Imagined Women: Bearing, Rearing, and Wearing the Tajik Nation

Accepted version of an article published in Central Asian Affairs: Shahnoza Nozimova. "Imagined Women: Bearing, Rearing, and Wearing the Tajik Nation", Central Asian Affairs 9, 2-4 (2022): 324-350.

Shahnoza Nozimova / ORCID: 0000-0003-2994-9239 Postdoctoral Researcher, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA *snozimov@gmu.edu*

Abstract

In contemporary Tajikistan, the onus of national identity's (re-)production has been disproportionately placed on women. Decisions about female bodies, dress, duties, and the limits of women's roles in the public and private spaces serve as important differentiating markers and mobilization tools for the competing ideological forces. Using the insights from the scholarship on nation-building and gender, this paper explores the official (government's) narrative on women in Tajikistan. Based on content analysis of various primary data sources, including official documents, government publications, official speeches, and media sources, I argue that contemporary nation-building has become about tangible lifestyles. Thus, nationhood in Tajikistan has acquired a recognizably gendered character. In this state-promoted imagination, women encapsulate the Tajik nation by performing three significant tasks that continuously reproduce and represent the nation: they bear, rear, and wear the Tajik nation-state.

Keywords

Tajikistan – women – gender – nationalism – nation-building – Islam – authoritarianism – identity politics

...

It's good that woman became a partner with the state, For, the
country became prosperous from her fate.[1]

Mirzo Tursunzoda[2]

∵

Introduction

In late March of 2020, as the world was coming to grips with the emergent COVID-19 pandemic, the Tajik political elite, instead of bracing for the inevitable disaster, was lavishly celebrating Navruz – the New Day – traditional Persian New Year. This multi-day celebration spree, which defied the World Health Organization's recommendations, included a royal-like, presidential trip across the northern Sughd region.[3] On March 25, 2020, Emomali Rahmon, the country's long-ruling president, held court with residents and activists of the Spitamen district. One of the local activists – a young female university student, Gulbahor Muminzoda – showered the President with praise and gratitude for his "wise" policies that empowered the youth. After her speech, the President went on to have a rather peculiar dialogue with the young woman.

Emomali Rahmon (ER): You are studying [Tajik] philology?4

Gulbahor Muminzoda (GM): Yes, your excellency.

ER: Good … Why are you so thin? [General laughter] Or do you diet?

GM: [Laughs shyly] No, I don't know why I am thin …

ER: Are you in your fourth year?

GM: Yes.

1 *Khub shud, ki zan ba davlat yor shud, / Mamlakat az dasti zan gulzor shud*. M. Tursunzoda, *Joni Shirin* (Dushanbe: Nashriyoti davlatii Tojikiston, 1963), 50. Throughout the article, all of the translations from Tajik and Russian to English are done by the author.

2 M. Tursunzoda (1911–1977) a prominent poet and political figure in Soviet Tajikistan (SSR). In 2001, posthumously, Tursunzoda was awarded the highest state award of the post-Soviet Tajikistan – Hero of Tajikistan.

3 On Tajikistan's COVID-19 pandemic response see: H. Boboyorov, "The Authoritarian Treat- ment of COVID-19: The Case of Tajikistan," Central Asia Program, November 17, 2020, last accessed March 10, 2021, https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/18278.

4 Havodis, "Suhbati Rahmon bo Gulbahor," YouTube, 4:21, March 27, 2020, last accessed March 10, 2021, https://youtu.be/KpH0HUZPQEc.

ER: In your *guruh* (cohort), how many *dukhtarho* (girls, here refers to young, unmarried women) are there?

GM: There are 27 *dukhtar* (girl, young woman) and 5 *pisar* (boy, young man).

ER: Ah … Those are some lucky guys [chuckles, smacks lips; general laughter] … Of these 27 girls, how many got married before their fourth year?

GM: Only ten of us girls remain, who haven't married [laughs shyly].

ER: 17 got married?

GM: Yes.

ER: So, you are part of the 10?

GM: [laughs, gets confused and embarrassed] … Yes, I am not married yet.

ER: Do you have a *domodshavanda* (candidate for a bridegroom)?

GM: No.

ER: Do you have anybody on the phone?

GM: [laughs shyly] No … According to the plans that I have put forth for myself, it is not the time for me to get married yet.

ER: Why? [Inaudible] You will get married in the fourth year … [sighs] … In the fifth year, you will receive your diploma and will give birth to a son … [General laughter] Then you'll start the work …

Rahmon appears to be so smitten by the young woman that he goes on to ask if she wants to study in Dushanbe (the capital of Tajikistan). When Muminzoda states that she plans to finish her current program (BA) and, later, Master's studies, all in Khujand, the President responds by repeating "*maylash*" (OK) several times and adds "*mo zid nestem*" (we are not against it). Rahmon continues by asking, "*chi khizmat kunam, dukhtarjon?*" (what service can I offer [you], dear girl?) and states his willingness to fulfill any of her heart's desires. Muminzoda, who continuously laughed throughout the exchange, probably to mask the president's embarrassing probing into her personal affairs, says that all she wants is to say thanks. In the video, the audience was also mostly laughing. Still, as the dialogue progressed, some of the women in the background visibly cringed, yet intently followed every word and gesture of the President. Rahmon ended the exchange by stating that he had recorded Muminzoda's name and instructed her to invite him to her wedding, promising to cover her wedding expenses out of his personal account. He also promised to bring her good presents for that occasion.

One can surely find an endless number of moral and ethical faults within this innuendo-laden dialogue, given the disparities in power and statuses of the people involved. I, however, propose to look at this exchange as a microcosm

of the current – second decade of the 21st century – gender order in Tajikistan. Currently, young women like Gulbahor Muminzoda dedicate years of hard work to their education, graduating with honors from schools and universities. Still, the first question they encounter is whether they are married.[5] In such a context, any man feels like he can (dis)approve of a young woman's studies, and all the president wants to offer to a young woman is help in organizing her marriage and fertility, without spending a single second to learn about her aspirations for her personal development and career. Perhaps the most disheartening realization is that, in the national patriarchal reality, bolstered by the state and religious narratives, women like Gulbahor Muminzoda are becoming an ever-rarer exception to the model that imagines women in progressively limited roles.[6] I detail the outlines of the official government narrative in the following sections of this paper. I argue that gender normativity, expected social behavior and demeanor based on one's gender, is a quintessential aspect of the current nation-building project in Tajikistan. To date, this normativity has not been systematically studied. In this article, I analyze the Tajik ethno-religious nation-building project with its distinct emphasis on a set of national gender norms.

I aim to contribute to the growing body of scholarship and research on gender issues and nationalism in Central Asia by providing a detailed analysis of the official national narrative on women in Tajikistan. The analytical insights of gendered nationalism in contemporary Tajikistan offered in this paper complement Roche's research on the Tajik government's policies and narratives on motherhood.[7] Similarly, by looking into the Tajik case, my research offers a comparable context to Suyarkulova's research on the gendered aspects of national clothing in Kyrgyzstan and Kudaibergenova's work on nationalization of bodies and representations of femininity.[8] The following sections provide

5 Notably, questions about marital status also inundated Helene Thibault during her field- work in Tajikistan, indicating that educated women, in general, and not just local women, become subjects to such personal inquiries. See: H. Thibault. "'Are You Married?': Gender and Faith in Political Ethnographic Research." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 50, no. 3 (January 2021): 1–22.

6 Here, I follow Sylvia Walby's definition of public patriarchy, which "is based principally in public sites such as employment and the state." S. Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 24.

