Control and subversion: gender, islam, and socialism in Tajikistan

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CHAPTER 7
THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP: LOVE, SEX, AND MARRIAGE

'After marriage we Tajik women have to do what our husbands tell us. Without their permission we cannot leave the house, we cannot study and we cannot take a job,' said Jahongul. 'It is our Tajik way to obey our husbands,' said Tillo. Even Karomat agreed that this was unfortunately so.

Such repetition of the 'magic formulas' of 'official' discourse produces the impression of strict adherence to gender norms. These women are announcing their acceptance of the traditions, their willingness to abide by them. This public acceptance of their duty to perform their feminine gender according to the rules makes it easier for them to get away with variations in correct performance, advertises their husbands' successful performances of masculine gender, and boosts family honour.

Outsiders listening to these women could be excused if they expected to find a nation of submissive, obedient wives, kow-towing to overbearing, dominant husbands, and indeed this is the image that many Westerners have of Muslim life. But what actually goes on behind the closed doors of the marital relationship? How much power do husbands really have over their wives? What is more likely to be successful, marriage where the young couple have chosen their own partners or an arranged match? Is it reasonable for Tajiks to expect to achieve happiness through marriage and what role does love play?

The stories in this chapter try to answer these questions by looking at aspects of the marital relationship not usually on public display. They describe the very most personal side of human relations, the feelings people have for their spouses and their relationships with them in the marriage bed.

Marriage

Life in an Arranged Marriage

Tahmina

It was Tahmina's wedding day and she and her family set out for Hisor for the ceremony. It was the first time that anyone except Nahdiya had met Tahmina's prospective husband and his family. Tahmina was very nervous. She wondered what this man, with whom she was perhaps to spend the rest of her life, would be like. The ceremony started. Tahmina looked at Rashid out of the corner of her eye so that no one would notice. 'Is he good looking? How tall is he? Will he be kind or will he be harsh with me?', she asked herself.

Rashid was also nervous. He was so shy he could not answer when the mullah asked him whether he agreed to marry Tahmina. He just sat there blushing, his voice stuck in his throat.

Then the ceremony was over and Tahmina's family got up to return home, abandoning her with these unknown people. At first Tahmina thought it might not be
too bad, after all Rashid had several sisters with whom she would probably soon be
friends, but to her dismay this didn’t happen. They seemed if anything to resent her
rather than to welcome her, as if she were an enemy come to take their brother away
from them. Her mother-in-law was no better. This all made Tahmina feel extremely
isolated. To be stuck in a village after living in Dushanbe all her life was an
additional stress. The fact that Rashid, the one person in the family she was supposed
to be close to, was away most of the time and that when he was at home the two of
them didn’t get on particularly well just made things worse.
Forty days after their marriage Rashid and Tahmina moved to his family’s flat in
Dushanbe. Tahmina was very beautiful and Rashid was extremely jealous of her. He
would watch her everywhere they went, to see if she responded to any of the men who
passed by, many of whom would look at her admiringly in the street and on buses and
even try to chat her up. This drove him absolutely wild.
Rashid would sometimes tell Tahmina he loved her but at other times he would say ‘I
have no feelings for you. You are not my wife but my parents' wife. They chose you,
not I’. He repeatedly asked her if she loved him and she would never say yes. Rashid
decided that if Tahmina did not love him this must be because she was in love with
someone else. Irrespective of her denials she must have had a boyfriend before
marriage.
They had not been living in Dushanbe for more than a couple of months before
Rashid decided he could not stand it any more. Since he could not watch over his wife
twenty-four hours a day he decided there was only one way to stop himself going mad
with jealousy and allow him the freedom to do what he wanted without worrying what
she was up to. This was for her to live in the village with his parents. So he insisted
on Tahmina moving back there, very much against her will. She had been promised
they would live in Dushanbe and she hated the village and living with his family. But
this decision was not Rashid’s alone. His mother had been pressuring him to bring his
wife home to live. She needed someone to do the domestic chores while she was at
work and her daughters at school all day. Soon after Tahmina moved to the village
her parents-in-law sold their Dushanbe flat, with the result that there was no longer
anywhere to return to.
For several years after their marriage Tahmina did not manage to get pregnant. She
was very upset about this. She would cry and cry. ‘For Tajiks not getting pregnant is
a tragedy’, she told me. ‘It is considered cause for divorce if a woman is not pregnant
after three years of marriage’. And Tahmina had been married almost one and a half
years.
‘If I don’t get pregnant what will I do? I will just go on getting older and older... To a
Tajik a 30-year-old woman without a child is just an old woman. She may be great at
housework, she may have a good job. But unless she can have a child she is a useless
wife.’
Rashid was very upset over Tahmina’s failure to conceive and told her that she
obviously did not love him because if she did she would give him a child. He was
furious at the fact that one of his friends, who had married at the same time they did,
was already a father, while Tahmina was not even pregnant yet.
Tahmina realised that Rashid's patience was wearing thin and that, unless she became pregnant soon, he would probably divorce her and she was not ready for this. At the same time she was not at all happy with Rashid and did not believe she could ever love him. Their characters were too dissimilar and this made it hard for them to pull together like a real couple. Tahmina often considered initiating divorce herself. However, she was too afraid of the gossip that might follow. She did not want people to point at her and say - 'Tahmina failed, she was a bad wife'. Also she did not know what would happen afterwards. 'Who knows if a second husband would be better than Rashid? In all likelihood he would be worse', she thought. She would no longer receive offers from young, unmarried men and an older man would be likely to be far more controlling than Rashid. In the end Tahmina decided it was probably better to put up with him.

So she decided to get herself checked out by a gynaecologist. After treatment she at last became pregnant and Rashid was ecstatic. He immediately became less jealous and stopped watching over her so anxiously. He allowed her to spend more time with her mother and in general started treating her much more kindly.

But after their daughter was born Rashid stopped treating Tahmina so well and went back to his old ways. The friction between them increased but now, with her child's welfare to consider also, Tahmina felt she was definitely no longer in a position to ask for a divorce. She had to put the child first.

In the last few years Tahmina and Rashid have worked out a reasonably amicable companionship based more on their mutual love for their daughter than on their feelings for each other. Tahmina has decided to try to be as happy as she can. She may not love Rashid but she could do a lot worse. At least he doesn't beat her the way Jahongul's husband does her. She has a lot to be thankful for and has stopped blaming her mother for forcing her to marry Rashid. Right now their biggest worries are financial. Rashid has been to Russia a couple of times but since the 1998 financial crisis the returns have not been great and he does not feel it is worth returning at present. However, he has been able to find no source of income in Tajikistan and they are completely dependent on his parents.

Abdurakhmon

Abdurakhmon was a teacher in Khojamaston. He and his wife had seven children whom he was having a very hard time feeding since not only was a teacher's pay very small, but it was often delayed for months at a time. Finally Abdurakhmon's wife became so angry at having to beg money from her parents that she decided it was better to return to them. She announced to her husband that unless he could provide for his family she would leave him. Abdurakhmon was devastated and humiliated by this. When his colleagues at school found out he said to them - 'None of this is my fault. I can't help it if the government doesn't pay us properly, can I? At least I know that my wife did not leave me because I could not satisfy her in bed'. His colleagues asked what made him so sure: 'She had seven children, didn't she? Would she have done that if she had not enjoyed sex with me?'

1 This story was told me by Hurshed Babaev.
Neither Rashid nor Abdurakhmon is able to support his family financially. But for the former this is not such a major headache. He and his wife live with his parents and all monies go into the communal pot. The fact that Rashid provides very little of this is a nuisance and means their living standard is low, but it is not crucial.

Abdurakhmon is in a very different position. He is an older man, now fully responsible for a large family whom there is no way he can support. The only chance he is likely to have of this is if he quits teaching and goes to Russia to work. Despite the shame attached to women abandoning their husbands to return to their natal families for reasons of ill treatment, when this happens because of their husbands’ failure to perform their male duties successfully, it does not carry the same negative connotations. Indeed in some parts of the Muslim world such failure on the man’s part would justify his wife’s refusal to fulfil any of her wifely tasks (Wikan 1980:46). Abdurakhmon’s wife has the upper hand here. She has done her part by providing the children. Now it is his turn to provide the wherewithal to raise them.

Neither of these men is in control of his wife. Rather it is the women who appear the more decisive. Moreover, it would seem that Rashid is not the only man to believe that women automatically have control over their own fertility. This is perhaps to some extent due to the fact that Rashid and Abdulrakhmon do not fully understand the process of conception. Before about 1800 in Europe and up until today in many Muslim cultures it was believed that the female orgasm was as necessary for pregnancy as male ejaculation (Laqueur 1990). Perhaps because he also believes this Abdurakhmon considers that his wife could not have conceived all those children had she not enjoyed their sex life? Rashid knows Tahmina does not enjoy sex, so is his apparent belief that Tahmina has the power to control her own fertility basically an emotional response to his own feelings of inadequacy?

He certainly does not appear to feel in control in his marital relationship. He is not a particularly enterprising sort of man. Unlike most of the Sayot men he has not even managed to make money working in Russia. Without his parents’ help his family would starve. They are still the controlling figures in his life, especially his dominating mother.

Rashid can only interpret Tahmina’s failure to love him as an indication that her heart is not free. The alternative would be much more scary. It would mean that he is incapable of inspiring her love. This would put the responsibility for being loveable firmly on his shoulders.

Such a concept is foreign to most Tajik men. Donish appears to consider that whether a woman will become a loving wife depends on her character rather than on her husband’s behaviour to her (cf. chapter 3). Rustam is the only man in Tajikistan whom I heard voice a doubt about his lovability but this was in the context of his capacity to attract people to him in general, not in the context of marriage. It is usually assumed that a husband who does not physically ill-treat his wife, gives her children, and supports his family financially has fulfilled all that is necessary. There is no discourse suggesting that men should behave nicely to their wives in order to gain their affection and love, unless one counts providing material gifts. Nevertheless, besides obeying their husbands, catering to their personal needs, bearing and caring for their children, keeping the house and yard in order, milking the cows and working on the private plot in the country, or holding down a job in the town, it appears that
women should love their husbands too. At least this is what Rashid expected. Even Rustam seems to be hurt that Jumbul does not care for him.

Rustam

The first time they were alone together after their wedding Rustam told Jumbul that he had no feelings for her. He was passionately in love with another woman and had only acquiesced to marriage with her because of the tremendous pressures applied by his parents. Jumbul told him she knew about his relationship with Zhenia. When Rustam asked why in that case she had agreed to marry him Jumbul replied her that mother had told her to.

Rustam felt very weird being with this woman, this stranger, expected to sleep in one room with her, have sex with her, and to spend his life with her, when they had not the slightest point of psychological contact. He could not quite bring himself to believe that she could actually be his wife. It felt so unreal that he was supposed to live with her when all he could think of was Zhenia.

After his marriage Rustam spent even less time at home than before, ignoring Jumbul as much as possible and using all his ingenuity to figure out ways of spending time with Zhenia every day without anyone finding out. At this time he started an evening course at the university to give him a legitimate reason for being absent most evenings and on weekends.

Even after his marriage Rustam still hoped that something would happen to save him from a lifetime of living with Jumbul and allow him to marry Zhenia instead. He deliberately chose to have sex with his wife only during her safe periods so that at first she didn't get pregnant. However, he did not think of this as a long-term strategy that he could have used as an excuse to leverage a divorce and he did nothing else actively to influence the situation, but just waited to see what would happen. When nothing intervened, deciding that life would be better with children around he went ahead and made Jumbul pregnant. After this he felt as though no escape would ever be possible; it was as if he were serving a life sentence.

After Zhenia's departure Rustam concentrated his mind on the thought that he would soon be able to go to visit her in Russia but when he realised he would not be able to afford this for a long time to come he fell into despair.

Shortly afterwards one of Rustam's colleagues became interested in him. She was really sweet and attractive and he tried his best to reciprocate, but in vain. Eventually he had to tell her that there was no point; he could not have a relationship with her while Zhenia had such a strong hold on his heart. She was very disappointed and told him he was probably one of those people who loved only once in a lifetime. A few years later Rustam was ready to start looking at other women once more and had a series of affairs, none of which lasted long because each time, after a few weeks, the woman concerned made it clear that what she wanted from him was financial support, not love.

At that point Finally Rustam gave up and decided that if he did not have anyone else he would just have to try to get emotional support from his wife. So he started trying to get closer to her. He would put his arm round her when they sat together in the evenings, and even tried to hold her hand when they went out together, as he used to
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do with Zhenia. But Jumbul pulled back from every gesture, using the convenient ayb as justification for keeping all physical and emotional contact with her husband to an absolute minimum.

Finally, Rustam decided it was useless to attempt to fall in love with this woman. It just wouldn't work. He did feel some affection for her but as the mother of his children rather than for herself. Recently he asked her what he meant to her. She replied that personally he meant very little. She only wanted two things from him - money and for him to be a good father to her children. Rustam found this cool statement very painful. He feels scarcely more contact with his wife than when they first married and believes their relationship will never improve.

Jumbul would like the major part of Rustam's wages to go on her own personal expenditures. Including her own meagre wages, well over half the monthly family income is spent on buying her clothes and entertaining her colleagues. Rustam spends very little on himself. The rest of his wages goes on household needs, the children, and his parents.

Rustam could not help contrasting Jumbul's attitude with Zhenia's. From the very beginning they had shared everything, down to the last crumb. Money meant so little to her.

When the problems started with Rustam's parents and it became clear that he and Zhenia would not be able to live with his family if they married, some of Rustam's colleagues jokingly offered them a windowless storeroom as a home. Zhenia immediately said, 'I would be happy to live anywhere as long as it is with Rustam. I do not care about anything else as long as we can be together.'

After Zhenia's departure from Tajikistan Rustam was left without a real friend. He did not have one single person in whom he could confide, with whom he dared to discuss his feelings, his desperate need for Zhenia. His colleagues and acquaintances only mocked him for being so emotional and for what they saw as his stupidity in falling so crazily in love, especially with someone as unprestigious as Zhenia. So he shut himself off psychologically from the outside world and live off Zhenia's image, which he kept close to his heart.

The years passed with the only contact between them letters and the very occasional telephone call. Zhenia had no phone and the connections were very difficult. Then Rustam got his new job and started to save. He soon had enough put aside for a visit to her and wrote in great excitement to tell her so. He had it all worked out. He would tell them at home he was going on a buying trip so no one would know what he was up to. But then the shock came. Zhenia sent him a telegram, which read - 'Do not come to me'. This Rustam took to mean that she considered their relationship over and done with. He was totally and utterly devastated. He spent the entire night staring sleeplessly up at the ceiling while the place she had occupied in his heart slowly emptied out, leaving an unbearable vacuum.

Rustam could not understand how Zhenia could just finish their eleven-year-old relationship in this curt manner. He wrote to ask her what she meant by her message but he never received a reply. Rustam now wishes with all his heart he had had the strength to defy his father all those years ago and refuse to marry Jumbul.
Since Zhenia's telegram Rustam has become very depressed. For years he had refused to accept that he had lost her, kept her loss at bay, thus postponing the suffering it would otherwise cause, very much in the way Freud describes (1960 in Butler 1997b: 134). By dint of keeping himself in a half-dream state he had been able for years to go around as if Zhenia were really with him. In this way he had also refused to face up to the consequences of his own behaviour in letting her go. But now he was suddenly confronted with the reality of that loss, something that has been only slightly less unbearable for him to accept in that it is so very long since they met that Zhenia is not completely real to him any more.

Now he feels completely alone. He only manages to stand his life with Jumbul now by cutting their contact to a minimum. He leaves home early in the morning and rarely returns until late in the evening. He even spends much of his weekends and holidays in the office. It is a lot more peaceful there than at home. His colleagues leave at five o'clock and then he can be alone to daydream of his darling Zhenia. But now even his dreams have lost hope. He feels more desolate, more lost than ever before.

Rustam had been taught by his father that women's function was to serve men. He had been conditioned not to take their feelings into account. Perhaps this is the reason that it does not seem as if he ever once considered Jumbul's feelings or thought about the fact that she might also be suffering. For instance, it did not seem to have occurred to him that immediately after their wedding might not be the best time to tell her he was in love with another woman, just when she was a new bride living in a new place with totally strange people about her and when she no longer had the option of backing out.

He also still resents the fact that she rejected his attempts at bringing them emotionally closer together at the time when he wanted this, after nearly four years of virtually ignoring her feelings. He feels extremely hurt that she does not appear to have developed any feelings for him. In other words, he believes with Donish and Rashid that his wife should love him irrespective of his behaviour towards her. If she does not it is her fault, not his. Interestingly enough while Rustam holds his personal inadequacies responsible for his failure to attract other women he does not seem to think his own behaviour in any way to blame for Jumbul's inability to care for him. He believes this is because her values are all wrong, because she cares only about money and possessions not about human relationships and emotions.

