regime's inattention to this kind of issue was bound up with the importance to the state of projecting appropriate versions of masculinity. It further posits the idea that the continued refusal of the independent Tajik state to offer appropriate treatments for sexual dysfunction is consistent with the image of modernity President Rahmon wishes to present to the world. The article shows that as masculinity discursively occupies the superior gender position, with men expected to dominate, the state is itself impotent to respond when they are, in fact, unable to do so in sexual practice. However, the myth of male dominance persists to the point that it may prevent women from seeing beyond their subordination and finding mutually beneficial solutions in their familial and sexual relationships.

Keywords: gender; marriage; masculinity; sexualities; the state

Introduction

You may well ask what gender, sex and marriage have to do with the state and why I am framing these apparently private matters as the business of the state. Feminist scholarship, however, has shown how crucial the display of appropriate forms of masculinity is to state image, both internationally and domestically. Moreover, inappropriate gender performance, of both femininity and masculinity, but in particular of the latter, has been conceptualized as a threat to state security, as potentially subversive of state power, and thus dangerous (Enloe 2007). Since masculinities define power relations not only between the sexes but also among men, the structure of society as a whole may be threatened when some men do not conform (Connell 2004). In fact, it has been claimed that the very reproduction of appropriate forms of the modern state and even of patriotism depends on masculinity since 'masculinity and the theory and practice of ... politics are ... mutually constitutive' (Hutchings 2008, p. 43; see also Zarkov and Cockburn 2002).

An important indicator of the weight states give to appropriate sexuality is the way it is treated in their legal systems (Millett 1977, Pateman 1988, 2008). Typically these will contain laws on the minimum age at which girls may consent to sexual congress or marry, as well as the regulation of homosexuality, abortion, and/or access to contraception. Pressure to uphold the forms and values of the traditional family, an institution to which sex is central and which furthermore is the chief instrument for the inculcation of appropriate gender norms, has frequently been exerted by heads of state (including General Secretary Gorbachev [Gray 1991]), showing family, sexuality, and gender identities indeed to be legitimate concerns of politics (Hirshman and Larson 1998, Reumann 2005).

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This has not been the case with all aspects of personal life. When it comes to domestic violence, for instance, the family has until recently been portrayed as a private space into which the state should not venture. This issue has long been, and in some places remains, unspoken of, in part because this would violate the rights of men as heads of family (Pateman 1988, 2008). It has been suggested that it is also related to appropriate gender performance – keeping women submissively domesticated while promoting masculine aggression. This is said to be important for equipping men for entry into the armed forces and for gaining the approval of the population for using these forces to wage war (Goldstein 2001, Enloe 2007). In other words, the ability of states to produce a show of military strength depends on their ability to project an image of a citizenry composed of strong men. This position is further confirmed by attitudes towards homosexuality, conceptualized as weakening the male image and thus damaging. Even if this is now changing, those states that particularly prize militarism – Turkey, Uganda and the United States, for instance – continue to take a quite negative view of deviant forms of masculinity¹ (Dolan 2002, Biricik 2009, Lemelle 2010) and this was certainly the case in the Soviet Union (Kon 1995).

Equally if not more damaging to ideal images of masculinity are men incapable of appropriate sexual performance, that is, of successfully penetrating a woman. Thus, to enquire into men's ability to perform sexually is to question the very foundations of gender, since sexual practices are deeply embedded in its performance and *vice versa* (Fracher and Kimmel 1995, p. 457, Connell 2004). In other words, sexuality is intimately and dialectically bound up with the construction of masculinities, such that the two mutually reinforce or conversely weaken one another (cf. Garlick 2003), and with this, the state. Hence, it is unsurprising that states prefer not to look too closely into their citizens' sexual competence and that speaking of such matters has been one of the last taboos.²

In Tajikistan (as in many other settings) the very definition of a man is linked to his ability to penetrate a woman and beget a (preferably male) child. The completion of the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood that starts with the circumcision ceremony (Tett 1995) is based on achieving and maintaining an erection for long enough to rupture the bridal hymen, thereby producing blood. To fail to perform these acts, therefore, is to be unable to display true manhood.

From its beginnings the Soviet state paid exceptional attention to gender, marriage laws being among its first constitutional reforms. Gender identities were also at the centre of the decades-long struggle between the Soviet state and the peoples of minority cultural groups, with special attention paid to the Muslim peoples of Central Asia (Keller 2001). While this played out differently among and even within the five republics, the tensions it produced strongly influenced the thinking of those affected on the ground (Tett 1995, Kuehnast 1997, Kamp 1998, Constantine 2001, Harris 2004, Kandiyoti 2007).

This was very clear in those areas of Tajikistan where I carried out my research, mainly Dushanbe and the Qurghonteppa region of Khatlon Oblast.³ Here explicit articulation of sharp gender distinctions between Slavs and Central Asians was common even among the uneducated. Between strong social pressures from family and neighbours to conform to fairly narrow sets of gender ideals and the rhetoric of the state, not only women but also men felt pressured to adopt culturally appropriate behaviour patterns.

