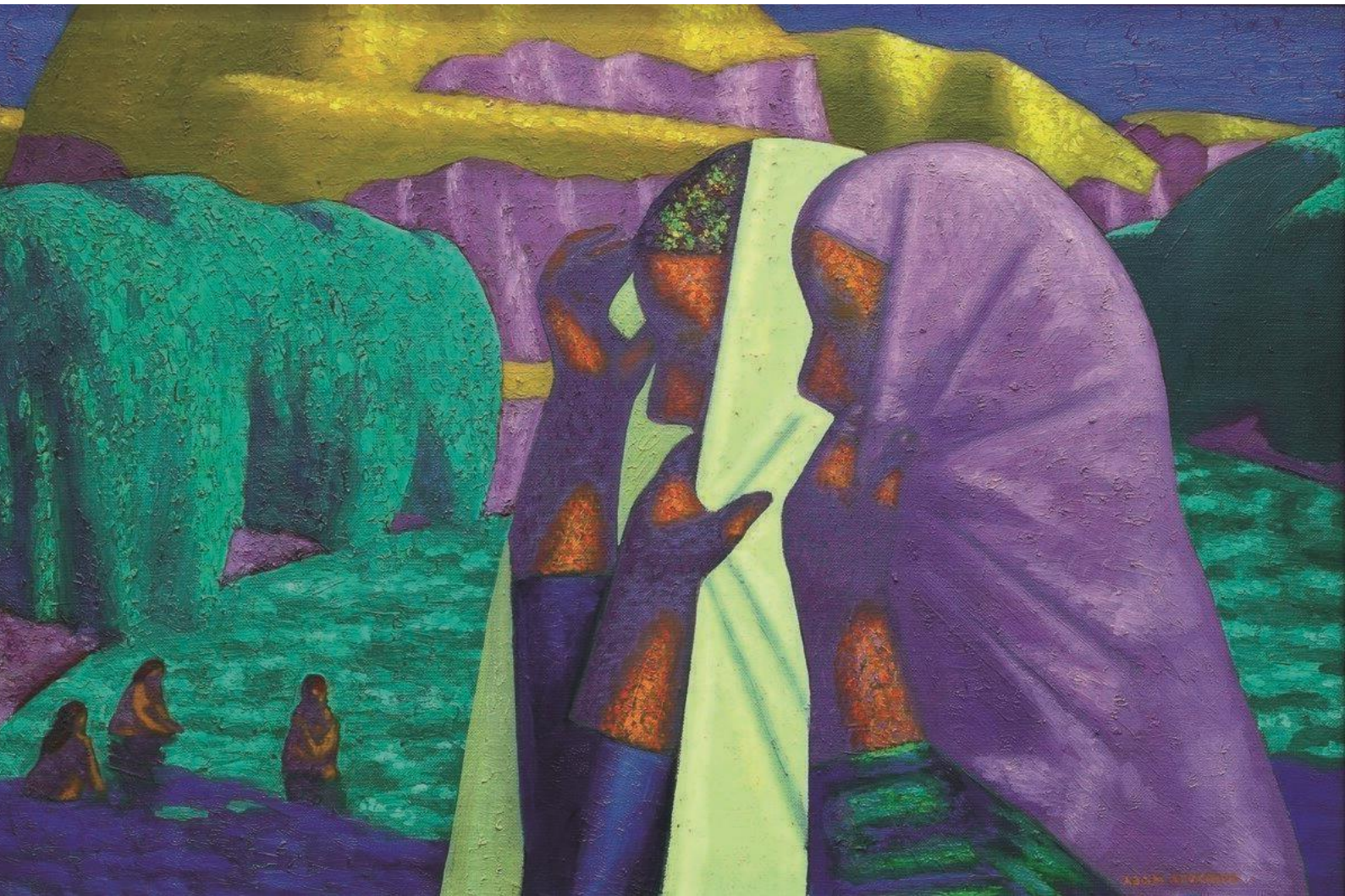




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Report on the Consultations

# Women of the Ferghana Valley for Peace

Foundation for Tolerance International

Association of Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia of Tajikistan

Tajikistan - 2024

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## About the Report

This report has been prepared by the Association of Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia of Tajikistan (ASTI) and the Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) within the “Women of the Ferghana Valley Contribute to Conflict Resolution” Project, implemented jointly with the non-governmental non-profit organisation Istikbolli Avlod (IA), with financial support from the Rapid Response Window of the United Nations Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund and support of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict.