The theme of alienation looms large in the stories both of Tahmina and Rustam. For Tahmina it is a double alienation since she is in a new and unwelcoming, if not downright hostile, household. She did not have any particular expectations of marriage. Having been brought up by a widowed mother and grandmother she did not have much concept of the marital relationship. She behaves towards Rashid in more or less the same way she behaves towards her brothers, often quarrelling with him, but at the same time unable to defy him openly. However, she is used to getting on well with the women in her family so the rejection by those she now has to live with has in some ways been harder to adjust to than her relationship with Rashid.

Tahmina would not call herself happy but since she decided to try to make the best of her situation she has at least found a measure of contentment. She no longer lies awake wondering whether to leave Rashid but rather about how to solve their financial problems. The only way she can get free of her mother-in-law is if she and Rashid can afford to move
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into their own home. As Rashid is the oldest son they should be able to live separately when his brother marries but they have no way of procuring the money for this.

Rustam does not have to suffer the double alienation of living with his in-laws but it is perhaps no less difficult for him to put up with the hostility of his own parents. This is very confusing for him. On the one hand he loves his parents, wants to please them, and dreads it when they say nasty things to him. On the other hand he constantly risks arousing their ire if they find out about the continuation of his relationship with Zhenia. He is even scared for them to discover they write to one another.

While Rustam is indifferent to the personal charms of his bride, Rashid, with no prior emotional commitment, finds himself attracted to Tahminia at first sight, but a great deal more than mere physical attributes are necessary for Tahminia to develop positive feelings towards him. It is how he will treat her that counts. Had the two of them been able to work out their sexual problems things would no doubt have been very different. As it is, Tahminia, knowing that while some women are happy in their marriages many others suffer a great deal at the hands of violent and unpleasant husbands, prefers to count her blessings rather than to long for a happiness she has no hope of ever attaining.

At the age of twenty-two she feels her life is already set in the pattern it will follow until she is old and she does not see the point of being unhappy all that time. She has rebuilt her relationship with her mother since Jahongul's marriage turned out so badly, especially since Nahdiya had a stroke in 1998 and almost died.

Robiya

Twenty-nine-year-old Robiya is from a village in Kofernihon. When she was in high school she fell in love with a student from the Pedagogical Institute in Dushanbe who had come to the village to do his teaching practice. They often used to chat in the street together. They never did anything more than that, never touched. But one day her mother took a stone and hit Robiya with it in the face, almost getting her in the eye, to punish her for talking to him. She said: 'you can talk in the house but not in the street for the neighbours to see'. But Robiya did not want to invite the student in. They still saw each other, but in secret. At the end of the term the student left for Dushanbe and never contacted her again. Robiya didn't know where he lived so all she could do was to wait for him to get in touch.

Meanwhile, she finished high school and wanted to go to Dushanbe to study. But her mother would not allow this. Robiya wanted to be a poet. Although her mother refused to allow her to study Robiya worked on her poetry by herself in her spare time, putting all her feelings for her friend into this. Several years went by. One day a lad from her village who had also studied at the Pedagogical Institute told Robiya her friend had finished his studies and gone home and that it was pointless her waiting for him any longer. She was upset but it had been a long time since she had seen him and her feelings for him were no longer very strong.

When Robiya was 22 her mother decided to marry her off and found her a husband from the central township of Kofernihon. They were married in April 1988. Although they had not known each other before the wedding they liked each other immediately and quickly fell very much in love. They were extremely happy together, except for the
fact that she didn't seem to be able to conceive, but she went for treatment and had just succeeded in becoming pregnant when the civil war started.

Because Robiya's husband had talked with Afghans and men from other Muslim countries he was suspected of favouring the Opposition. One night a group of masked men came and asked him for money. He gave them everything he had. After this Robiya begged him to leave the house. She wanted them to go to her mother in the village, or anywhere else, just as long as they went away somewhere where he could not be found. But her husband refused to budge. A few nights later the men came back. As soon as Robiya opened the door they put a gun to her head and demanded her husband. When he came out they ordered him to accompany them. Her husband turned to Robiya and told her not to be afraid. Then he went off with the men. She never saw or heard from him again. That was two and a half years ago\(^2\). His family searched far and wide but found no trace of him. They looked in Afghanistan, Pakistan and all over Tajikistan. They even showed his photo on television, but to no avail. They have now given up all hope of his still being alive.

Robiya refuses to believe this. She has decided to wait for her husband as long as it takes, if necessary for the rest of her life. Meanwhile, a few months after his disappearance she gave birth to his son, so at least she has something of him left. After they decided her husband was dead her parents-in-law asked Robiya to leave their house. Her son is now living with her mother in their village while Robiya is working in Dushanbe. Her mother has been trying to get her to marry again but she refuses. In Dushanbe there are several men after her but she will not pay attention to anyone.

Robiya is one of the success stories of the arranged marriage. Perhaps she and her husband were especially compatible or perhaps it was that she had already been in love once, or both, that made her emotionally open to her husband. In this she was unlike Tahmina who had never allowed herself to become emotionally involved with anyone before her marriage.

Violence against Women  

Battery

Ruzikhol, whom I briefly introduced in chapter 6, got to know Hafizullo when they were both students, and they married upon graduation. While he started work she went on to study for her master's degree. Three months later, shortly after Ruzikhol became pregnant the beatings began. They were always most severe when Ruzikhol studied too hard, stayed out late with her girlfriends, or showed herself to be particularly independent of him.

Hafizullo put Ruzikhol in the hospital for the first time when she was nearly six months pregnant. At the time she thought of leaving him but what would she do on her own with a child? He had been so good to her when they were courting. He had brought her flowers, paid her compliments, told her she was wonderful and he loved her very much. She had believed him. However, immediately after the wedding he had

\(^2\) The interviews with Robiya took place in early 1995.
started to change. All the warm feelings appeared to vanish. Moreover, he hated her studying in the evenings and deeply resented not being the centre of her attention all the time she was home.

Hafizullo's brother had married the previous year. He had also started to beat his wife but she had immediately reacted by leaving him and going home to her parents. Her father had come over and had told her husband that if he laid a finger on his daughter in violence again he would beat him up and see that his daughter was divorced from him. This stopped him and he has never hurt her since.

Ruzikhol has neither father nor brothers to protect her. She also made the mistake of not taking a stand immediately the beating started. She says she understood this too late and has since deeply regretted this but the violence has now become integrated into their relationship.

Things became worse when Hafizullo took to drink. Often he would start drinking on the way home from work. It got so bad that Ruzikhol would anxiously wait every day for him to come home to see what sort of mood he was in. If she saw he had been drinking and was in a bad mood she would grab her children by the hand and rush them into the street, where they would wait until his bedtime before daring to return home.

When she could not stand it any more Ruzikhol would go home to her mother. However, every time her family would tell her she must have done something wrong for her husband to beat her. They would always succeed in persuading her to go back to him, even once when she had been battered almost to death and could barely move for several months. But Ruzikhol's family have never seen the other side of Hafizullo. In public he behaves so well, saying nice things about Ruzikhol all the time. In fact he is only able to assert himself when he has been drinking and he never shows himself to others when he is like this. If they have guests he just says he is tired, and goes to lie down. The rest of the time he is very meek and mild. This makes it very difficult for Ruzikhol's family to understand what happens when he drinks and attacks her.

Zora and Fayziddin (cf. chapter 1) married just after Fayziddin finished his master's degree and while Zora was studying for her bachelor's degree. Even though Zora is less highly educated than her husband it has mostly been she who has supported the family financially. Fayziddin, although a professor at the university, has never earned very much.

When they married Zora was very much in love with Fayziddin, but all the same she refused to allow him to dominate her. She could not stop loving him, although he started beating her on the second day after their wedding. This was sparked off by her defying his order to abandon her studies. Zora continued to defy Fayziddin throughout their marriage and he continued to beat her every time she did so.

For over twenty years the violence continued. A couple of years ago he battered her so badly she spent forty days recovering in hospital. By that time their relationship had become so bad Fayziddin was almost never at home. After this beating he left altogether and they are now divorced.
Fayziddin's violence affected all family relations. When he was not actually battering Zora they would be screaming at each other and the children. The children were miserable, but none of them seemed to know any other way to relate. Because Zora was so dominant in their relationship and took all family responsibilities on herself Fayziddin never bothered to support his family financially nor to take much part in raising his children. He left most things to Zora. When they broke up Fayziddin married a woman from his home village younger than his daughter and they now have a child together. For the first time in his life Fayziddin has people dependent on him. He does his best to support his new family and in the more than two years they have been together has not yet started to beat his wife.

It is clear that Jahongul and Sadbarg were not being unreasonable when they feared throwing away their parents’ support in favour of risking marriage for love. This is certainly no guarantee of a good relationship. But men don’t just suddenly decide to beat up their wives without any cause. What is it that made both Zora’s and Ruzikhol’s husbands start battering them? Is it merely the fact that their wives have usurped their masculine roles as breadwinners that makes these two men feel so inadequate they can redeem their manhood only through violence? I am convinced that to a great extent this and other forms of male violence are related to the pressures of maintaining appropriate masculine gender performance.

The wives of these men have much the higher earning power. Hafizullo’s educational level and his professional standing are significantly lower than Ruzikhol’s. Although Fayziddin is a professor Zora is a very outspoken and determined woman who clearly considers herself culturally above her husband and she has always managed to find well-paying work, or else has taken two or three jobs at a time in order to maintain the family.

There may also be another reason for these men to feel the need for a physical demonstration of their capacity for exerting strict control over their wives. According to Tajik discourse a woman who looks at a man before marriage is unlikely to remain faithful afterwards. Good girls are like Jahongul and Tahmina; they remain aloof from boys altogether and wait for their parents to find them a husband. Only those girls interested in sex will look for a partner themselves and such women need to be very strictly controlled after marriage to keep them on the straight and narrow. In some circles a young man who marries his girlfriend is considered crazy because of this and his friends may jeer at him for it, as Rustam’s did when he wanted to marry Zhenia.

Hafizullo and Fayziddin, therefore, may have a double reason for fearing to be shamed through their relationships with their wives. In the first place, they have not fulfilled their masculine role of breadwinner and in the second, in marrying for love they have taken wives who, according to Tajik discourse, are more likely to be unfaithful than wives in arranged marriages. Hence they may have a double need to re-establish their masculine image through violence.

The Aftermath of War

Khidoyat and her husband have six children. Since their house was burned down in the civil war they have only been able to roof over one room, where they all live and sleep. Khidoyat's husband has recently taken a second wife and sleeps with her in the
same room as Khidoyat and her children. They openly have sex right in front of them all. Khidoyat says she can hardly bear it but she has no other option. She has nowhere else to go and no-one else to support her.

Since the war Jamaya's husband is no longer satisfied with having sex only with her. He has taken to bringing home prostitutes and having sex with them in the bedroom while Jamaya and her children are next door in the living room. Jamaya doesn't know what to do. She cannot afford to leave her husband and has no parents to take her in but she finds her husband's behaviour disgusting.

Twenty-eight year-old Shamigul lives in Sayot. She has been married 10 years and has four children. Since her husband returned from his last trip to Russia she has been in considerable pain. Each time they have sex it is as if some sort of substance on his penis burns her sexual organs. After her lesson on the subject from the health project she realises her husband must have contracted a sexually transmitted disease. However, he will not listen to her, when she suggests he go for treatment. Although she protests at having sex with him in this state, he insists. If she tries to resist he hits her. But this is nothing new. For as long as she can remember Shamigul's sex life has consisted of her husband trying to force her to have sex, her resisting and him beating her into acquiescence. He never, ever even asks her first, simply jumping her whenever he feels horny. Once when she had scabies he cut a hole in her exor so he could have sex with her through them, saying that only her 'hole' was necessary to him.

A few days ago she was shocked out of a deep sleep by her husband throwing himself on top of her. He had already pulled her exor down and was trying to penetrate her anally because she was in the middle of her period. When Shamigul tried to fight him off he hit her really hard and then penetrated her vaginally. Since then her period has turned into a haemorrhage which will not stop, despite treatment from the midwife. Shamigul says her husband's behaviour is getting worse and worse. She is desperate and doesn't know what to do. Her parents, just like the parents of all the other girls in the village, gave her no say in choice of husband, and now they are dead and she has nowhere and nobody to turn to.

This is violence of a different kind from that of Hafizullo and Fayziddin. These men take to the utmost limits the permission that Tajik discourse gives to them to exert their authority over their wives, to the point where their very humanity appears to have vanished. Shamigul's husband does not even bother to use language, that marker of the boundary between humans and animals, to communicate with her, but just physically grabs her.

This type of behaviour may well be a response to nearly a decade of violence, starting with the Dushanbe riots of 1990, and particularly to the short-lived but extremely brutal civil war, in which Tajiks inflicted on one another very much the same sort of horrors that the Yugoslavs have done in their various conflicts, only on a much smaller scale.

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3 The stories of Khidoyat and Jamaya were told me by Mohinisso Shonazarova.
4 In fact, she was later diagnosed as having contracted gonorrhoea.
5 This story was told me by Gulnora Suvankulova, Shamigul's teacher in the health project.
The most horrific violence against women was perpetrated during the war: raping with bottles and other objects, some of them large and/or sharp enough to cause very serious physical damage indeed; shooting in the pelvis or the abdominal area, burning them alive; taking them captive and subjecting them to humiliation and violence over long periods. All these horrors have left an indelible mark on the young men who perpetrated, witnessed or even heard of them.

Men cannot afford to feel the softer emotions during wartime. Therefore, an all-too-frequent result of the war has been for young men especially to bury their feelings as deep as they can. A girl in Khojamaston reported observing a group of boys stoning a cat to death. When one of them protested that this was a horrible thing to do, the ringleader apparently replied - If you cannot bring yourself to kill a cat, how will you manage to kill human beings? We must practise first\(^6\).

Such suppression of feeling often carries over into their personal relationships, no doubt frequently aided by a liberal consumption of alcohol and/or the usage of drugs, particularly heroin, both of which have enormously increased since the war. Vodka and cigarettes are sold on every street corner. Moreover, Tajikistan is on the main drugs route between Afghanistan, now, according to CNN the producer of seventy-five percent of the world's opium, and Europe. Thus, heroin is easily available and relatively cheap.

Violence against women is further encouraged by the flood of sadistic pornography now invading Tajikistan. When this is the main source of young men's information about sex, it is perhaps not surprising if they come to associate violence with it and, by extension, with male/female relationships in general. Unfortunately, such behaviour, like that of the men in these three last stories, appears to have become only too frequent, judging by the preliminary findings of a recent survey on violence against women carried out in spring 1999 by the local NGO Open Asia under the auspices of WHO (WHO 2000). Without either counselling or any other attempt to heal the psychological wounds of the civil war the rates of violence against women are unlikely to decline in the near future.

*Marriage for Love*

**Tillo**

Chahonbek started to pay court to Tillo at the end of 1994 when he was 30 years old and she was nearly 35 and with five children from her first two husbands from whom she was divorced. Chahonbek was still married to his first wife who felt furious and humiliated at the idea of her husband taking a second wife living only a few houses away. At the beginning of 1995 Chahonbek decided he wanted to marry Tillo. It took a long time for him to get her to agree but eventually she did so. Tillo told me that she agreed to marry him because she had fallen in love with him. However, she told her neighbours that she had married him so that he would provide well for her and her children, even though she had been doing pretty well from her own business at the time.

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\(^6\) This story was told to Barno Toshboltaeva in one of her classes in the health project.

\(^7\) According to personal comments from the surveys' fieldworkers. The results of the survey have not yet been made public at the time of writing this, in late 1999.
Soon after the wedding one of Chahonbek's friends told him Tillo looked like Maria in the Mexican soap opera so popular in Tajikistan at the time and recommended him not to let her go out to work because she was much too good looking. Chahonbek came home and told Tillo. He said that he would never, ever allow her to work outside the house again. He threatened to take a knife or gun to her if he caught her even saying hello to a man and forbid her to leave the house or even to stand at the gate to the street. 'If I ever catch you talking to a man I will kill you and then myself,' he said.

Chahonbek became so jealous that he cut Tillo's second husband out of the family photo she had on the sideboard. He also tore down a poster she had of a popular male singer. He could not stand her even saying she admired some male singer's voice, especially if she liked his looks also.

Chahonbek says he is aware that this jealousy is a sickness but he cannot help himself. The thought of Tillo having anything, the slightest thing, to do with another man makes him ill. If a man so much as looks at her in the street when they go somewhere together he immediately says 'that's your lover saying hello to you'. He refuses to believe she didn't have a lover while she was single, even though she swears it on God's name. He says he doesn't trust any woman.

At this time Chahonbek had a good job as deputy director of a factory so there was no immediate need for Tillo to work. This did not stop her hating being forced to stay at home all the time. When Chahonbek was at work Tillo would often go to visit her immediate neighbours, although she didn't dare go any further. The rest of the time she was bored stiff. She is not interested in reading and expects her daughters to do most of the housework. She finds her main interests in chatting with her friends and in being active outside the house. When she could not do this she would generally end up sleeping the day away.