This is not to imply that people actually lived up to the norms. As Butler points out (1995, pp. 31–32), nobody ever quite succeeds in doing this. However, in attempting it, strenuous efforts were often made to conceal deviations in order to give an impression of success – that is, to project the appropriate gendered performance, or to be what Paxson terms gender proficient (2005).

In earlier work I have suggested that one important approach to concealment was the use of what, following Scott (1990, p. 3), I have termed gender 'masks'. My idea was that wearing a

notional mask (represented by a certain kind of facial expression, body language, type of speech, and so on) can, for instance, allow men to look powerful and dominating despite internal feelings of inadequacy and permit women to display submission and compliance to conceal underlying strength (Harris 2004, p. 21ff).

Gender proficiency may further be projected via a joint or co-performance (cf. Mouton 2001). This may occur through deliberate collaboration or simply because of a tacit agreement to play these roles for protection from public censure and/or gossip, both parties finding themselves in a position where such collaboration seems essential for social survival.

Marriage is one situation in which two people whose private relationship is antagonistic may feel compelled to produce such a co-performance. This paper discusses one such case, addressing the relationship between the performance of appropriate sexuality and the (co-)production of gender proficiency on the part of Ali and Zulfia, a Tajik couple who married in the last years of the Soviet Union. It discusses what happens to the couple relationship when both are aware that the one expected to be dominant has proved unable to deliver, how the woman involved copes and what this means for the man.

I met the woman whom I call Zulfia in 2000 at the women's centre in Qurghonteppa run by Ghamkhori, the non-governmental organization (NGO) I helped establish in that town.⁴ She recounted her story over a series of meetings and I have pieced it together into a consecutive narrative following the method used in my earlier work (see Harris 2004). In order to protect her privacy I have given her a false name and concealed the identity of her home village. I never met Ali nor anyone else from either of their families; all the information here came from Zulfia herself. While this is just a single story, I came across many similar tales and the overall behaviour of the actors concerned is congruent with that of other families in that part of Tajikistan faced with potentially shaming aberrations.

The events narrated here took place during Soviet times in one of the most socially conservative areas of Tajikistan, perhaps of the whole Soviet Union, where the state had penetrated far less than in the regions discussed by the gender scholarship on other parts of Central Asia cited above or even than in the Tajik village studied by Tett (1995). The Gharmis of this region had put up a largely tacit but nonetheless solid resistance to Sovietization in which religion played a major role, to the extent that they became the centre of the Islamic opposition in the civil war. Soviet institutions, including medical ones, were shunned as far as possible, most births even occurring at home. Many women had never left their compounds (*havli*) since marriage other than to participate in the cotton harvests, and a few *mullahs'* wives had never been seen at all even by other women, who were permitted to talk to them only through a curtain. While working with Ghamkhori I met several quite young women whose parents had never allowed them to attend school. This was the setting in which Ali and Zulfia were raised, although she was among the most educated women from the Khatlon villages with whom I was acquainted, probably because her mother, who came from a less conservative background in Qurghonteppa, was a teacher.

The article starts by explaining gender performance and the vital importance of projecting appropriate masculinities, in particular in light of the honour-and-shame complex that dominates social relations in this setting, before going on to narrate the story of Ali's sexual failures and the enormous shame they carried, and show how the use of gender masks could facilitate their concealment. Next, I explain the suffering caused by a political system that outlawed all public mention of sex and failed to provide appropriate therapy services, and I claim that the privileging of masculinity makes it difficult for women to even grasp men's needs for support let alone actually help them. I end by suggesting that the importance for the state of maintaining appropriate versions of masculinity has sustained the concealment of such aberrations as the one on which

this paper focuses and that the image of Tajikistan that President Rahmon is trying to project is as dependent on this as was the Soviet Union.

Gender performance

In my first book on Tajikistan, I defined gender as ‘a culture-specific ideal, varying over time, that males and females are supposed to live up to in order to become intelligible to, and accepted members of, their own communities’ (Harris 2004, p. 14). In order for this to happen, gender has to be performed over and over (Butler 1993, p. 95). Since it is not always possible to conform to the ideals, it is frequently necessary to resort to the gender masks described above. They help conceal the fact that a variety of obstacles may hinder people from living up to social expectations, by enabling them to keep deviations from being made public. In some cases this is to prevent deliberate flouting of the norms, such as may be practised by those who refuse to comply with heteronormativity. In others this is to prevent the shaming of those exposed as (sexually) inadequate. The reasoning behind both may be that keeping something out of public view will result, if not in its going away, then at least in its remaining unmarked and thus socio-politically insignificant.

The importance given to projecting appropriate gendered images shows the power of perception in the *creation* of ‘reality’, no matter how fictitious, as well as the power of the threat of being shamed, and there is little more shaming for a man or his family than his being exposed as sexually inadequate. In settings where it is vital to preserve female virginity until marriage, it is pointless for a man to oversee its preservation in his daughter until her wedding night if her groom is unable to deflower her. After all, it is through penetration that her virginity is proved. In Tajikistan this may even take on material manifestation through the display of a bloody cloth. A failure of penetration will shame both families concerned, simultaneously preventing the groom’s acquisition of adult masculinity and calling into question the bride’s purity (Harris 2004). Thus, the inability to achieve this must be concealed at all costs.