7 S. Roche, "A sound family for a healthy nation: motherhood in Tajik national politics and society," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 207–224.

8 See M. Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the nation: gender and politics of dress in contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 247–265; D. Kudaibergenova, "Between the state and the artist: representations of femininity and masculinity in the formation of ideas of the nation in Central Asia," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 225–246.

an overview of the evolution of nation-building projects in post-Soviet, post- Civil War Tajikistan. Then, I outline a theoretical framework on nationalism and gender. In the empirical sections, I analyze the gender-specific aspects of the current ethno-religious national project by zooming in on the three dimensions (biological, political, and cultural) in which women in Tajikistan are (re-) producing the Tajik nation. My analysis presents gender as an intersection of nationalism, the models for patriotic womanhood, and as an authentic religiosity expressed through tangible reproductive, behavioral, and sartorial practices.

Evolution of Nation-Building Projects in Tajikistan

In post-Civil War Tajikistan, there were, at least, a couple of serious attempts to engage in symbolic politics and develop national identity projects. In 1999, Tajikistan, a nation-state that has not celebrated the first decade of its political sovereignty yet, took on the millennium-old mantle of a historical statehood as it marked the jubilee of the 1,100 years of the Tajik statehood. The epoch of the Samanid Empire rule (819–999 AD), personified in the mythologized representation of one of the dynasty's rulers – Ismail Somoni – became the centerpiece of the Tajik national imagination.[9] In general, scholars who studied the Samanids national project in post-Soviet Tajikistan agree on several points: 1) the project created an idealized myth about a strong Tajik state under a strong Tajik ruler; 2) the Samanid epoch was represented as a largely secular socio-political and cultural project, with a particular emphasis on the arts, science, and trade that flourished during the rule; and 3) an emphasis on the Tajik (Persian) language, which laid the foundations for a strong claim for the autochthonous imagination of the Tajik nation.[10]

In the new millennium, while not abolishing references to the "Samanids' successors," the Tajik elite doubled down on claims to Aryan ancestry. In 2001,

9 H. Blakkisrud and S. Nozimova, "History writing and nation building in post-independence Tajikistan," *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 2 (2010): 173–189. The intellectual underpinnings of the Samanid national project were borne out of Soviet historiography, in particular the works of Bobojon Ghafurov (1908–1977). See B. Ghafurov, *Tojikon: Ta'rikhi qadimtarin, qadim va asri miyona*, Vol. 1 (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1983); B. Ghafurov, *Tojikon: Okhirhoi asri miyona va davrai nav*, Vol. 2 (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1985).

10 See E. Marat, "Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: The Creation of National Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 1 (2008): 12–24;
M. Laruelle, "The return of the Aryan myth: Tajikistan in search of a secularized national ideology," *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 1 (2007): 51–70; Blakkisrud and Nozimova, "History- writing."

the Tajik government mandated the celebration of 2,700 years of "Avesta" – Zoroastrianism's holy book, presented as the most ancient example of Tajiks' Aryan scriptural heritage.[11] The Aryan theme had occupied the center stage in the intellectual discourse of Tajikistan's academia and political leadership in the early 2000s and ultimately culminated in proclaiming 2006 as the year to celebrate the Aryan heritage of the Tajik nation.

However, while these historical projects lingered on, their lasting impact on the public's national consciousness remained debatable and elusive.[12] Scholars saw the shortcoming of these largely secular events in their inability to engage the religious identity inherent to the post-Soviet Tajik public sphere.[13] Indeed, in the early 2000s, the Tajik government's nation-building politics had been pronouncedly divorced from Islam,[14] the self-professed religion of the majority of the country's population. State officials and government operatives regarded Islam as neither an ally nor a foe, but mainly a nuisance.[15]

By the late 2000s, the official approach had changed as it became apparent that the influence of Islam within the society of Tajikistan was not only not waning but, by most measures, growing. Realizing the consequences of promoting non-Islamic, and at times anti-Islamic, narratives, the state shifted its approach. The explanations for the change in state politics were laced with the narratives of Islamist danger, as demonstrated, for example, by the following excerpt written by Kholiki and Rakhimov:

> Experience shows that ignoring the "Islamic factor" is fraught with the explosion of Islamic extremism and terrorism and can lead to renouncing any ideology but Islamic fundamentalism and attempts to overthrow the constitutional order and establish Sharia law Islamic government. By being the religion of the majority of the country's population, Islam turned out to be a significant factor in the country's life, which presence

11 See "Sukhanroni bakhshida ba 10-solagii Istiqloliyati Jumhurii Tojikiston," *Khadamoti Matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, September 8, 2001, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http:// president.tj/node/15140.

12 See Marat, "Imagined Past."

13 See for example: K. Nourzhanov, "Nation-building and Political Islam in Post-Soviet Tajikistan," in *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia*, ed. M. Omelicheva (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 71–90; J. Heathershaw and E. Herzig, "Introduction: The Sources of Statehood in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011): 5–19.

14 Laruelle, "The return"; Marat, "Imagined Past"; Blakkisrud and Nozimova, "History-writing."

15 See P. Shozimov and R. Khaydarov (eds.), *Dinamika razvitiya nacional'nykh proektov v Central'noy Azii: Materialy Seminara* (Dushanbe: Irfon, 2006), 127.

> can't be ignored. Thus, starting from the 2000s, the Government of Tajikistan took on the course to improve relations with Islam.[16]

Kholiki and Rakhimov assert that there was an emergent need to make "sensible use of" and harness the "positive potential of the Muslim religion," especially in the spheres of "peacebuilding, culture-creating and politically-stabilizing power of Islam" and to implement this potential in the "moral-spiritual education/upbringing of the nation."[17] The authors identified this turn as a *novyy 'etap* (new stage) in forming the Tajik national identity.[18]

In 2009, the Tajik government's discourse began to fuse the Tajik ethnic identity that hitherto was predominantly defined in cultural, linguistic, and historical terms with the religious one. This process of integrating a sanitized and ideologically conservative Islamic narrative with the historic national project included spectacular year-long events to celebrate the Year of *Imomi A'zam* (refers to Abu Hanifa – an 8th-century scholar of Islamic jurisprudence and the founder of the Hanafi Sunni school of law) and the adoption of the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations in 2009, among others. The law spelled out a special recognition of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and its role in the "development of the national culture and spiritual life of the people of Tajikistan."[19] Since then, the Tajik government has taken considerable measures to impose a standardized experience of Islam throughout the country.[20] Thus, since 2009, the Tajik government's new nation-building approach has been to embrace the religious identity but maintain that there is an authentic Tajik way of practicing Islam.

16 A. Kholiki and N. Rakhimov, "Novyy 'etap formirovaniya nacional'noy ideii v Tadzhiki- stane," *Vestnik Tadzhikskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta prava, biznesa i politiki*. *Seriya gumanitarnykh nauk* 38, no. 2 (2009): 106.

17 Ibid, 107.

18 In addition to the translation provided in the text, the word *'etap* in Russian (a French borrowing) has another meaning referring to destinations along the transportation route of the prisoners to the prisons. Hence, by using the phrase "*novyy 'etap*," the authors gave way to an unintended double entendre, suggesting that the nation as a prisoner was *en route* to another ideological prison.

19 See Zakon Respubliki Tadzhikistan o svobode sovesti i religioznykh ob'edeneniyakh (from January 2, 2018, edition No. 1497), last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://base.mmk.tj /view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=197.