I asked Tillo whether she did not think that part of the problem of her leaving the house would be solved if she dressed in a faranja and veil as Iranian women do. Then she would be able to go out in the street without men seeing her. But Tillo replied with a resounding 'No, no way. Nothing on earth would get me to wear those horrible garments. I love it when people look at me admiringly.'

Although she chafed against the restrictions Tillo did not refuse to obey Chahonbek. She did not like staying at home, she said, but she felt she had no option but to obey, since a Tajik woman had to do what their husbands told them. She was the more inclined to do as he asked since for the first time in her life, she was very much in love. She would spend all day waiting for him to come home. She said that the two of them were so much in love that all they did the whole time was think of one another and long for the moment they would see each other again.

At the same time she was glad to share Chahonbek with his first wife because in this way she got a rest from him. When he was with her he insisted on making love all night and then wanted her to get up very early, fetch him water to wash in and make his breakfast before he went to work. She found this absolutely exhausting. It was good that he would alternate nights with his first wife. Nevertheless, Chahonbek much preferred his time with Tillo because they really loved each other. In theory, on the days he spent with his first wife he and Tillo should not
have seen each other. However, he usually dropped in to see her after work, since he missed her so much. Tillo did not know life could be this wonderful. Living without a man is boring. A woman needs a husband to make life interesting, she said.

But her marriage was not all gain. In the evenings Chahonbek returned from work around 7.00 pm and Tillo had to have his meal ready immediately and also be ready to sit with him and talk, and not allow her children to annoy him. Chahonbek smoked a great deal - three to four packets of cigarettes a day, which Tillo didn't like. He also drank alcohol and tried to get her to drink with him but she wouldn't, not even when he taunted her with the fact that his first wife drank with him. Tillo did not like the idea of drinking alcohol. She thought it was a sin. Muslims should not drink.

Everyone laughed at Tillo for accepting to become a second wife, which is considered demeaning. But Tillo did not agree. She thought it was a good solution for her. When she first married Chahonbek she thought that as a second wife she would have all the perks of being a wife without any of the problems. A second wife, according to Tillo's way of thinking, would have a nice warm emotional relationship with her husband without the need to take care of all his material needs, such as washing his clothes, and above all, without having to bear his children. As long as he had children by his first wife with whom he was still living, he would not need to have a child with his second wife. She would be able to get on with her life just as before, but with the added emotional support of a husband. However, it did not quite work out like that for her.

In the first place, Chahonbek's first wife was a lousy housekeeper so he would bring all his clothes over to Tillo's for her to wash and iron. In any case, after his marriage to Tillo his first wife had refused to do his laundry any more, saying his second wife could now do it. What with this and all the extra meals that had to be cooked for Chahonbek Tillo had a great deal of extra work, even as a second wife.

A few months after Tillo's marriage Chahonbek's first wife came over one evening just after he got back from work. She had a large knife with her. She started screaming at Chahonbek about his bad treatment of her and trying to run him through with the knife. He managed to get it away from her without any damage but became so incensed he said three taloqs and that was that. The following day he brought all his clothes and other things over to Tillo's place. Not long afterwards one of his children died and Chahonbek blamed his wife's indifference. A few days later he took his remaining children from his first wife's home to be brought up by his brother in their native village, saying he considered her a careless mother, unfit to look after his children.

The shock of all this calmed his first wife down. She now deeply regretted provoking Chahonbek to lose his temper and renounce her. She felt so bad about it that she came and told Tillo she wanted Chahonbek back, on any terms at all, even if only for one night a week. Tillo was in favour of this but he categorically refused. This made Tillo feel really bad. She never meant it to turn out that way. She did not want to hurt his first wife, to steal her husband, her fate from her. 'She is also a woman like me.' This was the first time I ever heard Tillo express any fellow feeling for the woman. Before this she had only had bad things to say about her, about how unattractive she was and what a bad housekeeper and a nag, and so on.
A few weeks after the repudiation his first wife went to Chahonbek's workplace and went down on her knees to him, begging him to remarry her on any terms he liked, just as long as he went back to her, and saying she loved him too much to let him go like that. She might not be beautiful like Tillo, but she still loved and wanted him. But Chahonbek would have nothing more to do with her.

Now that Tillo was his only wife he began putting tremendous pressure on her to become pregnant. But she absolutely loathed the idea. For years she had been grumbling about the five children she already had. If she had had any sense at all, she would say, she would have left it at two. She finds her children intensely irritating and would much prefer to be without them. She certainly didn't want a sixth.

Chahonbek took no notice of this. He said he wanted her to give him the pleasure of having a child for him. She gave her other two husbands children and if she really loved him more than them then surely she would give him one. She said she told him over and over that she doesn't want another child. But he wouldn't take no for an answer.

After he divorced his first wife Chahonbek started to press Tillo to have her IUD removed. She would agree to this, but then would always manage to put it off until the following month. In this way she managed for a long time to postpone any decision about getting pregnant. She said she would tell Chahonbek she has had the IUD removed without actually doing so, in order to stop him badgering her. Then she would pretend to be trying to get pregnant. However, Chahonbek did not fall for this ploy. He insisted on taking her with him to a doctor friend to have the IUD removed.

Finally Tillo decided perhaps after all it would be better to have another child than to suffer so much pain from the IUD and also to have Chahonbek constantly on her back.

In summer 1995 Tillo was finally persuaded to remove her IUD and she immediately became pregnant. However, this pregnancy was very difficult and she miscarried at four months. She started bleeding and rushed to the toilet, blood pouring out of her all the time. She continued haemorrhaging severely for two days. Chahonbek wanted to take her to the hospital but she said, 'why should we do that? I've just had a miscarriage, that is all, and now it is over and done with.'

But then she collapsed. So Chahonbek rushed her to the hospital. When the doctors told him she was as good as dead he pleaded with them desperately to save her. So they stopped the bleeding and gave her intravenous liquids, glucose, and so on. Eventually she returned to consciousness. Her blood pressure had been practically zero and the doctors told her had she gone another 15 minutes without treatment she would have died. The doctors wanted to give her a blood transfusion but Tillo refused, since a friend of hers who used to be a quiet relaxed type had had a transfusion and ever since has been edgy and nervy.

Chahonbek paid $300 for her stay in the hospital. After she was discharged he made sure she ate well and she soon began to feel healthy again.

The doctors told her that she should on no account get pregnant again within the following three months. While Chahonbek did not want her to, he did not take any precautions to prevent this. However, she was lucky and it did not happen. Immediately the three months were up he started badgering her again: 'just have one
child for me. What kind of a life is this without a child?' Tillo believed if she didn't have his child soon he would leave her and marry someone else. She did get pregnant again, but by the time the baby was born their relationship had become very fraught and Tillo was relieved when it was stillborn, especially because it was a girl. She believed that even had the child lived Chahonbek would not have stopped pressuring her to have another until she gave him a boy.

Soon after Chahonbek came to live full-time with Tillo he started to buy them electronic goods. First he brought home a colour television and later a video and a tape recorder. However, not long after he had bought this last the factory where he worked was forced to halt production and his paycheque was significantly reduced. Nevertheless, he continued to spend all day out of the house and to buy things as before.

Later it turned out that he had borrowed an enormous sum of money from some mafia types in order to buy heroin. He had been intending to sell this and make huge profits from it. Unfortunately, instead of doing this he had used much of the heroin himself and ended up squandering almost the entire amount of the loan.

He stopped buying any but the bare essentials, even reducing their food bill to a minimum. He began to resent having to support his step-children and to bring home just enough meat, butter, and other more expensive foodstuffs to feed himself and Tillo. The two of them would eat together in an inner room while the children remained outside. When I saw what was going on I asked Tillo how Chahonbek got on with her children and whether he treated them well. She replied that he was fine with them; that they had no problems, although it seemed clear to me that he tried to have as little as possible to do with them. He even refused to pay for Tillo's younger son to be circumcised, which caused a big scandal in the neighbourhood. The children were often hungry at this time, so hungry they would scrounge food from the neighbours, thus making their mother's neglect of them public and arousing the disdain of the neighbours even more (cf. chapter 4).

Then one day Chahonbek vanished. Tillo did not know what had happened to him. She thought he had perhaps been arrested but the following night several armed men came to her house demanding money or they would kill her and her children. She said she had no idea what they were talking about and had no money to give them. This was the first Tillo had heard of Chahonbek's loan and she was horrified. It turned out they had kidnapped Chahonbek and were now warning Tillo of the seriousness of the situation.

A couple of days later Chahonbek was released. He returned to Tillo and told her they must go away to the south and work as traders until they could amass enough money to pay his debts. His family would help them get goods for trading. She felt she had no option but to agree. So, leaving the children in charge of her second daughter, at that time 16 years old, Tillo and Chahonbek left. They were away for over six months during which time the children were left completely on their own, except for the occasional sack of flour or a few roubles that Tillo managed to send them by way of acquaintances travelling to Dushanbe. This was far from adequate to support them, however, and had it not been for the neighbours the children would have been hard pressed to survive.
Eventually Chahonbek was able to pay off most of his creditors and he and Tillo returned home. But they still had debts to his family and to her neighbours, who had kept her children going all this time. Moreover, they were having to borrow money to live on, as neither of them had a job.

At this point Tillo's elder son decided to go to Moscow to look for work. He was 15 years old. Sadbarg's (cf. chapter 6) second brother and he were best friends and planned to go together. Tillo was not happy about the idea and refused to give him any money. So he took their television set, sold it and bought himself a train ticket with the proceeds. Tillo and Chahonbek beat the boy so badly he had to remain in bed for several days afterwards. This upset him so much he swore he would have nothing further to do with his mother. He kept the ticket and as soon as he was well enough set off for Moscow.

Tillo is generally very hard on her children, routinely calling them the most appalling names. Perhaps her resentment of them derives from the lack of control over her life they symbolise for her. She openly admits finding it difficult to have any positive feelings for them at all, rather thinking of them as a cross she must bear, having been so stupid as to give birth to them in the first place. And she does not try to conceal her feelings from them, often bemoaning the fact that she did not take control over her life until after her second husband left her. Before that she had never thought she could, or should, make any decisions for herself. She had passively accepted whatever happened to her. She now bitterly and vocally regrets this.

With neither herself nor Chahonbek earning Tillo was concerned about how they were all going to live. She tried to discuss this with Chahonbek but he refused to listen. Something would turn up, he just knew it would. Tillo proposed that the two of them jointly start the same sort of trading venture she had been involved with before their marriage, travelling to Russia, the Emirates, Iran, and other places to buy goods and bringing them back to Tajikistan to sell. But Chahonbek neither wanted to go on his own nor to take her with him.

When they made no attempt to pay back their current debts their creditors started threatening them once more. Chahonbek fled Tajikistan, leaving Tillo to face them alone. She made an agreement with them that they would not harm her or her children and that she would pay off their debts in instalments. She set off for Moscow and by dint of six months hard trading managed to pay off the lot. Meanwhile, her son in Moscow had ended up in prison and Tillo had also had to find money to buy him out. When she returned to Tajikistan she found Mamlakat, her eldest daughter, in residence, after running away from her uncle's place (cf. chapter 6). Now Tillo had to support her as well and to find a husband for her.

Four and a half years after her marriage to Chahonbek Tillo's life is slowly coming back together again. However, those years have wrought considerable havoc. Her relations with her family are practically non-existent. Her health has suffered severely. Her elder son has never forgiven her and her younger children feel quite hostile towards her.

She is still not sure whether Chahonbek will ever return to her nor what will happen if he does. She would like to divorce him but she doesn't know how to do this. Only a man has the right to say taloq. Tillo very much regrets ever marrying him and says if
he will only divorce her and leave her in peace she will never marry again. She does not have much hope of this, however, as Chahonbek has no money and only a small flat of his own in Dushanbe. She knows that it will be only too easy for him to return to her house if he decides to come back. She just wishes he would stay away. She fears his return partly because she knows she still has a soft spot for him and that this would make it more difficult to throw him out definitively besides she is not sure she physically could get rid of him if he were determined to stay.

The story of Tillo’s third marriage shows the unequal balance of power between these spouses. This does not, however, mean that Tillo is merely submissive. She plays an active part in the relationship. Nevertheless, it is clear that most of the time Chahonbek does have the upper hand. When he orders her to remain within the courtyard she obeys, whether to keep the peace or because she genuinely fears his threats. However, she allows him to think she never leaves the compound, while in fact when she knows he is out of the way she does go out into the street and chat to her neighbours, thus exposing herself to the sight of men. So her obedience is not as real as Chahonbek would like. When he gets into trouble Tillo agrees to accompany him to help him get out of debt but is not passive about it. She has ideas of her own and tries to get him to carry them out. However, although she goes along with his ideas he does not do so with hers and while he can get rid of her by the simple expedient of moving out of her house it may not be so easy for her to prevent him moving back in should he decide to do so once she has made it possible for him to return by paying off his creditors. The relation is not unequal enough to force Tillo to wear a very thick mask but certainly not equal enough for her to be able to leave off a mask altogether.

It is also not clear exactly what Tillo thought she would get out of marriage with Chahonbek in the first place. The discrepancy between her telling her neighbours she married for financial reasons and saying to me that she did it for love was striking. Was she telling each of us what she thought would be the most acceptable? Or did Tillo express her real feelings to me, but find this inappropriate to say to Tajik women who would no doubt have thought her insane? As an honorary Russian I would be expected to believe in love rather than material things as a valid reason for marriage. Tillo’s subsequent confession of her love for Chahonbek would seem to suggest that the latter reason does reflect her true feelings.

However, it is entirely possible that both reasons were true and that she was merely telling each of us that part she felt most appropriate. Although Tillo had been doing well financially the economic situation was getting tougher and, as it happened, a couple of months after Tillo’s marriage, in May 1995, a new currency was introduced in Tajikistan which had until then been using the Russian rouble. The resulting economic chaos caused many small businesses to go under. The fact that in the long-term Tillo’s financial situation might well have been better were Chahonbek never to have entered her life could not have been foreseen at the time. At least, through her marriage Tillo rid herself of her brothers’ interference.

Tillo’s experience shows that marriage for love does not necessarily work out any better than an arranged marriage. However, both love matches and arranged marriages can be happy. As opposed to Tahmina’s and Jahongul’s unhappy fate, their mother Nahdiya was extremely happy in her own arranged marriage. The following two stories show that love matches can also be happy when the circumstances are right.
Karomat was very happy as a young bride living with her mother-in-law and her husband. He was quite different from her father. When Karomat was a child her father had treated his house like a hotel. He had five daughters and would expect all of them to wait on him, as well as his wife. He would come in the door and shout - 'boots!' and one daughter would rush to take off his boots, another to clean them and a third would lay the dastarkhon, while their mother would get the food ready. After he had eaten and drunk he would go and lie down, and the whole family had to go round on tiptoe in case they made any noise that disturbed him.

Khudoydod was not nearly so demanding. He was a long-distance lorry driver on the Dushanbe-Khorog run, which would take five or more days at a time. Then he would have a few days off, during which he would do a lot of work around the house although, of course, not women's work. He loved to have Karomat helping him while he fixed things. He liked her to be near him always when he was at home. He would dig the vegetable plot while she planted. However, Karomat did not have much time for this because she had her own work to do.

After World War II was over her sisters, who were still unmarried, returned to school. Karomat wanted to study also. However, Khudoydod would not let her. He said that if she did this she would be no use to him afterwards. Girls who studied were ruined. They either slept around or married 'foreigners' - Uzbeks, Tatars or even Russians. He did not want an educated wife. In the end Karomat agreed not to study even though she wanted to very much. She was always a quick learner and loved knowing things. Her sisters all went on to tertiary education and all married fellow students - Tajiks. None of them lost their reputations.

Khudoydod's one bad point was his jealousy. Karomat was not allowed to leave the house unless he or his mother accompanied her. The only place she was permitted to go on her own was to work. But there were times when Khudoydod did not even allow her to have a job at all. After her third child was stillborn her husband ordered her to stop working.

But Karomat got very bored without any children to keep her occupied, especially as Khudoydod was away so much. So after one and a half years of staying home she asked him for permission to work again. He told her the reason he had made her stay at home was that the neighbours had been mocking him for not being able to support even one wife from his own earnings and explained that was why he didn't want her to go out to work again. She said 'but the wife of this friend of yours works and the wife of that relative. Are they worse than me or am I worse than them? Why shouldn't I work?' Finally, he said, 'okay, go out to work then. I don't want you to be bored. Probably the people who said those things to me about you working are our enemies, go back to work.' And she did.