The reification of such images, their usage to construct social reality, is not unique to Tajikistan but derives from what has been termed the honour-and-shame system (Peristiany 1966), exported along with Islam and Christianity from the Mediterranean to many other parts of the world. This gender system was seen both by the Soviet state and by the population of Central Asia as inherently different from that of the Slavs, whose gender norms are closer to those of northern Europe. Starting in the mid 1920s the focus of the Soviet regime on re-engineering Central Asian norms into models nearer to their own ended up turning them into a weapon of political resistance and thus entrenching them the more firmly (see Harris 2004) in a way suggestive of the situation of many migrant communities in Europe today.

Influenced by the honour-and-shame system, in Tajikistan shame (*ayb*) has become reified and a notable hindrance in virtually everything a girl or young woman wishes to undertake. Almost anything can be, and frequently is, labelled shameful and the fear of attracting this stigma acts as a strong restraint. While the spotlight on men tends to focus more on their ability to control their womenfolk, their capacity for sexual prowess is clearly tied to a projection of honour or *namus*. *Namus* reflects the ability to display appropriate gender performances, above all masculinity. It is prized far above *sharaf*, the kind of honour that has to do with general personal behaviour and which could perhaps be better translated as integrity.⁵

Male sexuality is rarely under the spotlight, as the performance of the penis does not receive the same level of attention within public discourse as female virginity; failure to maintain this last is talked about as potentially *the* most significant source of shame. While women’s ability to produce the correct performance on their wedding night is carefully monitored, men’s capacity to do so is silently assumed, making seeking support doubly difficult for those

unable to achieve this. Of course there is a significant difference between the two – the woman must preserve something that once removed is gone for ever, retain until the proper moment a pre-existing condition that functions very much like a seal guaranteeing the purity of the ‘goods’ within, while this is just the start of the man having to demonstrate his ability to reproduce his manhood, something he will be called upon to do over and over. When, as with Ali, he is unable to do this, the shame is also ongoing.

Ali and Zulfia

Zulfia grew up in a small, mainly Gharmi, village on the outskirts of Qurghontepa, the daughter of two teachers. In the late 1980s at age 22, she had just completed a teacher-training course and embarked on her first job when her parents arranged her marriage to Ali, a young man from a neighbouring village. One day, she was simply informed by her parents that her wedding was imminent. No information about her future spouse was provided and Zulfia did not dare ask for any. On the appointed day, she was dressed in wedding finery, and the family set off for the ceremony. When the young couple was finally left alone together neither knew what to say so they both sat silent. Zulfia thought Ali looked like a shy but pleasant young man and she hoped with all her heart they would get on well and make a good life together.

That night the young couple were ushered into a bedroom and left to consummate their marriage. Zulfia felt extremely nervous. She had little idea of what to expect although she vaguely understood that a husband was expected to stick his penis into his bride and that this was how babies were made. She knew this had to do with a piece of tissue between her legs that her mother had insisted she be extremely careful not to damage, which was in turn related to the fact that she had to bleed to prove her purity. Otherwise she associated blood from that part of her body solely with menstruation. This was the extent of her information, although she greatly feared that whatever was about to occur would be painful.

After they were undressed Ali started to stroke her and soon achieved an erection. He hastily pushed her legs apart, seeming highly excited, so excited in fact that he ejaculated before his penis reached her. Eyes down and mumbling excuses, Ali tried again, with much the same result. This time his penis actually touched Zulfia’s leg before ejaculation but got nowhere near her vagina. He flushed bright red and seemed very upset.

Zulfia began to feel frustrated and annoyed. It was not that she felt aroused or wanted sex. She experienced no pleasurable anticipation at the thought of intimate contact with Ali’s body. She just wanted to get this obligatory rite over and done with. She tried to ask Ali about what had happened but, face averted in apparent shame, he just muttered something about never before having seen a naked woman and that this made him so excited he was unable to control himself. He was sure it would change once he got used to being with her.

The next day, greatly to Zulfia’s relief, nobody questioned her on the subject. That night Ali tried again but with no more success and the same on the following night, although that time at least he managed to ejaculate between Zulfia’s legs, his ‘disgusting liquids’ running all down them.

On the following day, tired of waiting, Zulfia’s grandmother asked her what was going on. Had she not been a virgin, had she not bled, was this the problem? ‘No,’ Zulfia told her. ‘I am not the problem here. It is Ali. He has tried and tried but his penis doesn’t stay hard for long enough. This liquid stuff comes out and then it goes soft again.’ Reliving these experiences, Zulfia started to cry. Her grandmother tried to soothe her and told her not to worry. She would inform Ali’s mother about the problem, so nobody would blame her.

After this, the young couple was left to their own devices. Nobody explained anything; nobody offered any help. Ali apparently did not speak to anyone about his problem, nor did Zulfia.

After several months had passed without consummation, Zulfia began to despise her husband. Men were supposed to be strong and powerful so how come this one was unable to perform adequately? She was doing her part, why couldn't he do his? She understood a woman was expected to be passive in bed and leave all action to the man. Anything else would be contravening her bridal role and might even be held against her. She did not want to put herself in a position that would allow Ali to justify himself by suggesting it was some deficiency on her side that had inhibited him. In any case she had no idea what she might be expected to contribute to the act.

