Control and subversion: gender, islam, and socialism in Tajikistan
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CHAPTER 5
INTER-GENERATIONAL FAMILY CONTROL

Chapter 4 explained how Tajiks use gossip and other methods to force conformity to the social norms, especially gender norms, and how control is most effective when applied to women through their men folk or directly to men via mockery or tougher measures. It demonstrated that social pressure works on people not as single individuals but as members of families, its force coming precisely from the fact that each individual is enmeshed in a family so that any hint of shame attaching to one member affects them all. The present chapter shows how powerful this is as a motivation for family members to control each other, so that potentially shaming behaviour will remain concealed within the family circle. It also shows how all family members can manipulate internal power relations so as to take personal advantage of the threat represented by this social pressure.

Parental Power

Rustam is the eldest of four siblings. He has two sisters, Khatiya and Sumangul, and a brother Kurbon. Their family originally comes from Hisor but moved to Dushanbe some twenty years ago. At the time I became acquainted with him Rustam was in his late twenties and a teacher of handiwork at one of the best schools in Dushanbe. His mother, Dilorom, was also a teacher and his father, Malik, a high-ranking Party official. Kurbon was studying to be a doctor and Khatiya was a nurse, while Sumangul was still in high school.

Even today Malik is a strong believer in the Soviet socialist system and has brought up all his children to believe in its basic principles, including atheism. His code is that the world should be organised according to a strict hierarchy, in which everyone, especially the young, has to know and keep to their place and obey parents and superiors.

In his youth Malik spent a great deal of time away from home on Party business and he delegated much of their children’s upbringing to Dilorom. The emphasis was always on discipline. As the children of a Party official they had to show an example to everyone else. For this reason they were not allowed to play with the neighbours’ children and were scolded for being even the tiniest bit rowdy.

Rustam was a very energetic boy who loved the outdoors, so he found the prohibitions very difficult to live with. He longed to join in the wild games of the neighbourhood boys but he knew that if either of his parents caught him at this he would be severely beaten, his mother often inflicting even more pain than his father. The strict control exercised over him by his parents was the harder to bear because most other boys were allowed to run wild as long as they kept out of their parents’ way.

Whenever his parents permitted, Rustam would stay with one of his maternal uncles. This uncle’s wife was Russian and she treated both her own sons and Rustam very kindly. Above all, he was allowed to go out to play with the other boys as much as he liked without constant reminders not to disgrace his father’s position.
As he grew older Rustam realised that his parents took little notice of his progress at school. The only thing that was important to them was that he did exactly as he wasbidden. However, despite their lack of interest in his schooling his parents wanted him to have a prestigious career and his father decided he should become a lawyer. This absolutely horrified Rustam, who could not imagine anything he would like less. Moreover, he was sure that he would be totally unable to cope with the course work and would inevitably fail.

Taking no notice of this Malik arranged for his son to enrol in Dushanbe University. Rustam set out on registration day feeling absolutely dreadful. On his reluctant way to the law department he passed by the Pedagogical Institute. All of a sudden he decided to defy his father's wishes and instead of enrolling in law he signed up to study to be a handicrafts teacher. Having done this he was terrified of his father's reaction and went off to stay with his uncle for several days until he got up the courage to go home and face up to Malik's wrath. When he did so he found his father more furious than he had ever seen him. However, since Rustam was by this time considerably stronger he could no longer be beaten. Malik had to content himself with calling him all the names he could think of. The one that especially stuck in Rustam's mind was 'brainless'. His parents have never forgiven him this career change. How much more prestigious it would have been to have had a lawyer for a son than a mere handicrafts teacher! Since then they not only have never praised him, they have repeatedly told him he is stupid, dull-witted, and dense.

But Rustam was quite content studying at the Institute, especially as he managed to get a place in the student dormitory so he could live away from home. However, after finishing the Institute and completing his military service he had no option but to go back to live with his parents, since housing for single persons was virtually non-existent in Soviet times. It was then that he started his professional life in the same school he was teaching in when he and I met.

One day soon after Rustam's return from the army Khatiya brought a fellow medical student home with her. This was a Russian woman, Zhenia, a few years older than Rustam and divorced. Rustam and Zhenia almost immediately fell in love and became completely inseparable. Although both were living with their parents, Zhenia's travelled a great deal, and Rustam was often able to stay with her in their absence. Thus, over the next year their feelings for each other became deeper and deeper. The only things that marred their happiness were the fact that both sets of parents disapproved of their relationship and that Zhenia's Fallopian tubes were blocked, something that had happened after her husband had hit her in the stomach when she was in the fifth month of pregnancy, killing their child and giving Zhenia serious gynaecological complications. Rustam took Zhenia to every specialist in the country but they could find no way of remedying her condition.

The following year Rustam reached the age of twenty-three and his parents decided it was time to find him a wife. Although they had nothing against Zhenia personally they had no intention of accepting her as a daughter-in-law. She was Russian, older, worst of all she could not have children and she had been married before, all major strikes against her, especially the last two. Healthy young men with a reasonable
position in life should marry virgins. Anything else is unacceptable. Rustam was already being jeered at just for being so obviously besotted by Zhenia. Were he actually to marry her he would become a laughing stock, which would be very humiliating for his family.

Zhenia's parents were less strong in their opposition. As Russians they did not believe that their daughter had to obey them absolutely but they did hope that their opinion would count with her. They did not feel that anything good could possibly come of a match between a Russian woman and a Tajik man. Although they could not forbid her, they at least could withhold their approval and make it clear that Rustam would never be welcome to live in their home.

Rustam and Zhenia continued to see each other, although by this time his parents had totally forbidden this. They even tried following him round town after work every day in order to see what he was up to, and he had to go to extreme lengths to find ways of getting away from them to meet Zhenia.

Rustam was desperate. His love for Zhenia was one of most important things in his life. He tried as hard as he could to enlist the support of other family members. His mother was not in favour, as she thought Zhenia would be a most unsuitable kelin for a Tajik family. Neither was anyone else. Even Kurbon upheld their father's position against his brother. Unfortunately, the uncle with whom Rustam had often stayed as a child, had long since emigrated to Russia along with his wife, and was not available to support his nephew.

Rustam told his father over and over again that he could and would marry no one other than Zhenia. This made Malik furious. Finally, he gave his son an ultimatum: 'if you marry Zhenia you will bring shame on me and on the whole family. All our friends and relatives will laugh at me for allowing it. I absolutely forbid it. You will marry whomever I tell you to or I'll divorce your mother and abandon the family'.

This was too much for Zhenia, who could not face being responsible for breaking up Rustam's family. She told him she could no longer agree to marry him and that in any case she was doubtful whether she had a right to marry at all, infertile as she was. After vain attempts to get her to change her mind Rustam went to his father and agreed to marry whomever he selected.

With some input from Rustam Malik and Dilorom chose a bride whom they could all agree on. However, on their way to make an offer for the girl Rustam's parents were waylaid by the mother of a quite different girl who had decided to try to get them to offer for her daughter, Jumbul. After a short discussion Malik and Dilorom agreed to

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1Gabrielle van den Berg, a Dutch philologist who studied in Dushanbe before the civil war and lived in the student dormitory there, told me the following story: In her dorm there were a couple of students who were very much in love with one another. However, the woman had been married previously. For this reason the man's parents were set against the marriage, although in every other way they found his friend suitable. With his girlfriend's acquiescence the young man agreed to marry a virgin. He stayed with her precisely one year and then found a pretext to divorce her. Immediately afterwards he married his friend, with whom he had continued his relationship throughout that year. This was the only way to escape social opprobrium and to gain his family's consent. Of course, this also meant ruining the life of the poor young woman whom he had taken as his first wife, and who now would have little chance of acquiring a decent second husband of her own age.
accept Jumbul, nineteen years old at the time and also, like Rustam, a teacher. A few
days later Rustam and Jumbul were introduced and permitted to go to the cinema
together. After this Rustam made no further attempt to see her. He did not like her but
did not really care one way or the other. It just did not seem worth making a fuss
about; he was already too emotionally exhausted and if he couldn't marry Zhenia he
no longer cared whom he was going to marry. So he agreed. At this point Dilorom
went to visit Zhenia, told her that her son's wedding had been fixed, and begged her
to leave him alone now he was pledged to another woman.
Shortly thereafter Rustam and Jumbul were married and she came to live with him at
his parents' place. Within three days of the wedding Zhenia and Rustam had resumed
their relationship, now in the utmost secrecy, and their affair continued until she
emigrated to Russia with her parents a few years later. Realising the tremendous
grief both her daughter and Rustam were clearly feeling at the prospect of total
separation, perhaps for ever, Zhenia's mother burst into tears and said - 'We did very
wrong to part the two of you.'
After Zhenia left Rustam did not attempt to hide his grief and unhappiness from his
parents. However, seeing this did not change their belief in the correctness of their
actions, nor their certainty of their right to choose the fate of the rest of their
children.
The next child whose turn it was to get married was Khatiya. She was twenty-three at
the time, had just finished her studies, and had so far received not a single offer of
marriage. At that point Dilorom was approached by her sister, demanding that
Khatiya should marry her son. The family was dead set against this since they knew
this woman to be a great tyrant who made everyone in her family unhappy.
Furthermore, this son was a drug addict and alcoholic. The only person in favour
was Dilorom, who felt it incumbent on her to accede to her sister's demand. Notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary she could not believe that her
daughter would not be well treated in her own sister's household.
Dilorom was so certain of this that she pressured her husband as hard as she could,
until he finally gave in. Khatiya herself did not know what to think. She was not happy
about the idea of marrying her cousin but since her only other option appeared to be
to end up an old maid she decided not to oppose her mother. She desperately wanted
to have a family of her own, especially children, So she decided it would be better to
have a not very good husband than none at all.
However, after the wedding it became clear that the reality was far worse than the
family had feared. Khatiya, accustomed to Dushanbe, was now forced to live in very
poor circumstances in a rural area. The family had no money and barely allowed her
the most basic necessities. Her mother-in-law treated her harshly and her husband
beat her. In fact he started to beat her almost as soon as her own family went out the
door after the wedding celebrations were over. Khatiya could not escape since for the
first year after her marriage she was kept imprisoned within the courtyard. She had to
work like a slave from morning to night, was given very little to eat, and became so
thin she was little more than skin and bones.
When she found out how her daughter was being treated Rustam's mother became very upset and refused to have anything more to do with her sister. The result of this was a major split that served to isolate Khatiya still more from her natal family. One day, after several years of marriage, she appeared at her parents' home in Dushanbe, covered in bruises. The family was horrified. Her father said that she should stay with them and not return to her husband. However, a couple of months later it was clear that Malik was becoming nervous about this. When one day her father-in-law appeared and made his son's apologies Khatiya decided to return to the village, despite her brothers' opposition. This was partly because she said she feared the gossip that would ensue were she to leave her husband definitively but also because she had been pregnant when she left him and did not want to bear her child without a father. However, when her daughter was born she turned out to be extremely severely mentally handicapped, attributed by everyone to the cousin marriage, but probably also due to the beatings and the starvation diet. Khatiya still lives with her husband, and her family hardly ever sees her. Her parents make no effort to have anything to do with her. Her brothers are extremely upset but they are at a loss to know how to help her. At the same time they can hardly bear to think of her life, knowing she is living in a real hell.