The project is a partnership initiative of civil society organisations from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan aimed at enhancing women’s participation in peace processes. For this purpose, national consultations were held in each of the three countries with women living in the border communities of the Ferghana Valley, government and civil society representatives (field consultations in Kyrgyzstan were led by FTI, and in Uzbekistan by IA). The consultations were intended to formulate recommendations on women’s involvement, taking into account existing opportunities, gaps, and challenges.



## Key Findings and Recommendations

- 1. Women have played important roles in peacebuilding in Tajikistan, both historically and during the latest escalation of violence on the Tajik–Kyrgyz border in 2022.** During the acute phase of the military conflict on the border, the role of women was visible in highly vulnerable communities. In particular, women called for peace and non-involvement in violence, using their authority, especially with the youth; they also have provided relief to refugees and border communities, cooking food and sharing clothing; and have advocated for victims' rights.
- 2. Traditional gender norms are perceived as the main role to women's effective participation in public life and in peacebuilding.** Many women, especially young women, do not participate in decision-making either in their home or in their community. Most decisions are made for them by their husband, their brothers, or their husband's family. Some of the consultation participants also suggested that women themselves are socialised into believing that they should not or are not able to participate in public life.
- 3. The government's policy of involving women in public spaces has played an important role in changing gender roles and expectations, and paving the way for women's greater involvement in public life.** The consultations have shown differences in how women from different age groups perceive barriers to participation – with younger women being more likely to point out cultural barriers. Regardless of the age group, women and men interviewed agreed that the current situation is characterised by shifts in gender relations supported by the state's policy of involving women in government bodies at all levels.
- 4. Border tensions and the recent outbreak of violence have had a significant impact on women.** Years of border tensions at both the Tajik–Uzbek and Tajik–Kyrgyz borders often meant reduced mobility, in particular when visa regimes were introduced. Since women are traditionally the ones responsible for maintaining family ties and caring for elderly or sick family members, the reduced mobility often disproportionately affected them. Additionally, the outbreak of violence on the Tajik–Kyrgyz border between 2021 and 2022 created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. This has had profound psychological effects on both women and men, but there have been **no adequate, long-term psychosocial support programmes**. For women, the psychological burden of the war was often **aggravated by men's labour migration**: faced with violence, women had to choose between staying or migrating together with their husbands; additionally, they took on more responsibilities when their husbands migrated.
- 5. The relationships between Tajikistan and its two Central Asian neighbours, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, have been on positive trajectories.** The Tajik–Uzbek relations have largely been normalised and there has also been a cooling off in the relations with Kyrgyzstan. **It is critical to maintain this momentum and prioritise**

**building of peace and understanding, including through formal negotiations that include meaningful participation of women.**

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Tajik government and international partners and donors

1. Support and invest in women's peacebuilding efforts and women's involvement in public life and decision-making. This should include **awareness-raising campaigns, capacity building, and other activities to transform harmful gender norms and stereotypes** that confine women to the home and deprive women, especially young wives, of decision-making power in their own households.
2. Ensure that **women are meaningfully included in all peacebuilding and peacemaking initiatives**. In this context, the government should continue and amplify its efforts to include women in formal decision-making positions. Donors should also support programmes designed to support women's roles in peacebuilding, including through local dialogues.
3. **Provide sustained access to long-term psychosocial support programmes for women and men in the border areas**. These support programmes should be gender responsive, meaning that they should take into account the specific experiences and traumas of women and men and as much as possible should be provided by both women and men psychologists.