20 See: Nozimova and Epkenhans, "The Transformation"; H. Zainiddinov, "The Changing Relationship of the Secularized State to Religion in Tajikistan," *Journal of Church and State* 55, no. 3 (2013): 456–477.

The emergent narrative of the ethno-religious national project legitimized the patriarchal political order centered around President Rahmon.[21] This narrative created explicit categories of domestic enemies (often with some unidentified "foreign masters"), who supposedly practice and/or interpret Islam differently from the state-sanctioned interpretation, Tajikistan's version of Sunni Hanafi Islamic normativity, and, therefore, become harbingers of subversive intents aimed at depriving the Tajik nation of its sovereignty and peace.[22] Hence, on the part of the governing elite, there has been a significant turn from viewing Islam as an inconvenience to realizing that Islam could be instrumental in peace-building and ethical upbringing. Indeed, in the current national project, government-curated Islamic content is recognized as the cornerstone of the Tajik national identity. After presenting the theoretical framework of this research, I demonstrate how women became the symbolic repositories of the government's ethno-religious narrative. I find that in the state-promoted national project, women's bodies became a canvas to demarcate both ethnic/cultural and religious/ideological boundaries.

Theoretical Framework: Gender and Nation-Building

Until the late 1980s, women and gendered aspects of national narratives have often been overlooked in the scholarship on nationalism. For example, Gellner asserted that "two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation … nations are the artefacts of men's convictions and loyalties."[23] Similarly, Anderson argued that it is the bonds of "fraternity" that made a (self) sacrifice for the nation possible.[24] Thus, Thapar-Björkert convincingly argued that the distinguishing feature of the established theories of nationalism has been in the fact that those discussions "have been primarily *by men about men*" (emphasis in the original).[25]

21 This process culminated in the adoption of the Law on *Peshvoi Millat* (The Leader of the Nation) in 2015. Related constitutional amendments were adopted in 2016. A. Sar- korova "Prezident Tadzhikistana Rakhmon provozglashen liderom nacii," *BBC Russian*, December 10, 2015, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/russian /international/2015/12/151210_tajikistan_national_leader.

22 See Nozimova and Epkenhans, "The Transformation"; E. Lemon and F. Roberts, "Tajiki- stan: From Reconciliation to Post-Reconciliation," in *Political Regimes and Neopatrimo- nialism in Central Asia: A Sociology of Power Perspective*, eds. F. Izquierdo-Brichs and F. Serra-Massaansalvador (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 199–247.

23 E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7.

24 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections in the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 7.

25 S. Thapar-Björkert, "Gender, Nations, and Nationalisms" in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, eds. G. Waylen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 806.

The much-needed intervention in the theorization of women in the nation-building processes began in the late 1980s. Since then, the research and writing by Yuval-Davis, Anthias, Walby, and Kandiyoti, among others, significantly advanced our understanding of the national projects as inherently gendered constructs.[26] Such works provided insights into how women become physical, ideological, and cultural (re-)producers of national boundaries. They also exemplified how women can use national projects to carve out ways to participate in national politics. Significantly, this research direction also conceptualizes the relationship between masculinity and nationalism.[27]

Yuval-Davis argued that nationalism and gender were mutually informative and proposed to view national projects as "multiplex," where "different dimensions would be emphasized in particular historical moments or by particular segments within the national collectivity."[28] The scholar identified three dimensions of nationalist projects and argued that specific gender relations can play an essential role in their shaping: 1) a genealogical dimension centered around "the myth of common origin or shared blood/genes"; 2) a cultural one, which focused on "symbolic heritage provide by language and/or religion and/or other customs and traditions [that] are constructed as the 'essence' of the 'nation'"; and 3) a citizenship-related one referring to the factors "determining the boundaries of the nations and thus relat[ing] it directly to notions of state sovereignty and specific territoriality."[29]

There is a long history in Central Asia to connect political loyalty, as well as ethnic and religious identity with female personal space and behavior. This process became most evident starting in 1927, what Shoshana Keller called "[t]he watershed year," when the Bolshevik party, who were determined to end Central Asian "backwardness" and resolved to "put Muslims on the path to Communist enlightenment," launched their initiative by mass public unveilings.[30] Douglas Northrop argued that in the process of creating Central

26 See N. Yuval-Davis and F. Anthias, *Woman-nation-state* (London: Macmillan, 1989); N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: SAGE, 1997); S. Walby "Gender, nations and states in the global era," *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 4 (2000): 523–540; D. Kandiyoti, "Identity and its discontents: Women and the nation," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1991): 429–443.

27 For example, C. Enloe, *Bananas, beaches, and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1989).

28 N. Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations," *Nar. umjet.* 40, no. 1 (2003): 11.

29 Ibid.

30 S. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), xv; A. Edgar, "Bolshevism, Patriarchy and the Nation: The Soviet 'Emancipation' of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 252–272.

Asian nationalities, it was paramount that Soviet leaders create some checklist of features that distinguished one nation from another.[31] Language had proven to be a poor indicator, as most Turkic nations were linguistically similar, and in multilingual centers, like Bukhoro and Samarqand, people often spoke both languages, Turkic and Persian. Thus, eventually, the spotlight fell on women and "gendered patterns of family behavior."[32] In particular, Northrop argues that "[h]aving long served as cultural emblems, women became the normative figures for each nationality: they stood for the inner domain of the family, home, and spirituality, where the roots of cultural identity were taken to lie."[33] Yet, because Communist party leaders declared these gendered customs and behaviors as "primitive and oppressive," they reasserted the view that indigenous people were uncivilized and in need of transformation through women.[34] Unsurprisingly, in the post-Soviet Central Asian national narratives, women and gender roles continue to occupy a central place. In the tumultuous first years since independence (September 9, 1991), women in Tajikistan and Central Asia, in general, were often described as being caught between the anvil and the hammer of the competing gendered regimes – systems of gender-specific norms of social and familial behavior. In particular, the remnants of the "secular" or "modernizing" female emancipation project promoted by the Soviet state were often viewed as being incompatible with the ever-tightening grip of the ethno-religious imagination centered around the so-called "traditional" female roles.[35] Such existential symbolic antagonisms proved instrumental in facilitating the emergence of a vibrant political space where secular, communist, Islamist, and nationalist forces competed for domination.[36] Thus, by demanding the observance of certain gendered cultural traditions, various political movements attempted to construct imaginations of the greater political ambitions and social development models.[37] In this manner, the emotive

31 D. Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 50.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid, 58.

35 S. Akiner, "Between Tradition and Modernity: The Dilemma Facing Contemporary Central Asian Women," in *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*, ed. M. Buckley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 261–304; D. Kandiyoti, "The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?" *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (December 2007): 601–623.

36 See T. Epkenhans, *Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).

37 S. Tajbakhsh, "Between Lenin and Allah: Women and Ideology in Tajikistan," in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, eds. H.L. Bodman and N. Tohidi (Boulder:

idealized images of women anchored abstract political ideologies to everyday life and, at times, to a mythical past and provided a cohesive set of indicators of success for the competing political forces.