Karomat was very happy with Khudoydod. Their personal relationship was great at every level. 'There's nothing better in the world than a husband and wife together,' she said. 'They look after each other when they are sick, give each other massages, bring each other things to eat and drink, and do lots of other nice things for each other. They respect each other; the wife obeys her husband and they are happy together.'
Unfortunately Karomat and Khudoydod did not remain together for life, since she insisted on divorcing him so he could have children (cf. chapter 6). However, despite the divorce and all the years since, Karomat never stopped loving her husband. She almost always spoke of him with great affection and continued to call him 'my husband'. When he came to her father's funeral she was very excited and pleased. Had she been less proud she might never have divorced him, but she could not bear the daily reminder of her failure to provide a living child expressed by Khudoydod's relatives. She often voiced her regret at the circumstances that had made her feel compelled to divorce him and, especially after her parents died, felt lonely without him. Although she had a number of offers of marriage after her divorce she would never contemplate accepting any of them. She said she could not understand how a woman, having been to bed with one husband, could ever bring herself to have sex with another.

The one thing that Karomat liked about being divorced was being able to be her own boss. For all their good relationship Khudoydod took it for granted that Karomat should obey him and she had never been completely comfortable with that, being generally very outspoken and not liking to rein in her tongue. She prided herself on her ability to take on Soviet bureaucrats and win. So it was difficult for her to have to keep quiet in front of Khudoydod, just because he was a man.

Once again the discourse that allows men to boss their wives made things difficult for the woman. Even such a loving spouse as Khudoydod does not accept equality with his wife, despite her strength of character. But at least Karomat knew some very real and positive joy in her relationship with her husband and had some good times afterwards living with her beloved parents. Hard as it was for her to end up on her own as she did, Karomat still seemed to me to have lived far more happily than most other Tajik women. She even really enjoyed her twenty-five years working at the Textile Factory.

Gulbi

When she met Kamirjon Gulbi was thirteen and he was fifteen. Gulbi is from the town of Kurgan and Kamirjon from Sayot but he had come to live with his uncle, Gulbi's next-door neighbour, so he could attend high school in the town. The two young people immediately became fast friends.

Towards the end of that year the war started. Kurgan was in the centre of the war zone and very soon abductions, rapes and forced marriages were going on all around. Gulbi's parents were very worried about what might happen to her. They decided to protect her by marrying her off. Gulbi said she wanted to marry Kamirjon. Her parents made no objection to this and suggested the match to Kamirjon's uncle. The boy's family agreed immediately. Gulbi doesn't know why their parents assented so readily because she knows that this is rare. None of her girlfriends has been allowed to choose. Perhaps it was because of the pressures of the war. Gulbi and Kamirjon had already started talking about the possibility of getting married later on but had expected to have to wait until they had both finished high school and then to have to confront the problem of persuading their parents to agree. So they were very happy to be given the chance to marry so soon. After the wedding
they stayed on with Kamirjon's uncle in Kurgan, since his parents had been forced to flee Sayot and were living as refugees elsewhere. However, once the war was over and Kamirjon's family rebuilt their house, the young couple moved to Sayot. Kamirjon's mother is a warm-hearted, kind woman and she made Gulbi feel very welcome.

By the time she was nineteen Gulbi had two children and expected eventually to have two more, as this was what Kamirjon wanted and she was in agreement. Gulbi is very happy. She has a pleasant home and a wonderful husband. They have such good times together. They can talk about everything.

It is noteworthy that thirteen-year-old Gulbi was given the opportunity to voice her ideas on her marriage while seventeen-year-old Tahmina was given none. Could this be because Nahdiya strongly suspected her daughter's only response would have been to refuse even to contemplate marriage at that time? Gulbi, having someone she really cared about, was in a very different position.

It is good occasionally to see something positive coming out of war, which gave both Gulbi and Karomat the chance to choose their own husbands, and in both cases ones who made them very happy.

Karomat and Gulbi, together with Oisoat (see below) and Robiya, had as happy marriages as any women I met in Tajikistan. Their stories demonstrate that love is possible in either arranged or love marriages, providing the circumstances are propitious and the partners willing. One thing that all these women had in common was that they had stepped outside the convention that refuses girls permission to have pre-marital emotional contact with someone of the opposite sex. Karomat, Gulbi, and Oisoat had married for love. Although Robiya had not done so she had had a boyfriend even if this relationship had not worked out. This experience had awakened her emotionally so that, like the other three, she was emotionally ready for marriage. Unlike Bonu, whose story is told below, Robiya's relationship had been terminated by her friend, not her parents, and this had happened some years before her marriage, which no doubt largely accounts for the fact that she had been able to get over him and was thus ready to give her heart to her husband. It was not only the women who were unconventional here. The husbands of the first three women were also unusual in that they put their feelings for their future wives above any possible negative outcome of marriage for love. Perhaps they could afford to do this because they felt very secure in their masculinity?

Gender Relations in Marriage

In front of others Tajik women have to be careful to keep their gender masks in place, so that their behaviour does not bring down shame on their husbands. The important thing for many men is not so much that their wives actually submit to them as for them to show submission in front of others. This no doubt accounts for much of Umed's reluctance to admit that his wife is not submissive to him but actually bosses him around (cf. chapter 6).

Javhar and her husband are preparing for a visit from friends. He gives her a lecture on how to behave to them. 'You will keep your mouth shut as much as possible. You will not gossip, nor venture an opinion of your own. You will not contradict them. I
don't want my friends thinking I can't control my own wife.' Javhar deeply resents this but all the same his admonitions are sufficient to make her behave in a more retiring fashion than she might otherwise have done.

Javhar's husband cares a good deal about his image so that it is of great importance to him that his wife keep to her place in front of guests. He would prefer that she were always more submissive but he does not appear to object too much as long as her opinions remain within the family and nobody else suspects how much her behaviour challenges his authority. No doubt Zora's and Ruzikhol's relationships with their husbands would have been easier and more pleasant had they not presented a constant public reminder of their lack of submission.

Women like Jamaya, Khidoya and Shamigul have to be very careful in their behaviour with their husbands, not just in public, but at all times. They never stop being afraid either of violence or of being thrown out of their homes and becoming destitute.

In a group discussion in Sayot all twenty women present, aged between 30 and 50, said fear was a major element in their feelings about their husbands although they could not point to any specific mistreatment that might account for this. Their fear seemed to stem from never quite knowing what mood their husbands might come home in, nor what they would do if they were in a bad mood, so that they constantly had to be wary round them. They often found their husbands' demands arbitrary, impossible to understand or anticipate. However, it is also possible that they claimed to be afraid of their husbands because as is often the case in Tajikistan they had been taught that the qor 'an demands this. The women acknowledged that if they committed a 'sin' their husbands had a right to punish them. All of them had been beaten by their husbands at one time or other, although no-one admitted to being a battered wife. The 'sins' their husbands would punish them for included not having meals or other domestic tasks completed when their husbands wanted or refusing to have sex.

The women in the discussion group acknowledged the fact that such sins seemed very minor compared with the ones their husbands committed, such as unfaithfulness, drunkenness, spending the household money on their own pleasures while the family went hungry, not telling their wives when they were going away or where to, and sometimes staying away for very long periods of months or occasionally even years at a time without giving any sign of life. However, the women laughed at the idea that they might be able to punish their husbands. They said they were certainly physically incapable of hitting them. Only Russian women were strong enough to do this. Tajik wives just had to endure.

These women are frightened enough of their husbands to try to perform as near as possible the role of the ideally submissive wife in their presence. Some of them hardly dare open their mouths in front of their husbands. While such submission is what these men appear to be demanding, at the same time it makes their wives very dull company for them, which is one of the reasons they spend so little time at home.

Many of these men now migrate to Russia where they have taken second wives. Some of the differences in their relationships with their two wives are illustrated by the story of Eshmurol (cf. chapter 6). On their return to Tajikistan it is not uncommon for such men to complaint to their wives there that they find their company tedious, that they have little of interest to say for themselves and that they are boringly ignorant of the world. They have a much better time with their Russian wives, they say.
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The Tajik wives understandably find this very upsetting and feel slighted by being told they are inferior to Russian women. They feel it is hardly their fault. If they are rarely allowed out of the village, how are they supposed to learn anything interesting? They do not even know enough Russian to understand the television news broadcasts from Moscow, let alone have sufficient knowledge of the world to be able to grasp what they are about, and Tajik-language news largely concentrates on the exploits of the president, to the exclusion of most other stories.

While their husbands express irritation at their wives they are still not prepared to allow either them or their daughters greater mobility or exposure to the outside world. Despite their grumbling, the last thing they actually seem to want is for their Tajik wives to become Russified. Eshmurod makes his attitude clear in his insistence on changing his own gender performance on his return to Tajikistan. There is no way he is going to allow his wife to change hers instead. It is impossible to know how much this is due to social pressures that would call his masculinity into question if his wife does not conform and how much to Eshmurod’s wish to continue his relatively comfortable position in relation to his Tajik wife. It is likely that both are important factors. They certainly weigh heavily against any perceived benefits that these men might gain from their wives making changes in their gender performance.

Sexual Relations

The marriage bed is the place where gender performance is at its most critical, where the whole façade of a person’s performance will be shown to have a sound basis or revealed to have feet of clay. The infertile, the most masculine seeming man who cannot get an erection, the most submissive woman who cannot prove her virginity at the appropriate time, are shown up as failures.

The successful start of marriage is dependent on the woman demonstrating her femininity through bestowing her virginity on her husband, a symbol of her willingness to belong submissively to him only. The man must prove his masculinity by a demonstration of his virility, a symbol of his qualities of control. Together they establish their parents’ success in producing children capable of the correct gender performances, thus preserving family honour.

Most married couples know each other very little, if at all, before their wedding night and any emotional relationship will have to be built up after this. Moreover, almost the only time when most couples will be alone together will be at night in the bedroom. It is partly for this reason that the quality of the sexual relationship becomes so very important, as it is practically the only real contact they will have, unless or until they get a separate place of their own.

This is one of the moments, however, when the rigidity of Tajik gender norms and the puritanical nature of the Soviet state combine to make it extremely difficult to develop mutual sexual enjoyment. The latter is responsible for an almost total lack of knowledge about sexual matters on the part of both sexes, while the former makes it practically impossible for most young people to have a chance of mutual exploration of each other’s bodies before getting to the point where they have to have intercourse on the first night of marriage. The result tends to be inevitably that few men are either knowledgeable or sensitive enough to care about their
bride's feelings so that sexual contact is painful and anything but arousing for her. Moreover, young women also have no opportunity to learn anything about their own sexuality prior to being deflowered. In other words, instead of being the source of mutual pleasure, the sexual relationship tends to become abusive, if not (virtual) rape. For women sex is made even more problematic because up until the moment of marriage this has usually been a mere vaguely understood and frightening shadow on the future, something that may even at times have traumatised their childhood.

Virginity and Innocence

Javhar knew that after marriage one slept with one's husband and that a woman was allowed to sleep with no other man. She knew this was connected with loss of virginity and pregnancy. However, she had no idea what actually happened. She thought that the couple simply went to sleep side by side. One day when she was sixteen Javhar's class went on a school outing. Javhar was the last of the girls on the bus and found herself seated next to a boy. She felt very awkward. She did her best not to touch him, even with her clothes. But gradually she felt herself getting tired. To her great mortification she fell asleep. When she woke up and realised she had been sleeping next to a boy she felt terrible. Perhaps she was no longer a virgin? Maybe she was even pregnant? Gradually she realised that nothing actually appeared to have changed but she worried about this event for some time afterwards. It was not until she had been a student for several years that a recently married friend enlightened her on what happens when married couples 'sleep' together.

There is such a strong taboo on speaking about sex in Tajikistan, that many girls are not aware of its very existence. They only know that their mothers constantly warn them that any contact with boys and men is dangerous and might cost them their virginity. However, as the girls do not understand what this actually is, they are confused as to what exactly they are supposed to be avoiding. Javhar's shock at finding she has 'slept' with a boy, which she knows is absolutely prohibited is typical not just of Tajikistan but of other places with the same sort of taboos (cf. Al-Khayyat 1990: Naamane-Guessous 1991). Such lack of knowledge can occasion great trauma, since as a result girls feel as if they are living in a minefield where they do not even know what the mines might look like. They can only keep as far as possible from all the places, where they have been told danger might lurk.

After she had seen an advertisement for a hot line for women in need, Ilimo contacted the organisation concerned and asked for help. She told them she believed she had been interfered with in childhood and had somehow lost her virginity. After this she said she had not dared to make friends with other girls, for fear they would find out she was different from them. Ilimo was now a student and too scared to accept any offers of marriage in case she were found not to be a virgin. She could not give a coherent account of what had happened to her but said a group of boys had molested

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8 In Tajik the phrase 'to sleep with' carries the same secondary meaning of 'to have sex with' as in English.
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her while she was walking near her home in the country. She did not recall what specifically they had done to her, nor did she know what the loss of virginity might entail. Examination by a sympathetic gynaecologist reassured Ilimo that her hymen was intact, and she burst into floods of tears, saying that her entire adolescence had been dominated by her fears, which she had never before dared to tell anyone about and she felt she had been given a whole new lease on life knowing that it had all been imaginary.

It is likely that the boys did not even touch Ilimo on the genitals but, without any idea exactly what she should be shunning, she feared the worst. It was only because she was told that the women’s organisation treated all information as confidential that she had plucked up the courage to go to them. The last thing she could have done was to let anyone in her family know, because that could have brought shame down on them all. A daughter’s losing her virginity is about the worst thing that could happen to a family, irrespective of whether or not it was lost by actually having sex.

One day when we were in Sayot a little girl of five years old fell into the aryk and bled a little from somewhere between her legs. Her mother immediately started to worry that her daughter might no longer be a virgin.

Had this girl actually ruptured her hymen then she would have lost her ‘proof’ of chastity and neither she nor her family could ever have demonstrated it. This would have made it very difficult to marry her off with honour. In fact, it is possible in Tajikistan to have an operation to restore the hymen. Apparently this was big business in Soviet times, when high-level officials would pay enormous sums for their girlfriends to have this operation carried out so that they would be eligible for marriage after their affair was over. However, even if the parents of the little Sayot girl knew of the existence of such an operation it would be prohibitively expensive for them.

A study carried out in the UK among four-to-five year old children from Muslim and Western backgrounds showed that the former were far less well informed about the location and function of the sex organs, with girls being much less knowledgeable than boys (Kreitler & Kreitler 1974).

In fact in most Muslim societies there are strict prohibitions on girls touching their bodies. In Morocco mothers are so afraid their daughters might rupture their hymens that they tell them never to touch their genitals and above all not to wash themselves there. Many girls hardly dare touch anything between their legs. They think the hymen is on the external genitalia and are terrified of damaging it (Naamane-Guessous 1988: 188-9). Tajik children know if anything less than these other Muslim children. They are also given little chance to explore their own bodies, and girls seen touching themselves on the genitals are immediately punished. Although Tajik girls are not given the sort of detailed information regarding their genititals that Moroccan girls seem to get they too are taught to fear anything that might rupture the hymen. With the exception of some of the mountain peoples Tajiks value virginity at marriage as much as other Muslims do.

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9 This story was told me by a member of the women’s organisation concerned.
It is partly for this reason that they want to keep their daughters ignorant of anything to do with sex, fearing that knowledge will encourage experimentation. The problem is that today, as their parents struggle to keep the family afloat, urban girls have more freedom than ever before but with no increase in knowledge to go with it. This is a true recipe for disaster as shown by the increase in the abortion rate among urban teenagers. They may get information from older siblings or friends (cf. Monogarova 1982: I, 88) but this is rarely thorough or well informed, partly because of mutual embarrassment but largely due to ignorance.

Even if they wished to do so most Tajik parents would be hard-pressed to tell their children much about sex. They would not know what to say to them. There was so little information available in the former Soviet Union that even in Moscow and Leningrad few even of the most highly educated understood much about it. The following examples give a picture of the levels of ignorance. The first is an excerpt from a letter sent to the Leningrad family-advice bureau somewhere around 1970:

_We've been married a couple of months... we've come to you for advice. Would you please tell us exactly when and how one gets pregnant? We need to know because we have absolutely no idea (we just didn't need to know before) 'what' and 'how' (Golod 1993: 140)._ 

The second is from a study carried out during _perestroika:_

_A 24-year-old female editor in Moscow claims: 'on the first night of marriage I did not suspect that I could get pregnant as a result of sex' (Geiges & Suvorova 1989: 33)._ 

A survey carried out in the Soviet Union in early 1991 showed that only 10% of boys and 15% of girls had received any information at all about sex from their parents, while there were no sex-education courses in the schools and little, if any, access to literature on the subject (Kon 1995: 92, 117). When the health project started giving sex-education lessons to the teenagers, only the most religiously fanatical parents were against this and _they_ were not much in favour of their children receiving _any_ form of secular education. The other parents seemed on the whole relieved that someone else had taken on the task of providing their children with coherent information.