In the months and years that followed Ali was never fully able to penetrate his wife, although he eventually managed to tear her hymen and somehow make her pregnant. After this, he left her alone until well after the birth. When their sex life resumed Ali was still unable to maintain an erection for more than a few seconds and only on a handful of occasions managed to penetrate even a few centimetres into his wife's vagina. His attempts became fewer and farther between and once she was pregnant for the second time he stopped trying altogether.

Upon announcing her first pregnancy Zulfia sensed a relief on the part of both sets of parents as if they assumed the sexual problems had disappeared, but the subject was never raised, not even by her grandmother and Zulfia did not feel able to talk about it either. Meanwhile, their problems in the bedroom kept the young couple on edge and maintained a distance between them that prevented any but the most superficial of communication. Ali spent as much time as possible out of the house and when alone together he often spoke harshly to her. Zulfia continued to feel he was a failure as a husband and a man and to despise him. She did not feel the slightest warmth or friendship towards him, not even as the father of her children.

Thus, the young couple never established a meaningful bond. They were like two strangers forced to share a room. After the birth of their second child their relationship deteriorated until Zulfia began to feel so constantly irritated it affected the whole household. When this child was two Zulfia could stand it no longer. Even though she knew it would place her in a difficult social position she demanded a divorce. She had a good job and so would be well able to support herself and the children, and her parents were willing for them to move back home. In the circumstances Ali did not oppose the divorce and Zulfia left her in-laws' house, wanting nothing more to do with men.

A few months later Zulfia heard Ali had married another woman of his parents' choice. This second wife did not produce even one child and a couple of years afterwards, she too left him. Zulfia assumed this meant he had been unable to solve his problem. To the best of her knowledge he never married again.

Masculinity, virginity and the rupture of the hymen

It can never be easy to perform sexually when this must occur virtually in public,⁶ especially if it is the very first time, the couple has never previously met and, like Ali, the young man may have had little experience of his sexuality beforehand. In the setting Ali came from masturbation was considered a sin,⁷ homosexuality deviant, and post-puberty gender segregation was practised. The wedding night might even be the first time a young man prized his erection as opposed to being embarrassed about its spontaneous appearance. Obviously, there are no statistics on the proportion of young men who, like Ali, suffered some kind of performance inadequacy but, as stated above, this is likely not to be an infrequent occurrence. Such problems are exacerbated when brides are ill equipped to deal with the situation.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ghamkhori staff came across many couples who like Zulfia and Ali had experienced an obstacle on their wedding night, resulting in ongoing sexual problems (see Harris 2004, 2005a). Arranged marriages were still the norm and

parents consulted their own convenience when making decisions about the marriage of both sons and daughters. Few parents provided an opportunity for their offspring to contribute their opinions, including those who despite still resenting similar treatment meted out to them in their own youth, rarely seemed to empathize with their children or see any reason to consider their feelings even on such an important subject.⁸

Cases of girls being forced into marriage against their will are legion in Tajikistan but it is not unheard of for boys to undergo similar treatment. I have no information on whether Ali had been willing to marry Zulfia, nor do I know whether he subsequently had a sex life away from the marital home. Zulfia believed he was so intimidated by his failure with her that he did not even try with another woman. She felt that had he done so this would surely have improved his ability to maintain an erection with her. At any rate, after their divorce Ali apparently succumbed to parental pressure to find him another bride. Perhaps his inability to perform sexually with Zulfia had affected his confidence to the point that he was self-programmed for further failure since the brevity of his second marriage and its lack of issue suggest he had been unable to solve his problem.

The chief reason for keeping information on sex from unmarried girls seemed to be the stress laid on female virginity, the idea being to keep girls innocent as long as possible.⁹ As in other honour-and-shame societies, in Tajikistan an entire social structure has evolved in order to ensure not only that girls reach marriage with their hymen intact but also that they are *seen* to have done so. The importance of ensuring the visible preservation of virginity prior to marriage and faithfulness afterwards accounts both for female seclusion and for much of Tajik opposition to adopting Soviet behavioural norms, including a preference for keeping girls away from (co-educational) school, especially after the onset of puberty. For most Tajik families there is little more shaming than a *perceived* failure to preserve a daughter's virginity until her wedding night. In other words, female seclusion is about *image*. It is as much about a family's willingness to show conformity by *demonstrating* their ability to preserve their womenfolk's sexual purity as about the purity itself, or in other words, it is about showing willing to submit to social control.

This whole structure serves to prop up that most fundamental and vital social institution – masculinity, that entity I suggested at the start of this paper is so important for the image of the state. In other words, individual families' projections of appropriate images of adherence to gender norms are intimately linked to the ability of the state to demonstrate appropriate gender norms in its citizens as a whole.