Observing the emergent political trends in Central Asia during the first decade of the 21st century, Deniz Kandiyoti noted that the recently- independent states launched sweeping "nationalizing" campaigns "ranging from language policies and revised national histories, geared to consolidating the hegemony of their respective titular nations, to new iconographies for successor regimes," and calls to bring back "traditional families" were part of these efforts, as well.[38] Noting Uzbekistan's particular turn to "conservative gender ideologies," Kandiyoti suggested that it was a part of the multifold strategy. On the one hand, it was a display of (perceived) true adherence to the gender ideals of Islam, which was regaining moral ground. On the other hand, it was an effort to delimit a "national and therefore benign" Islam from the militant, foreign, transnational, "and therefore perilous" forms of Islam.[39] Remarking that precisely what qualified as authentic traditions in a nation-state created by the Soviet (colonial) state was problematic, Kandiyoti maintained that:

> national traditions are being actively reinvented and self-consciously deployed to serve new ideological purposes [of the newly independent political regimes]. Discourses on national independence can be seen to perform a dual function. They attempt to distance new regimes from their Soviet past by casting it as a colonial encounter that repressed a national essence that is now being revitalized. They also strive to create new imaginaries of the nation that enhance social solidarity in increasingly fractured societies. Gender plays a central role in both these processes.40

Using insights from gender and nationalism theories, I argue that during the second decade of the 21st century, in the state-sanctioned ethno-religious national project, women carry the burden of national (re-) production by becoming repositories of the Tajik nationhood. This form of nationhood combines a particular historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage and a specific practice and regulation of Islam. Women in Tajikistan have become instrumental in defining the contours of the genealogical, cultural, and citizenship

Lynne Reienner Publishers, 1998), 163–185; G. Tett, "'Guardians of the Faith?': Gender and Religion in an (ex) Soviet Tajik Village," in *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, eds. C. F. El-Solh and J. Mabro (London: Routledge, 1994), 128–151.

38 Kandiyoti, "The politics of gender,"
610. 39 Ibid, 611.
40 Ibid, 616.

dimensions of the current ethno-religious national project. My argument is based on qualitative content analysis of various primary data, such as official state laws and government documents, speeches of the President and other state officials, and state and independent media publications. By providing a window into the current discourse on national gender norms and roles, my research demonstrates that critical issues and local identities in Tajikistan, as elsewhere, are being constantly contested, negotiated, and reframed. In the following, I analyze how and in what ways women in Tajikistan are tasked with bearing, rearing, and wearing the Tajik nation

Women Bear the Tajik Nation

For women is but one art enough,
Sit and beget lions, male and tough.[41]
Unknown[42]

In Tajikistan's contemporary political imagination encapsulated by the ethno-religious national project, the nation is seen as a woman, and each woman is seen as a national possession. As a result, matters concerning female bodies, especially regarding reproduction, are highly politicized. Yet, women's political activism is highly discouraged. For example, the state transformed International Women's Day, celebrated annually on March 8, into Mother's Day. In Tajikistan (and the former-Soviet space), International Women's Day has lost the political connotation it had in Soviet times. Instead, it had turned into a cultural celebration of femininity, a hybrid between Mother's Day and Valentine's Day. In Tajikistan, the formal change is not only about semantics. It is also reflects the national project, where a Tajik woman's role as a mother had become a cornerstone of the official state's narrative on women as a part of the current ethno-religious national project.

41 Zanonro hamin bas buvad yak hunar, / Ki shinandu zoyand sheroni nar.

42 In public discourse, this verse is often attributed to Ferdowsi (10–11th century Persian poet); see, for example: M. Anvari "Shahzoda Tabarova: Zani Tojik behtarin zan dar ham- sardori, sarfakori, tahammulpaziri va muhabbatu sadoqat ast," *Khovar*, March 4, 2016, last accessed March 10, 2021, https://khovar.tj/2016/03/sha-zoda-tabarova-zani-to-ik-be-tarin
-zan-dar-amsardor-sarfakor-ta-ammulpazir-va-mu-abbatu-sado-at-ast/. However, I could not find credible literary sources supporting this claim.

Birthing a Healthy Nation's (Male) Offspring

In the state-promoted official discourse, women in Tajikistan continue to be almost singularly, defined by their biological reproductive role. For example, the expression "*zan – modar*" (woman – mother) is a frequent collocation in President Rahmon and other officials' speeches and addresses. In this narrative, women, not just as individual mothers but as a collective noun – national mothers – must "secure the production of an *oilai solim* (sound family)."[43] As Roche observed, national legislation has been amended to allow extensive state measures with the aim "to create healthy families and ensure that only healthy children are born."[44] These measures include state policies on reproductive control, mandatory pre-marital virginity, health checks, and the prohibition of marriages among close relatives, the carriers of certain genetic diseases or mutations, as well as, persons with drug addictions or some forms of viral infections (e.g., HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis C).

Having a healthy nation in this state's narrative means to be free of disabilities, which are seen as an immense social and familial burden. Notably, individual disabilities are necessarily seen as female borne. Such narratives nearly always specify *nuqsu illathoi modarzodi* (deformities and deficiencies borne by mothers); preventing these is considered of paramount importance for the state policy.[45] For example, President Rahmon, in one of his speeches in 2015, justified mandatory pre-marriage medical examinations, including virginity checks, by claiming that they will prevent genetic diseases. He argued that potentially millions of his compatriots suffer *zindagii ma'yusonavu talkh* (a life of misery and hopelessness) because of the 165 thousand *ma'yubon* (persons with disabilities).[46]

The president did not limit his arguments only to the medical and genetic fields. To satisfy religious aspirations and sensibilities, he also presented evidence from traditional Islamic sources to support his views: a vague reference to an Islamic source, a verse from Persian ruler and poet Keykavus, and an unspecified statement from the Al-Azhar (Egypt's most prestigious) university's ulama.[47] Therefore, the President argued that Tajik people should draw appropriate conclusions from the medical evidence and the counsel of the ancestors to make sure that "the *genofond* [gene pool] of our dear nation is

43 Roche, "A sound family,"
215. 44 Ibid, 216.

45 "Sukhanroni ba munosibati Ruzi modar," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, March 6, 2015, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://www.president.tj/node/8349.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

protected and healthy generations keep making our families happier."[48] Following the president's urging, the amendments stipulating mandatory and extensive medical examinations, including virginity checks before marriage, and the ban of marriages between close relatives were adopted.[49]

A woman's role as a national mother could only be fulfilled if she birthed male children and devoted them to the Tajik nation since only males could be worthy representatives of the nation. In a typical speech, the President praised Tajik mothers as those who have birthed the nation's *farzandoni farzona* (sage offspring), from Rudaki, Ferdowsi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ismail Somoni to Jadidist Ahmadi Donish and Soviet-era names such as Ayni, Ghafurov, and Tursunzoda – the most renowned cultural, scientific, and political dignitaries. Rahmon also mentioned that there were also "thousands" of other "honorable and glorified men who are now considered our – Tajiks' – pride."[50]

Similarly, a publication attributed to President Rahmon speaks about the life and legacy of the prominent historical figures, who have left an outsize imprint in the "six thousand years" history of the Tajik nation. In this publication, among the 25 dignitaries – from Cyrus the Great and Zoroaster to the prophet Muhammad, from to Ayni and Shotemur – not a single woman is recognized as a *chehrai mondagor* (lasting/impactful figure).[51] Thus, when the national gene pool is discussed, it is implied that the worthiest representatives of the nation can only be male; females are recognized only (if at all) as those who have endowed the nation with their glorified, homeland-loving sons.

Protecting the "National Gene Pool" from Foreigners

The flip side of the discussion around the issue of preserving the Tajik gene pool is a growing call to prevent Tajik women from marrying foreigners. In 2011, the country's Family Code was amended to require foreigners who want to marry Tajik nationals to live in the country for at least a year, sign a marriage contract,

48 Ibid.

49 The practice of performing pre-marital virginity checks as part of pre-marital medical examinations has already led to fatalities. See: M. Ahmadi and M. Muhammadrajab, "Nomi zanu shavhare, ki khudkushi kardand, ma'lum shud," Radioi Ozodi, July 16, 2018, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.ozodi.org/a/tajik-couple-committied-suicide-tajikistan/29367203.html; also "Virginity Tests Spark Debate in Tajikistan After Tragic Deaths," RFE/RL, August 14, 2018, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/virginity-tests-spark-debate-in-tajikistan-after-tragic-deaths/29433097.html; on the practice of virginity checks in Kyrgyzstan see Kim et al. in this issue.