_The First Night of Marriage_

_Sitora was born in Dushanbe in 1930. When she was seventeen she went to work in the silk factory, where she met Haydar, a fellow worker. They liked each other very much and he was able to gain the permission of both sets of parents to marry her. Sitora said that in her day a girl would know nothing about sex until the moment she was about to be bedded. A wedding would last three days but not until the last night would they be permitted to have sex. Just before they laid her down in the bed they would give the bride a cloth and tell her that her husband would penetrate her, and_ 

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10 A school course on family life, set up in the 1980's, dealt largely with moral issues, virtually ignoring sex. In one school when a young teacher tried to give sex education to the girls in her class she was summarily dismissed (Geiger & Soverova 1989: 39).
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she would bleed. They would be afraid to tell the girl earlier for fear she would run away.

Before her marriage Sitora had not known anything about sex. She thought that all husbands and wives did together was to kiss and hug, like in the films. She thought this was how babies were made. She had felt no desire at all. Tajiks don't discuss such things and she didn't know anything about it. She had not even known about the existence of genitals or the hymen. All she knew was that blood flowed from somewhere between her legs every month. She didn't even know where babies came out when a woman gave birth. The first time she went into labour the pain was so bad she kept crossing her legs instead of opening them.

On the third night of her wedding Sitora was put to bed with her husband. He stroked her a little and then started to take off her exor. Sitora was very upset and asked what he was doing. He explained they had to do this thing because everyone expected it of them and if they didn't do it they would all say he was a babka and he would be shamed. Then they had sex and although he tried to be gentle with her, she was bruised and hurt and in pain and all the next day she kept feeling his sperm dripping out of her. By tradition she was supposed to get up the next morning and make the dough and do other household tasks, but she could barely move.

It is not that Sitora's husband intentionally raped her, after all he loved her, but what else can such sex be but factual rape, since the woman has in no way been aroused. Even when the man is gentle, as Haydar was. The ignorance that the total ban on all public discussion of sex in Soviet times has produced has made it very difficult for men to know what else to do.

When I exclaimed in horror at the pain Sitora experienced on that first night, she asked me 'well, what was it like for you then?' It was so hard for me to know what to answer. How could I tell her that I already knew what sexual arousal, and indeed satisfaction, were long before the first time I had actual intercourse and that, in any case, I and my partner were not in a position of being forced to perform but were there because we both wanted to be? I solved the problem by telling her that both I and my husband had known about sex before marriage and that this had made it much easier for us.

When Tahmina and Rashid first met on their wedding day he was immediately attracted to her. However, she disliked him on sight, mainly, she claims, because he was not tall enough. On the third day one of her sisters-in-law said something about sex. Tahmina asked, 'what's that?' Her sister-in-law said, 'don't you know? Your husband Sleeps with you and then you bleed a lot'.

Tahmina had never heard anything about this before. Until her marriage she had thought babies were just given by God - 'After all, we Tajiks always say we will have as many children as God gives'. She thought the wife and husband lay side by side in bed and the wife got pregnant through her menstruation. She thought that that was what was meant by bleeding at marriage time. She did know that she had to be careful not to jump too much or do anything that would make her a woman and not a girl, but she had not known why. She had had no idea of the existence of sex.

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11 These were the extremely chaste and totally asexual workers' romances of the Stalin period.

12 In Central Asia a girl is a virgin and a woman is not.
Her sister-in-law’s mention of sex told Tahmina very little. It was just enough to get her frightened. For a whole week she managed to go to bed so late that Rashid was already asleep. Then finally she was persuaded to go to bed at the same time as him and agree to having sex. Rashid was quite gentle and used persuasion rather than force. It took him 3-4 hours to be able to get an erection. Then the sex hurt her so much it was awful. Her head hurt and she had a bad pain between her legs as well. Afterwards her stomach and back hurt also. The next day she could hardly move, she felt so bad. Nevertheless, Tahmina thinks she was lucky. She has heard from other women that some husbands just remove their wife’s ezor, by force if necessary, and rape her.

These two stories were typical. Almost all the women I talked to had experienced considerable pain on their wedding nights and not one of them had enjoyed themselves or experienced any sexual arousal.

It was the third night after her wedding. Sanobar went into the room where she was supposed to sleep with her husband for the first time. He was lying there naked with his penis sticking up. It was the first time she had seen a naked man. He told her to take her clothes off and join him. She was so shocked she could not move. Every time he tried to touch her she went crazy. She was in such a bad way that eventually she had to be sent home to her mother. After a doctor’s examination proved she was still a virgin Sanobar was married a second time but did not let this man near her either. Her mother came to consult our midwife as to whether she should try to marry Sanobar off a third time13.

Although this level of traumatisation seems to be rare Sanobar’s was not the only case I heard of where a girl had been returned to her parents for refusing to let her husband come near her. Although some men, as Tahmina suggested, do rape their brides outright I never heard of any case in Tajikistan of a girl being held down by her relatives to allow her husband to force her, as apparently not infrequently occurs in Iran (Heise 1997: 415).

But it is not just girls who are ignorant and afraid on their wedding nights. These can be very hard on men too, especially for the totally inexperienced. Such difficulty in getting an erection as Rashid had is not uncommon.

The boys in Sayot knew very little about girls, sex, and how they should behave on their wedding night. Some boys knew about menstruation and that girls could only have babies after they have started this. However, quite a few boys thought that menstruation was brought on by sexual arousal. They thought it was the equivalent of an erection and assumed that girls had the same feelings during menstruation that they experienced when they wanted to masturbate. Perhaps, like the girls, these boys confused bleeding due to rupture of the hymen with menstruation. They thought that when the time came to have sex with their bride they would both be equally aroused just from anticipation. Others thought that only men enjoyed sex. Girls had no sexual feelings at all. They just did it for their husbands’ sakes and to have babies. Several boys thought that girls would be very frightened the first time they had sex.

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13 This story was told me by Bahri Abdulloeva.
and that a husband should try to make his bride want to be with him and be gentle and tender with her. Another said that some older men had recommended him to give his bride a big fright on their wedding night so that she would fear him for the rest of their lives.

It was clear that the Sayot boys knew very little about what they should do on the first night. Those who have spent time in Russia or have had Russian girlfriends are the only ones who have any idea at all. Urban young men may have had some physical contact with girls. In the village young men may not have even spoken to a girl other than their sisters, since they were small. All they know is that they have to have sex or their friends will mock at them. Few of these village boys have as yet been exposed to pornography so they do not even have the incomplete and misleading information this can provide.

Such ignorance as well as the deliberate attempts to frighten them in bed at the start of their relationships may well have something to do with the undirected fear that the Sayot women claimed to feel for their husbands. They may not have felt able to articulate the fact that it was in bed that their husbands hurt them the most, whether intentionally or not. Certainly most of them claimed to dislike sex.

Negmatullo is from Khojamaston region. He was very young when he was married and had no idea at all what he was supposed to do on the first night. No one in his family or circle of friends had told him anything and he was too embarrassed to ask. When the time came he therefore did nothing at all. His bride could not help him because she did not know either. Their families did not check if all was well, so that Negmatullo did not have to explain anything.

The days went by, and then weeks and even months and Negmatullo still had not consummated his marriage nor learned what he was supposed to do. He became more and more morose and started drinking. Finally one day, several months after the wedding, he plucked up his courage and asked one of his former schoolteachers for help. His teacher told him what to do and, enormously relieved, Negmatullo went home and tried it out. Now, a couple of years later, they have a child.

As Negmatullo's story shows, for all the importance of virginity on the wedding night, in Tajikistan defloration is not surrounded by the sort of elaborate rituals common to many other countries where similar emphasis is placed on it. Compared with the Iranian practice cited above or that of manual defloration still performed on occasion in Egypt (El Dawla, Hadi & Wahab 1998: 87) the first night of marriage in Tajikistan is mild and private. Nevertheless, there are still considerable pressures involved, which make it very traumatic, even for sexually experienced men, especially if they are expected to perform with the families listening in.

Before Rustam got married no one in his family told him anything about sex, although they did not actually know he was already experienced. The only person to say anything to him beforehand was his grandmother. 'You will have to prove you are a

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14 This information on boys' sexual knowledge was gathered by teachers in the health project.
15 This story was told me by Hurshed Babaev.
man now', was her admonishment before he was dispatched to have almost public sex with his new wife.

This consummation was one of the most painful experiences of Rustam's life. He was sent into a room in his parents' house with both his family and that of his wife next door, able to hear almost everything that transpired. In this room Jumbul was waiting for him. He found it degrading and humiliating to be forced to perform such an intimate act with a stranger. Having to do it virtually in public made it much worse. It was not made any the easier by Jumbul's insistence on the utmost modesty. She made him turn out the light. She would not remove any garments beyond her ezhor.

He tried to stroke her to get her aroused before penetration, but she did not welcome his caresses, telling him it was shameful to do such things. It took the most tremendous will power and strength of mind to force himself to concentrate enough to get and maintain an erection.

In Tajikistan and other culturally-related societies, the wedding night is the occasion for the young couples' symbolic transformation into adults. The perforation of the hymen makes the bride a woman ready for childbirth. The 'public' act of perforating it on his wedding night brings a man to full adult sexuality (cf. Lindisfarne 1994: 92). This was so important that before the Revolution, when marriage was very expensive for the groom and many families were extremely poverty-stricken, the poorest men might take years to save up enough money to marry a virgin even though marrying a divorcée or widow would have cost very much less (Shishov 1904: 364).

This sheds further light on Malik's refusal to allow Rustam to marry a non-virgin and on that of those young Tajik men, who refuse to marry their non-virgin girlfriends, even if it is they who are responsible. This would deprive them of that supreme moment of transition. However many times a man might previously have had sex, however many virgins he may already have deflowered, it is the wedding night that counts because here he is demonstrating his virility in public, even if this 'public' is also symbolic, since it is not always known exactly when this event takes place. This may also account for the fact that so many men deprived of this vital rite of passage by being forced to marry their deflowered girlfriends, subsequently show them considerable violence.

Looked at from this angle, one could say that the bleeding of the bride on her wedding night is in reality more important as a demonstration of her husband's virility than of any attribute of hers. The thing is that her virginity is a requirement for her husband to be able to complete his passage into adulthood. This is perhaps the answer to why it is so vital for girls to preserve their virginity for the marriage night, why mothers in Morocco tell their daughters that they must preserve their bodies intact until the day they will be given to their legitimate proprietors, their husbands (Naamane-Guessous 1991: 8). This may also go some way to explain why it is particularly husbands who are against the manual defloration ritual in Egypt (El Dawla, Hadi & Wahab 1998: 87). Naamane-Guessous (1991) tells of one mother who never fully accepted the fact that her son had chosen a divorced woman for his wife. After sixteen years of marriage she managed to force him to divorce her and marry a virgin, so he could have the pleasure of defloration (Naamane-Guessous 1991: 124). Finally, her son had become a 'real man'!
But the first night is of course only the start of sexual relations. For those few couples who click it will be great. But for most it can be highly problematic especially where the woman really suffered on the first night and now dreads having sex. Under Muslim law a woman should not refuse her husband (Bouhdiba 1975: 111) but Tajik women are generally not aware of this. However, they do know it is unwise explicitly to reject their husbands. Although rape within marriage has been a crime in Tajik law since Soviet times, as far as I am aware nobody has ever made a formal accusation of this. It is impossible to assess the incidence of marital rape in Tajikistan but when the women of Sayot learned about sexually transmitted diseases and en masse refused their husbands sex until they went for analysis it seemed that the majority of men respected their wives' rights to refuse them, although they did not like it. However, clearly many men are not so considerate, as I discussed above.

Thirty-year-old Parvina is from a southern village. She has recently found herself feeling aroused in bed with her husband but this has only increased her bad feelings about the way he treats her when he wants sex. He simply orders her to pull down her ezor and open her legs. Then without any preliminaries he pushes inside. When he is finished he turns away from her and falls asleep, leaving her aroused and tense. Parvina was a participant in a women's discussion group and one day decided to bring up her frustrations there. Several other women said they had the same problem. The group leader told them it was possible to satisfy themselves and explained how this worked. Parvina came back the following week beaming and saying she had managed to masturbate to orgasm and it was wonderful. Now she just waits until her husband goes to sleep and carries on for herself. Moreover, she can do this whenever she feels like it. Learning to masturbate has made it possible for Parvina to take control of her own sexuality. Sadly, she and her friends were not able to give themselves permission to explore their own bodies and discover masturbation for themselves. It took an outside authority to give that permission, although once this had happened the women were not slow to act. But, of course, Tajik women are certainly capable of figuring out for themselves how to masturbate. I was told by several urban women that they were practising it.

Tahmina

After several years of marriage Tahmina had still never experienced sexual arousal. Indeed she cannot begin to imagine what this can possibly feel like. Before she married lots of boys in her class told her they loved her or that she was attractive to them. But as soon as anyone said such a thing to her she never wanted to speak to him again. The very idea that he might want to touch her was completely repulsive. After she married Tahmina talked to some of the young women she met in Rashid's village about her sexual problems. She thinks they know more about sex than her

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16 I want to thank the group leader for telling me this story.

17 Hisor, where Rashid lives, is much more modern and Sovietised than Sayot and the other villages of the health project. Hisori women have higher educational levels and considerably greater mobility.
friends in Dushanbe and enjoy it more. One young woman, seeing how little Tahmina knew, lent her a book on sexual positions her husband had brought back from Russia. Tahmina leafed through it and looked at the pictures a little but found it repugnant. The book made no mention of women's erogenous zones and Tahmina knew nothing about these.

A week after they first had sex Rashid wanted it again but Tahmina absolutely refused. She was even more afraid than before, since now she knew how much it hurt. Eventually he persuaded her and they did it again but it still hurt a great deal. By now she so much hated his touching her that even an accidental brush of his hand was torture. At night she would wait until he was asleep and then roll as far away from him as she could, to prevent any chance of contact during the night. She particularly hates it when Rashid wants to French kiss. Before her marriage she didn't know such kisses existed and finds them disgusting.

It definitely hurt less if they had sex every week, especially if they had it several times a week. Despite this Tahmina tried to do it as rarely as possible. Most of the time when Rashid wanted sex she would just say - 'just a minute', or make some other excuse and then wait in the next room until he went to sleep. Then he wouldn't wake up until morning. Probably after that it would be a whole week before he'd ask again.

In the village Tahmina mostly refuses sex because there are no bathrooms there and she hates it when she can't wash properly.

While they were living in Dushanbe they settled down to having sex once every 2-3 weeks. But they started to lose a lot of weight and thought it was because they were having too much sex, so they cut down. Neither of them was really enjoying it. Then Rashid discovered that he had inflammation of the penis. After he was cured he wanted sex more often. However, gradually they settled down to once a month.

One thing Tahmina cannot understand is how Rashid can possibly get pleasure from what they do, but he tells her he does and however extraordinary she finds it, she has to believe him, otherwise why would he want to go on doing it.

After Tahmina got pregnant Rashid agreed not to have sexual relations until after the baby was born. He told her that he didn't want to risk harming the baby merely for a few moments of pleasure for himself. He knew how very much Tahmina disliked sex. Some of the women in the hospital ward she stayed in during her pregnancy said that after their first child was born they began to love their husband and to want sex, which they hadn't before. So Tahmina began to hope this might happen to her too. She feels this would be likely to make her relationship with Rashid very much happier. She knows it is because Tajik women are embarrassed about sex or don't enjoy it that so many of their husbands have Russian girl friends.

However, the baby's birth did not make any real difference to Tahmina. Sex is no longer so painful but she is still not aroused by it. At least she is used to it now and does not mind it so much. She knows that she must not refuse Rashid all the time as otherwise he will go to a Russian woman and maybe bring her back a disease.

Davlatpochcha

When Davlatpochcha got married for the first time she knew vaguely that a man sticks something into a woman somewhere but not how or what or where. She only
found out on her wedding night. Her first husband was so repulsive to her that the very idea of wanting to like sex with him was revolting. Being with him was like having a dog in bed with her. He was ugly and she didn't like him to touch her at all. Immediately after marriage Davlatpochcha became pregnant. Her grandmother told her all the time she should have lots of children; she wanted her to have 10. Davlatpochcha was totally ignorant of everything and just went along with what people told her to do. Her husband made her pregnant and she had the children. In any case what else was she to do? It is a sin to have an abortion; it is like taking a life. So she had two children one and a half years apart.

With Saydali, Davlatpochcha's second husband, she had for the first time started to enjoy sex, but not all the time. Her first husband, who was a big brawny man, had a small penis. Saydali is not a big man but he has a very large penis and sometimes he thrusts in so far and hard that he hurts her. When she complains he just says - 'Nonsense. You have had three children. This can't possibly be hurting you.' - and continues as before.

It is also painful if they have too much sex. Saydali wants sex virtually every night, sometimes even 4-5 times, and cannot bear to wait the few days for her period to end, although he knows that it is not right to have sex during this time. It is a sin. It is the more painful because Davlatpochcha has an IUD that she had inserted a few days before they married. The doctor told her to wait 12 days after insertion before having sex. However, as soon as they were married Saydali insisted on having sex right away, no matter what the doctor said. This started her haemorrhaging and she also began to have pain from the IUD but she could not be bothered to go back to the doctor to have it checked. She thought that if she just waited a while the pain would just go away on its own.