## Introduction

### Relevance of the Consultations

A study by the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies of 182 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 has demonstrated that there is a 35% increase in the likelihood that a peace agreement will last for 15 or more years when women are involved in peace processes.<sup>1</sup> Other studies have also shown that women’s participation increases the likelihood both of an agreement being reached<sup>2</sup> and of it lasting longer.<sup>3</sup> Evidence also shows that when women participate in peace processes, the resulting agreements are more likely to address issues related to gender equality, including important provisions related to economic development, education, and justice during transition.<sup>4</sup> Research has also pointed to clear links between the overall state of gender equality and women’s rights in the country and the society’s resilience to conflict and violence.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the security of society depends on women’s ability to take leadership roles in peacekeeping and active participation in security issues.<sup>6</sup>

Despite our best efforts we haven’t found any systematic analysis of the participation of women from border areas in peace and post-conflict recovery processes in Central Asia, and this report aims to fill this gap. The report is based on a series of consultations, which investigated women’s participation in three aspects of peace processes: (1) formal processes within or between countries that aim to establish peace and development in the countries of the Ferghana Valley, (2) processes or intermediary structures that link adopted agreements with local needs, and (3) all forms of social cohesion that enable communities to be resilient to different forms of tensions and potential conflicts. The purpose of the consultations was to understand the entry points for building an inclusive environment for women from border communities that will help them bring their concerns and vision for solutions to peace processes and decision-making at all levels of government.

### Goal of the Consultations

Identify, describe, and analyse existing practices, opportunities, gaps, and challenges in women’s participation in peace processes in the Ferghana Valley.

Timeline: September–December 2023

<sup>1</sup> Marie O’Reilly, Andrea O’Sullebain, and Thania Paffenholz, “Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes,” International Peace Institute, June 2015, <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/IPI-E-pub-Reimagining-Peacemaking.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Thania Paffenholz et al., “Making Women Count – Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women’s Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations,” UN Women, April 2016, [https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/making\\_women\\_count-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5712](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/making_women_count-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5712)

<sup>3</sup> Jana Krause, Werner Krause, and Pii Bränfors, “Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace,” *International Interactions* 44, no. 6 (November 2018): 985–1016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>.

<sup>4</sup> Jacqui True and Yolanda Riveros-Morales, “Towards Inclusive Peace: Analysing Gender-Sensitive Peace Agreements 2000–2016,” *International Political Science Review* 40, no. 1 (January 2019): 23–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118808608>; Jillian Abballe et al., “Gender-Sensitive Provisions in Peace Agreements and Women’s Political and Economic Inclusion Post-Conflict,” Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and New York University Center for Global Affairs, May 2020, <http://gnwp.org/nyu-research-2020/>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Caprioli, “Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2005): 161–178, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-8833.2005.00340.x>; Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, “Gender Empowerment and United Nations Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (2009): 505–523. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343309334576>

<sup>6</sup> In this report, security is broadly defined as the state of being protected from impacts that could cause harm to individuals and society. This definition includes economic, social, information, environmental and physical security.

## Methodology

Formal processes focused on resolving peace issues in border communities of the Ferghana Valley are inherently masculinised and elitist. They exclusively involve government representatives, and many documents regarding these processes are not publicly available. This is consistent with broader regional and global trends, where women tend to be excluded and marginalised, despite their contributions to peacebuilding within their communities.<sup>7</sup> While it is critical to maintain advocacy for women's inclusion in formal negotiation spaces, it is equally important to recognise, and make visible, their contributions through informal peace processes, often at the grassroots level.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the consultations were not intended to assess any governmental efforts or to monitor the development of intergovernmental dynamics in the region. Instead, the consultations focused on local gender dynamics in the context of peacebuilding, documenting both tensions and prospects for development. For this, we used a mixed-method approach that includes a review of available publications, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. During the consultations, we adhered to the following ethical rules and do no harm principle:

- Participation in the consultations was voluntary.
- Respondents of the consultations were guaranteed anonymity.
- Data collected as a result of the consultations were encrypted and access to them was restricted.

### The consultation questions were:

1. What is the current status of women's participation in building peace and stability in the border communities of the Ferghana Valley?
2. What problems and needs do women have in order to fully utilize their capacities in building peace and stability in the border communities of the Ferghana Valley?
3. What opportunities exist to support women in their pursuit of peace and development?

Two hundred ninety people living in border villages of Soghd Province of Tajikistan participated in the consultations and shared their opinions. We conducted group discussions with residents and representatives of local executive bodies of state authorities of border villages in Soghd Province.