Next it was Kurbon's turn to be married off. At this point Malik introduced him to a girl he decided would be suitable for him to marry. Kurbon decided he liked her well enough and agreed to marry her. It is only recently that he has come to the conclusion that he made a major mistake in agreeing to marry Mukhayo but since he now has two children he feels it is too late to do much about it. He says if it were not for the children he would not live with Mukhayo for one more day. Rustam, his wife, and children now have a flat of their own, since there was no room for them with his parents once Kurbon got married. However, Rustam spends more of his waking time at his parents' than at his own home, visiting them at least once a day. If he does not go over of his own accord his father sends Kurbon over to fetch him and his children.

Today Rustam has four children whom he absolutely adores, and on whom he spends as much time and energy as he can spare from his work and his emotional preoccupations. Even though he believes that his father is right and it is necessary to be strict with his children Rustam only slaps them when they are naughty, never hitting them hard as he was hit as a child. He spends less time with his children than Jumbul does but gives them much more attention. Jumbul prefers to keep out of her way as much as possible and leave her in peace, and her relations with them are not nearly so warm as Rustam's. While he plays with his children and shows them affection Jumbul more usually swears and shouts at them.

Malik realises that all his three married children are very unhappy but in front of them at least, he absolutely refuses to accept any of the blame. Malik insists he did the right thing in choosing his sons' spouses and, although he does regret their choice of husband for Khatiya, he blames this entirely on his wife. He is still annoyed that Rustam made his own choice of career and professes not to see anything special in his love for Zhenia. Although Malik does not much like Jumbul himself he insists that the only reason his son is not happy with her is that he does not treat her with the
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appropriate authority and strictness. Malik claims that the reason he and Dilorom do well together is because he controls her with an iron hand. She is never allowed out of the house except with his explicit permission and has to wait on him hand and foot. Rustam, Malik says, is altogether too lenient. He helps with the housework, does not expect to be waited on, and worst of all allows Jumbul to go wherever she wants without asking his permission or even informing him of her plans.

Rustam's elder son prefers to live with his grandparents and rarely can be persuaded to go home to his parents' place. The family feels this is in great part because he does not want to be with his mother and they find this worrying. Dilorom and Malik have also decided they do not much like Jumbul, whom they feel does not treat them with respect.

Part of Rustam's frustration with his parents comes from a feeling that they have never treated him as an individual with needs of his own. Their cruel behaviour has not been so much, he believes, because of lack of love but rather out of failure to see him as anything but an appendage to themselves. It would not even occur to them to try to put themselves in his place and consider his feelings. He is loveable only as long as he enacts the persona they want and only by doing this can he meet with their approval. Were he to fail in this, especially if he were to shame them in any way, then their love would be withdrawn.

For Rustam this would be truly unbearable. In fact, the main reason he acceded to his father's demands to give up Zhenia was that he could not face the idea that his father would despise him for ever. After all there were things he could have done to keep Zhenia had he whole-heartedly and single-mindedly decided this was what he wanted. The two of them could have gone away to Russia and married there. They could have gone to his uncle or to one of her relatives without shaming Rustam's family so much, since they would have been out of the sight of the Tajik community. In fact Rustam and Zhenia did discuss this but decided against it because he could not bear to be permanently separated from his family.

In the last few years Rustam has joined a private firm and is now earning many times more than the rest of his family. His parents earn very little and Kurbon is still a student, so Rustam finds himself obliged to support not just himself, his wife and children, but to help support his parents, younger sister, brother, and the latter's family as well. Despite this, Malik still considers himself the head of the family and allows Rustam no greater say in family affairs than before. He has explicitly informed both Rustam and Kurbon that they, along of course with the rest of the family, will obey their father as long as he lives. They may do what they want only after his death.

Rustam's father takes all the advantage he can of the authority that discourse accords him as head of the family. Thus, even after Rustam separates his living space from that of his parents he has not been able to separate psychologically from them. Rustam and his brother are forced to enact a subordinate style of masculinity in relation to their parents, especially their father, something they find very frustrating. These young men's experiences like those of others, for instance Hamid (cf. chapter 4), bear out Butler's contention that gender performance often tends to be enacted under constraints, such as the threat of ostracism or
even (social) death (Butler 1993: 95). This is further evidence for my position that Wittig's idea of one gender (cf. Butler 1990: 115ff) does not correspond to the reality in Tajikistan.

The material complications of trying to make his own way without any support from his family makes it doubly difficult for Rustam to escape his father's control. Finding somewhere to live was very tough indeed in Tajikistan during most of the Soviet period. At the time Rustam was trying to persuade his parents to allow him to marry Zhenia it would have been impossible for them to get a flat of their own without years on a waiting list so that there would have been nowhere for them to live except with friends or family. This is one of the main reasons why without the support of at least one of their adult relatives, it would have been extremely difficult for them to marry.

Shahzoda is from the township of Khojamaston. When her boyfriend's parents offered for her in marriage her own parents turned them down. She fought bitterly with them but to no avail. When they would not change their minds Shahzoda ran off to her aunt in Dushanbe, whom she managed to persuade to take her side. This aunt organised her wedding, since Shahzoda's parents still declined to have anything to do with it. Afterwards Shahzoda and her husband returned to Khojamaston. For many years she had to sneak home to visit her mother when her father was out. Eventually her father started to speak to her husband. However, it took almost ten years before he again addressed a word to Shahzoda or acknowledged her as his daughter.

Unlike Rustam Shahzoda was able to get a relative on her side and so she achieved her wish, even if this seriously damaged her relationship with her father and made things difficult for many years. But she was only able to do this because of her aunt's support and because her husband's family gave them a place to live. For Rustam and Zhenia things were considerably more difficult, since they had no support from either family. For Tajiks the family has always been vital for material survival. During Soviet times the difficulties for young people of earning a decent living wage often meant that parents made a significant financial contribution to their children during much of their adult lives.

In the transition period, however, it is no longer necessarily the older people who make the most money. In fact, very often the young make considerably more, as Rustam does, since they are the only ones capable of taking on the more commercial type of work. But even today the webs of connectivity that are used to procure jobs and other benefits still function via the family, which makes gaining or even holding on to a job almost impossible without their support. Small wonder then that Rustam could not bring himself to take the drastic step of doing something that might well have cost him his family. In Tajikistan any defiance of one's parents becomes a serious risk, the consequences of which have to be very carefully weighed up. So Malik was making use of a formidable tool when he threatened to break up the family if he failed to get his own way over the question of his son's marriage.

Earlier as a child and now as an adult Rustam's first obligation to his natal family is obedience. His second is to support his parents financially, as well of course as his own wife and children, even though this has not gained him one whit more say in family affairs. Malik is determined to keep his son emotionally dependent and this is even more important now he is earning so well. It is not uncommon for patriarchs in extended families to do their best to

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2 This story was told me by Hurshed Babaev.
stop their financially independent sons from psychologically separating themselves from the family, fearing that any small sign of independence will mean a significant drop in their own power. In Egypt, for instance, the patriarch of a peasant family has total decision-making powers over his sons and grandsons as long as he lives. However, those sons who are more educated or who have spent time as migrant workers in other countries and can now afford to build their own separate homes may win some measure of emotional independence along with their economic self-sufficiency. At the same time separation is negatively viewed in that society's discourse, which fathers make use of as much as possible in order not to lose the prestige and power of controlling not only their sons but also their daughters-in-law and grandchildren (Weyland 1994: 163).

In Tajik peasant families and the least educated urban ones much the same tends to be true, and the senior woman will also do her best to keep her sons dependent on the family. However, it is striking that Malik, a Party official and a far from religious man, at home sticks even more strictly to tradition than many religious non-Party members. As he appears healthy and is little more than twenty years older than Rustam there seems little likelihood that the latter will be given a chance to lead his own life until he is too old for it to matter.

**Control over Children**

Control over children is most important of all at the crucial moment of their marriage, when a family must be able publicly to demonstrate its mastery of the correct gender behaviour. At that time there is a great deal at stake, and the family's *nomus* can take a severe blow if everything does not turn out correctly. Zhenia would have affected Rustam's and his family's *nomus* very negatively. Zhenia could not have fit in well with their family culture, could not have prepared local dishes or carried out the local rituals. Her inability to have children would have been the final straw.

The fact that Rustam and Zhenia had an enormous amount in common and could be real friends as well as passionate lovers and thus had all the ingredients for a truly happy relationship was of minimal interest to his parents. None of this counts as an asset in Tajik eyes, rather the contrary. What concerned Malik was that his son's marriage to this Russian divorcée would represent a serious deviation from his appropriate gender performance, her infertility and lack of virginity threatening his manhood and, by extension that of his father. Malik clearly felt that had he permitted Rustam to marry Zhenia he would have failed in his own gender performance and besides would have lost in a big way. He would have lost his son psychologically to the woman he loved with all his heart. He would have lost the chance of an appropriately behaved daughter-in-law, since as a Russian Zhenia would have had no need to preserve her good name by behaving submissively to him and, of course, there would have been no grandchildren. Finally his standing in the community would have been seriously affected. On the other hand once Rustam was safely married to Jumbul and had produced children Malik had proved himself a fully mature and successful man. Furthermore, his power position was greatly enhanced as he had achieved control over a whole new family.

Now Malik expects Rustam to develop into a proper mature adult male by following his father's example in the way he exercises control over his family. But to his father's consternation, he does nothing of the sort, and does not appear even to care what his wife does, so indifferent is he to her. Perhaps it is to some extent because he feels that his son does
not fully live up to his masculine gender performance that Malik keeps Rustam so strongly under control even now he is coming up to maturity himself, since Rustam could still do something that might damage his family's nomus and make Malik a laughing stock. Malik has a potential rogue male on his hands, a highly Russianised son who has not bought into the Tajik ideas of masculine gender identity. At least it is only within the family that they know that Rustam does not try to control Jumbul, so that his lack of correct performance in that respect has been kept private.