In Tajikistan mature masculinity is conceptualized as inherent in male heads of family and characterized by control over both women and youth. This control is particularly important in the matter of ensuring that female sexuality will be placed firmly at the service of a husband. This is not merely a matter of intra-family pressure; it is just as much communities who, via heads of family, apply pressure to conform to all their members. This is not enforced in a uniform manner, however. It appears that the higher a man's overall social status, the greater the aberrations he can get away with. However, at least in the Khatlon villages where Ali and Zulfia lived, the slightest suspicion that a girl might have done something to cause her to lose her virginity prior to being safely married with her father's explicit and public agreement, will shame and stigmatize not only her but also her father, exposing him¹⁰ as incapable of living up to local norms of masculinity. If that happens he may be forced even against his will into violence against an errant daughter in order to reclaim his own social standing, although this is unlikely to go as far as actually killing her.¹¹ She may, however, be beaten, thrown out of the family home, banished to the house of a distant relative, and/or married off to a much older man unlikely to demand a virgin. In other words, if others discover the secret, punishment must be seen to be meted out, less because of the transgression itself than because of the shame caused by its revelation. The generally accepted way for a family to overcome such shame has been by

visible disassociation with the transgressor through severe punishment (cf. Ginat 1982). As long as the secret can be preserved, however, the family is likely to cover it up, for instance by getting the girl a secret abortion and perhaps subsequently by surgical reconstruction of the hymen.

A young man *must* marry a virgin as his first wife since it is the (virtually public) rupture of the hymen on the wedding night that completes the rite of passage to manhood (Tett 1995, Harris 2004). It was this task that Ali was unable to fulfil. Had the lack of a bloody sheet been made public along with the reason for it, Ali's menfolk, and by extension his whole family, would have been greatly dishonoured. Since the issue of male sexual inadequacy was so extremely shaming that it was virtually banned from public discourse it seemed to encourage even more strenuous concealment than female aberrations.¹²

As a result, while the failure of a bride to produce proof of her virginity by bleeding at penetration was likely to be severely penalized, with her being returned home to her parents in disgrace, the failure of a groom to carry out the penetration that would cause his bride to bleed was usually glossed over, as happened with Ali. This did not make it any less shameful for the young man, who might be unable to face even his bride being aware of the problem. Indeed, it was not unknown for a groom to insist that the lack of blood was due not to his own inadequacies but to his bride's disgrace, and return her to her parents, thus stigmatizing her and her family and making it difficult to find suitable partners for younger siblings. It was rare for a groom to be questioned as to the veracity of his statement unless he repeated his accusation with a subsequent bride.¹³

At least Ali did not subject Zulfia to this ordeal but she intimated that the shame of his failure was such that he was unable to discuss it even with her, perhaps in part because putting it into words would have rendered it not only visible but explicit and thus would have forced him to acknowledge his failure. The lengths men often go to in order to avoid revealing themselves as inadequate in front of their wives show how important this is to them (Harris 2004).

Very possibly if the couple has a positive relationship before the moment they are first expected to have sex, a solution can be worked out between them. Since in Zulfia and Ali's setting prior contact between couples was frowned upon, however, this was rarely the case and, like Zulfia, brides often had little sympathy with any failings in their groom. The responses of the young women with whom I discussed these issues suggested this was in the first place because they believed men's higher power position equipped them to deal with whatever situation might arise and in the second because they also bought into the gender system and wanted their husband to show himself a *real man*.

In fact both men and women generally made an effort to produce appropriate gender performances even within the marital bed.¹⁴ Discussing such problems with a friend was risky, especially for men, for whom maintaining the image of gender competence among their peers was vitally important. Moreover, had the friend subsequently wished to attack Ali or his family this would have proved a potent weapon.

I was frequently told in Tajikistan that it was impossible to trust anyone fully since betrayals of confidences were common. People claimed they did not discuss anything potentially shameful with friends or even other family members. Perhaps this accounts for the silence apparently maintained on the issue of Ali's sexual abilities after Zulfia explained the problem to her grandmother, including the family's tacit agreement to ignore the lack of a bloody sheet on their wedding night.¹⁵ As an outsider people apparently assumed I would have no reason to betray them, which presumably helps to account for the fact that during my time in Tajikistan I was inundated with information on sex.

For her part, Zulfia was unable even to imagine she could have done anything to help Ali since in her opinion men should be strong enough not to have such problems in the first place. Brought up to see their brothers given all kinds of advantages and particularly comparing

their own restrictions with their brothers' freedom of mobility, it seems difficult for girls to understand that young men also labour under significant constraints. Teenagers in Dushanbe often told me with scorn they thought young men were weak since they seemed to fear pressing their parents to allow them, for instance, to marry the girl of their choice (Harris 2004, 2006a). Seeing young men as immensely powerful in relation to themselves, the girls simply could not imagine how powerless they might be in relation to their elders, nor that males were as subject to social pressures as females.

Thus, the confluence of local culture, intra-familial power relations, and Tajik concepts of masculinity tended to result in arranged marriages between couples, many of whom proved emotionally and/or sexually incompatible, something that frequently produced great suffering, as it did for Ali and Zulfia.

The (post-)Soviet state and sexuality

The lack of information on sexual matters that hampered this young couple's relationship was widespread among those I worked with in Dushanbe and Khatlon. Indeed, among them were both men and women who had been totally ignorant even of the existence of sex prior to marriage (Harris 2004). It appeared that while some people did quietly discuss the subject, this was comparatively rare and many claimed the first time they had ever talked about it (including with their spouse) was with Ghamkhori staff. This is because the NGO puts considerable emphasis on this issue, providing sex education for teenagers as well as discussion groups and individual support sessions for adults.