As a second step, we interviewed experts, local government officials and project staff, and local leaders. We present the data obtained during the consultations in the report in the form of a summarised analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, "Towards Gender-Equal Peace: From 'Counting Women' to Meaningful Participation | HD Centre," Oslo Forum, December 2021, <https://www.hdcentre.org/publications/towards-gender-equal-peace-from-counting-women-to-meaningful-participation/>

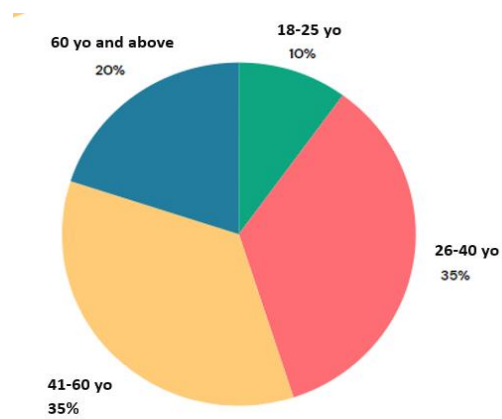
<sup>8</sup> Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, "Building Trust through Care: A Feminist Take on Inclusion in Multi-Track Mediation," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2326623>

Following are breakdowns of participants by gender (Figure 1) and age (Figure 2).

**Figure 1. Breakdown of respondents by gender**



**Figure 2. Breakdown by age**





## Security Dynamics of Border Areas in the Ferghana Valley in a Historical Perspective

During the period 1991–2023, the border territories in the Ferghana Valley underwent significant changes in terms of security and stability, and this has had a significant impact on local communities. In the Ferghana Valley, Tajikistan borders Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The analysis conducted for this report reveals two security dynamics that have emerged in the border areas of Soghd Province: the first is represented by processes on the Tajik–Uzbek border, the second covers changes on the Tajik–Kyrgyz border.

The situation on the **Tajik–Uzbek border** is characterised by periods of free movement, interspersed with periods of restriction of movement of people and trade across the borders, which are usually followed by a new stage of full resumption of cooperation and resolution of all conflict issues. In 2000, a State Commission on Border Delimitation and Demarcation was established between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In less than two years, the commission agreed on the demarcation of 84% of the joint border, and in 2002 the agreement on the agreed border sections was signed by the heads of the two countries. However, despite the formal agreement, disagreements and border disputes periodically reignited between the countries.<sup>9</sup> Between 2000 and 2016, there was an increase in conflict in the region, which led to the militarisation of the borders between the countries.

For many women in border villages, the deterioration of relations between the countries had a negative impact on their ability to maintain social and family ties. In some cases, women were forced to find illegal ways to cross the border due to the tightened border regime and the introduction of entry visas by Uzbekistan:

*“It was very difficult, we had not seen our relatives for years. We had to wait for a visa for a long time; sometimes even with a visa at the border they could simply refuse [entrance], despite the availability of documents”. – Woman, age group 40–60.*

The situation for border residents was also aggravated by the mining of border areas. Anti-personnel mines on the border with Tajikistan were planted by Uzbekistan in 2000–2001 after attempts by militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – an armed group that took part in fighting in Afghanistan and the civil war in Tajikistan – to enter the country through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The first mine explosion on the Tajik–Uzbek border, according to the Tajik Red Crescent Society, occurred on August 29, 2000, killing four civilians – two women and two children.<sup>10</sup> According to the National Mine Action Center of Tajikistan, anti-personnel mines in Tajikistan killed 374 people and seriously injured 485 more.<sup>11</sup> Out of these, about 100 people were killed by anti-personnel mines on the Tajik side of the border with Uzbekistan.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> TASS News Agency, “Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Cancelled the Visa Regime Introduced between the Countries in 2001,” March 2018, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/5018793>; “Joint Statement of the President of Tajikistan and the President of Uzbekistan on Strengthening Friendship and Good-neighborliness,” <https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/3010/sovместное-заявление-президента-республики-таджикистан-емомали-рахмона-и-президента-республики-узбекистан-шавката-мирзиёева-об-укреплении-дружбы-и-добрососедства>

<sup>10</sup> Negmatullo Mirsaidov, “Official Sources: Uzbekistan Has Completed Demining Its Border with Tajikistan,” Central Asia News, April 2020, [https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2020/02/04/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/02/04/feature-02)

<sup>11</sup> Gazeta News, “‘There Used to Be Mines on the Border with Tajikistan’ – President,” September 2021, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/24/mines/>

