



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud)

## The feminization of agriculture in post-Soviet Tajikistan

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Gender  
 Post-Soviet agriculture  
 Feminization  
 Farm and water management  
 Service providers  
 Central Asia

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we aim to analyse economic and social transition factors affecting the agricultural labor force and to understand the feminization phenomenon in rural Tajikistan. Agrarian reforms, seasonal male labor outmigration, and the subsequent increase in women's labor participation have facilitated changes in gender occupational segregation. We assume that in post-Soviet transition countries such as Tajikistan, the process of feminization grew from the need to take on jobs and to slip in the role of the breadwinner due to the absence of men. The process enabled women to gain knowledge and experience in new employment positions.

We contribute to the knowledge on feminization by conducting qualitative, case based analysis through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and present unique data on previously unobserved employment categories and their characteristics from the Sughd province of Tajikistan.

Results suggest that existing local systems of power and male-dominated relationships are being challenged due to male labor force outmigration, leading to a feminization of the remaining labor force and recipient clients. The jobs women perform remain subject to low protection, security, and earnings. However, increased participation in the labor force provides a gateway to a wider spectrum of labor opportunities and advances women's roles in primary agricultural production as well as in the service supply sector, and provides them a certain amount of control over their own lives.

## 1. Introduction

After gaining independence in the early 1990s, the majority of the former Soviet countries experienced periods of political and economic turbulence. Among them is the Republic of Tajikistan, which, after gaining independence in 1991, was ravaged by civil war from 1992 to 1997. The war brought with it a drastic decline in living standards, and a sharp fall in production and employment (World Bank, 1999). Although there have been many reforms aimed at improving economic development over the past 25 years, the implementation of these reforms has been slow, investments and job opportunities, especially in rural areas, are lacking, and the population is becoming increasingly vulnerable. One major constraint for the overall population is poor employment conditions that negatively affect both men and women; however, female workers typically struggle more as a result of additional burdens stemming from their involvement in reproductive family care and productive agricultural and non-agricultural activities (Chant, 2006; Gartaula et al., 2010a). In the formerly Soviet Central Asian countries, the encumbrances of transition and of structural adjustments have had a disproportionate effect on women compared to men in the

formerly Soviet Central Asian countries. In particular, female employment has been influenced by post-independence socioeconomic, institutional and cultural changes including a weakening of social protection systems, effectively reducing the possibility of women working outside the home; limited access to paid jobs and employment opportunities; and the redistribution of state ownership, which placed many income-generating resources in the hands of men.

The present study looks at the increase in women's labor participation and, in particular, the growing diversification of the agricultural positions they take on as well as their increased labor mobility stemming from male outmigration. It attempts to answer whether this has helped to lift gender inequalities or whether, on the contrary, it has served to reinforce patriarchal values. We contribute to, and advance, the existing knowledge on feminization by characterizing and categorizing the agricultural labor force specific to Central Asian countries and show how women have gone from being non-participants to being included participants beyond the conventional female positions.

Tajik land reform was initiated in the early years of independence, encompassing the transformation of former Soviet collective (*kolkhoz*) and state farms (*sovkhoz*) into joint-stock companies called collective

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farms (CFs) and individual *dehkan*<sup>1</sup> farms (DFs). However, the distribution of land for private use was unequal and included many administrative and informal obstacles (Mirzoeva, 2009). For the rural population, low-paid agricultural work became less rewarding and provided insufficient wages for meeting basic household needs. Due to the limited employment opportunities at home in both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, around 40 percent of the working-age population, the majority under 30, set out to search for labor opportunities abroad. According to the World Bank Living standard Measurement Survey on Tajikistan, around 95 percent of the migrants go to Russia and they are predominantly men (93.5 percent) from rural areas (WB, 2013). The absence of male labor in agriculture led to a substantial increase in the responsibilities of female household members. In addition to caring for the family, women were now required to take over what were previously considered to be traditionally male agricultural activities. Since then, the proportion of women in the agricultural labor force of Tajikistan has been increasing, from 54 percent in 1999 to more than 75 percent of the total current population (TAJSTAT, 2015). Increased involvement and the diversification of the roles of women in agricultural activities have led to the phenomenon of feminization of the agricultural labor force.