Some of the village boys we worked with had previously tried to find out about sex through spying on their neighbours but overall their knowledge was minimal. At the time of Zulfia's marriage, adults in that region apparently rarely provided information on sex even to sons. One man I knew said the only mention of sex came from his grandmother, who without further explanation told him on his wedding night to 'go in there and show you are a man' (Harris 2005b). A number of young men informed Ghamkhori staff that the only mention of sex by family members was that when the time came they should treat their brides roughly so they would fear and thus obey them.

According to one Russian man, who visited Central Asia before the Revolution, at that time at least boys received some form of sex education even before reaching puberty (Pahlen 1964). Why that no longer appeared to be the case in the parts of Tajikistan I worked in, I cannot say. However, it is entirely possible that it was due to the influence of the Soviet state.

Following a brief flowering of sexual libertarianism immediately after the Revolution, in the late 1920s the Soviet regime decided to suppress public discussion of sex on the pretext that the time and energy of the population should rather be focused on the building of socialism (Stern 1979). In the 1930s this was compounded by a ban on psychology, to the point where the term Freudianism became equated with sexual deviation. This state of affairs continued throughout most of the Soviet era and it was not until the late 1980s and the advent of *glasnost* that it was once more permissible openly to study sexuality (Kon 1995).

In fact, ignorance on sexual matters was typical not just of Tajikistan but of the Soviet population as a whole. By the late 1980s, when Zulfia and Ali married, lack of knowledge on sexuality was particularly striking even among the educated and pretty much all over the Union, resulting in considerable levels of sexual dissatisfaction (Geiges and Suvorova 1989, Gray 1991, Kon 1995). Tajikistan was no exception (Harris 2004, 2005a).

This was presumably caused not only by social taboos but also by a complete lack of information as well as of support services. During my time in Tajikistan the only professionals specifically dealing with sexual problems were the so-called sexopathologists – that is,

specialists in physiological problems pertaining to sexual pathologies. They were so stigmatized that only in the most desperate of situations – for help in cases of severely malformed genitals, for instance – did anyone appear to consult them. In any case, it is unclear their training equipped them to deal with the kind of problem Ali was faced with.

Some men plucked up the courage to consult a doctor but if Ali did so, it does not seem to have benefited him. This is the less surprising as the doctors I met had little if any understanding of the condition. Moreover, they were frequently quite judgemental. Nevertheless, they were usually the only possible source of professional help so men continued to turn to them. Those doctors I discussed the subject with informed me that premature ejaculation was one of the most common male sexual dysfunctions reported by their patients. They also said they had never received any training on how to deal with this and that the most they could do to help was to make encouraging noises about the problem eventually going away of its own accord.

When I first arrived in Tajikistan the taboos on talking about sex were so strong that even those heading the Tajik women's movement thought it should not become a topic of discussion and categorically warned me off researching it. However, when people got to know me they seemed to sense I would be open to talking about the topic and many men and women broached the issue. In some cases, as with Zulfia, this was apparently just for the relief of finally having someone to talk to about it, in others with the hope of finding a solution (Harris 2005a). This made it clear that enforced silence on the subject had placed a great burden on both women and men, one that had not been lifted throughout the succession of changes in Soviet ideology.

I was told that traditionally uncles and aunts had been tasked with informing young people on the eve of marriage what to expect. However, by the late 1980s, in Khatlon at least, this was no longer functioning well and parents said they were reluctant to speak to their children about sex as they felt their own ignorance did not equip them to address the subject. So they generally preferred to ignore it.

At first when Ghamkhori staff started to talk openly about sex during education sessions, people were shocked and tried to stop us. However, gradually those with whom we worked started to realize that this brought real benefits and eventually the fact that people could come to Ghamkhori for this kind of help made the NGO so much in demand that we had a long waiting list of villages eager to work with us. A major attraction was that the staff were trained not to be judgmental and were expected to do their best to provide support on sensitive issues.

The women's centre where I met Zulfia had been established to help victims of violence. However, we were often consulted on sexological problems too. Even men came to ask for help because they believed they could talk openly without fear of mockery. This became so frequent that I tried to get funding for a men's centre, only to be turned down on the grounds that the donors prioritized women's problems. However much I insisted that men's issues were inseparable from those of women and that helping men to solve their problems could make a significant contribution to women's wellbeing, nobody would listen. Some six years later our main funders of the women's centre told me things had changed and they might now consider financing a men's centre. Unfortunately, by then I was no longer working in Tajikistan so I was unable to act on this.

In the Soviet Union all social services were provided by the state, with the result that its unfortunate insistence on minimizing attention to sexual matters shifted the burden of solving their problems on to ill-equipped individuals. Very probably the extremely high divorce rates in the Slavic regions were due in great part to unresolved sexual problems (Kon 1995) and these were said to have played a major role in divorce in Tajikistan too (Monogarova 1982, II, p. 61). In other words, state policy on sexuality plays an important role in social stability, or the lack of it.