Davlatpochcha is embarrassed to ask Saydali to do anything different when he hurts her and also cannot bring herself to tell him what she would like him to do to make sex more enjoyable for her even when he tries to encourage her to tell him. However, on occasions when sex does not hurt she quite often has an orgasm. She finds this both incredible and wonderful. Before her marriage to him she had not realised such a sensation could exist. Davlatpochcha is pleased when Saydali tells her how much pleasure she gives him. He loves her body. She has a big bottom, and a small waist and breasts. He especially likes to stroke these. She has just the sort of body Tajik men admire.

It is only recently that Davlatpochcha has begun to feel desire and she thinks this is partly due to the love she feels for Saydali and partly to her age. She thinks that this has made her able to experience arousal but also that sex should be associated with love, otherwise it is not pleasant. She and Saydali have a good time in bed because they love each other and he enjoys this as much as she does. For both of them it is the first time they have fallen in love.

Saydali was not really in love with his first wife, who hated sex, and so he did not like sleeping with her. She was not attractive, especially after having seven children. During sex she would just lie there like a lump and would even cry because she disliked it so much. For this reason Saydali had lots of girl friends and was hardly
ever at home. But after his marriage to Davlatpochcha he said he did not need to stray because she fulfilled all his needs. Within a year after Davlatpochcha and Saydali married he had a problem at work and lost his job. Soon after this he began to take heroin and also to get drunk quite often and come home very late. Then he would insist on having sex with her virtually non-stop, all night long, so that she would be in a dreadful state by morning, all swollen.

Rustam

Rustam had been interested in sex and had started discussing it with his Russian school friends in his mid teens. From them he had learned how to arouse a girl and about the existence of the clitoris. He believes that it is the man's duty to make sex enjoyable for the woman.

Rustam was initiated into sex at the age of seventeen by a Russian girl. Afterwards the first thing he did was to ask 'Are you pregnant now?' She explained to him about the safe period and afterwards he used this method of contraception with his other college girlfriends.

In the beginning, while Zhenia was still in Tajikistan, Rustam performed his 'marital duties' as rarely as he could. Jumbul never allowed him any more freedom in their sex life than before. Every attempt on his part to make the sex more pleasurable for her, or more interesting for him were met with the protesting ayb. What a contrast with Zhenia with whom he went to bed whenever her parents were away from home, which fortunately for them was often. Being in bed with her was absolute heaven. She was experienced, uninhibited, and open.

It took the birth of four children before Jumbul began to feel any sort of sexual awakening. At that point she began to undress totally before sex in order to give Rustam access to parts of her body he had never touched before. And for the first time she began to reach orgasm. However, she remained adamant that only one position was respectable, that the light had to be out, and that she was going to take no active part whatsoever in the process. She also made it clear that her new-found sexuality did not come in any way from increased feelings for Rustam. It was purely a matter of horniness on her part, not a sign of desire or affection for him, still less of love. Indeed if he tries to show affection rather than merely satisfying her sexually she shies away and tells him not to mess about but to get on with it. This he finds very frustrating since for him the expression of affection is a major part of lovemaking.

Sitora

When Sitora got married her in-laws' house had only one room so she and her husband had to share it with his parents and other family members, separated from them only by a curtain. When her husband wanted sex he would give her a special sign so she could prepare herself. The young couple would then go to bed first and the others would wait up to allow them time by themselves. They would make love and then lie in bed until the others had come in and fallen asleep. Afterwards Sitora and Haydar would tiptoe quietly outside and wash in the aryk. Later they built on another
room so they could have privacy. Of course, it is not pleasant to have sex when other people are around.

During the first three years of their marriage Sitara got no enjoyment from sex although she liked being with him. Haydar had no idea of how to arouse her and she didn’t understand what the point of the whole thing was, aside from conceiving children. When she was first married her mother-in-law told her that she should just give in to her husband’s desire for sex every time he wanted, to prevent his going to another woman. So she did.

Haydar’s job sometimes allowed him time off in the afternoons and then he would come home at midday for sex and food. Sitara found this a great bore.

Then one day Haydar’s workmates started to discuss how to turn a woman on. One of the Russians explained what a man should do for his wife to enjoy sex. He said that the woman had to climax first and only then should the man let himself go. Haydar confessed that he had never given any thought to his wife’s pleasure. The Russian was amazed that Haydar’s wife had allowed him to get away with it and neither taken a lover nor been annoyed with him. Haydar said that neither of them had known that a woman could enjoy sex so it hadn’t occurred to his wife she had been hard done by.

That afternoon Haydar went home and wanted to try out what he had learned. Sitara became absolutely furious, accusing him of having taken a lover and of practising on his wife the tricks he had learned with his mistress. ‘Don’t treat me like your whore’, she told him. Haydar protested his innocence but Sitara wouldn’t believe him. Every night he tried to give her pleasure in bed and every night she would be furious with him. Eventually he couldn’t stand it any more and told her where he had learned it from, but she didn’t believe him.

Then a few days later she was talking with a Russian friend who explained that men discussed sex among themselves and that Russian men were much better informed than Tajiks. Sitara realised that what Haydar had told her had probably been true and she went home and apologised for having misjudged him.

Only then did she allow him to try out what he had learned and it was really great. Haydar was very tender with her and showed her so much love. He learned not to have sex just for his own pleasure, but to make sure that she participated too. After this Sitara started to enjoy sex and they began to have a wonderful time together in bed.

Haydar believed that if the couple didn’t both climax the woman could not conceive. However, Sitara had managed to conceive without ever having had an orgasm so she didn’t believe him.

The contrast between these men’s attitudes to their own sexuality is striking. Saydali is clearly highly insecure in his masculinity, needing to prove it over and over while the other men are much more relaxed. Rashid seems to come from a different world from Saydali and to know little of other men’s sexuality if he thinks sex a few times a month excessive. Perhaps what he needs is a few friends like Haydar’s workmate, only it is unlikely that Tahmina would respond. She was horrified at the idea of so much physical contact when I discussed with her how they might learn to enjoy sex together. Although Rustam has no special interest in Jumbul he nevertheless does his best to make her enjoy sex, if only because it is more
pleasurable for him to have a responsive woman in bed. Despite the emptiness of having sex with someone he feels nothing for Rustam says as long as he has a wife, even one with whom he has no rapport, he would rather have sex with her than masturbate.

Oisoat was a medical student in Dushanbe who had married a fellow student. Before marriage they had done a lot of exploration of each other's bodies without ever going as far as penetration. In this way she had discovered clitoral stimulation and she loved this. In fact, after marriage, she found this was the only way she could reach orgasm. Intercourse alone never satisfied her.

Oisoat found herself much better off than most of her friends who had never had any sexual experience before marriage and who failed to reach orgasm after it. Eventually she found herself giving advice to her friends, patients, and even fellow medical practitioners on how they too could receive satisfaction from sex.

Oisoat is the only woman I have talked to in Tajikistan who admitted to consciously experimenting with her own sexuality before marriage or to making a serious effort to get her husband to satisfy her afterwards. This may have had something to do with the fact that Oisoat had known her boyfriend since they were children and they were very close, so that their relationship was quite different from that of most dating couples. At the time he did not appear to judge her behaviour and voiced no objection to marrying her. However, a few years later he left her for another woman and Oisoat could never understand why. In her view they had had an ideal relationship.

Oisoat's second husband had never thought to do anything to arouse his previous wife in bed. It had not occurred to him that there was anything one could do. At first after their marriage Oisoat was very unhappy with their sex life but was too embarrassed to tell him what she enjoyed. Then she left a book about women's sexuality she had found in the Dushanbe women's resource centre lying around their flat, opened at the section on the clitoris. Her husband read this and asked her about it. Once the theme was broached she felt relaxed about discussing it with him and was able to tell him exactly what she liked. After this their sex life improved greatly. Her new husband was amazed at the difference between making love with a woman who really enjoyed sex and his previous experiences with his reluctant first wife. His and Oisoat's relationship got better and better. He had not known it was possible to be so happy.

Of course, most female students do not dare go in for petting like Oisoat because they fear the consequences. Such fears may continue to inhibit their sexual feelings even after marriage and may help account for the fact that young Tajik women so rarely seem to experience sexual arousal.

It is impossible to know how many of them would have experienced this from the start of their marriage had their husbands been able and willing to excite them. Unfortunately, although there is no discourse favouring female frigidity many men are made nervous by a

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18 Vas i Vashe Telo - The Russian version of The New Our Bodies, Ourselves. (Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1984).
sexually responsive wife as they feel such a woman may well betray her husband. Men who spend long periods away from home are particularly anxious on this score. Therefore, women have to tread a very fine line between enjoying themselves in bed and being considered (potentially) loose women.

Davlatpochcha and Jumbul seem to have grown into their sexual feelings as they got older. It is difficult to know how much girls like Tahmina, who feel no sexual arousal after marriage, have been repressed through the repeated injunctions against touching their genitals. It is also impossible to judge how much Davlatpochcha’s enjoyment with Saydali came from the general horniness she had begun to feel, how much from her love for him and how much from his greater skill in bed than her previous husbands. Most probably it was from a combination of the three. It is much too early to have any indication of how Tahmina’s sexuality will change as she approaches the age of thirty but perhaps she too will start to enjoy sex and with it to come to care more for Rashid.

Sexual compatibility is not considered important in a society that prizes sexual relations largely for their production of children. But things are changing in Tajikistan, in the post-Soviet period of greater exposure to the outside world. Younger couples, at any rate, are starting to expect something more out of their sex lives and if they do not get this there will eventually be problems. Even in Sayot, before the health project had got round to broaching the subject of sex, several of the younger women complained that they did not feel pleasure with their husbands.

The fact that so many previously unresponsive women developed sexual feelings around the age of thirty ties in with Western sexological research that shows women becoming more and more sexual with age, certainly well on into their fifties (Hite 1976: 349ff). However, sex, of course, is not a purely physiological phenomenon. It is highly likely that the lack of sexual arousal in young women is in some measure connected to a lack of emotional response. Tahmina was not just sexually, but also emotionally, repressed. Before marriage she had feared the possible consequences far too much to allow herself any response to boys’ attraction to her. Such emotional repression cannot help but have repercussions. Since women’s sexual response is very much dependent on their emotions this may be why it was that those women who allowed themselves to feel emotionally connected to men before marriage were the ones most quickly able to develop sexual feelings once their husbands learned how to arouse them.

Desire and Passion

Psychological studies have come up with important distinctions between sexual arousal, horniness, and sexual desire. The first is a physical state marked, for instance, by penile erection or vaginal lubrication. The second is a mental state of undirected sexual tension, while the third is sexual tension focused on a specific object (Shaffer 1997).

The difference among these can be illustrated by a comparison of the relations Rustam has with Zhenia and with Jumbul. For Zhenia Rustam felt desire, which he delighted in giving sexual expression to as often as possible. For Jumbul he feels little or nothing, so that he has sex with her only when he feels generally horny. He does not get aroused by thoughts of her but on the contrary uses thoughts of another in order to be able to become sufficiently aroused to be able to perform with her.
Similarly, Zhenia felt desire for Rustam, while even now that Jumbul experiences sexual arousal and orgasm these do not appear to Rustam, at any rate, to be the result of specific emotions towards him but rather of an undirected need for sexual release. She never initiates sex, not even by doing things like dressing up or wearing scent in the hope that this might put Rustam in the mood, nor does she behave any other than passively either before or during sex.

The boys from Sayot had all felt horny but, aside from those who had been in Russia, had never focused on a specific sexual object. They were ambivalent about the prospect of marriage. Some of them looked forward to the chance of an outlet for their sexuality, others did not appear as yet capable of relating to the idea of marriage for themselves, even when their parents had already arranged this and the wedding day was not far off. Although they were all masturbating they did not all feel ready yet to welcome the idea of having a constant sexual partner.

For many Tajik men their sexual feelings do not appear to be focused on a specific object of desire. In view of the fact that a man may not necessarily be especially turned on by his wife, particularly if she exhibits no significant sexual or emotional interest in him, this is not surprising. In the circumstances it is more surprising that there are couples like Sitora and Haydar, and Oisoat and her second husband.

In the second volume of his History of Sexuality Foucault asks how a person comes to see himself as a subject that can desire. Butler takes this further and asks 'who is it who is able to recognize him/herself as a subject of sexuality and how are the means of recognition controlled, dispersed, and regulated such that only a certain kind of subject is recognizable through them?' She further suggests that the development of agency is intimately linked to the development of sexual desire (Butler 1999: 19).

Butler is hinting that it is particularly women who are those people unable to recognise themselves as subjects of sexuality and thus unable to allow themselves to experience sexual desire. For Tajikistan it can further be said that most women have also not been able to conceptualise themselves as subjects of passionate love. Despite Tahmina's hope that she will one day feel such love this remains an alien emotion for her.

As Segal (1994) points out young women need narratives of desire in order to explore their sexuality. Physical experience alone may not be sufficient (Segal 1994: 264). Both Butler and Segal are saying that in a society where there is no discourse of the female as subject of sexuality it will be very difficult for a woman to be able to experience sexual desire, that is to allow herself the freedom to focus sexually on the person she wishes, rather than merely experiencing her sexuality within a socially sanctioned relationship with someone she might otherwise not have chosen to be with.

The taboos on public discussion of sex in the Soviet Union, together with their sheltered upbringing, mean that many girls in Tajikistan are not even aware that there is anything to be a subject of. They are raised as non-sexual beings and many women remain non-sexual all their lives. In Sayot, when we held a group discussion on the function of the clitoris in female sexual arousal most of the women present seemed to be fascinated by the subject. A few of the younger ones said they wished their husbands could be informed of this. All they knew about was moving their penises in and out, they said. However, one of the older women said - 'I have felt nothing except distaste for the sex act throughout twenty years of married life and the birth of seven children. I don't think anything is likely to change my feelings now. I am only too glad when I am left in peace.'
Control and Subversion

For this woman marriage removed her ignorance of the physical existence of sex only as far as she learned of penile penetration and understood this could cause pregnancy. She did not even have much idea how this last happened and knows nothing more of sexual feelings than the pain or discomfort the sex act causes her.

Foreplay is virtually non-existent in the practice of most Tajik couples. If it takes place at all it tends to be a perfunctory caress of the breasts, mainly for the man’s own pleasure. There are no books to help them learn anything else. The experience of Haydar and Oisoat’s second husband is common. It took some time before they realised that sex could be for anything more than their own pleasure. Rustam was very lucky that some of the Russian boys in his school were informed about female sexuality and to have had experienced girlfriends to teach him more. The one person in Sayot who said she really enjoyed bed with her husband, and who clearly had good communication with him, was a woman in her late twenties who had spent many years in Russia.

Naziramo thinks the most important things in marriage are love and companionship - sitting and talking together - being tender and loving to one another. Sex is not that important. It is mostly in order to have children. She would not have wanted life without a husband because that would be uninteresting. She often has problems with her kidneys and her back hurts. When this happens she doesn’t want to have sex. This upsets Aljon and he says, 'but I am so good to you, why don’t you want to sleep with me? Don’t I do everything for you, don’t I give you things, and bring you things, don’t you love me any more? Why won’t you have sex?' She answers she doesn’t feel like it because she doesn’t feel very well. She says that Aljon doesn’t try to force her but says, okay, you don’t feel well, sleep. She thinks she is very lucky. She has one friend whose husband tries to force her to have sex every day and she hates it. Naziramo feels that couples should ideally have sex about once a week, or maximum twice.

At twenty-eight, an age when the other women in this book were already beginning to feel arousal Naziramo does not yet do so, perhaps having come to marriage late she will be later developing such feelings. Aljon’s question suggests that he does not expect her to enjoy sex for its own sake, but thinks that she should comply with his wish for sex not out of her own need but because of his, and that she owes it to him because of what he does for her. In other words sex in return for material goods, not sex as a mutual expression of love. It would seem from Naziramo’s lack of interest in sex, which she expressed to me on more than one occasion, that Aljon’s having studied in Dushanbe has not given him any more idea of how to arouse his wife sexually than the men of the health project had.

It would seem then that the majority of Tajik women are denied the remotest possibility of becoming subjects of desire, by being locked into marriage with men who are totally incompetent in bed and in any case unlikely to inspire such feelings in their wives. At the same time they have little possibility of contact with someone with whom they might feel different. The prospect of their desire focusing on a homosexual object instead is remote in the extreme. This is so far outside the comprehension of these women that not one person would admit to ever even hearing of there being any lesbians in Tajikistan. The very thought appeared to terrify the members of the women’s organisations to whom I broached the
subject. How much this is a reaction to the gross violation of Tajik gender performance lesbian practice would represent and how much a reflection of the anti-homosexual discourse of Soviet times it is difficult to say. However, male homosexuality, although not encouraged, is openly discussed and there are a few gay men who are not totally secretive about their sexual orientation, although I have so far found no evidence of wide-scale premarital homosexual relations among adolescent boys.