50 "Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo namoyandagoni zanoni mamlakat," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, March 7, 2006, last accessed March 10, 2021, http://president.tj/node/313.

51 See E. Rahmon, *Chehrahoi mondagor* (Dushanbe: 'ER-graf, 2016).

and provide their Tajik spouse with the means of existence and a place to live (e.g., purchase an apartment).[52] These legal provisions have been subject to criticism by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) as violating the norms stipulated in the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, including the right to choose one's spouse, to which Tajikistan is a signatory.[53] Representatives of the Ministry of Justice of Tajikistan continue to give positive assessments to the decreasing rate of Tajik women's intermarriage with the foreigners, arguing that it is an effective measure to prevent human trafficking.[54]

Some state officials argued that the restrictions preventing Tajik women's marrying foreigners were a way of maintaining the cultural, biological, and religious purity of the Tajik nation. For example, Saodat Amirshoeva, the only woman to hold the rank of General-Major and two-time member of *Majlisi Namoyandagon* (lower chamber of the Parliament), argued that allowing women to marry foreigners, especially representatives of religions other than Islam, would be to the detriment of the Tajik gene pool. She said,

> I am against Tajik girls marrying men of other religions or representatives of other nations – Russians, Chinese, or others, that will not benefit our traditions and customs … I believe that Tajik Muslim men can marry women of other religions, but I am against Tajik Muslim girls marrying men of other faiths, especially the Chinese…. We have our own nation, our own traditions, customs, and rituals. Sharia and Islam that we are developing today, if other people do not follow those, they should not be allowed to marry [Tajik women].[55]

Another media outlet reported Amirshoeva promising to restrict the possibility of marriages among Tajik women and foreigners. She said, "[w]e, Tajik women, as Muslims do not have the right to marry men of other religions. As a member of Parliament (deputy), I promise you that although the Constitution

52 A. Sarkorova, "Tadzhikistan vvodit ogranicheniya na braki s inostrancami," *BBC Russian Service*, January 27, 2011, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2011/01/110126_tajikistan_curtails_foreign_marriages_anora.

53 M. Ahmadi, "SMM khostori sabuki dar izdivoji dukhtaroni tojik bo khorijiho shud," *Radioi Ozodi*, August 29, 2017, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.ozodi.org/a/un-tajikistan/28702732.html.

54 Ibid.

55 F. Umarzoda, "S. Amirshoeva: tadzhichki dolzhny vykhodit' zamuzh tol'ko za musul'man," *ASIA-Plus*, July 3, 2013, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20130703/s-amirshoeva-tadzhichki-dolzhny-vykhodit-zamuzh-tolko-za-musulman.

guarantees the freedom of marriage, I, God willing, will try to take measures against this phenomenon."[56]

Similar views have been expressed in the larger public sphere. For example, Sayyofi Mizrob (aka Sayf Dostiev), the editor-in-chief of *SSSR* (USSR) newspaper, which has a large audience (reportedly, around 50,000 readers) and is considered independent, has recently expressed his outrage at the "fashionable trend" of Tajik women – whom he called *jalabho* (whores) – marrying *shavhari begona* (alien husband). He wrote,

> I know [it's] democracy, freedom, and so on. But it is an affront for me when a Tajik woman marries a Russian, an American, a European, an Afghan, an Iranian, a Chinese, or a Pakistani…. Death to *javonmar- done* (honorable men) that allow their women to marry *ghayritojik* (non-Tajiks).[57]

Recalling the legends of the *Childukhtaron* (Forty girls) mountain range in the Khatlon region of Tajikistan,[58] Mizrob concluded that,

> Tajik ladies fought the invaders and demanded from God to be turned into stones so that they wouldn't become subjects to sexual violations of Alexander [Alexander the Great], Mongols, Tatars, and Russian … A Tajik woman would instead turn into *but* (a lifeless stone figure) then become a wife to a foreigner![59]

Moreover, Mizrob's nationalist vitriol carries a particular racial trope that is markedly anti-Mongol. "The beautiful faces that we have, my dear Tajik readers, are thanks to the vow made in Avesta," writes Mizrob, "to maintain kin- only marriage…. If it weren't for that vow … our faces would resemble those of Mongols or Chinese."[60] Although state officials try to be more careful about

56 "Saodat Amirshoeva: Tadzhichki ne imeyut nikakogo prava vykhodit' zamuzh za nemusul'man," *Ozodagon*, July 1, 2013, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://catoday.org/public/index.php/tjru/saodat-amirshoeva-tadzhichiki-ne-imeyut-nikakogo-prava-vyhodit-zamuzh-za-nemusulman.

57 S. Mizrob, "Mo va jalabhoi mo," *SSSR*, July 25, 2019, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://cccp.tj/tj/component/k2/item/6308-mo-va-jalabhoi-mo.html?fbclid=IwAR1FwoWJY_rFJL82zQVaVkbUIlc5rp9CWXN4aE-agfV3hkwzfTvTd23_iEc.

58 On *Childukhtaron* mountains and legends see: T. Rasul-zade, "Nepokorennye. I pochti nedostupnye," *Fergana*, October 26, 2019, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://fergana.news/articles/111780/.

59 Mizrob, "Mo va jalabhoi mo."

60 Ibid.

such direct racialized references, these thinly veiled dog-whistles exist in plain sight. For example, there is, supposedly, such a thing as *simoi zeboi Tojiki* – a beautiful Tajik phenotype. Although it is hard to find the exact parameters, it can still serve as a basis for exclusion. For example, in 2016, Shahnozi Niyozboqi participated in a competition among university students to make a public speech in front of the President (like Gulbahor Muminzoda, discussed in the earlier section), who was officiating Navruz celebrations in the Sughd region. Although Niyozboqi was initially among the participants' roster, she was later removed. When Niyozboqi started inquiring at the district and regional *hukumat* (executive office) about why she was removed from the list, she received an official response from the district government stating that she did not meet the requirements for appearing in front of the "Founder of Peace and Unity, Peshvoi Millat (Leader of the Nation)."[61] According to the letter, these requirements were: "*Simoi zeboi Oriyoi* [beautiful Aryan phenotype/face], high stature and clear diction."[62] Niyozboqi said, "[m]y goal was … to simply express my gratitude," as she received her university degree thanks to the Presidential quota for girls from rural areas.[63]

Such concerns about the racial and ethnic purity and the nation's quality centered around its physical reproducers make women crucial in defining the boundaries of nations. Since the assumptions of who belongs to the nation and who does not are often passed from one generation to another, especially in ethnic discourses, the most common way to join a community is to be born into it.[64] Therefore, the nationalist projects that emerge from such hegemonic discourses can encourage or discourage either having children or not, or having children of specific sex and excellent health, or having children only with approved partners.