Conclusion

The contradictions between the need for a stable state and Soviet and post-Soviet policies around sexuality were highlighted by the refusal to acknowledge the need for sexological support – that is, by the rejection of the idea that men might need help in regard to that most central of masculine attributes – the ability to perform appropriate sexuality. Perhaps acknowledging this would have appeared to threaten the state's ability to project an apposite image of masculine strength.

The banning of private enterprises in the Soviet Union meant that no non-governmental organizations existed to take up the slack when the state was unable or unwilling to provide. In any case, systemic failures were carefully concealed since they contradicted claims that the destruction of the bourgeois state and the building of socialism would solve all problems (Rakowska-Harmstone 1970, Lenin 1972), rendering social services superfluous. When added to the signal distrust of psychology noted above, it becomes clear that the Soviet state was ideologically incapable of providing the kind of support that might have been able to help Ali with his problem.

Zulfia had clearly experienced considerable frustration at her husband's inability to provide her with the slightest modicum of sexual pleasure. Since her divorce she had learned how much she had missed out on during her marriage, particularly in regard to sex. She did not express any sympathy for her husband whom she clearly continued to regard as a failure for having been unable to meet his obligations towards her. It did not seem to have occurred to her that showing him sympathy and support might have helped him overcome his problem. Furthermore, she seemed to compare Ali solely with the husbands of those of her friends who were happily married, never being willing to acknowledge that in fact Ali had not treated her nearly so badly as those men who raped and/or battered their wives. But perhaps her point was that at least they had shown themselves *real men*, making it possible for their wives to complain publicly and get a sympathetic hearing. Zulfia on the other hand found herself in the unenviable position of having to maintain silence on her marital problems for fear that revealing her husband's inadequacies would reflect badly on her.

It is possible that had the couple been able to develop an emotional relationship prior to that initial injunction to have sex, things might have been different. With a better understanding of the causes of premature ejaculation and ways to deal with it, Zulfia might have felt less frustrated and tried to help. However, the culturally produced prohibitions that keep women and men apart before the wedding day, together with the silence surrounding sex and the general lack of understanding of sexological issues made this impossible. Moreover, insistence on maintaining the gender power positions that placed the man in a position of superiority *vis-à-vis* his wife was another obstacle that prevented couples in difficult situations from collaborating to solve their problems (Harris 2004).

After her divorce Zulfia found herself stigmatized not only socially but also medically. She was strongly pressured by the doctors at her local clinic to remarry, on the grounds that any health problems she presented with were due solely to her lack of sex. She was furious that these doctors had never said anything of the sort during her marriage. At that time it was assumed she was having regular sex and the fact that she was in a constant state of tension precisely due to the sexual problems she and her husband were experiencing had gone unnoticed. Once she had left her marriage and attained a kind of equilibrium, was no longer being tormented by the failure of her relationship or by her husband's pitiful attempts at sex, her doctors were pressuring her to remarry on the sole grounds that sex was necessary for her health. Zulfia was enraged at their failure to conceptualize marital sex as having the potential to be highly negative. They never asked about her sex life, never considered her nervous complaints during her marriage might have been due to strain caused by sexual problems, and her much

more relaxed mien after divorce was not taken to show she was better off single. It seemed to her that the doctors, both male and female, were simply championing the concept that a woman had no right to make an independent life. Zulfia believed this had nothing to do with the true well-being that friends had told her they gained from good sex and this made her prefer to consult the non-judgemental doctors at our women's centre rather than those at the government clinic.

That this attitude on the part of Soviet-trained Tajik doctors was common was made clear by the many other women from different parts of the republic who reported it. In other words, these doctors appeared complicit with the state as well as with local opinion leaders in trying to keep women firmly under the control of men in order to avoid the *fitna*, or social disorder, that is supposed to come from allowing women to be independent. The implications were that such women were likely to indulge freely in sexual relations, making them dangerous to the social order.¹⁶

No doubt many of the constraints faced by Ali and Zulfia have significantly changed if not disappeared over the two decades since independence, especially considering the high levels of labour migration that have exposed men at least to other lifestyles and brought them considerably more sexual knowledge. However, it is unclear how much this has actually improved sexual practices or broadened the permissible, at least in that part of Khatlon where Zulfia and Ali live.

It was my experience that there most men reverted to Tajik gender norms at home even if they behaved differently when away in Russia, thus negating any benefits to their marital relations of more liberal influences from abroad. Moreover, those with whom Ghamkhori staff discussed the issue refused to use the sexual knowledge they had gained from their Russian lovers to benefit their Tajik wives, on the grounds that if the latter began to enjoy sex they might well take a lover during their husbands' subsequent periods of migration, thus cuckolding them, something that represented a highly significant threat to their masculinity (Harris 2004).

In fact the issue of sexual problems is still not adequately addressed in the independent Tajik state. Rather than improving sexological services, the introduction of incipient capitalism has spawned a pornography industry the products of which provide a veneer of information on sexuality but of a highly distorted kind. The misinformation on both male and female sexuality emanating from pornography is helpful for nobody, and results in dauntingly unreasonable expectations on both sides (Harris in press). However, to the best of my knowledge the Tajik regime has taken no steps to remedy this, seeming to prefer to allow the proliferation of pornography rather than to take steps to provide accurate information on sexual issues.