Feminization refers to the increased participation or greater roles of women in decision-making processes within the community or household. The phenomenon itself has a rich history and can be found in both developed and developing countries (Sachs and Alston, 2010; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2008; Mandel, 2013). The trend towards the feminization of agricultural labor is often linked with a variety of factors such as male labor outmigration, the growing number of female-headed households, and the development of labor-intensive agriculture (Kelkar, 2009; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2008). In many cases, the feminization of labor is accompanied by changing political and economic processes such as access to and control over resources, degradation of productive resources, low returns on labor and other investments, and lack of finances for health and social services. Rural women respond to these changes by participating more in subsistence farming and taking over a wider number of agricultural occupations, including those that were formerly considered to be male activities (Tamang et al., 2014; Mandel, 2013).

This paper contributes to the knowledge on the feminization of agriculture in rural societies and presents a systematic review of the reforms and social changes that have taken place since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the transition period in Tajikistan's Sughd province. As such, this study questions whether the observed economic transition, agrarian reforms, male outmigration, and the subsequent increase in women's labor participation has facilitated changes in gender occupational segregation. We assume that in transition countries such as Tajikistan, although the jobs women perform remain subject to low protection, security, and earnings, increased participation in the labor force provides a gateway to a wider spectrum of labor opportunities and a certain amount of control over their own lives. Therefore, a gender perspective provides an important analytical lens for assessing how changes associated with transitions affect gender relations and women's status in societies characterized by varied levels of openness to, and tolerance of, women's participation in the labor force (Bieri, 2014).

The paper continues with a background section providing an introduction to the research area as well as agricultural production during the Soviet Union and within the transition period following independence in 1991. This is succeeded by a framework focusing on the causes and consequences of the feminization of labor in general and in agriculture. The case study section focuses on two support services influenced by the feminization of rural communities and agricultural production: water management (village and farmer *mirobs*—water

masters) and the organization of seasonal workers (*mardikors*). The conclusions emphasize the importance of considering the contextualization of feminization for possible interventions and the need for comparative research in other provinces of Tajikistan to reveal similar or distinct cases of women gaining importance in agricultural support services where the supply of male workers has decreased.

## 2. A gender perspective on agricultural labor

Gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups and societies have of others based on sex, societal values and beliefs. Interactions between individuals and their social, historical, political and economic environments shape the norms which influence the formation of gender roles in society (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Applied to various contexts and locations, these norms can represent certain formal or hidden structural elements that influence gender regimes. Thus, not only are activities and experience gender-specifically structured, but gender norms influence the formation of skills, interests, power relations, and decision-making processes at individual, family, and institutional levels. Economic activities differ according to gender norms and, in the workplace, men and women are often expected to perform different tasks and occupy different roles based on their sex. Gender-occupational segregation refers to the different distribution of men and women across occupations and jobs. Occupational segregation is determined by “social norms, values and beliefs that commonly undervalue women's productive work and legitimise their relegation to lower status, casual, manual work while men predominate in managerial and more skilled jobs” (Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck, 2014).

In the United States, improvements in women's occupational standing began to gain momentum from the 1970s, during which sex segregation declined by more than 14 points (Cotter et al., 2004). This movement subsequently spread throughout the Western world and brought with it a change in traditional views on women's rights, including the increased influx of women into paid labor, the expansion of the educational system, technological and institutional developments, and, most importantly, a shift in the public opinion towards gender equality (Mandel, 2013; England and Boyer, 2009). Empirical evidence from Western countries also shows that the occupational mobility of women and the resulting feminization of certain labor positions furthermore progressed with the increasing demand for workers due to a shift or absence of male workers in those occupations (Mandel, 2013; Shortall, 2014). Women became successful in entering highly rewarded occupations and/or previously male-dominated professions such as medicine, law and managerial positions. However, to a certain extent, this process negatively influenced the pay levels in male-typed and high-paid occupations (Mandel, 2013) and empirical evidence confirms the devaluation theory, which refers to a process of decreasing fees for jobs that occurs as a result of women's entry into prestigious occupations (England and Boyer, 2009). Yet, contrary to highly paid occupations, low-paid male-dominated occupations that “require little or no education and skills should be less affected by women's entry because their initial social ‘value’ or reputation is already low” (Mandel, 2013, p. 1188). Thus, regardless of the progress achieved in the name of occupational gender equality, the positions and benefits attained by women remain, for the most part, worse than those of men who have the same professional qualifications.

Although empirical data shows some convergence of male and female patterns of employment in Western countries, analyses by Standing (1999) suggest that in industrialized countries the growth and flexibility of labor markets and diverse forms of insecurity have triggered a relative and absolute growth in non-regular and non-wage forms of employment. Employment in the formal sector is largely based on wage and salaried labor where workers are secured and protected under legislation and guaranteed better career prospects, whereas the informal sector consists of self-employed, family labor and wage

<sup>1</sup> *Dehkan-persian* is a word for a peasant, farmer.

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