These narratives link Tajikistan's national project to a Eugenicist discourse, where the nation's most crucial element is its (bio-physical) quality.[65] In such discourse, the nation's quality is not ensured by improving the quality of life of adults and children. Instead, the goal is "to pre-determine the nation's quality via 'nature' in the way of selective breeding."[66] Hence, the efforts to control

61 "Se sharti sukhanroni nazdi Emomali Rahmon: Simoi zaboi oriyoi, qomati baland va nutqi burro," *Tojnews*, April 29, 2016, last accessed March 10, 2021, https://tojnews.org/tj/news/se-sharti-suhanroni-nazdi-emomali-rakhmon-simoi-zeboi-oriyoi-komati-baland-va-nutki-burro.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist Projects," 12.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid, 13.

Tajik women's marriage choices are part and parcel of an attempt to maintain the quality and the purity of the ethnic blood, religious belonging, and particular cultural/racial heritage.

These multifaceted observations indicate that, in the current ethno-religious national project in Tajikistan, women must carry the burden of physical reproduction of the nation. Women's bodies and their role as mothers are further exploited to maintain ethnic and religious boundaries, enforce Eugenicist policies to create a disability- and disease-free society, and ensure belonging to a particular religious heritage. To guarantee the "quality" and "purity" of the Tajik nation's racialized concept(-ion), the state has initialized official institutional/medical examinations, created barriers preventing women from marrying foreigners, all the while cementing into the national consciousness a view that women are, first and foremost, the carriers of nationalized wombs tasked with (re-) producing glorified and patriotic Tajik sons.

Women Rear the Tajik Nation

> If a woman didn't grant us an eternal existence, We'd have
> lived with no name, or roots, or trace.[67]
>
> Mirzo Tursunzoda

In the official state rhetoric of contemporary Tajikistan, women – mothers are depicted as physical reproducers of the nation, and more importantly, as transmitters of national identity. Women are expected to link the generations and channel the historical heritage and proper cultural traditions and practices to their offspring through their breastmilk. This section investigates the state's discourse on Tajik women as instillers of the Tajik national identity and sense of patriotic duty in future generations.

Instilling National Identity, Culture, and Traditions

A uniting feature of the previous historical national identity projects (e.g., Samanid or Aryan) has been their distinctly intellectual basis. The poets, writers, historians, and archeologists – the intelligentsia – were considered the most responsible agents in defining cultural heritage and properly transmitting and instilling national identity in the larger nation in the process of *khudshinosi* (self-(re)discovery). President Rahmon consistently repeated that the intelligentsia was responsible for creating the Tajik nation and ensuring

67 Zan agar moro namebakhshid umri jovidon, / Betakhallus, benasab, benom memondem mo.

national unity. He insisted that "[i]t is imperative for the intelligentsia to instill the importance of nation and state in the public consciousness" and that the intelligentsia should "propagandize people to value the state and national statehood."[68]

During the second decade of the 21st century, however, the task of channeling, protecting, and instilling Tajik cultural heritage, identity, and loyalty to state and nation, previously an exclusive domain of the intelligentsia, was increasingly transferred to women. This task came to be represented as an essential part of a woman's life-long mission of being a national mother in service to the Tajik state. In his 2009 speech delivered on Mother's Day, President Rahmon praised Tajik women-mothers as worthy of public respect because they responsibly fulfill their "motherly mission" and "duty as citizens" by "raising children in the supreme spirit of devotion to Homeland, instilling thinking and national essence, strengthening national self-realization and self- determination, as well as, patriotism and love for Homeland."[69]

While a Tajik woman must have and raise a male, patriotic child(ren), her role in educating and raising proper daughters is also clearly spelled out. In one address in 2016, the President instructed Tajik women to educate their daughters in a framework of traditional gender roles and norms:

> Dear mothers, you have an enormous role and impact in the act of upbringing of children, especially your daughters, in a spirit of patience and tolerance, respect for righteous national rituals and traditions, including respect and admiration of elders, economy, and frugality, counseling them to the virtuous path in life and advising to create a healthy and stable family.[70]

The Tajik leader's rhetoric defines the true mission of Tajik women-mothers is to be educators and transmitters of national identity and national language (mother-tongue), to be protectors of the authentic national values and culture and the authentic practice of Islam, and to be instillers of patriotism. The following statement exemplifies the current national project: "[t]he greatness of the woman – mother, first of all, is embodied in that she is the guardian of

68 "Sukharoni dar muloqot bo namoyandagoni ziyoiyoni mamlakat," *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, March 20, 2004, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://president.tj /node/6614.

69 "Payomi tabriki ba munosibati Ruzi baynalmillalii zanon," *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, March 6, 2009, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://president.tj/node/316.

70 "Payom ba iftikhori Ruzi modar," *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, March 7, 2016, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://president.tj/node/10858.

language, history and culture of the nation."[71] In this project, every woman's national and motherly duty and life mission is to raise proper ethnic Tajiks who are able to speak the titular language, are aware of the national culture, and are eager to serve the amalgamated conception of nation-state-homeland. In 2011, Tajikistan codified official legislation about parental duties in the Law "On Responsibility of Father and Mother in the Education and Upbringing of a Child." This Law required parents to give their children "righteous names in accordance with national values," to limit religious education, and to raise children in the spirit of respect to Homeland, law, and national values.[72] In 2019, the Law was amended to require parents to raise children to recognize that national interests prevail over personal ones. While this law does not necessarily place a greater onus on women as mothers, the official state's discourse does. In the official rhetoric and public discourse, *risolati aslii khesh* (most essential mission) of women – mothers is centered on the "upbringing of the future generation."[73] In 2019, Qosimzoda, the head of the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, expressed this view saliently. According to her, Tajik women with "*simoi zeboi tojiki* (beautiful Tajik faces)" and who speak in *lafzi shirinu nobi tojiki* (sweet and pure Tajik) are trying day and night to effectively implement the law on parental responsibility and raise healthy, conscientious, honorable representatives of the Tajik homeland.[74]

In the current ethno-national project in Tajikistan, women reproduce national identity in several complex ways. As the bearers of the collective honor, the state's control of women's sexuality and other aspects of their reproductive health and childbearing reproduces ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. At the same time, women-mothers are themselves cultural symbols. The Tajik language is designated as *zaboni modari* (mother tongue), regardless of whether or not one's mother is a native Tajik speaker.[75] Similarly, the Tajik homeland came to be ubiquitously equated with a woman in the common

71 "Tabriknomai Prezidenti Jumhurii Tojikiston, Peshvoi millat, muhtaram 'Emomali Rahmon bakhshida ba Ruzi modar," *Khadamoti matbuoti Presidenti Tojikiston*, March 7, 2018, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://president.tj/node/17199.

72 Law on "Responsibility of father and mother in the education and upbringing of a child," April 4, 2019, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=257 ().

73 "Tabriknomai Prezidenti."

74 "Idigul Qosimzoda: 'Fazoi solimu orom va pur az muhabbati oila az sarishtakorii zan vobasta ast'," *Khovar*, March 6, 2019, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://khovar.tj/2019/03/idigul-osimzoda-fazoi-solimu-orom-va-pur-az-mu-abbati-oila-az-sarishtakorii-zan-vobasta-ast/.

75 Tajik (and its different dialects) is considered the native language for the titular majority in Tajikistan. However, for significant ethnic and regional minorities, such as Uzbeks and

verbal construction of "*Vatan – Modar*" (Homeland – Mother). Further, women's role as mothers includes an important task of being *payvandgari naslho* (connectors/welders of the generations) to the "intergenerational reproducers of the nation."[76] It is noteworthy that the state does not trust women with defining the national heritage. Instead, women's role is to be mouthpieces to voice, teach, and transfer the already-defined-by-the-state cultural norms, which are strengthened with a hefty dose of legal stipulations.