Rustam is strict with his children but he is also really concerned with their happiness and he is very worried about their mother's poor treatment of them. He thinks this may be why his elder son does not want to live at home and seems to prefer hardly ever to see his mother.

Both Rustam and Kurbon are markedly closer to their children than their wives are. They are not alone in this. Naziramo (see below) is somewhat more affectionate with her children than Jumbul, but nevertheless shouts and swears at them a great deal, while like Rustam and Kurbon's children they seem much closer to their father. Mothers shout and swear at their children so much in Tajikistan that the less harsh swear words almost come to sound like the words of affection that are practically never spoken. Several women told me they realised they were taking their frustrations with other things in their lives out on their children but that they simply could not control themselves, that they suddenly feel as if all their problems are their children's fault. In return children get used to being screamed at and appear to take little notice. Perhaps for this reason parents generally punish their children by beating them, at times extremely hard, as Rustam's parents did.

It is also noticeable that emotional relationships between parents and children tend to be at their strongest before the children reach their teens. By the time they are over twelve the emphasis will be on control rather than love. Thus, the small amount of affection Rustam's parents ever showed him had vanished totally by the time he was twelve, never to be expressed again. When Javhar (see below) was a teenager her mother, a professional nurse, would knock her daughter's head against the wall if she did not immediately obey her. One of the few exceptions is Jahongul's mother, Nahdiya, whom I have never heard speak to her children other than in a kind and warm tone.

The women whom I know in Sayot tend to be too busy to pay much attention to their children most of the time, except when they annoy them. Until the civil war most rural and many urban women had so many children they had a baby at their breast for practically the entire first 15-20 years of their married lives. After the first few children, as each new baby was born the previous one would be turned over to an older sibling, receiving very little care from their mother thereafter. The youngest child seems to remain closer to her mother than her older siblings, who once weaned will receive little physical warmth from their mother.

Gender Ideals for Adolescents

As long as they exhibit proper deference to their elders and behave in a quiet, orderly, and obedient manner in front of them most parents do not seem to care too much what their sons get up to; it is preferred that they spend most of their time outside the home so they do not get in their mothers' way. Girls on the other hand are kept at home most of the time helping their mothers and learning to wait on the male members of their families. Thus both sexes absorb
the message early on that males are free, females tied to the home, and no male should ever be expected to carry out even the simplest of domestic chores.

While Jahongul was busy with her homework her 15-year-old brother, Farukh, came home from school. She immediately stopped what she was doing and rushed to get him supper. I asked why he could not get it for himself, especially as it had already been cooked and just needed serving. 'He is a boy. Boys don't get their own meals. That's what girls are for', Jahongul replied. I told her, if Farukh did not learn now he would never do so and would be unlikely to help his wife in the home later on.

The unmarried Jahongul was very shocked that I should think a husband should be expected to do any housework. However, when I first arrived in Tajikistan a group of women asked me what they could do to get their husbands to help in the house. I asked them how they were raising their sons. Were they getting them to do housework and teaching them that their sisters are just as important as they are and that just because they are boys this does not give them the right to be waited on all the time? 'Of course not', was the reply. 'That is not how things are done here.'

How is it that these women are eager to have their husbands do work that they refuse to raise their sons to do? It seems to me that this is due to the underlying tension between these women's roles as wife and housekeeper, and as mothers. As the last they are responsible for inculcating into their children the regularity norms of their community, which state that boys do not do housework. Should they contravene these norms there are plenty of people to remind them of their duty. An effeminate son or a non-submissive daughter would reflect poorly on both parents, while when a husband does not live up to the ideals of masculinity this reflects badly on him and his natal family, not on his wife.

Zora (cf. chapter 1) is not the only woman I met in Tajikistan who wanted her son to help in the home but the others who did this had no daughters at all and so their husbands reluctantly permitted their sons to help their mothers. In such families the sons are reared to understand that it is only through desperation that they are being asked to carry out women's work and that as soon as possible they will be relieved of it. However, these families are all urban, so that they can hide their aberrations from the prying eyes of neighbours behind closed doors. Fayziddin was raised in a village where nobody can hide such things, and he reacts to his children's behaviour very much as a villager might do, despite his exposure to higher education and his years of living in Dushanbe.

Seventeen-year-old Rivoj invited his schoolteacher to his wedding. The teacher was shocked at the idea that he was getting married so young and wanted to know why. Rivoj explained that he was doing this for his mother's sake. Their family had only sons, of which he was the eldest. His mother's health was not very good and she was experiencing difficulty in coping with the housework on her own. They needed a kelin to help them. She would not be his wife but his mother's, Rivoj said.

1 This story was told me by Hurshed Babaev.
Rivoj's story makes it clear that a prime function of a kelin is to act as an unpaid servant. Clearly it is out of the question that Rivoj and his brothers might themselves help his mother instead. In the village it is highly unlikely that boys could easily get away with this. Too many domestic tasks are done out of doors, including washing clothes, the dishes, cooking, and milking. There would just be much too much pressure on a family for them to be able to accept the shame of their sons' doing such work.

The variant gender performances of these families go beyond the boundaries of Butler's theories about the way that gender performance reflects gender ideals, in various ways. First, there is the dichotomy between the way that women view their sons' and their husbands' gender performances. Then there is the greater flexibility of gender performance in towns compared with what is acceptable in villages.

Unlike boys girls are not only expected to carry out all household tasks, they are also strongly disciplined until they learn to remain silent and not ask questions nor volunteer opinions. They are not so much taught good behaviour as suppressed, until they learn to be quiet and keep their mouths shut in front of adults. It is essential that by the time they are teenagers, they should have learned how to present themselves as modest and submissive, and to understand how important it is to be on their guard against breaking any of the taboos on contact with members of the opposite sex.

Even in Soviet times when schools were working many parents did not favour the acquisition of much education for their daughters, as they considered this would spoil their characters. It is still thought that an educated girl will not be sufficiently humble and submissive to her husband and mother-in-law. For this reason many parents remove their daughters from school by the end of eighth grade if not earlier. For her marital family a kelin is useful to provide household labour, not financial support, which should be left to the men, so what use will education be to her? Moreover, daughters are big responsibilities for their parents, who need to be constantly watchful that they never disgrace them. This is one reason they are rarely averse to marrying them off young. Although married daughters can still shame their natal families, as long as they remain with their husbands it is the business of their marital families to control them.

Marifat was born in 1950 in Dushanbe, the eldest of several siblings. Both her parents were educated and worked outside the house. Nevertheless, they were convinced that the Soviet State was a corrupting influence, from which their children needed to be protected. They did not want Marifat and her sisters to have anything to do even with other Tajik girls and were totally opposed to their meeting boys under any circumstances.

For this reason Marifat was never allowed to attend school at all. She was kept at home all the time and allowed to play only with her siblings, with no contact with the world outside their courtyard. When Marifat was 13 she was informed that she was to be married. She had no idea what that meant. She was given pretty clothes and a lot of people came and there was dancing and other festivities. After all this she was taken to another house and put to bed. She begged to go home with her mother but she was told she must stay behind.

After her mother left she fell asleep. Later on in the night she woke up feeling a pain. She saw the young man she had been introduced to that day at the festivities lying in
bed with her. Her ezer and his were pulled down and his penis was touching her. It was wet. She had seen her brothers' penises and knew they were for peeing, so she just assumed this man had been too lazy to go to the toilet and she scolded him for it. She did not know he was her husband, or indeed what a husband was. In the following days she hated it when her husband kept having sex with her but there was nothing she could do about it. He was twenty and much stronger than she was. Marifat was very unhappy living there with this man and his parents and kept running home to her own parents, only to be scolded and sent back. Somehow or other the KGB found out that she had been married under age and started to follow her parents and her husband's. This continued until she had her first child at the age of fourteen and a half, after which they were left alone. The KGB never tried to take her away from her husband. However, they succeeded in frightening her parents so much that they allowed her younger sister to attend school and did not marry her off until she was eighteen. Now in her mid forties Marifat is a small, sad-looking woman, who does not feel she has ever completely recovered from the harm done to her by her premature marriage.

Marifat's story was no doubt not uncommon in earlier times, although I have never heard of another such extreme case occurring at such a late date. I cannot help wondering why Marifat's parents clung to such a very strict and rigid, almost pre-revolutionary concept of what their daughter's gender performance should be, especially in view of the fact that both of them had been educated and were working in the Soviet system, and that it was already the 1960's when Majvuda's marriage took place. Marifat also did not understand why her parents had been so much more reactionary than most other people's, especially considering they had been living in the capital. Neither she nor her neighbours could think of another family at that time where a daughter had been treated anything like so strictly.

Choice of Kelin

By far the most important life decision for anyone is the choice of marriage partner. But this decision is rarely taken with the welfare of the couple themselves in mind. It is the young man's family that feels their needs to be paramount here. Considering she will spend her life with her marital family the selection of a kelin will affect all its members and is, therefore, considered far too important to leave up to an immature young man.

Elizabeth Bacon visited Central Asia in 1933-34. The following passage is from her subsequent book on the region (1966):

*The Soviets have not been able to break the tradition that children should be brought up to defer to all senior family members and the collective community never supports children over parents even if the authorities do. In marriage, members of the intelligentsia who have been exposed to Russian cultural orientation sometimes select their own mates, but even they ask for parental approval. Girls particularly are subject to parental wishes. Traditionally, a girl was expected to marry a man of her own social status or higher, and her status was also dependent on the value of the bride price paid for her and on the dowry she received from her parents.*
Inter-Generational family Control

Apparently, girls today almost never go counter to the wishes of the parents. In one case where an Uzbek opera singer wished to marry a Russian, she was murdered by her brother. It is possible that educated young women use persuasion or even the threat of elopement to obtain parental permission for marriage to a preferred male, but few cases have been encountered of a girl marrying outside the social class or ethnic group that would traditionally receive family approval. In rural areas, even among intelligentsia and party members, girls drop out of school at the traditional age of marriage, an age when they would have little opportunity to form preferences of their own. Even the most Russianized intelligentsia insist that a girl be a virgin until she marries (Bacon 1966: 170-171).

This passage strikingly illustrates how very little change there has been in the general relationship between children and parents, and in particular in the way spouses are chosen, over the last almost seventy years. Compare it with the story of Rustam or the following one of Jahongul’s eldest sister, Tahmina:

Tahmina had been married at age seventeen at the end of the civil war, during a time of great violence, with rape an everyday occurrence. Her widowed mother, Nahdiya, decided it was better to marry her off rather than risk anything happening to her. Tahmina on the other hand was totally set against marriage at that time. She wanted above all to go to university and could not bear anything to stand in her way. She had never even looked at a boy before her marriage because she knew all the dangers involved and had no intention of ever putting herself in a position to be gossiped about.