Are Tajik men better able to recognise themselves as subjects of desire than women? Men are certainly strongly encouraged to be sexual. Islamic discourse prioritises sex as one of the most important paths to spiritual union with God (Bouhdib 1975: 16, 21, 106). Although the Qur'an suggests that it is preferable to have only one spouse (Omran 1992: 18-22) the permission given for polygyny and divorce suggests to many Muslims that having multiple sex partners is perfectly acceptable and even preferable, to too strong an emotional bond with a spouse that might distract one from one's duties to God (Mernissi 1987: 8).

The Muslim heaven is conceptualised as a place where the main pastime will be sex and where, besides their wives, men will be supplied with multiple partners in the shape of houris, living sex dolls who are always virgins and who return to their virgin state immediately after each sexual act (Bouhdib 1975: 95-96). This further situates discourse on male sexuality firmly in the camp of undirected sexual tension and away from a specific object of desire.

Thus, there is a very fundamental Muslim discourse that both depersonalises sex and privileges sex with a virgin above all other sexual experiences. As stated above defloration is the ultimate proof of virility and something that each man should experience at a minimum once, on his wedding night (cf. Lindisfarne 1994: 89).

A man's ability to impregnate his wife is also very important in Tajik discourse on male sexuality. Rashid felt almost public humiliation at his failure to give Tahmina a child. For some men the idea that any time they have sex there is a chance that they may make their wives pregnant can be a vital part of their sexual enjoyment. In Morocco also many men have a concept of virility incompatible with contraception. My husband has always said that the true man is he who gives his wife a child every year' (Naamane-Guessou 1991: 114).

*By the time she was 28 Tozagul had had six children in seven years. She was really tired of being pregnant and wanted a break but her husband, Fazil, would not hear of it, so she secretly had an IUD inserted. Seven years later Fazil decided he was fed up with Tozagul because he wanted more children and he feared she had become infertile. When he threatened her with divorce Tozagul told him that he did not need to find another wife. She could simply have her IUD removed and they would be able to have more children. When he heard this Fazil became furious. He divorced her immediately, throwing her and all six children out of his house. He said that he had spent seven years trying to impregnate her while all the time this had been impossible because of her IUD. Tozagul had made a mockery of him and cheated him, giving him years of empty sex*.

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19 This story was related to me by Ayesha Homed.
This is surely far from an expression of sexual desire. It is not Tozagul whom Fazil wants, nor children for their own sake, but as an expression of his masculinity. Since the post-Soviet economic collapse men can no longer afford to feed such large families and have had to learn to content themselves with fewer children, but the principle remains the same.

Men are also anxious to have their first child as soon as possible in order to tie their wives more firmly to them. They know it will be much harder for them to leave their husbands once they have a child. This may also be why Hafizullo did not start beating Ruzikhol until she was pregnant. Otherwise she might just have left him.

If men experience their sexuality as undirected hominess then it will not be very important which woman they mate with. This is no doubt one reason why so few men refuse to accept their parents’ choice of a wife. The moment of spousal selection is the time when more than any other both men and women are treated not as individuals but as virtually interchangeable members of an object class (Shaffer 1997: 10) by parents who generally choose their children’s spouses in the hope they will not come to feel passionately for one another. The resulting lack of a real sexual and emotional involvement after marriage restrains any tendency for either spouse to focus strongly on the other, and encourages husbands to stray.

Malik’s inability to grasp why Rustam is so upset at having his desired object replaced by another woman may well derive largely from his lack of understanding that one member of the ‘woman class’ could mean more than any other. Like many Tajik men Malik does not recognise himself as a subject of desire. The very concept of desiring a unique person and thus wishing to marry that person only, rather than experiencing undirected sexual tension that could equally well be satisfied with any member of the appropriate object class that one’s parents choose, is foreign to the Tajik way of thinking. After all, this would upset one of the stronger principles of Tajik society - the right of parents to decide their children’s futures.

Sexuality Resurveyed

I want to return here to the argument with which I started the section on sexuality. I said that sexual relations bore a great deal of the responsibility for the quality of the marital relationship. A survey of the experiences that were recounted in the stories will test the truth of this hypothesis. It seems to me that Oisoat’s second husband says it all when he states how very happy he has been with her since he discovered how to satisfy her sexually, a level of happiness the existence of which he had had no concept of during his previous marriage. The same is true for Saydali. At the same time the essentially self-centred nature of the latter comes out in his refusal to put considerations of Davlatpochcha’s pain from his deep thrusting before his own needs. How different their relationship seems from those of truly loving couples such as Haydar and Sitora.

The stories above showed how many women are forced into having sex with their husbands against their wills and how negative they feel about it. There are many gradations of force here. At the most extreme are Shamigul’s and Lola’s (cf. chapter 6) husbands whose actions, I think, few people would hesitate to classify as rape. It seems to me also that probably many people would regard Marifat’s husband as raping her, when he forced himself on her physically (cf. chapter 5). At the same time it is entirely possible that this man had no choice in being given a child bride and might well have preferred a willing woman. Having,
however, been presented with this child as his wife with whom it was after all his duty to have sex, he seems to have felt this gave him permission to do this, irrespective of her wishes. On the other hand, had he not done this would he perhaps not have felt he had failed in his masculinity?

Is Parvina’s husband a rapist or not? Unlike Shamigul’s husband he uses words to initiate sex. However, they are not a request but a command. Parvina is given no choice but to open her legs to him. Although it is not made explicit in her story, it certainly gives the impression that her denial would be likely to result in force. Even without physical force Parvina’s husband pays not the slightest attention to her needs. This case is less clear cut than those mentioned in the preceding paragraph but I would classify this as rape, as I would any sex that makes no attempt to pay any attention to one’s partner as a human being with the right to be treated as such, with his/her own sexual needs. Unfortunately, the type of relationship Parvina has with her husband seems to be fairly common in Tajikistan. I have often heard women saying that all their husbands do is to say to them - ‘Come on, open your legs’.

It is unclear just how Saydali approached his first wife but it would seem obvious that she must have hated sex, if she lay there like a lump and cried all the time. Rashid knows how much Tahmina hates sex. Although he is gentle with her, approaches her nicely, and does his best not to hurt her, even renouncing sex for the whole of her pregnancy, he still persists in having sexual relations, even if infrequently. It is not that he wants to hurt Tahmina; however, he has sexual needs, which he expects to be able to satisfy with his wife although he has no conception of how to make her want sex too, and probably no idea that it is possible for him to do anything to achieve this. Tahmina, although wishing she could enjoy sex, wanted this to happen somehow magically, of its own accord, not through any conscious effort on her part such as would have been represented by following the sort of sexological exercises used in the West, which was all the help I had to offer her. No doubt she was right to reject them because they only work if a woman wants to be caressed by her partner and Tahmina could not at that point bear Rashid even to touch her. In such circumstances trying to get herself to practise enjoying sex with him would have been in the nature of self-rape.

Neither Rashid nor Saydali could claim to believe their wives enjoyed sex with them. Both knew they did not. Yet they persisted in having sex with them, even if infrequently. Is it rape that Rashid subjects Tahmina to or Saydali his first wife? What is it when a man uses a woman sexually without attempting to give her any pleasure, not necessarily harshly but simply because, like Haydar, he has no idea that he should or indeed could be doing this? These are very much trickier questions. Sitora enjoyed being with Haydar, even if she only later came to enjoy sex with him. Tahmina did not want to be with Rashid at all, in any way. Could one say that the first is not rape and the second rape? Or should one posit a whole new category of sexual abuse? Because there is no doubt in my mind that Tahmina and Saydali’s first wife felt abused, while I do not think that Sitora did.

Perhaps the point is that it is not so much that Rashid and Saydali are doing the abusing here as individuals, as much as that the abuse comes from a discourse that denies women the right to understand their own sexuality and legitimises men’s selfish use of women for their own sexual needs, while denying the latter an outlet for theirs. Furthermore, the silence on the matter of sex also makes it very difficult for a man to understand what to do to help his wife enjoy sex or for a woman to understand her own sexuality. In fact, being given a woman as a
wife in that way, and told to have sex with her tells a young man that women are just a
function of their sex, not people whose feelings have to be taken into account.

This abuse does not stem from Islam, which, on the contrary, is in favour of sex being
enjoyable and specifically states that women have sexual rights, something that Christianity
does not. In past times there must have been considerably more knowledge on sex in Muslim
communities than there is today. A number of detailed sex manuals were produced by Islamic
scholars in the Middle Ages. One of the most important of the medieval Islamic jurists, El
Ghazali (1058-1111), stated that women had a right to sexual enjoyment. In the early fifteenth
century Sheikh Al Nefzawi gave very detailed instructions on how to please a woman
sexually in his *Perfumed Garden* written probably between 1410-1434 (Sabbah 1984: 8-9).

Al Nefzawi includes detailed descriptions of foreplay, coitus, and post-coital love making
all intended to give great pleasure to the woman and to ensure that orgasm alone was not the
goal but the tender relationship between the couple. He goes as far as to say that coitus should
not start until the woman's vagina is wet. Ibn Agiba Aboul Abbas of Tetuwan (1747-1809)
says that 'any man who wants coitus should not approach his wife before she is panting, her
eyes troubled and she is demanding to be satisfied'. He explains in great detail how to produce
this effect, as also how to give her tremendous pleasure during coitus and remarks how
stimulating and pleasurable this can be *for the man*. Both Ibn Agiba and Al Nefzawi suggest
that women need more time to be satisfied and that men should learn to hold back in order to
satisfy their wives first if they want to have harmony in their marriages. Such 'sex manuals'
were in great demand by Muslim men (Naamane-Guessous 1991: 230-233).

It is a great pity that such manuals are not more commonly available today and that the far
more rigid gender relations of contemporary life prevent women's sexual needs being taken
into account in the way that they appear to have been in the past, at least by the class of men
who wrote the treatises, and their readers. I find it so interesting that people bandy about
phrases such as 'positively mediaeval', when referring to the most backward and woman-
unfriendly aspects of modern Muslim life, whereas in fact all the evidence points to the fact
that in the Middle Ages Muslim women were treated very much better and had far more
sexual rights than they generally do today. In fact, perhaps better than a lot of Western women
today.

According to Pahlen, who spent some time in Central Asia before World War I, in those
days eight-year-old boys were already being instructed in sexual matters, including a
knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases (Pahlen 1964: 42). It appears to have been the
Soviet Union that was responsible for much of the loss of the former sexual knowledge and
this may be the cause of a great deal of the misery of Tajik married life.

The difference between what Haydar learned about sex from his Russian colleague,
Rustam from his Russian schoolmates, and Zhenia's knowledge and openness in this respect,
and the stories of the ignorance in Moscow, are very striking.20 Sex seems to be far more
important in Tajikistan than in Russia, for the very reason that it functions more overtly as a
marker of masculine identity. Perhaps it was the Tajik influence that set the Russians living
there exploring their sexuality, while their less constrained gender identities enabled them to

20 Although in some areas of the Soviet Union, where there was at times a little more freedom secretly
published sex manuals were available, for instance in Akademgorodok of Novysibirs in Siberia in
the late 1960's. The men I know who studied there then are practically the only Russian men with
whom I have discussed the subject who understood anything about female sexuality.
do this more fully than the Tajiks could. After all, there are no great secrets to understanding sex. Books and other sources of information may help, but two unreppressed people interested in setting out on a voyage of mutual exploration can surely discover for themselves without any outside help, where their erogenous zones lie and how to turn each other on and satisfy each other. The problem for so many people is that the way they feel compelled to perform their gender prevents a great deal of this exploration. This is especially true for Tajiks.

In a relationship like that of Tahmina and Rashid, the tension between the demands of his male sexuality and her lack of sexual response illustrates poignantly the dichotomy at the heart of marriage between two people, who remain essentially alien to each other even after several years as husband and wife. The suppression of female sexuality, represented not just by the need to retain virginity until marriage but also by the lack of attention men pay to their wives as sexual beings, reflects not only male selfishness but also the strong emphasis on correct gender performances that often outweighs all other considerations. The indifference of these men to the sexual needs of their wives and the inhuman treatment of them in bed must surely be mirrored in the rest of their lives. I find it hard to believe it is possible to behave like this in this central moment of marital life and be caring and considerate the rest of the time.

The first few sexual encounters may well set the emotional tone for the entire future of the marriage. However, sexual satisfaction alone does not create a good relationship. Rustam, for instance, was willing to attempt to satisfy his wife in bed but not to give anything of himself emotionally. It is probably that the tone he set at the start of their marriage in telling Jumbul he could feel nothing for her set her off on the path of the rejection of all subsequent emotional contact with him. Thus, it might be said that he was as cruel to her and did as much to destroy his own chances of happiness by his behaviour as other men did by their indifference to their wives in bed.

Love

As has been repeatedly remarked on Tajik parents select their children’s spouses not based on the potential mutual compatibility of the young couple but for the benefit of the family at large. A bride should be a suitable member of a specific subclass - for instance, a cousin, or a domesticated, or particularly submissive girl. The actual person that is chosen appears to be of little consequence, whatever the young people themselves may feel about it.

Nahdiya married Tahmina into a family to whom she owed a debt. She had no idea when she agreed to this which boy would be picked. Rashid was the nephew of the man Nahdiya had contracted the debt with. Jumbul had not been on the list of candidates when Malik and Dilorom started looking for a bride for Rustam. It was only through her mother’s aggression in pushing her daughter forward that she became Rustam’s wife. Jumbul was acceptable because of attributes - virginity, presumed fertility, and nationality - that are shared by thousands of girls. This was all that Rustam’s parents knew about her before the marriage, but it was sufficient for their purposes.

Afterwards they clearly thought that their son would soon find himself content with his new relationship and forget about Zhenia. The fact that they believed Jumbul to be an adequate substitute for Zhenia and that Dilorom was able to go to Zhenia and ask her to leave her son alone that now he had a wife, demonstrates how little she understood of the world of emotions that Zhenia and Rustam inhabit.
This lack of understanding is not because the concept of love in itself is alien to Tajik culture. Muslim love poetry has been around for a thousand years and indeed was the precedent for mediaeval European love poetry. The Persian language boasts some of the world's finest love poetry.

But in this type of poetry, passionate love is either an allegory for spiritual union with God or something destructive, tragic, disturbing of the social order and, therefore, undesirable, a reflection of a sort of madness, likely to end in tragedy. Romeo and Juliet, Heloise and Abelard are examples of this. Such love could never end in the way idealised in the West today, in a stable and enduring marriage.

It is not that the East rejects the idea of love in marriage. It is rather that here love is held to be something that should develop after marriage with propinquity - what has been called companionate love. This is a warm and tender feeling, far from the madness and disorder of passionate love, essentially a heightened form of affection. It has little to do with that longing for spiritual and physical union characteristic of passionate love (Hatfield & Rapson 1996: 3).

Passionate love can only be experienced by persons capable of being subjects of desire. This is not to say that an object of desire is always also an object of passionate love. However, an object of passionate love must be also an object of desire.

While in Tajikistan there is no discourse round desire there is a certain discourse round love in marriage, although it is unclear how positively this is viewed because of the fear that it may be destructive to family cohesion. However, such feelings are supposed to develop after marriage, not to be a reason for contracting it. Donish does not include love even in his list of the foolish reasons men give for wishing to marry (cf. chapter 3). It was the Bolsheviks who introduced the concept of marriage for love, along with the end of seclusion, an institution that puts considerable obstacles in the way of young people being able to select their own marriage partner.

In the last few years young people have increasingly started to mention the word love in connection with marriage. This is partly due to the influence of the media, especially the soap operas (cf. chapter 6) and partly to that of the returned migrant workers discussed earlier on in this chapter. Eshmurod and the other men who have taken Russian wives have also started to develop new concepts of the meaning of relationships. For the first time they have had the chance to choose their own partners and to be chosen by them, based on personal traits. They have lived with women who have a very different outlook from that of their Tajik wives. These Russian women demand to be treated as unique individuals with their own special needs and personalities. Thus these men have learned what it is to live with a woman who welcomes them into bed and who at least to some extent expects a partnership with them outside it, like Tanya (cf. chapter 6). Despite what was stated earlier about the lack of sexual enjoyment of women in the Soviet Union the Sayot men all said that sex with their Russian wives was far more rewarding than with their Tajik ones, which suggests sexual responsiveness.