Women Wear the Tajik Nation

O my beloved beauty of age, The
clothing of atlas befits you
***
O my beloved and lively with no *faranji*, Let me
talk, I don't mean to offend you[77]
Mirzo Tursonzoda

On September 6, 2017, millions of mobile service users in Tajikistan received text messages (SMS) from their mobile service providers. These messages instructed users to "observe traditional Tajik clothes" and respect national/traditional clothes. One of them, somewhat tautologically, stated, "Let's make it a tradition to wear traditional clothes."[78] These messages were sent out by the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs on the eve of the annual Independence Day celebrations. In line with the policies of other official institutions, these messages heralded a significant change that was going to affect the sartorial choices of all of Tajikistan's citizens: the national dress requirements were going to be inscribed onto the legal framework for the first time.

Indeed, just days before this mass notification, the Law "On Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations and Rituals" was amended to introduce new responsibilities of individuals and legal entities "to protect elements of the national culture, including the state language and national clothing" during the weddings,

Pamiris, Tajik is not a native language, making its categorization as the "mother-tongue" presumptuous, if not outright discriminatory.

76 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 80.

77 'Ey dukhtari nozanini qadras, / Zebanda turo libosi atlas,
'Ey dilbari shukhi befaranji, / Yak gap ba tu mezanam, naranji.

78 "You've Got Veil: Millions of Text Messages Remind Tajiks to Obey New Dress Code," *RFE/ RL*, September 6, 2017, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-text-messsages-remind-obey-new-dress-code-hijab/28720266.html.

festivities, and/or other community events and gatherings.[79] The law did not specify the details of these protections and left ample room for bureaucratic interpretations, albeit resulting in significant financial penalties.[80] While neither the law nor the mobile messages specified women as particular targets of the campaign and restrictions, by implication, women became the wearers of the nation through Tajikistan's national dress.

The state's concern with the women's sartorial choices appears to be three-dimensional: 1) protection and representation of the national heritage; 2) control of sexuality and promotion of modesty, and 3) warding off foreign/alien "radical Islamic" influences and ideologies.[81] Over the years, multiple state structures, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, the State Committee on Religion and Regulation of Rituals and Traditions, and the Presidential Administration, were the vanguard of the wardrobe policing. Their active promotion of "traditional" dress indicated that the female dress code and head-covering continued to occupy a center stage in the current national project.

National Dress as Cultural/Historical Artefact

As is the case in other Central Asian countries, in contemporary Tajikistan, the female national dress is considered a quintessential aspect of the national culture.[82] As a tangible symbol, a dress code demarcates the boundaries between those who belong or do not belong to the nation. In the official state rhetoric, the traditional female dress is a material culture artefact that consistently reproduces the connection to the claimed historical heritage and feeds into the myth of common origin.[83] Traditional clothing is often described as "*in'ikoskunanda* (a reflector/mirror) of history, culture, and traditions" that

79 See Law "On regulation of traditions, celebrations and rituals," no. 1461, August 28, 2017, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=174&language=tj.

80 See Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Tajikistan, Article 481, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=4.

81 On politicization and contestation over the female dress in Tajikistan, see S. Kasymova, "Atlas, chakan, khidzhab i mini-yubka …" *Fergana*, February 7, 2021, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://fergana.site/articles/121671/?fbclid=IwAR24SSAZo2uVjN9iA8sclYS9kQtKuCe3vqQmLLNT4EfE43KT0yo0BNuv_w4.

82 For analysis of the Kyrgyz context see Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the Nation."

83 Usually consists of loose kaftan-style dress made of colorful fabric with trousers made of matching fabric and some form of head-covering, usually a kerchief, tied at the nape of the neck, that leaves the neck and chin exposed.

introduces the Tajik nation to the world.[84] Hence, in the state's national(ist) discourse, the traditional female dress is conceived to be an unchanging cultural artifact, which has been preserved since time immemorial: "national clothing … [is] *yodgori* (relic) of *ajdodonamon* (our ancestors) that throughout *qarnho* (the eons) has not lost its charm and beauty."[85] This connection to the ancestral heritage explains why wearing the Tajik national dress is mandated for women during communal and/or family-related celebrations and events and also in their place of work and study.[86] By ensuring that most women follow a traditional dress code, the state's nationalist discourse positioned women as the main object of national imagining. As a result, Tajik men would become a part of the nation only through an association with a woman who actively reproduces belonging to the national community by embodying its values through the dress code and performing other tasks, such as bearing and rearing the nation.

National Dress as Proper Religious Clothing

In the state's discourse, the Tajik national dress is also an appropriate symbol of national and religious modesty. European dress, which sometimes is referred to as *rusi*/*urusi* (Russian) or *sovremenniy*/*hozirazamon* (contemporary/mod-ern) dress, is approved and often tacitly encouraged by the state officials as a professional (civil) uniform and an overt expression of political loyalty. Yet, the official rhetoric clarifies that excesses in these matters will not be tolerated. In 2018, the Ministry of Culture produced the most comprehensive instruction manual for women, depicting age-appropriate clothes for the different occasions and settings. This manual lists the clothes that are not appropriate for Tajik women. These are as follows:

> … European clothes that are half-naked, miniskirts, décolletage, tank tops, clothes from see-through fabrics. Also, it is not recommended [for women] to be in public places in *galoshes* (clogs) or slippers, underwear,

84 "Bozdid az Namoishgohi hunarhoi mardumi dar dehai Shahrinavi dehoti 'Dehibaland'-i nohiyai Mu'minobod," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, September 10, 2019, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://president.tj/node/21292.

85 M. Bobobekova, "Vaqte sukhan az libosi milli meravad …" *Jumhuriyat*, January 15, 2019, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=36533.

86 Order of the Ministry of Education and Science from March 2, 2018, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://maorif.tj/storage/Dokument's/9ccb2179a8b01fe6f2659065d7 97d050.pdf.

> house clothes (robes), form-fitting trousers, clothes that reveal curves, and those made of synthetic fabrics, as they are bad for health.[87]

For the official political elite, including the urban intelligentsia and state-loyal religious authorities, the traditional dress represents *satri tojiki* (an authentic Tajik religious garb). For example, in 2018, while disagreeing with the US State Department report that raised concerns over the violations of religious freedom in Tajikistan, *Hoji* Huseyn Musozoda, the chairman of the Council of Ulama in the Sughd region, stated that the propaganda of the national dress cannot be a violation of the right to religious dress precisely because "in the course of the thousands of years the traditional/national dress has become our *satri milli* (national religious dress)."[88] In 2017, a similar view was expressed by *Mullo* Haydar Sharifzoda, the imam-khatib of the central mosque of Kulob, who stated that "the best *satr* (religious clothing) is the one that was worn by our mothers and grandmothers and the clothes that the blessed mother of Emomali Rahmon wore."[89]

In the official state rhetoric, traditional Tajik dress is also depicted as the antidote to the perceived threat of Islamic radicalism.[90] The hijab, an Islamic head covering and modest religious dress, has occupied public imagination and considerable state resources for over a decade. An analysis of the official state discourse demonstrates that this particular form of modest religious clothing has become "the nemesis of [the] Tajik statehood."[91] The manual mentioned above on appropriate clothing discourages women from wearing

87 R. Nur, "'Dasturmali liboshoi tavsiyavi baroi dukhtaron va zanoni Tojikiston'. Rioyai on arjguzori ba sunnathoi milli va 'ehtirom ba khalqu millat ast!" *Khovar*, September 3, 2018, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://khovar.tj/2018/09/dasturamali-libos-oi-tavsiyav-baroi-duhtaron-va-zanoni-to-ikiston-rioyai-on-ar-guzor-ba-sunnat-oi-mill-va-e-tirom-ba-hal-u-millat-ast/.