When Nahdiya received an offer from the family of Rashid, a student from Hisor, she accepted it on the proviso that the young couple live in Dushanbe and that Tahmina be permitted to study after marriage. Rashid’s parents agreed and so Nahdiya accepted their offer. Only after she had done this did she inform her daughter that a marriage had been arranged for her. Tahmina was horrified, but did not know what to do. She could not bring herself explicitly to refuse her mother or even to make a protest to her. Even looking back on it afterwards she was able to think of nothing she could have done to stop the marriage. ‘We Tajiks have to do what our parents want’, she told me.

Tahmina was so depressed at the fact of being forced to marry that she was indifferent to the person she would be living with, possibly for the rest of her life, and even refused an offer to meet the young man before the wedding. She just said ‘whatever will be, will be and there is nothing meaningful I can do to influence my fate’.

After they were married Rashid’s parents broke both their promises. Tahmina was forced to abandon all idea of studying for the time being and after a few months in Dushanbe she ended up living with her in-laws in the village. She was extremely unhappy. It did not take long for Nahdiya to realise she had made a mistake but there was little she could do about it for all she spent many a sleepless night lying awake worrying about it. She so very much hated seeing her daughter’s misery.
Tahmina wanted to leave her husband but was too afraid of the ensuing gossip through which she might thereafter be labelled as bad. She thought she would never get another husband afterwards, or at least that he would most likely be worse than her present one. So she decided it was probably better to endure what she had. However, after the birth of her first child Tahmina decided that she had better start thinking about taking charge of her own life. Her health had seriously suffered from her pregnancy and her husband was not earning anything. She felt she needed to take steps to prevent her health deteriorating further, and that it would be wrong for her and Rashid to produce a whole brood of children they would be unable to feed or clothe. When she became pregnant again she had an abortion and at the same time got herself fitted with an IUD. She says she categorically refuses to consider having another child until Rashid proves himself more responsible and is in a position to support his family properly.

Although she was never able to become a full-time student, in 1998 Tahmina started an external degree course at the University of Dushanbe. She has to study on her own most of the year, having only a couple of months of classes. She knows that this is her only opportunity to get any sort of education and tries to do as well as she can, although it is hard to study in her parents-in-law’s house and she has little access to books.

Meanwhile, Tahmina has been married six years and has more or less come to terms with it. She no longer considers divorce. She sees that other women have an even harder time than she does and it makes sense to try to make the best of what she has.

Although Tahmina has neither father, nor grandfather to boss the family round as Malik does, and on the surface her relationship with her mother appears relaxed, she still finds it impossible to speak out openly in opposition to her even though Nahdiya really loves her daughters and very much wants them to be happy. She believed she was only acting for the best in a difficult situation when she married Tahmina off. Nahdiya’s concern for her children’s happiness and welfare and her expectations for their achieving happiness in marriage may well be the result of the happiness of her own (arranged) marriage, tragically cut short by death (cf. chapter 6).

In marital situations the husband and his family hold the formal power. Thus, situations tend to be weighted in their favour. As in Tahmina’s case they often make promises to the families of future kélins, which they break after the wedding when it is too late to go back. There are no written marriage contracts in Tajikistan and people can only hold others to their promises if they are in a position of power. Nahdiya is in a particularly weak position as she is very poor and has no older man to support her in standing up for her daughters’ rights. Moreover, she is far less educated than Tahmina’s mother-in-law, which makes it even harder for her to stand up to her.

Marriage for Love

Akram is the youngest son of a family from Kofernihon. While at university in Dushanbe he met and fell in love with a Russian woman in the same dormitory. They
lived together for several years. Her parents knew and approved their relationship but he kept it completely secret from his own family.

When his parents told their son it was high time he was married he informed them that he already had someone in mind. His parents agreed that if she came from a good family they would accept her. However, when they learned she was a Russian they were horrified and categorically refused even to consider her. They expected Akram to settle down with them in the village and wanted a kelin who would fit in with them there, so they insisted their son give up his Russian girlfriend and find himself a Tajik woman, or else they would choose one for him.

As his girlfriend was about to finish her diploma and leave for Moscow to continue her studies there Akram, agreed to this. After she left he did indeed find himself a Tajik girlfriend although the relationship was much less strong. This was in part, because they could not, of course, live together nor have much in the way of intimate contact. In the end Akram did not marry this woman either, because the war interrupted his studies and he fled to Moscow as a refugee. Here he found his first friend again, but unfortunately by then she was married to someone else. Had he been able to marry her he would probably have been given an official residence permit for Moscow. As it was, the authorities in Russia treated him as a semi-illegal alien and he has ended up as an asylum-seeker in Germany, completely on his own.

At the time Akram was very upset about his parents' attitude to his Russian friend but now he is older he realises that it would simply not have worked. His parents would never have got on with his girlfriend nor she with them. He would have been forced to live in Dushanbe, which he had not wanted to do and which would have been tantamount to insulting his parents. They might well have cast him off, which would probably have caused the rest of his family to refuse to have anything to do with him and made his life impossible. So on the whole he does not think it was a bad thing that they were separated at that time although, as things worked out, a Russian wife would clearly have been enormously advantageous to him.

Akram either had more courage than many of his contemporaries, more at stake in his relationship with his Russian friend, or a much closer relationship with his parents than other young men I know, in that he dared mention his friend to them. Most young men never inform their parents they have a girlfriend. In their turn Akram's parents show more willing than most rural inhabitants to allow their son his own choice. Akram's relationship has to a certain extent Russified him. For instance, like Rustam he believes that female virginity at marriage is not especially important and says he would not care if his sisters had lovers, provided only that nobody in his family or village learned of this. In general though, Akram wants very different things out of life than Rustam. He is a villager who wanted and expected to follow in his parents' lifestyle, and who is not adverse to the idea of living according to Tajik norms, while Rustam is a very Russianised urban dweller, who would prefer to banish Tajik customs from his life altogether, if only his parents and the community at large would let him.

Naziramo is a paediatrician from the town of Nurek. Her mother died when she was thirteen. When she was eighteen her father decided it was time for her to marry but
she flatly refused, saying that everyone around her was getting married and then breaking up after a few months and she didn't intend that to happen to her. She told her father she wanted to study first and only afterwards to get married. He tried to put pressure on her but it was fairly half-hearted and she managed to get her own way. Soon after Naziramo left to study in Dushanbe her father remarried. She does not get on with his new wife whom she avoids as much as possible.

It took Naziramo some years to get accepted at medical school so that she was considerably older than the other students. When she was in her third year she met her future husband, Alijon, at that time a fifth-year economics student at Dushanbe University. After they had known each other a couple of years Alijon and Naziramo decided to get married, which they did in September 1994, when Alijon had just graduated and Naziramo was in her fifth year and had just turned twenty-six. Her parents-in-law at first demanded that the young couple live with them in the village but Naziramo hates village life so much that she is uncomfortable even visiting there for a few days. In order to stop them pressuring them too much Alijon explained to his parents that they could not stay in the village as Naziramo had not yet completed her studies, but even now she is working they remain in Dushanbe because Alijon also prefers it there.

For Naziramo her mother's death allowed her to grow up more independently than she would otherwise have been able to. Perhaps because she lives so far away from her father, and his second wife has no interest in her stepdaughter no one in the family cared enough to insist on her marrying within the usual time limit. Very unusually for Tajikistan Naziramo was in the end able both to choose for herself when and whom she married, and to do so at an age most people consider shockingly old. But it was not just Naziramo who was brave. Alijon was also more confident than most young men and decisive enough to inform his parents that he had already chosen the woman he wanted to make his wife. This may very well be because he genuinely loved Naziramo. But Alijon may also have been motivated by the fact that he wanted to live in Dushanbe and that he knew that if his parents chose him a wife she would be from the village and they would expect her to remain there. He wanted a wife in Dushanbe and was supported in this by the uncle with whom he was living at the time, who knew Naziramo well and was willing to welcome her into the family. Moreover, Alijon has three or four brothers, which means that his parents can still have other sons and kuls living with them. Nevertheless, even Alijon did not have the courage to defy his parents outright by telling them that he and Naziramo did not intend ever to live with in the village. He let them realise this by degrees instead of all at once, which made it less confrontational and avoided conflict.

Naziramo's family seem to have been more relaxed about her marriage than most I have come across. This may be because it is no longer very close knit. The remarriage of their father seems to have removed his children from his immediate concern. His new wife does not seem interested in them, which may be another reason for their lack of contact. Naziramo is too far away for his friends and acquaintances to have much idea of what she is doing and this very likely stopped them pressuring him when she remained unmarried for so long.
When Javhar was ready to graduate from the Pedagogical Institute her mother decided it was time to think about getting her married. The first candidate she considered was the son of one of her brothers, whose family was both impoverished and sickly. Several of them had contracted tuberculosis. Javhar was appalled at the idea of marrying into such a family. They had learned in their health classes at the Institute that tuberculosis was very dangerous and highly contagious and she had no intention of putting herself or her future children at risk from this. She was shocked that this did not seem to bother her mother, a nurse by profession. After a hard fight Javhar was able to convince her mother she would never accept her cousin. Before anyone else had a chance to offer for her Javhar informed her parents that they were going to receive an offer from a fellow student at the Institute. He was from a different region from that of her parents, which upset them and put them very much against the match. However, Javhar managed to stand firm. She insisted that he was the only man she would ever agree to marry and that if they forbade this she would simply not marry at all. Eventually she got her own way. Her parents, however, made absolutely certain that this insurrection would not be repeated by her sister, whom they forced into marriage with a spouse of their own choosing. Ten years later Javhar lives reasonably well with her husband, while her sister is married to an alcoholic, who not only does not support his family financially but beats his wife almost daily. Her mother refuses to acknowledge that Javhar made a better choice for herself than her parents did for her sister. Instead of being thankful that at least one of her sons-in-law treats his wife decently she continues to be upset by the match and says she will not be able to sleep peacefully in her grave because her daughter turned down her brother's son and instead married for love. Since the civil war her dislike of her daughter's having married someone from another region has grown still stronger, because there is now a great deal more prejudice against 'intermarriage' between people from different regions.