In this way President Rahmon is no doubt following the Soviet path of preserving the image of a strong state. He has long made it clear that having once been part of a superpower, he finds it difficult to cope with being head of one of the poorest states in Eurasia. In the 1990s this brought him to refuse the status of least-developed state from the United Nations and it seems to have influenced his attitude towards gender issues as well. Simultaneously with supporting traditional Tajik gender ideals of masculine control before domestic audiences, in front of members of the international community he appears to uphold gender equality – for instance, through passing appropriate laws. This allows him to project an acceptable level of modernity to the outside world through an enlightened constitution while quietly failing to enforce the equality laws at home in order not to challenge Tajik gender norms.

In other words, Rahmon has as much invested in not airing dirty linen in public as the head of any other state. This means there is little likelihood in the near future of support services for others who suffer as Ali did. For the Tajik state to do otherwise than maintain an image of competent masculinity would be to diminish its power in the region and globally, since, after all, the other states are busy doing likewise and for much the same reasons.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Sonja Plesset for her comments on an earlier version of this paper, as well as the other participants in the session of the 'Sexualities in the Arab World' conference held at Harvard University on 8 December 2007. I also want to thank John Heathershaw and three anonymous readers for their comments.

Notes

1. Most visible in attitudes towards gays in the military. Religion also plays a pivotal role in all of this and is simultaneously a potent weapon for states to use in social control (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003).
2. A taboo in some ways now lifted through the marketing of Viagra that has brought the issue on to the public stage, but done so through a technological fix rather than through meaningful attention to the issues concerned.
3. Altogether I spent some three years in Tajikistan, roughly half of every year from 1994 to early 2001 plus a few subsequent visits.
4. Ghamkhori grew out of a development project funded by Christian Aid of London, with additional support from the Tacis LIEN (Link Inter European NGOs) programme of the European Union. Established in 1997 in the Qurghontepa region of Khatlon Oblast, it provides information on health matters, reproductive health services, and community-level education on social issues (see Harris 2005a, 2006a).
5. See Harris (2004) for an in-depth discussion of the honour-and-shame system in Tajikistan and of *ayb*.
6. In Tajikistan the marriage ceremony usually lasts several days (and nights) with the young couple at a certain point being sent to have sex, accompanied to the door of the bedroom by the wedding guests. Subsequently the couple is expected to stay with the groom's parents for at least the following 40 days and nights, irrespective of where they will subsequently live. As with Ali and Zulfia, in rural areas patrilocal residence is common. This can exacerbate problems as it allows young couples little private time together outside the bedroom and even there only at night.
7. While this may not keep boys from trying this, according to sex therapist Carol Boulware (<http://www.psychotherapist.net/sextherapy/sex-therapy.htm>) feelings of shame around it may even cause premature ejaculation later on by pushing them to finish quickly to avoid being caught. Some boys in the villages where Ghamkhori worked had sex with donkeys but this seemed to be confined to a very small number. It was practically impossible for the unmarried to find other sources of sexual outlet in those Khatlon villages at that time.
8. As I discovered during my own work in the villages near Qurghontepa. A national survey carried out in the late 1990s found that over 99% of adult women in Tajikistan believed they had the right to choose their children's marriage partner (WHO 2000).
9. The current availability of pornographic videos would make it difficult to keep girls in such ignorance today. However, this story took place in the puritanical context of the Soviet Union.
10. And her brothers too.
11. According to older acquaintances of mine, in pre-Soviet times it was common to stone to death a daughter who had shamed her family, for instance by getting pregnant out of wedlock (see Harris 2004, p. 43).
12. This significant blow to masculinity is on a par with male rape, something also almost never alluded to or admitted although it is known to have occurred during the civil war.
13. While for obvious reasons there are no statistics on the numbers of young men unable to perform adequately, it seems likely there has been a recent upsurge. Since the increase in the trafficking of heroin from Afghanistan through Central Asia, drug addiction has also increased and impotence is one consequence of long-term use (Harris 2006b). According to Ghamkhori staff, addicted grooms have apparently started to take out their frustration at their failure to perform by attacks on their brides that at times have even killed them. Perhaps figuring out how to protect daughters from such a fate will lead to new ways of conceptualizing and dealing with the first night of marriage.
14. This attitude is not confined to Tajikistan. My research in many parts of the world shows it to be widespread. Even in the West men are often uncomfortable in acknowledging to their intimate partners an inability to perform appropriate masculinity, especially in relation to sexual prowess (Hite 1981). For more detailed information on this issue and on gender and sexuality in Tajikistan more generally see Harris (2004, p. 149ff, 2005a, 2005b).
15. Not all Tajiks insist on exhibiting the sheet but this family had apparently been prepared to do so.

16. This attitude is not confined to Tajikistan. During a research trip to Indonesia in the early 1990s, I was frequently asked by men how come I was travelling without my husband. Upon my once stating that I enjoyed this freedom, the man concerned immediately asked – ‘would you like to be free with me?’

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