88 M. Muhammad, "Mas'uloni umuri din: 'Guzorishi Amriko ghayrivoqei ast'," *Radioi Ozodi*, August 16, 2017, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.ozodi.org/a/tajik-officials-reaction-to-usa-annual-report-about-religious-freedom/28680059.html.

89 G. Ganj, "Mulloho guftand, ki zanho digar libosi tang mapushand," *Radioi Ozodi*, July 29, 2014, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://www.ozodi.org/a/tajik-national-dress-pro paganda-in-tajikistan-mosque/25473550.html.

90 For an analysis of a similar discourse in the context of Kyrgyzstan, see E. Nasritdinov and N. Esenamanova, "The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek," *Central Asian Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2017): 217–242.

91 S. Nozimova, "Hijab in the Changing Tajik Society," *Central Asian Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2016): 95–116, 96; See also: M. Miles, "Switching to Satr: An Ethnography of the Particular in Women's Choices in Head Coverings in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2015): 367–387.

"black clothes, black headscarf, *satr,* and *hijab*."[92] The "black clothes" in this quote refer to full-body garments (usually black in color), such as *abaya*, *niqab*, *chador*, worn by some Muslim women.[93]

Tajik state officials continuously warn citizens, especially the youth, of not falling prey to the "web of lies of the dangerous extremist and terrorist movements," which they can be exposed to when following "alien" dress styles.[94] While such warnings do not precisely define what the foreign garb is, the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, in conjunction with the local police departments, conduct regular "propaganda raids," where through *vospitatel'nye raboty* (educational activities), they intimidate and harass women to change the style of their head-coverings.[95] Therefore, in the contemporary political reality, Tajik national dress also means adherence to the particular gender regimes and state-sanctioned Tajik Islam. The following quote from President Rahmon's speech illustrates this point most poignantly:

> Our women and girls should not forget that as *millati bostoni* (an ancient nation), we have our national head coverings and styles and ethics of clothing. Those who follow propagandists of the foreign ideologies and *mazhabs* (Islamic schools of jurisprudence) should keep in mind that we have our tolerant *mazhab* and the *pir* (religious leader) of our *mazhab* [was] the prominent personality of the Islamic world – Imam A'zam Abu Hanifa.[96]

In the paragraphs above, I have discussed how women's bodies and their sartorial choices become important demarcating identity markers in the current ethno-religious national project in Tajikistan. In this project, the female Tajik dress, legally or otherwise mandated, serves multiple functions. The nationalist

92 Nur, "Dasturamali libishoi."

93 R. Goldman, "What's That You're Wearing? A Guide to Muslim Veils," The New York Times, May 3, 2016, last accessed on February 28, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/world/what-in-the-world/burqa-hijab-abaya-chador.html.

94 "Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo rahbaronu fa'olon va namoyandagoni sokinoni viloyati Khatlon," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, May 13, 2017, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://president.tj/node/15372.

95 I. Karmazin, "Platok – delo tonkoe: pochemu Tadzhikistan voyuet s khidzhabami i borodami," *IZVESTIYA*, December 24, 2018, last accessed on March 10, 2021, https://iz.ru/826721/igor-karmazin/platok-delo-tonkoe-pochemu-tadzhikistan-voiuet-s-khidzhabami-i-borodami.

96 "Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo rahbaronu fa'olon va namoyandagoni sokinoni viloyati Khatlon," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, May 13, 2017, last accessed on March 10, 2021, http://president.tj/node/15372.

discourse around the Tajik dress represents it as a time capsule connecting multiple generations, namely the present-day Tajiks, to the mythical ancestors. The ever-praised, sufficiently modest, and traditional Tajik dress caters to the patriarchal social imaginations in the official discourse. At the same time, its formidable distance from the Islamic hijab serves as a tangible token of political loyalty to the state.

Concluding Remarks

It became evident to me that woman is made of Sun[97]
Mirzo Tursunzoda

In the literature on nation-building, women were rarely even an afterthought. Fortunately, contemporary feminist scholarship on nationalism places women and gender issues squarely in the center of national projects. In this article, I have employed insights from feminist scholarship on nation-building to analyze the evolution of national projects in post-Soviet, post-Civil War Tajikistan. Specifically, my work has examined gendered aspects of the current ethno- religious national project in Tajikistan.

In this paper I have demonstrated a continuous evolution and transformation of the Tajik national project. This evolution is not a cessation of the nation- building projects, but instead, includes a complex layering of emphasized or obscured elements at different times. Because nation-building projects, unlike other construction projects, are Sisyphean tasks, they require constant fine- tuning and modifications. Therefore, depending on which national project is being promoted, different elements of are amplified or dialed down. During the second decade of the 21st century, women became central to defining the contours of the ethno-religious national identity project in Tajikistan. In this national project, a disproportionate, unique onus of nation-building is placed on women. Not only are women's bodies used for biological, political, and cultural reproduction, but they also serve as the reification of internal and external ethnic (even racial), ideological, and cultural boundaries.

Current national gendered discourse has inherent aspects that are controversial, if not outright dangerous. The discourse on *oilai solim*, a healthy family, is not just a public health campaign for the nation's health; it also conveys a message that mothers are solely responsible for their children's "defects and pathologies" or that disabled children are exclusively the result of parental

97 Zan, ba man ma'lum shud, ki oftobi budaast.

irresponsibility – kin marriage. Moreover, this language promotes ableism and further drives people and families who have children with disabilities into invisibility, as those who do not represent a healthy and able nation, and, as a result, are not a part of it or worthy of the state's attention or its public services. Discourse on the national gene pool is similarly dangerous for many reasons. It legitimatizes a view that women are the property of the nation and that they are carriers of the nationalized wombs. In this discourse, women and their bodies are used to reinforce the nation's national: ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. Thus, women's marriage choices are seen as unions with whom it is appropriate to procreate for the "benefit" of the nation. Foreigners and people of different religions, interpretations of Islam, and different races are seen as those whom Tajik women should not marry or procreate with.

Discourse on men, and only men, as national dignitaries limits women and girls' horizons of imagination and downplays the importance of women's contributions to society and its development. It limits their national role to being only mothers. Since in the current national project, women can only become mothers in full if they give birth to sons, this discourse legitimizes discriminatory sex preference and prizing of male children.

The law on parental responsibility codifies parenthood not as a personal and social role but as, foremost, a political duty. Even if we set aside the personal, familial, and economic challenges that come with motherhood, in this state discourse, motherhood becomes an impossible task of political socialization that begins with politically and nationally appropriate naming; an inculcation in the language of power (Tajik), which, regardless of the mother's ethnic (and regional) background, is universally designated as the mother-tongue; and the upbringing of politically docile citizens.

Discourse on the national dress overtly and overwhelmingly politicizes women's choices of clothing that may be attributed to such factors as personal comfort, social and economic status, and fashion. Moreover, mandates on national dress create new mechanisms of intimidation and exclusion of those who are seen as not conforming to it. It creates barriers to access public goods and state services, which impede women's access to education, justice, and economic opportunities.

In this article I have argued that women bear, rear, and wear the Tajik nation in its contemporary conceptualization. In certain ways, this should be an empowering realization for the women in Tajikistan. We may even conclude that the Tajik nation is a nation of imagined women, where men can find belonging only by their association with the women who belong to the nation. Whether or not women will use their ideologically central position within the Tajik national project to increase their social standing and redefine the social and political status quo remains to be seen.