In 1943, when Karomat was seventeen, the government started sending unmarried girls in their late teens to the war front as nurses. She decided that as the eldest child and with her father already at the front she couldn't possibly leave her mother and the other children. For one thing they would be hard pressed to survive without her wages from her factory job. They held a family council and it was agreed she should get married to avoid being called up. Karomat had a friend, Khudoydod, who had been prevented from being a soldier due to a minor health problem, and who had been quietly courting her since she was fifteen. They would arrange to go to the cinema at the same time, each with a group of friends of their own sex. On the way back, in the dark, the same-sex groups would discreetly give way to opposite-sex pairs, at which time Karomat and Khudoydod would find the opportunity to snatch a few words together. This was practically the entire extent of their contact but nevertheless they had come to care for each other very much. Karomat and her mother discussed the situation and decided the best thing to do was for her to marry her friend as soon as possible, which she did. On his return after the
Karomat told me she thought now that the only good way to marry is the clean Muslim way - with parental agreement. It is best to marry without love because this will come with propinquity and children. It is not necessary for it to be there in the beginning. She said she would have preferred to have had her parents choose her husband. Then she would have been happy. I queried this and said that surely she had been happy most of her married life. She had married a man she had really loved and who had loved her, even if later on she had problems and ended up divorced and without children (cf. chapters 6 and 7).

Karomat said she didn't think it would have been very bad for her if her father had forbidden her to see her friend any more and had forced her to marry someone else. She would have forgotten her friend and been fine with a man of her father's choice. Perhaps her fate would have been better. The most important people in the world are definitely one's parents. It is they who should determine their children's fate.

Looking back from her vantage point in old age Karomat sees her parents as the most important people in her life because, of course, in the end she spent most of her life with them. She would doubtless have felt very different about this had she had her own children and grandchildren to consider. Moreover Karomat said she believed she could have been just as happy with another man as with Khudoydod when she thought of him connected to her bad luck in becoming a childless divorcee and speculated on the fact that her fate might perhaps have been more positive with someone else. However, when she remembered what their relationship had been like she always sounded very happy to have been with him. I wonder, in fact, if at age seventeen she would as easily have accepted her father's decision to find her another husband as she later thought.

Javhar, Karomat, and Naziramo all managed to take major decisions for themselves that influenced the course of their lives. Javhar used the strength and knowledge gained from her time living away from home as a student to insist on making her own choices. As the eldest child during World War II Karomat, although only in her mid teens at the time, was expected to take her father's place in helping her mother with decision-making as well as in supporting the family financially, since when the Soviet government closed the schools and conscripted the older pupils into the war effort she had gone to work in a factory. As the oldest daughter Naziramo took over something of her dead mother's position in the family, which also taught her to be decisive. These stories serve to demonstrate that when the full structure of the family hierarchy is missing, it may be possible for a young woman to usurp some of the attributes of the missing older person, including their gender performances.

Criteria for Choice

How much parents in Tajikistan insist on making their children's choice of spouse themselves and how much leeway they are willing to allow their children in this will depend partly on individual family structure, as with Karomat and Naziramo, but even more on parents' perceptions of their own needs. A parent, especially a father, who perceives either his
own gender identity or his power base, or both to be at stake, may feel it vital to compel his children to knuckle under to him and to be seen to be doing so, as Malik did.

Unusually, in their family Malik chose the *kelins* and his mother found her daughter a husband. Generally, it is the other way round. Perhaps it was the threat of his son’s incorrect gender performance that led Malik to insist on having so much input into the choice of his son’s bride. On the other hand Malik may have allowed Dilorom to overrule him on the subject of Khatiya’s marriage, even though he was very much against her choice, because he did not feel threatened over the choice of a husband for Khatiya. After all, she was not contesting her father’s right to decide for her. An additional reason may have been that there is not that much families can actively do to seek husbands for their daughters. They have to wait to be approached. Khatiya was already twenty-three, quite old still to be unmarried, and she might not easily have got another chance at a husband. It would have been shameful for the family had she not married. It is likely that Malik’s actions were very much influenced by his desire to keep a strong power base, as also by fears of failing to live up to the gender norms. Thus he is fierce whenever these are at stake but when they are not he does not feel it is worth fighting about. It is also possible that Malik was simply not strong enough to be capable of standing up to his wife when she was really determined, despite the fact that he prides himself on his control over her.

No doubt it is the importance in patrilocal society of finding a *kelin* to suit the family’s needs that is responsible for the tradition that the boy’s family should be the one to take the first step in arranging a marriage, through approaching the family of a potential *kelin*. It is also likely that the reason the main mover in any marriage tends to be the mother of the groom is because it is she who has the chance to meet young women and decide on their suitability, something very difficult for her husband to do (Tett 1995: 106). Even more important, it is she who will be the one to have the most contact with the *kelin* after marriage, especially when the young couple will live with the boy’s parents.

The women in Sayot who participated in group discussions on the subject of choice of *kelin* said that they had all chosen their sons’ wives. Generally speaking they seemed to have been motivated in their choice by practical considerations. These are especially important to rural women, whose *kelins* will be vital for carrying out chores both in the house and on the land, so they need girls capable of good hard work. Most of these families expect their sons, and thus their *kelins*, to live with them for life, which makes the choice doubly important to the family. All this no doubt accounts for the fact that so few rural parents, at least in Khatlon, permit their children any say at all in the choice of spouse. There are far more important considerations at stake than the personal relationship between the young couple. The welfare of the entire family will ultimately be dependent on its *kelins*.

In the village Tett studied (1995), on the other hand, there was a high proportion of marriages for love and young people were very interested in the idea of romantic love, despite their acceptance of the concept of *ayb* and all this meant for girls (Tett 1995: 102-8). Very likely the fact that girls were allowed to study in Dushanbe is related to young people being able to choose their marriage partners. Neither could happen in any of the villages in which the health project has worked in the south. These differences are partly regional but also due to the fact that this is a far less religious village than those the health project works in (cf. chapter 1).
Control and Subversion

In Sayot at least, a woman wants a daughter-in-law not only to be a good hard worker but also to obey her unquestioningly, so as to avoid power struggles within the family.

When a seventeen-year-old girl in a village in Khojamaston expressed her opinion aloud in front of a group of older women, they scolded her and told her that such behaviour would count against her by anyone on the lookout for a kelin. She had better learn to put a curb on her tongue if she ever wanted to get married.

Another important reason the women in Sayot gave for taking a kelin was to supply their sons with a controlled outlet for their sexuality, which still does not mean a woman will choose her kelin with her son's personal preferences in mind. A kelin, as the name implies, is a person grafted on to the family from outside, who can be removed if necessary without much trouble and without disturbing the essential structure. A man only has one father and mother but a wife can easily be replaced (cf. Patel 1994: 7). Therefore, unless they fall deeply in love, men will not put their wives before their parents. Women in particular want to come first with their sons as their position in life will be dependent on them. They believe that the stability of the family would be endangered if sons fall too deeply in love. They are, thus, unlikely to welcome signs that love is developing between their sons and their kekins. Indeed, it is not unknown for mothers to try to force their sons to divorce if they realise they are beginning to care too much for their wives.

The preference in many Tajik families has long been to marry off their children to their cousins (Kislyarkov and Pisarchik 1970: 27; Shishov 1904: 360). The pressures towards cousin marriage are particularly strong in the northern part of Tajikistan and the Tajik areas of Uzbekistan, such as Samarkand, where it is considered a serious insult not to marry children off to their cousins. This may be because inheritance and brideprice are paid there in land (Sukhareva 1978) and, as Karomat remarked, who wants to give their own away to another family? A study carried out among pregnant women in Dushanbe at the beginning of the 1980's showed that 33% of the women studied were in cousin marriages (Ergina & Rustamova 1983: 36). In many Tajik families like Javhar's and Khatiya's, brothers and sisters put pressure on one another to marry their children to each other and insist they will be extremely offended if they do not do so. Very often parents agree to such marriages largely to avoid arousing a sibling's hostility and so causing rifts within the family, although in Khatiya's case the marriage ended up causing a very serious one. As can be seen from the examples in this chapter, in Tajikistan cousin marriages are not necessarily with agnates. Marriage in the maternal line is every bit as common, perhaps because marriage arrangements are often initiated by women.

Tett found marriage between cousins to be favoured in the village she studied, although there first cousins were considered to be too close a relationship to be healthy (Tett 1995: 173-4). Rustam believed this to be the reason his sister's baby was mentally handicapped, although it is likely that her husband's drug addiction and alcoholism together with the

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4 There are close similarities here between rural Tajik women's criteria for selection of daughter-in-law and that of rural women in extended families in other countries, such as those of the Maghreb (Bouamama & Saoud 1996: 24).

5 See glossary.

6 Compare Donish's discussion of the struggles between a man's wife and mother (cf. chapter 3).
violence Khatiya suffered and the poor diet forced on her, were at least as responsible as their close family relationship. In fact, a number of women in cousin marriages complained to me bitterly about the frequency of birth defects in their children, which they attributed to generations of inbreeding. Nevertheless, many Tajiks are still not aware of the dangers of inbreeding, as we found out when we brought up the subject in the health project’s discussion groups.

As Khatiya found out to her cost cousin marriages are no guarantee of good treatment on the part either of a husband or of his parents. Furthermore, if a woman in such a marriage is badly treated it may be harder rather than easier for her to have recourse to her parents’ protection since family pressures intervene. This certainly made things more difficult for Khatiya.

If there is no suitable cousin available or if the family prefers not to marry their son to a relative and does not immediately have another bride in mind for him a potential candidate will be sought among their friends and acquaintances. Karomat suggested how a woman might go about this:

When a woman with a son of marriageable age goes to a social gathering she may observe all the young girls of the right age group present and see if she likes the look of any of them. If she does she will observe her carefully - see how she eats, moves, speaks, and so forth. Then, if she does not know her already, she will try to find out who she is - who her parents and family are. At that point if all seems satisfactory she might approach the girl herself and ask if she is married, if she has children. If the answer to both these questions is no, she will then ask if she is a virgin. Generally a woman can tell without having to enquire if a young woman is a virgin, since in that case she would hold her head down when spoken to, especially on the topic of marriage.

Once she makes her choice the woman will discuss the potential kelin in family council and then if she gets the go ahead she may visit the girl's family and try to get a feel for them and for the likelihood of their accepting an offer. It is obviously preferable to sound out the situation before making a formal offer, in order to save face. Discussions between women will not carry the same weight, and therefore are not liable to cause the same problems, as those between men.

The husband-to-be is not only unlikely to be consulted, he very probably will not even be taken into account. What his mother will consider is first and foremost how this girl would suit her and the family and secondly how the two families would be likely to deal together, not the future relationship between the young spouses. The girl's family will most probably focus on the material circumstances of the family and the ability of their daughter's future

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7This does not mean she is being asked whether she has had sex out of wedlock. It is simply another way of asking whether she was previously married but is now divorced or widowed.