These Russian women are operating from a position of advantage vis-à-vis their Central-Asian partners and so can be more demanding than their Tajik counterparts. For many of their husbands union with a Russian woman is their ticket to a comfortable way of life in Russia, bringing them a home and a place in society, rather than condemning them to live as outcasts in barracks, or worse. At the same time this new relationship forces them to adopt different behavioural patterns from those they have grown up in.
When these men return from Russia they often find themselves dissatisfied with their Tajik relationships since they have learned to have a different type of relationship in Russia. This does not necessarily mean they have learned to see themselves as subjects of desire. They may simply have learned to choose between different subclasses, that of Russian or articulate, sexually responsive women, over Tajik or submissive, non-responsive ones. However, men like Mahmud and Akram (cf. chapter 5), Abdul (cf. chapter 6) and Rustam do recognise themselves as subjects of desire and the numbers of such men are growing.

But what of Tajik women? What have the changes meant for them? On the whole even more problems, as they grapple with yet another problem in their marital relationships, their newly dissatisfied husbands.

It is unclear their husbands know what they really want. Most are convinced that the only faithful wife is one who does not enjoy sex and therefore that they will have to choose between enjoying themselves in bed and a faithful wife, since they do not believe the two to be compatible. This is especially true for men who intend to return to Russia and leave their Tajik wives behind on their own.

For those Tajik men, who have not experienced what it can mean to make love with a responsive partner or who do not view this as especially desirable, it is likely that considerations of nomus far outweigh any wish for a responsive wife and this may account for the indifference of so many Tajik men to their wives' sexual needs. However, those men who have taken Russian wives have usually now experienced what it is like to make love with a responsive woman rather than merely having sex with someone who 'lies there like a log', as they put it. They are now caught in a bind with their Tajik wives. Do they want them to become sexually responsive or is it preferable for them to remain as they were? They complain to their wives how boring it is to have sex with them, compared with their Russian wives but do nothing to get their Tajik wives to respond in bed.

What do these men expect to gain from their complaints? Do they want their wives to act in the way prostitutes are supposed to, that is to do things purely for their partners' pleasure with no regard to their own? Or are they caught in a bind of half wanting their wives to be responsive and half fearing the consequences if they are?

The Tajik wives of these men do not seem fully to understand what is involved, perhaps because they are too sexually unaware for this to be clear to them. Quite a few of these women have asked the health project for help in learning how to please their husbands more in bed. Does this mean learning to be sexual themselves or merely mechanically learning the techniques of pleasing a man in bed? Either way is fraught with risk and could be highly dangerous for their marriages since either would mean a radical change in their gender performances.

Other changes that have come about as a result of the transition period are the result of influences from outside the former Soviet Union. For some urban girls exposure to the Latin-American soap operas and Indian films Sadarg likes so much has led them to seek romantic love in their own lives. While Jahongul and Sadarg categorically refuse the responsibility of marriage for love an increasing number of their schoolmates do not agree.

Boys are little interested in these types of shows. It is the explicit sex of hard porn or more often the soft porn of 'B' movies\(^\text{21}\) that gets their attention. The concept of desire

\(^{21}\text{Cheaply made American films usually full of sexy blondes in revealing clothes who obligingly remove them with great alacrity and considerable frequency.} \)
focused on one special object is completely absent from such media. The result is that many boys look not so much for love as for a sexual outlet in their friendships with girls, while the latter are searching for the great love their heroines find at the end of the films. Small wonder then that there is confusion about what each wants from the other. As the girls in one Dushanbe high school asked: 'What do boys mean when they say they love a girl?'

Boys may think they love their girlfriends but the weakness of these feelings is illustrated by their reluctance to make problems with their parents even by the mention of the fact they have a girlfriend and the readiness with which they abandon them for their parents' choice of wife. Men as determined as Abdul (cf. chapter 6) are rare and why this should be so can be seen from the outcome. Just how utterly unbearable was the stress he was being subjected to is demonstrated by how totally he cracked up under it.

Girls are in a much more vulnerable situation than boys. Since she risks her reputation, if not much worse, a girl who is willing to have a friendship with a boy will have a very great deal more at stake in the relationship and treat it correspondingly more seriously.

Bonu is from the small southern township of Komsomolobod. In high school she fell in love with a classmate. They did not date but managed to spend a lot of time together. When Bonu's parents wanted to marry her off she managed to convince them to wait, certain that her friend would be able to persuade his parents to make an offer for her. But alas he could not. Much against his will he was forced to marry a cousin and abandon Bonu. Bonu did not lose hope until the last moment. It was only on the day of her friend's marriage, the worst day of her whole life, that she consented to be engaged. She has now been married two years and has a son. 'My husband is kind but he is meaningless to me. I can think of nobody but my friend. I yearn for him night and day, and cannot bear to think that we will never be together again. I cannot imagine I will ever be happy now', said Bonu, on the verge of tears.

Bonu's story is only too common in the towns, although much rarer in the village, where there is greater sex-segregation and where most girls are married before they are old enough to be ready to fall in love. However, this does not mean that most women are necessarily actively unhappy. Like Tahmina they display an amazing tendency to look on the bright side, to do whatever they can to make the most of their lives within the framework they have been placed in by circumstances and their parents. If they cannot love their husbands then at least they have their children.

Although on the whole Tajik women do not look for love with other men their husbands appear to feel that the threat of this is ever present. One of the reasons for this seems to be that men's feelings towards their wives tend to be largely based on sexual attraction, which they often confuse with love. 'We Tajiks love our wives. Of course, we do. Much more than Russian men, for instance. We show it by the number of times we make love to them,' said a senior government official. Projecting their own feelings on to their wives, the men perhaps think it is as easy for them to have sexual relations with other men as they themselves find it to become interested in other women.

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22 This story was told me by Professor Ivanov, a UN representative in Tajikistan.
The Couple Relationship: Love, Sex and Marriage

Even when a man knows his wife loves him, as Karomat loved Khudoydod, this does not seem to preclude jealousy, which seems to be almost universal among Tajik men. Their inevitable reaction is to try to lock their wives away from all possible contact with other men.

While men continually talk about their jealousy women rarely express such feelings for their husbands. This may be because male jealousy is strongly tied to the performance of masculinity - to control over women - while women’s status does not depend on their husband’s fidelity. This is just as well since, while most men would appear to have little if any grounds for jealousy, most women would be thoroughly justified. The percentage of faithful Tajik husbands must be very small.

In discussions in Sayot on marital infidelity very few women, besides that small number who had formed a really loving bond with their husbands, evinced any sign that their husbands’ relations with other women bothered them. Tahmina’s attitude is fairly typical. It is not that the idea that Rashid might have relations with another woman particularly upsets her. She just does not want to get a disease from this, a very real possibility in view of the rapid spread of syphilis and gonorrhoea, and the fact that few men know how these diseases are transmitted, so that the use of condoms is still very limited.

Whatever the nature of the relationship between spouses it is important for both men and women to make a public proclamation of their esteem and attachment for one another, thus demonstrating that all is well. After the first bestowal of her virginity a woman can best display her regard by the only gift she is traditionally required to give to her husband - children. This is no doubt one reason why Rashid and Chahonbek were so insistent their wives would become pregnant if they really loved them. Men are expected to demonstrate their esteem by means of material gifts. A man who lavishes expensive goods on his wife is demonstrating his love to the world (Al-Khayyat 1990: 63; Wikan 1980: 44-46).

If there is an increasing number of Tajik men who are no longer satisfied with the limited emotional, intellectual, and sexual experiences of their marriages with Tajik women since their marriage to Russian women, if they really love these wives, what will this do for the traditional discourse around marriage? Will there continue to be a dislocation of gender performances between Russia and Tajikistan, both in masculine performance and in men’s insistence on their Tajik wives maintaining the local standards? Will Russian gender norms slowly seep into the discourse in those villages where a preponderance of men has Russian second wives? How will all this change the way both men and women view female sexuality? Will young men learn enough about sex to be able to arouse and satisfy their Tajik wives and will they choose to do this? Can any significant change on these lines take place in the continued absence of real information about sex and what effect will the epidemic of STD’s and the likelihood of an AIDS pandemic in Tajikistan have? Will marriage for love become increasingly common in Tajikistan and, if so, how will this affect the entire way of life there?

The answers to these questions very much depend on the way the political situation in Tajikistan will develop. Whether Tajikistan gains a greater openness to Western ideas, the spread of stricter forms of Islam, or a more authoritarian post-Stalinist-style government as in some other Central-Asian republics, will strongly influence the sexual and emotional lives of its people. The economic situation will also be an important influence. Should it no longer be

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23 The relative strength of many women’s feelings for their husbands and their sons is shown by the fact that women’s jealousy tends to be aimed at the relationships between their sons and their kelins.
necessary for men to go abroad to work, or should Tajik men start to migrate to the Middle East instead of to Russia, this would also change the form of personal relations in Tajikistan.

Conclusion

In this culture, where marriage is the single most significant occurrence in the lives of the vast majority, but where young people have no input into the choice of their partner, they are particularly vulnerable, dependent for their happiness and futures on the decisions of others, very often made with totally different goals in mind.

While young men see marriage as a way to the legitimate satisfaction of their sexual needs and are therefore likely to welcome it, almost all the unmarried girls I have talked to say they see it as an unavoidable ill, necessary largely because it will provide them with children and the prestige of having successfully attained 'adult' status but especially because without it their position in society will be untenable. Marriage for them is likely to mean the end of a relatively carefree childhood and the assumption of immediate responsibilities, first to their husbands and mothers-in-law, and later to their children. It means the end of any dreams for something different. It may mean exposure to all sorts of ill treatment. Only the most highly educated and the elite will have a chance of achieving anything outside very narrow limits of home and family, the collective farm or a boring and ill-paid job, on top of the housework and possibly also market trading.

Girls say they have heard only negative things about marriage. They all express a fear of becoming victims of marital violence, which there seems to be a lot of talk about among teenage girls. But one of the most negative things for most of them is the knowledge that after marriage they will be under the control of their husband and parents-in-law, which is almost always more confining than life with their natal family, at least in the first few years. I never heard any of them suggest it might be possible to get happiness from the marital relation itself. When I would suggest the possibility of this in discussions of marriage with the teenage girls in the health project not one girl ever looked as if she really believed this. It is true that I met very few women who claimed to have had any real happiness from their relationship with their husband. Those who really wanted to get married mostly said this was because they did not want to be different, like Tillo. This was also behind the anxiety of older girls not to be left as old maids.

Tajikistan is not alone in being a place where girls have a basically negative attitude towards marriage. In Yemen Makhlof found that girls feel very sad when their marriages have been arranged but they know they cannot change their parents' minds (Makhlof 1979: 39). Turkish girls in the Netherlands, like Tajik girls, balance the wish to marry as late as possible with the fear of gossip and other problems if they do not marry before they are too old (De Vries 1988: 152). It is difficult to understand whether Tajik girls would really wish never to have to marry or whether they just want to put off their marriage to a future time. In Holland Turkish girls always expect to get married, they just do not want to do it at that moment. De Vries only found one girl who was adamant that she never wanted to get married at all (ibid: 26). Jahongul's reluctance to marry was a reluctance to marry at that point but not for ever, no matter what she said, otherwise why would she have accepted the first offer made for her almost immediately after leaving school?
Of course, these Tajik girls take into consideration not just their relations with their future husbands but also that with their future mothers-in-law which may be every bit as important for her chances of marital happiness. As the experiences of young wives described in chapter 5 suggest it is not often that this is good. In the cases of Karomat and Gulbi, their relationships with their mothers-in-law were also good and this made a very significant contribution to their marital happiness.

The only girls I ever heard say that they had wanted to be married were those who had been in love, like Gulbi and Bonu, and had had the expectation of being allowed to marry the object of their affections. I did not hear one girl about to be placed in an arranged marriage express anything positive about the institution of marriage. However, they were all aware that for social reasons they would have no choice and that married life, however negative it might prove to be, would be likely to be preferable to life as the single spinster among their acquaintance.

In Morocco younger girls are seduced into positive feelings towards the idea of marriage by the idea of escape into a freer way of life from what they lead as a young girl with their parents and the promises of social advancement and material good they will receive from it (Naamane-Guessous 1991: 65). However, in Tajikistan none of these incentives apply. Most young wives are far more restricted than girls living at home with their parents. Moreover nowadays rather than finding themselves materially better off they are more likely to end up like Khatiya (cf. chapter 5) or Tahmina, thin through being begrudged food by their in-laws and with no money other than what their natal families supply them with. Small wonder then that girls have little wish to marry. Real benefits from marriage are far off in the future when they may become mothers-in-law. But even this may be denied these girls given the current high divorce rates so that there is a very real possibility that they will never attain the cherished position of mother-in-law within the marital family but are just as likely to end up as single mothers. However, the stigma of being unmarried after the age of twenty is so strong that it is hardly surprising that the vast majority of girls resign themselves to accepting marriage, especially in the villages, where women have no possibilities outside marriage.

Once they are married, these girls and their husbands will find themselves involved in an ongoing negotiation between the ideals of gender performance, which favour male domination, and the real circumstances in which women may dominate their husbands in family decision-making. Nevertheless, for most women, in everyday life it is their husbands who have the upper hand. Even the kindest of them tend to take their right to boss their wives for granted. Certainly when it comes to the home most husbands assume their wives will wait on them and indeed it is rare that the latter refuse, or even complain directly to their husbands about this. For the sake of peace women may at least appear to do as they are told, even when they do not like it. It is not so much that they are forced to obey their husbands as that they actively decide to do so to make their lives easier, to avoid conflicts. Urban women, who have been exposed to Soviet propaganda on sexual equality, often believe in what they call equal weight within marriage, but they know they live within a social system where this is far from easy, if at all possible, to achieve. In fact, in order to get their own way without arousing their husbands’ ire, women generally prefer not to challenge them directly but instead show great ingenuity in finding productive and non-confrontative ways to manipulate them, such as that used by Zulfia (cf. introduction). All the same, young women married to men of their own age
usually seem to feel that it is considerably easier for them to handle their husbands than their parents-in-law, especially their mothers-in-law.

The inhuman treatment that Lola (cf. chapter 6) and Shamigul experience is an aberration, not a part of 'normal' gender relations. However, it is made possible precisely because of the authority given by the discourse of male superiority, which essentially legitimises the use of violence against women. Another obstacle to sexual equality is the disparity in earnings and employment opportunities between husband and wife. Coupled with the restrictions on female mobility this frequently makes it impossible for women to leave their husbands, simply because they cannot afford to do so. Moreover, there is a tremendous imbalance in knowledge and experience between the sexes, especially between rural women who may practically never have left their villages and their husbands who work in Russia, which makes women dependent on their husbands for coping with the wider world. Considering how very heavily all this is weighted towards the masculine side it is amazing just how much women still manage to assert themselves.

The negative aspects of Tajik marriages are not specifically due to their being arranged, since love matches may be no less unhappy. Provided neither of the spouses has their heart set on someone else, young people in an arranged marriage often do quite well together. It is to the advantage of both of them to try to do so. Perhaps because they feel their wives do not conform sufficiently to the norms, men in love matches are often more negative about their relationships. This is especially hard on the women as their expectations tend to be higher than those in arranged marriages. Like Ruzikhol, they may really be in love and bewildered by the change from a loving boyfriend to a hostile spouse.

Thus it is not the arranged marriage in itself that is an obstacle to happiness. It is rather gender norms that prevent the development of a happy relationship. The quality of marital relationships tends to be in inverse proportion to the thickness of the gender masks the spouses wear when alone together, the thicker the mask the worse the relationship. In other words, the more closely the couple stick to their stock gender characteristics the less chance there will be that they can treat each other as persons, rather than as men and women obliged by social convention to exhibit gender-appropriate behaviour.

It would, therefore, appear that a prerequisite for marital happiness is to be capable of renouncing gender norms as much as possible, at any rate in private. For instance, Karomat and Khudoyodod, Gulbi and Kamirjon were happy not so much because of their love matches, as because they were able to put their feelings for their partners before their psychological adherence to gender norms, something that Fayziddin and Hafizullo, for instance, were not. It is unfortunate that more men are not as well able to cope with strong women as Alijon is and that some are so insecure in their masculinity and feel so off balance that they see their only salvation in the performance of brutal and distorted versions of masculinity expressed as violence.

The transition period is a particularly painful one for marital relationships. The young are no longer satisfied with their parents' way of life but they have not been able to rid themselves of the obligations to follow traditional gender performances that hamper the development of new patterns. Tensions between individualism and the emphasis on communal good are starting to increase. This in turn is creating greater tension between husbands and wives, parents and children. It is unclear that the new trends are beneficial to women. For many girls increased pre-marital contact with boys has led more to unhappiness, loss of reputation,
illegitimate children, and disgrace than to any greater emotional satisfaction from more meaningful relationships.

The result is that Tajiks are caught in a clash between very different lifestyles. On the one side are the old ways with their stable marital relationships, usually for life, and relatively little emphasis on the personal aspects of the couple relationship. On the other are the often confusing new ideas they have been exposed to in the last decade through contact with other cultures. The emphasis on romantic love is balanced by easy access to pornography that has introduced new ways of objectifying women. The result has been to bring both sexes new aspirations, ones that have introduced many complications. One of the chief questions that has arisen from this is how to resolve the conflict between these new ideas and the current gender identities.