<sup>12</sup> Zarangez Navruzsho, “Mines of Not Slow Motion,” Radio Ozodi, October 2015, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/more-than-80-tajiks-died-in-tajik-uzbek-border-/27314745.html>

After 2016, relations between the countries stabilised and began to improve slowly. Within the framework of two historic visits – the state visit of the president of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Republic of Tajikistan (9–10 March 2018) and the state visit of the president of the Republic of Tajikistan to the Republic of Uzbekistan (16–17 August 2018) – a total of 53 bilateral documents were signed.<sup>13</sup> In 2020, Uzbekistan fully de-mined the border areas with Tajikistan,<sup>14</sup> and by 2023, the countries had completed the delimitation and demarcation of 95% of the border.<sup>15</sup>

The economic development of the border areas continued to suffer, in particular during the periods of deterioration of the relations between the two countries, such as from 2000–2016, due to the interruption and blockage of land transit of transport between the countries, and due to the reduction of people’s mobility. This had a negative impact on the traditionally established economic ties of the border communities, and reduced sources of income from trade and agriculture. The initiated process of restoring cooperation and strengthening ties has changed the space of opportunities for border communities.

On the **Tajik–Kyrgyz border**, the conflict dynamics have dramatically intensified in recent years. Between 2021 and 2022 there was a series of violent clashes between the two countries. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan signed a ceasefire protocol on 19 September 2022.<sup>16</sup> Since then, and until the time of preparing this report (June 2024), intensive work has continued to define and agree on the boundary line between the two countries at the presidential level. On 2 October 2023, the parties signed Protocol 44, which was marked as a significant shift towards a political solution to the issue of borders between the states.<sup>17</sup> However, the document remains unavailable to the public, so its contents are not included in the analysis in this report.

Thus, at the time of preparing this report, there is an emerging dynamic with a positive political momentum for resolving the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict. In this context, the consultations’ participants noted that the most urgent need is to conclude a peace agreement on the borders and to normalise the life of border communities as soon as possible. Some of the women who participated in the consultations highlighted that it would be highly beneficial to include women in any official peace process.

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Relations of the Republic of Tajikistan with the Republic of Uzbekistan,” September 2021, <https://mfa.tj/ru/main/view/145/otnosheniya-tadzhikistana-s-uzbekistanom>

<sup>14</sup> Central Asia News, “Official Sources: Uzbekistan Completed Demining of Its Border with Tajikistan,” April 2020, [https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2020/02/04/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/02/04/feature-02)

<sup>15</sup> Sputnik News, “Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Signed a Protocol on the Border: Details,” October 2022, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20221022/tajikistan-uzbekistan-protokol-granitsa-podrobnosti-1052360667.html>; Sputnik News, “Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Continue Work on Border Demarcation,” June 2023, <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20230628/uzbekistan-tadjikistan--demarkatsiya-granitsy-36392321.html>

<sup>16</sup> Radio Ozodi, “Dushanbe and Bishkek Sign Peace Protocol, Tajikistan Releases Four Captured Kyrgyz Soldiers,” September 2022, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32041590.html>; Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Sign Peace Protocol,” September 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32042109.html#comments>

<sup>17</sup> Toktosun Shambetov, “Kyrgyz–Tajik Border: Will the New Protocol Solve All Problems?” Radio Azattyk, October 2023, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32622194.html>

## Key Findings

### Building Peace and Women: Experience of Tajikistan

In order to explore the role of women in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery processes in Tajikistan, it is important to understand the country's history of peace processes and women's involvement in them. Between 1992 and 1997, the country was faced with a civil war that left more than 60,000 people dead.<sup>18</sup> As previous studies have noted, “[t]he 1997 peace agreement in Tajikistan was a remarkable achievement that ended the country's bloody civil war after a military stalemate”.<sup>19</sup> During the civil war, women made a large but unrecognised contribution to peacebuilding. While studies of the peace process that ended the civil war note that “[w]omen in Tajikistan are connected to peace and even more – women claim that peace is a value of femininity”,<sup>20</sup> in practice, women's contributions were practically invisible in public spaces due to the patriarchal culture that permeates the society.