I was confounded by Karomat's asking me if a Tajik friend of mine, who was over forty years old but who had never been married, was a virgin. Knowing full well she was not but not feeling it was my place to discuss my friend's love life with Karomat, especially as she would no doubt have condemned her for having sexual relations outside marriage, I answered that I did not know, that Karomat should ask her herself. To the best of my knowledge Karomat never did or at least not in my presence. Only later did I realise she had simply been asking if this woman had ever been married.
parents-in-law to provide a suitable amount of *kalym*. Although this is by no means universal in Tajikistan those families that demand it often have very high expectations and even something as apparently trivial as offering poor quality dress material may be sufficient to put an end to wedding arrangements. It is noteworthy that insufficient *kalym* is an acceptable excuse for breaking off a match whereas a young person's dislike of a future spouse is not.

Some urban families, and a very few rural families like Akram's, may allow a son to suggest his own candidate and, if she is found suitable, will make an offer for her. Daughters cannot have more than the right of refusal, since a girl's family takes a passive role here. However, in those rare cases that a girl has a boyfriend who wishes to marry her and who is able to persuade his parents to offer for her, she will try to see to it that this offer gets precedence, as Javhar did, although, of course, this does not mean that her parents will necessarily accept it.

The families of girls are caught in the bind of the very narrow window of opportunity that girls have in looking for a marriage partner. Their parents cannot simply go in search of a boy they like. They must wait for suitors to come to them. It is only in the case of cousin marriages that they can arrange things themselves. Moreover, there are only a couple of years between a girl's finishing school and her arriving at an age where she will be as good as on the shelf. There appear to be few parents willing to run the risk that their daughter might not be able to find a husband in the future and allow her to wait until the right person turns up. Since parents consider the personal qualities of their son-in-law relatively unimportant this is an understandable position.

**Divorce**

*Aysha is twenty years old. She is the youngest girl of a family of eight from the Hisor Valley, an area near Dushanbe from where, unlike the South, many girls have gone on to tertiary education, as most of Aysha's older brothers and sisters all did. Her oldest sister is a Russian-language teacher in Dushanbe and the others have similar professional levels. Aysha finished high school shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her father had died some years before and her mother was working as director of the village kindergarten and struggling to make ends meet. Although Aysha was desperate to study as her siblings had done, there was no money to pay for this now tertiary education was no longer free.*

*When the war started her mother decided the best thing to do was to find her a husband immediately. Thus, at age seventeen Aysha found herself married to a young man in a neighbouring village, with a very domineering mother-in-law, who seemed determined to show her who was boss. She was not at all pleased that her kelin had aspirations to continue her studies, and told her to put all that right out of her mind. Aysha quickly got pregnant. Her first child was a daughter, who died soon after birth, but a year later she had a healthy son. By this time her relations with her mother-in-law had become very strained. When Aysha's son was a little over a year old things became so bad that her mother-in-law decided to send her home, along with her small son, saying she could not afford to feed two extra mouths. Aysha was very upset. She believed the economic problem was just an excuse and it was actually the incompatibility between herself and her mother-in-law that had*
caused the latter to send her home. She felt that, although her relations with her husband were not ideal and she often felt angry with him, they could have worked out a reasonable relationship together, if only they had been left alone to do so. The main problem was her mother-in-law. Had Aysha been more submissive things might have worked out but she was not like that. As it was, her husband was so completely under his mother's thumb that he simply went along with her decision and agreed to a divorce. This made Aysha feel abandoned and alone.

Aysha's situation is not uncommon. Like many other young women she suffered the consequences of her refusal to submit to her mother-in-law, to wear her appropriate gender mask and keep her feelings to herself. In fact, according to a study carried out in northern Tajikistan, such friction between kelins and their female in-laws (Monogarova 1982: 73) is one of the main reasons for divorce in Tajikistan. Aysha's mother-in-law both chose her son's wife and decided on the divorce, Aysha's husband taking little part in either decision.

It was easy to send Aysha back to her mother because her marriage was not registered with ZAGS. Since independence it is becoming increasingly rare to register marriages. Because of the high divorce rates a bridegroom's parents today rarely agree to registration, so that their kelin will not be in a position to put in a claim against her husband's property if they split up. Rustam was shocked to find three years after his sister's marriage that as far as the law was concerned she was still a single person living in Dushanbe with her parents. Neither her marriage, nor the birth of her daughter had been registered. Khatiya's new place of residence had also not been notified to the authorities, as required by law. In other words, should Khatiya be divorced neither she nor her daughter would be able to claim maintenance from their husband and father since they have no proof either of marriage or of paternity.

**Relations with Kelins**

Rustam and Jumbul lived with his parents until Kurbon married. At this point the flat was not large enough for them all and Rustam and his wife moved out. As the youngest son, Kurbon will be expected to take care of his parents for life and eventually to inherit his parents' home. This is very much the general pattern in Tajikistan except for those rural families that have enough land to house all their sons within the one compound. The result is that most kelins spend at least a few years living with their in-laws. Even where they will be living neolocally from the start, custom demands that the young couple spend the first forty days after their wedding living with the groom's parents. In this way the mother-in-law gets to break in her new kelin, to see what she is really like, and to mould her to her requirements.

At the same time the kelin finds herself in a new environment, where she has no real ties to anyone. Even her husband has less strong feelings for her than for his own family. Aysha is not alone in feeling bitter about her husband's inability to stand up to his parents. Many a young woman feels the same, isolated in her marital family with not even one person to stand up for her. It is very rare for young husbands to support their wives against their parents. As well as endeavouring to keep this marriage bond weak, parents will have done their best to ensure their sons understand that it is to their own benefit to side with their parents. Thus, the life of a new kelin can be very hard.
Tahmina felt she was particularly badly treated by her in-laws. They made no secret of the fact they felt no affection toward her. Tahmina could not understand how Rashid’s family could treat her so, when she and her family were exactly the opposite with their own kelin. She loved her eldest brother Farhod’s wife and the two had become close friends. Nahdiya also gets along well with her daughter-in-law. Rashid’s mother is quite different. She orders Tahmina around all the time. Except for the grandmother everyone else in the family goes out to work, including her mother-in-law, who works as chief bookkeeper to the kolkhoz, so all the housework devolves on Tahmina.

Tahmina is an excellent housewife. She had always kept her mother’s home spotless, even cleaning the communal stairway every week. However, it is much more difficult to do housework in a village. It is very hard work building fires, fetching water every day, washing all the family’s clothes outside in cold water, milking the cow, and cleaning the yard. These are all new experiences for her. Just living in the village is rough after the central heating and indoor plumbing of their Dushanbe apartment. Tahmina has to get up early in the morning and start the fire going before the rest of the family gets out of bed. She is given a minimum of food, and scolded if she asks for more. If she wants to watch television or listen to music in the evenings she is told there is work to do and she is not there to sit around idle. She feels as if she were being treated as an unpaid servant. From the start she has found this almost intolerable. Village life is especially hard in the cold winter and in the first few years adversely affected her delicate health. She was constantly in pain from her back, lost a great deal of weight and generally felt terrible.

Rashid was a student and earning money only sporadically. Whenever he had any money his sisters would inveigle it out of him. They would complain and give him a hard time if he gave any to Tahmina. Her sisters-in-law got presents from their parents as well as their brother but Tahmina got little from her husband and nothing from anyone else in the family. If she needed anything for herself it was usually her own mother who paid, despite her lack of resources.

When Tahmina finally became pregnant she was already quite anaemic and this only worsened until she felt dizzy much of the time. However, her mother-in-law showed her no mercy and insisted on her doing the same amount of hard labour as before. Tahmina felt so ill she went to town to see the doctor. When she heard what Tahmina was made to do every day at home she insisted on hospitalising her in order to ensure she got some rest. Her in-laws were furious. They came to Dushanbe and tried to get her out of the hospital to go home with them.

For once Rashid stood up for his wife. He realised that if she did not rest the likelihood was that she would miscarry. They had spent a great deal of time, energy, and money on getting her gynaecological problems treated so she could bear his children, and now his parents found it more important that she should do housework than that their son should have a healthy child. Rashid managed to persuade them to leave Tahmina alone for the time being. And they did so. Completely. While Nahdiya and Jahonguil went every day to the hospital, taking Tahmina her meals and generally looking after her, none of her marital family, other than her husband, came to see her at all, not even her brothers-in-law, who lived five minutes walk from the hospital.
When Tahmina left hospital and returned to the village her mother- and even her grandmother-in-law tried to make her carry heavy buckets of water, which she had been expressly forbidden to do by her doctor during her pregnancy. When she told them this they mocked her, saying that they had both always worked up to the day they had given birth and started again immediately afterwards. They did not understand how this young girl could be so sickly. What was the point of having a kelin if they had to do the work themselves? Luckily, despite this treatment, Tahmina was able to carry her child to term and gave birth to a healthy daughter.

Kelins are all too often harshly treated like Tahmina, Aysha, and Khatiya. Few young kelins seem to be happy with their position in their parents-in-law's home. The attitude of Tahmina's sisters-in-law in treating their kelin almost like an enemy rather than as someone in a close relationship to the family is not untypical. It is as if they see their brother's wife as a rival for his affections. Young women have frequently told me they are treated like intruders in the family. Like Tahmina, an often-repeated complaint is that they are given less to eat than everyone else, even when they are pregnant and it should be in the family's own interest to see they bore healthy children.

Once their sons are married women expect to do very little housework. They feel they deserve an easier time and prefer to sleep, or chat to friends or relatives, just keeping an eye out to check their daughters-in-law are carrying out their allotted tasks correctly. If a kelin fails to live up to her mother-in-law's requirements she is likely quickly to find herself divorced and back home like Aysha, so that there is a great deal of pressure, especially at first, for kelins to show themselves obedient and hardworking in order to prove themselves worthy.

Once Rustam's mother had a kelin she decided to take a rest from housework. The kelin could see to it. Kurbon's wife, Mukhayo, did not have problems with this at first. However, she now has a toddler and a small baby, as well as a job, so she finds herself very overburdened. She does not protest but sometimes feels so exhausted she hardly knows how to cope. Kurbon would like to shield his wife from his mother's demands but knows that if he tries to intervene his father will accuse him of not being a real man, of being soft, and unable to control his wife. Therefore, he asks his brother to see if he can't get their mother to be easier on Mukhayo. Rustam tells Dilorom she should take pity on her daughter-in-law and that at least while Mukhayo's baby is so young she should be spared some of the housework. For a few weeks afterwards Dilorom will share the work, but then she will decide once more that it is not right and that her kelin should do it. So Rustam will have to interfere again. He and Mukhayo have never exchanged a word on the subject. She just sits there and looks gratefully at him.

Javhar might have married for love, she might be educated and have a job, but none of these absolved her from living with her in-laws or from fulfilling her domestic obligations. By the time of her marriage she already had a teaching job in a village.

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8 However, since most people in Tajikistan do not connect female nutrition levels before and during pregnancy and lactation with the health of their babies, this is perhaps not so surprising.
several miles outside her husband's hometown. To get there by public transportation was possible, but very time consuming. Javhar insisted on keeping her job. Her parents-in-law insisted on her taking on a large share of the housework. This was especially necessary because her husband was the oldest of a family of boys so there was no other woman to help her mother-in-law. Her father-in-law was a high-level bureaucrat, entitled to a government car, which he made use of to have Javhar driven to school and back every day. In this way he was able to organise her life so that she had the maximum amount of time at home to get on with the housework. This also enabled him to control her movements and ensure that she never went anywhere without his explicit permission.

Javhar's colleagues all made comments to her about this posh car and driver, and were clearly very envious of her having such luxury apparently at her disposal. However, Javhar felt totally trapped by it. She could not tell her colleagues that what they saw as luxury she saw as a prison. She did not have one moment of freedom to do anything or go anywhere she wanted. She could not exploit her job or the necessity of travelling to and from it to make a window even to visit her own parents who lived a few minutes from her school, in the opposite direction from the town. The only way she was able to escape was to apply for a job in the town. Her new job was in easy walking distance of her home, which at least gave her the opportunity for a little bit of freedom, the car now being redundant. After a few years her next oldest brother-in-law married, allowing Javhar and her husband to get a place of their own. Now she is her own boss Javhar is much happier.

It gives some indication of the relative equality women have with their husbands that it is not uncommon to hear them say with Javhar that once they have left their in-laws' house and set up in their own place they feel they are now their own boss. This may not give them full and free mobility but it is a tremendous improvement since it is rare for a husband to interfere with the running of their home.

Lack of submission on the part of a *kelin* is often linked in the minds of their mothers-in-law with higher education, which is why a daughter with tertiary education commands considerably less *kalyem* than one who left school after eighth grade or earlier. Interestingly enough it is Aysha and Tahmina, both of whom merely aspire to higher education, who leave off their gender masks of submission and stand up to their mothers-in-law while Mukhayo, Khatiya and Javhar, who already had their diplomas, show themselves much more compliant. No doubt Khatiya, brought up by such very strict parents, was unable to challenge her domineering aunt and perhaps Javhar, having forced her parents to accept her choice of spouse, felt she had to get on with her parents-in-law whatever the cost. Despite the fact that these women were all professionals they were not able directly to confront their in-laws and demand better treatment from them since they had no advantage they could use to negotiate a better position. It may be that it was precisely Tahmina's and Aysha's aspirations to better their position in life that gave them the courage to stand up to their mothers-in-law.

In the following story Zebo also wants to learn new skills and better herself. She was able to use the lack of a father-in-law and the illiteracy of her mother-in-law as a lever to attain a more favourable position than a young *kelin* would normally have, although she paid for this in the emotional energy she expended on constant fighting and bickering.
Twenty-four-year-old Zebo and her husband, Ahmed, live in Sayot with Saodat, her husband’s mother, and their two small children. Saodat is divorced, her husband having left her some ten years previously for a younger woman and she is illiterate, since her father would not permit her to attend school. Her twenty-one-year-old daughter, Mokhru, who had recently returned to live with her mother after six years in an infertile marriage, had also never been allowed to attend school. Zebo graduated from tenth grade and is both intelligent and interested in learning. She is also a skilled seamstress and very determined that she and her family should live well. Ahmed is also intent on improving their material situation. Their house was completely destroyed in the civil war and he puts all the extra money he can earn into rebuilding it and making it beautiful again.

Ahmed is absent a great deal on business, leaving Zebo and Saodat to run the household and look after their cottage garden between them. Saodat is, of course, in charge but she is also insecure about how to cope with the demands of life in the post-Soviet era. She is nearly seventy years old. All her life she had been protected by her men folk who had taken charge of all interactions with the outside world but now she has only her youngest son left living with her. Since the war her other sons have not returned to the village. Furthermore, in Soviet times everything had been properly regulated. Saodat had worked on the kolkhoz and her wages would be handed directly over to her husband, who would put them into the communal pot. Saodat would ask him to buy her dress material and he would bring it her, along with all the other groceries she requested. They would buy in bulk, several months’ supplies at once. In those days they were never too poor to afford all the food they wanted. Since the war things have been very different. It is hard to make ends meet. Inflation is high and often the family cannot afford to buy anything but the most basic foodstuffs.

Saodat is afraid to go into town, which she has very rarely visited. She has never been to the market and the very idea of going there scares her. She does not even really know where it is. She knows she could not cope and, being innumerate, would almost certainly be cheated. With Ahmed away much of the time she has no option but to allow Zebo to go to market for her.

Zebo does not like agricultural work and it makes her ill to spend long periods in the blazing sun. But every family in the village has to have at least one member working for the kolkhoz in some capacity or other, Saodat is too old and Ahmed has better things to do. After the medical centre was rebuilt by international aid agencies Zebo was able to find herself a job as cleaner. In this way she guaranteed herself a small but regular wage, as well as freedom from labour in the fields. Furthermore, Zebo is in great demand as the village seamstress. Although she does not charge very much, all in all she makes a significant contribution to the family purse. Saodat’s part is to do most of the work on their plot of land.

When Zebo goes to the market to sell the produce from their plot she will use this money as well as her own earnings to buy provisions for the family. Her purchases will be discussed beforehand with Saodat. However, Saodat cannot know how much Zebo actually receives for her potatoes or apricots. Zebo will buy what they had planned on but at times she also decides to buy something extra for herself or sweets
for her children. This enrages Saodat and they have loud shouting sessions. Saodat feels she is losing control and tries to regain it by exerting her power over her in other matters. One afternoon when I arrived in the village I found Zebo in tears. She had picked some roses from the tree growing by the side of their house to give to a guest. After the guest had left Saodat had started to scold her, claiming she had wanted to give the roses to someone else and that Zebo had no right to touch the flowers without asking her first. She had made an inordinate fuss about it and the row had lasted several hours. Zebo was still extremely upset. While she tearfully recited the events of the morning Saodat could be seen sitting on her veranda, alone and outwardly calm.

On another occasion Mokhru and Zebo had a tremendous row, which ended up in a practically knockdown fight. They started hitting each other and tearing at each other's clothes. Saodat waded in, hitting out seemingly indiscriminately at both parties. Suddenly she snatched up a chair, which she seemed about to bash down on Mokhru's head. At that point I felt things were getting out of hand and grabbed hold of the chair before she could hit her daughter with it. There is often bad feeling between these three women, although I never again saw it take such a violent form, and things were eased considerably after Mokhru remarried and left the village.

Saodat then decided that she did not need such a pushy and disobedient daughter-in-law as Zebo and ordered Ahmed to divorce her. They would send her and her children back to her village and then find a new wife for him, who would be more obedient to Saodat. The latter felt doubly justified in her position by the fact that Zebo is from a region that had been on the opposite side from most of the rest of the villagers in the civil war. Ahmed, however, would have none of it. He was adamant. Zebo should stay. He loved her and his children and they were his family. Nothing his mother could say would budge him. So Zebo remained.

The dynamic that has built up in this family would not be at all the same were there older men present on an ongoing basis. It is clear from his behaviour on the rare occasions when he comes over that Saodat's husband would never have allowed his daughter and daughter-in-law to be so free. Moreover, Saodat's authority would have been greater had her husband not abandoned her or had she not needed Zebo's help with shopping, something that in the past had been considered purely men's work. The absence of his father as well as his mother's fear of dealing with the outside world has also made it easier for Ahmed to go his own way and make himself de facto head of the family, even though this place is nominally occupied by his mother. Thus, he can put his feelings for his wife in first place, something few other men of his age seem able to do.

This story would serve as a good lesson for any parents who believe that their daughter will not gain anything from education. Saodat's position as mother-in-law would be enormously enhanced were she as capable of functioning in the outside world as her kelin is. Unlike Saodat, most mothers-in-law are literate and usually much more competent than their daughters-in-law to handle the family's affairs in the absence of their men folk. They rule their households strictly and would not stand for the defiance that Zebo often shows Saodat. They would certainly never send a kelin alone to the market but go themselves. If they have
several *kelins* they may take one of them with them to help carry their loads home, while the others stay at home to look after the children and do the housework.

Things get more complicated in families where two generations of mothers-in-law have to coexist. In this case the older woman may insist on choosing her grandsons' wives and in being the boss of her *kelin* as well as of her *kelin's kelins*, effectively cutting the younger woman out of the power equation. The latter may well feel particularly badly done by since part of the 'patriarchal bargain' is that women eventually get to attain a position of power and that this should happen at the time they marry off their sons. In a sense Rustam is in a similar position, in that his father has usurped his position vis-à-vis his son, thus depriving him of the power that should be his as a father.

**Grandchildren**

Whatever women may state about their reasons for taking a daughter-in-law a *kelin's* most important function is, of course, to provide descendants for her husband's family. Therefore, she must prove her reproductive capacities by becoming pregnant as soon as possible after marriage. Failure to do so within the first year or so will give her husband and in-laws a good excuse to get rid of her. Many a young woman has been returned to her parents for this reason. Tahmina was very nervous that this might happen to her and for this reason happy to become pregnant.

However, her story and Aysha's also point up a strange dichotomy in Tajik life. Although the desire for children is very strong and a *kelin* must prove her fertility as soon as possible her parents-in-law often do not seem very interested in the outcome of the pregnancy. Moreover, if a marital family decides to get rid of their *kelin* they do not seem to have any compunction about getting rid of the children also. I have almost never heard of a family whose father claimed custody of the children on divorce. In fact, I have not come across a divorce in those families where the man really cares for his children. On the other hand I have come across only too many families where *kelins* together with the children/grandchildren have been abandoned with great ease.

When we discussed why this should be with the women of Sayot, they each maintained that whoever else might behave so despicably it would not be them. They all seemed to consider it very negative behaviour, although this may well have been our fault in the way we presented the topic. These women may of course have genuinely been against this practice but it seems to be increasingly frequent as life becomes more unstable and difficult. However, Tillo is testimony to the fact that disregard for grandchildren long predates the civil war. Her first marriage broke up in the early 1980's but her parents-in-law have never once bothered to have any contact with their grandchildren, nor does her second husband bother with the children he insisted Tillo have for him. He now has several more children with his new wife.