However, women's position within the society evolved over time. Sophie Roche, the author of a monograph on Tajikistan's contemporary society who has studied women's narratives from the Tajik civil war period, writes:

*“Women are a forgotten group of peace negotiators, but their voices are becoming increasingly visible. Today, women work in bazaars alongside men as successful businesswomen, they work in schools, in the media and in public services. [...] They accept the conservative views of religion, which demands that women stay at home, hidden from the public eye. [...] But society is changing under the pressure of practical necessity, despite the patriarchal national narrative [...] the conceptual return to conservative gender roles has collided with the reality of life, in which men have failed to fulfil the role of sole breadwinner in most families”.*<sup>21</sup>

The quote illustrates both the barriers women face in their peacebuilding work – including the conservative norms and gender roles within the Tajik society – but also the opportunities that emerged for them especially during and after conflict, as they took on the role of heads of households and became increasingly active in the economy.

In parallel, the consultations have revealed that women considered it important to initiate a dialogue process in villages located in the most vulnerable *jamoats* (local administrative units). Those who raised this issue also highlighted the importance of strong involvement of women in leading peace processes.

*“It should be noted that men are often not tolerant when it comes to any negotiations. So women should also be allowed to come to the negotiating table. We used to have meetings with women from neighbouring villages in Kyrgyzstan. Now there are none. And this is very bad. At one time,*

<sup>18</sup> Dinora Kamolova, “I Couldn't Even Cry”: Children of the 90s and the Civil War in Tajikistan, CABAR.Asia, [https://longreads.cabar.asia/memories\\_of\\_civil\\_war](https://longreads.cabar.asia/memories_of_civil_war)

<sup>19</sup> Parviz Mullojanov, “Tajikistan's Peace Process: The Role of Track 2 Diplomacy and Lessons for Afghanistan,” United States Institute of Peace, April 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/tajikistans-peace-process-role-track-2-diplomacy-and-lessons-afghanistan>

<sup>20</sup> Sofie Roche, “Sophie Roche about the War in Tajikistan: ‘The Shahid Mother Still Had Milk in Her Breasts,’” Central Asian Analytical Network, May 2016, <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/9143>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

*neither we nor they even wanted to see each other. It was very hard for us as mothers. But now the situation has changed. We see what is happening in other countries – Israel and Palestine. And we realize how difficult it is when war comes on us. And we don't need war. So we need to start work as quickly as possible, joint negotiations, to establish communication". – **Woman, age group 40–60.***

*"Let there be peace, and for that we need to have mutual understanding. So we need to increase interaction. There used to be a lot of seminars and joint events with the Kyrgyz people, but now there are none". – **Woman, age group 40–60.***

Given the important peacebuilding experiences of women in Tajikistan during the civil war, in our consultations we asked about the role of women during the recent large-scale border conflicts in September 2022 with Kyrgyzstan. **We found that during the acute phase of the military conflict on the border, the role of women was visible in highly vulnerable communities. In particular, women called for peace and non-involvement in violent actions during the acute phase of the conflict:**

*"The youth kept saying they wanted to go to war and defend our land, but we persuaded them to stay. These events brought us closer together". – **Woman, age group 60 and above.***

*"We didn't go anywhere during the conflict, we helped each other, older women went out into the street and calmed the young with various examples and advice. The young people listened to them". – **Woman, age group 25–40.***

Although most of the data we collected confirm that the current gender order in Tajikistan's border communities remains patriarchal, the consultations also indicate important shifts at the level of political will as well as local societal dynamics. As noted by the consultations' participants, the government's policy of involving women in public spaces has played an important role in changing gender roles and expectations. Regardless of age group, women and men interviewed agreed that the current situation is characterised by shifts in gender relations supported by the state's policy of involving women in government bodies at all levels.