This attitude may owe something to the earlier high rates of infant and child mortality, which may mean that parents came to value the individual child less strongly. Such an

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9 A woman's life cycle in such families is such that while young brides are likely to experience deprivation and hardship they know that this will eventually be superseded by control and authority over their own children and eventually *kelins*. This encourages their tacit acceptance of their situation as brides, their willingness to wear a mask of subordination while waiting for their turn to assume power (*cf.* Kandiyotti 1991: 32-3).
attitude at least was expressed by Zora’s mother, who herself had had nine children, when she felt that her daughter was expending an inordinate amount of time and energy caring for her sickly young son. ‘Just let him die. You can easily have another, who might be stronger’, was her advice. Zora was shocked by this. She loved her son and did not feel he could be so easily replaceable: besides she did not want to undergo another pregnancy.

However, the relatively easy abandonment of children upon divorce is more likely to be the result of the Soviet legal system. Although before the Revolution it had been normal for men to keep their children on divorce, as is the practice in other Muslim societies, during Soviet times children were always awarded to mothers on divorce (Pal’vanova 1982: 7). It would be interesting to see a study of what this meant to families in the early post-Soviet times. It is entirely likely that the strong reaction against women demanding divorces at that time was partly due to the fact that the family would lose their children/grandchildren along with their *kelin*. This meant that their paternal family would no longer be able to exert control over these children, which would have been very serious. How could they consider part of their family a child over whom they had no control, whom neither father or parents-in-law could ensure were keeping to their proper gender performances? Who knew how they were being raised by their mother’s family? Had their paternal family kept contact with them and acknowledged them as theirs, they could be shamed by children they could not control.

**Russian Wives**

Family relationships have become even more complicated in recent years since the economic situation became so bad in Tajikistan, and increasing numbers of men now go to Russia as migrant labourers. The majority of them form relationships with women there and many of them marry. Thus, Akram and Rustam are no longer in such a minority. Today there are thousands of men of local nationalities who have fallen in love with Russian-speaking women, with whom they have developed quite different relationships from those they could have with Tajik women. Indeed most of these men already have a wife (and children) back in Tajikistan to whom they were married by their parents, but with whom they may have little emotional contact.

Where younger men do not already have a wife they are rarely able to escape their parents’ insistence on marrying them to a Tajik woman when they return for a visit, so as to provide a *kelin* for the family. In most cases young men will find it expedient to accede to their demands. One of the health-project staff said the wife of one of her relatives, who lives with them in the village, now has seven children, although during their eight years of marriage she has seen her husband only for a few months in total. He has several more children by his Russian wife, with whom he spends most of the year. There are a few young men, however, who manage successfully to resist their parents and refuse to marry a woman of their choice.

This is a subject that the young men who attend the health project’s group discussions bring up on occasion. They would like to be able to resist parental pressure but do not know how to do this. Once when this subject came up in Sayot Mahmud, at twenty-eight the oldest man present, told the rest how he had managed to get his own way and still keep on good terms with his parents.
When I first went to work in Russia I got to know Olga and we fell in love. We got married and now have two children. A few years ago when I came back to Tajikistan for a visit I found that my parents had started to look out for a Tajik wife for me but I decided that I did not want this. As far as I was concerned Olga was my wife and that was that. So I told my parents I would on no account allow them to find me a wife. When they asked why, I said I already had one in Russia whom I loved very much and that I was not going to take another one. When they insisted I told them that unless they agreed to stop pressuring me I would return to Russia and neither visit them, nor support them financially any more. Since then they have never again raised the subject.

Mahmud added that he did not intend to deprive his parents permanently of a chance to be with their grandchildren nor did he wish to spend the rest of his life in Russia. As soon as economic circumstances permit he will bring his family to Tajikistan and raise his children according to local traditions. What gave Mahmud the power to force his parents to accept his terms, while Rustam was unable to do this? In the first place this is very probably because there does not appear to be any very great stigma attached to a Tajik man’s marrying a Russian woman in Russia. Rustam, on the other hand, wanted to marry a divorced, infertile, older Russian woman in Tajikistan itself - thus in full view of the community - something so outrageous in Tajik terms that it would inevitably have made him, and by extension his family, a laughing stock. This was no doubt also the reason Kurbon did not try to help his brother convince their father to allow him to marry Zhenia. In the second place, Mahmud lives in Russia and supports his parents financially. Rustam was living with his parents at the time and had only a small income. Moreover, Mahmud does not seem to have greatly feared his parents’ rejection but even now, when Rustam is in a much more favourable economic situation, he is still unable to separate himself psychologically from his father.

Malik has not deliberately set out to ruin his children’s lives. Never having been in love himself he does not realise what this means. To him any reasonable woman could become a decent wife for any man. It all depends on the way the husband handles things. He assures his son that all that is necessary for marital happiness is for him to be firm with his wife. In other words, to Malik Rustam’s predicament is not that he is forced to live with an incompatible wife whom he cannot love but that he does not feel himself a proper man, owing to his lack of strictness with her. Putting this right would solve his emotional problems. That is to say, his son’s unhappiness is not Malik’s fault but his own. Malik has done nothing wrong.

This no doubt sheds more light on Malik’s hang-ups than on Rustam’s and points to the fact that it is very likely his insecurity round his own gender performance that has made Malik feel himself particularly vulnerable to social pressure and therefore impelled him to be so very authoritarian with his sons. He has managed to bolster up his weaknesses by means of the discourse that gives him as head of family the right to control all its members and make all decisions. At the same time he keeps a mask of dominance firmly in place at all times, a mask that his children are unable to see behind.

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10 This story was told me by Hursheed Babaev, who was teaching the class Mahmud attended.
150  *Control and Subversion*

**Conclusion**

The family relationships described here are not nearly as straightforward and clear-cut as one might assume from listening to the Tajiks' own discourse. Nevertheless, the strong social norms help considerably to reduce the differences between families to a minimum. The margin for variation of the norms is fairly small and very much dependent on a family's social position and the psychological strength of its members, particularly of the head of family. Although it may seem extraordinary that some families fear the slightest deviation from the norms while others seem to deviate unhesitatingly, closer examination usually reveals good reasons for this, just as with Mahmud and Rustam.

I find it interesting how often young women, despite the constraints of their upbringing and the restrictive gender performances they are forced into, tend to be more decisive than their husbands. This appears especially noticeable after the birth of their first child, when they suddenly have someone else to consider beyond just themselves, as happened with Tahmina. It is also notable that while young people are submissive to their own parents the level of submission of daughters-in-law to their mothers-in-law may be much less, as with Zebo, Aysha, and even Tahmina. These last two and Jahongul have all told me they find it difficult to understand why so many young Tajik men are so submissive to their parents. They think it shows weakness. Men should not be as submissive as girls. After all they do not have as much at stake since their gender identity is far less rigid and their position within the family much more assured. Young women very much suffer from the fact that they get little loyalty from their husbands and this means they are rarely secure in their marital relationships. Even forming a close relationship with their husbands is no guarantee of security, since it may have the opposite effect of their mothers-in-law deciding to get rid of them. Thus, they have no control over their situation and in theory could at any moment find themselves divorced and back home with their parents. This is on the whole a new phenomenon, since the post-war situation, together with economic migration has produced a serious dearth of young men, as well as a generally unstable situation.

At the same time boys are every bit as strongly subjugated by their parents as girls in the matter of the one thing that all parents insist on from their offspring, and that is obedience. The repetitive inculcation of this in children of both sexes results in submissive sons as well as daughters, as Rustam's story shows. However, it seems to me that young men's apparent submission may at times be fictitious, a ploy to get their own way more easily since they know their girlfriends or wives might be able to stand up to them but cannot oppose their mothers. Thus, they may couch their own wishes in terms of their mothers' commands. This does not, however, mean that mothers do not bring very strong pressures to bear on their sons and that they do not harass them with great determination if they go against their wishes. It demands equally strong determination to stand up against this day after day, as the story of Abdul in the following chapter demonstrates.

In the Tajik project of maintaining their own cultural identity, control over sons is almost as important as over daughters. If large numbers of young men were to behave like Rustam it would be almost impossible to maintain cultural separation from the Russians. At the personal level Rustam had accepted the Russian cultural ideals, virtually abandoning the most vital Tajik masculine gender norms, including control over women. In essence what Malik was doing was preventing his son from opting out of Tajik culture. In fact, in one way this
story could be read as a classic case of how the Tajiks have been able to preserve their own culture in the face of Soviet pressures to modernise.

Nevertheless, despite the harsh treatment that considerations of nomus and ayb cause parents to impose, most Tajik parents are loved by and also love their children. However, the spiteful way that parents often behave to their children, if they do manage to escape their control, as in Ulhon’s case (cf. chapter 6), would suggest that love is not always so strong on the side of parents. Rustam is far from being the only person in Tajikistan to find it difficult to escape a passionate attachment to, and a long-term, highly emotional dependency on parents. Sixty-nine-year-old Karomat’s outpourings of grief for her own mother, who had died about two and a half years earlier, shows how very strong this attachment could be:

*I miss my mother every second of every day. Other than the 20 years I lived with my husband I lived with her all my life. I spent almost 50 years with her. She was mother, sister, daughter to me. I cannot bear being without her. I wake up every morning thinking of her, I think of her while I say my prayers, while I eat my meals, while I get ready for bed at night. When I lie in bed trying to get to sleep I think of her. It’s as if there was passing in front of my eyes a film of how it was when she was still alive. I keep her photo near me and I talk to it all the time. Very often I do not know how to go on without her. My life has become a burden to me. Were it not for my father needing me I should prefer to die and be buried beside my mother. Only then would I rest happy.*

The stories in this chapter show just how important generational placing is to gender identity. The way young men are supposed to show submission and older women are in positions of dominance reverses the usual concept of gender relations, which contrast female submission with male dominance. These stories also show some of the main trends of the transition period, most especially frequent divorces, smaller family size, and long-term migration, all of which will no doubt eventually result in fundamental changes in family structures and relationships.

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11 Karomat’s mother died in October 1992. This interview took place on April 28th 1995. In December 1995 her father died and then she really felt she had nothing left to live for. In November 1997, a few days before her seventy-second birthday Karomat herself died of a stroke.

The way Karomat sublimes her loss by keeping her mother ‘alive’ inside herself is very similar to the way Rustam sublimes his loss of Zhenia - cf. chapter 7.