Tajikistan is a country that has joined the main international documents proclaiming gender equality as a value of social development. The president of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, has emphasised that women receive great support in the implementation of state programmes to improve their position in society, highlighting the government's awareness of the importance of women's role.<sup>22</sup> Within the framework of implementing the norms of the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan and with the aim of strengthening the position of women in society, a number of laws and resolutions of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan and state programmes have been adopted. Among them are measures to improve the status of

<sup>22</sup> "President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Leader of the Nation, Honorable Emomali Rahmon's Message to the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan," 28 December 2023, <https://khovar.tj/rus/2023/12/28-dekabrya-poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-tadzhikistan-lidera-natsii-uvazhaemogo-emomali-rahmona-madzhlisi-oli-respubliki-tadzhikistan/>

women in the society, presented in the Decree of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan dated 3 December 1999; the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan dated 8 August 2001 “On the State program of training, selection and placement of managerial personnel of the Republic of Tajikistan from among talented women and girls for 2007–2016”; the National Strategy dated 1 November 2006; the “Activation of the role of

women in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2011–2020” act dated 29 May 2010; and the “State program of training specialists from among women and promoting their employment for 2012–2015”, among others.<sup>23</sup>

One example of a state initiative to support women and girls is a presidential scholarship awarded annually to girls from mountainous rural areas, which entitles them to free university studies in their chosen field of study. There are also support centres for women’s entrepreneurship and preferential loans for women entrepreneurs. The depth and speed of these changes can be discussed, but our consultations show that changes are also visible at the level of border communities.

*“There are still stereotypes now, I’m not saying they have completely disappeared. We all feel that women are not yet able to fully express their opinions, but now the situation is improving. After our president has taken the initiative and nominated women to various positions in local government, state government and other structures, the situation has also changed. We have women who are chairpersons of jamoats and women who hold positions in the hukumat [province-level government body]. These days the situation has become much better”. –*  
**Woman, age group 60 and above.**

The shift in the gender roles and perceptions in the Tajik society is important because it paved the way for women’s involvement in peacebuilding during the 2021–2022 violence. As noted previously, women played important roles in preventing escalation of violence in their communities. The consultations have also documented their important role and potential in the post-conflict recovery. Before this discussion, however, it is necessary to more closely examine the gendered impacts of the security dynamics in the border regions.

## Challenges to Women’s Inclusion in Public Spaces

Despite the gradual shift in the perceptions of women in public spaces and in peacebuilding in particular that has been described, many challenges to women’s full and meaningful inclusion persist. For example, the World Bank’s 2021 Gender Assessment conducted in Tajikistan indicates that patriarchal family structures contribute to low levels of decision-making by married women in the country.<sup>24</sup> Households in Tajikistan are generally multigenerational, with women living with their husbands’ extended families. Within this structure, women who have recently

<sup>23</sup> For more details see “The Status of Women in Society (in Light of the Message of the Leader of the Nation, Honorable Emomali Rahmon),” Russian-Tajik University, December 2023, [https://rtsu.tj/news/?ELEMENT\\_CODE=1409](https://rtsu.tj/news/?ELEMENT_CODE=1409)

<sup>24</sup> World Bank Group, “Tajikistan: Country Gender Assessment 2021,” December 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan/publication/country-gender-assessment>



married are excluded from decision-making, since issues are largely decided by the father-in-law, husband, brother-in-law, or mother-in-law. In nuclear families, women may take on a second voice (after the husband's), but their role is rarely significant. The World Bank study found that as women age and have children, their social status in the household improves, as does their decision-making ability.<sup>25</sup>

The consultations confirmed the findings about young women's limited role in decision-making in both their households and their communities. In particular, participants discussed and identified three main factors that can lead to a decrease in women's public participation. The first relates to **cultural norms and gender order in society** at large:

*"In my community the problems are domestic violence against women, financial problems, unemployment, lack of understanding, there is an infringement of women's rights, limiting freedom of movement, the ability to study and work. Girls are quickly married off. If a girl is in her third or fourth year at a higher education institution, it is understood as a problem". – **Woman, age group 18–30.***

Our data signal that religious norms can act as a barrier to women's inclusion in the public space. Participants of the consultations noted that

women's leadership or activism in public spaces is not welcomed by the norms of Islam. This can have the effect of narrowing the space of opportunities for women if they go deep into religion. However, most of the consultations' participants agreed that the main challenge to women's activism is women's gender socialisation. The following is a woman's opinion typical of most of the analysed cases collected during the conducted consultations:

*"I'm 39 years old. I did very well at school, but I did not continue my studies. In this region, girls are married off early because they think that a girl should be married right after school. My parents always said: 'Instead of spending money on your education, we'd better spend money on your dowry, we can't have double expenses. It is not known whether your husband will allow you to work or not. It is better to marry you off'. That's how I got married right after school. Many girls did not go to the 11th grade, they left school after the 9th grade, stayed at home and got married afterwards. I am married and have three children". – **Woman, age group 40–60.***

This account from a woman participant in the consultations reveals the following situation on a national scale: 31% of girls who finish school continue their education and enter higher education institutions, but only 13% graduate as the others leave to get married (one of the most common reasons).<sup>26</sup>

The second factor was discussed in the consultation groups with middle-aged women

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Asia-Plus, "Ensuring Girls' and Women's Access to Education Is Key to Tajikistan's Future," September 2024, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20231128/obespechenie-dostupa-devochek-i-zhentshin-k-obrazovaniyu-zalog-budutshago-tadzhikistana>

participants. They expressed the opinion that **economic inequality** can be a limitation of women's activity in public spaces. Participants noted that women often have to reconcile domestic work with professional work, leaving them less time for professional development. Others also emphasized that young women might not be allowed to work by their husbands or in-laws, increasing their economic dependency.

Interestingly, other participants expressed the view that economic factors did not limit their activity in public spaces. As one respondent noted:

*“Economic factors have no impact on women’s participation in problem-solving initiatives. I will say more, now women are more involved in all issues because they are in charge before their husbands come back”. – Woman, age group 60 and above.*

This can be attributed to the generational differences between younger and older women in Tajikistan. While young women face more economic challenges and are less present in the public space, older women – who are the majority of those involved in peacebuilding activities – have not felt the economic restrictions as strongly.

Third, in line with the findings of the World Bank study, the consultations' participants agreed that **young women** are a particularly vulnerable group:

*“It has improved a little bit in recent years, but girls are still not allowed to have a job after their studies. People still think that even an educated husband’s family will not allow them to go out to work. It’s hard to get a job too, small salary”. – Woman, age group 40–60.*

*“As a young woman, I can say that I face a lot of stereotypes. Since I participate in many social activities, I know that there are different views and opinions about women’s activism. And I don’t like it. In Isfara, women’s activity is not very welcome, there are restrictions, and my rights are infringed, here I am dependent on unwritten laws”. – Woman, age group 18–25.*

*“Gradually parents’ mindset(s) are changing and they have started letting girls study, but there are few of them”. – Woman, age group 40–60.*

All the data confirm the findings of most previous gender studies<sup>27</sup> and indicates structural gender inequalities in contemporary society.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, our consultations point to the **digital gap**: inequality in access to modern technologies as an important element supporting structural gender inequality. For example, social media was not really recognised as a potential mobilisation tool by the consultations' participants. Women noted that they rarely used social media and did not have practices of

<sup>27</sup> Asian Development Bank, “Tajikistan: Country Gender Assessment,” June 2016, <https://www.adb.org/documents/tajikistan-country-gender-assessment-2016>

<sup>28</sup> Katalin E. Fábán and Muborak Sharipova, *From Soviet Liberation to Post-Soviet Segregation: Women and Violence in Tajikistan* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 133–170.

uniting through social media groups.

*“Women meet each other in schools or at joint events. We don’t have a separate group on social media to discuss any other issues, there is a parents’ chat at school, but there the conversation is only about school”. – Woman, age group 40–60 years.*

*“We need to take into account our situation in jamoats. Women do not use social networks, modern technologies, and the Internet much. On the one hand, they do not know how to use them properly and how they should be used. On the other hand, men do not support their activity in social networks”. – Woman, age group 40–60.*

Moreover, the consultations revealed some negative perceptions about the use of social media and the Internet that can act as deterrents for women to make use of these tools in their peacebuilding work:

*“There are bad wives too, they want a divorce, they are unfaithful. Phones spoil all women, the Internet too”. – Woman, age group 40–60.*

Our findings are generally consistent with the problem of access to the Internet in the country. According to open data, 22% of the population of Tajikistan has access to cable Internet.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the prevalence of mobile Internet is over 90%. Access to mobile Internet can reflect the gender order. For example, in the consultations, female participants reported that their access may be restricted in the family to men or older women. Experience from other countries in the region demonstrates that the Internet can be a useful mobilisation tool. Therefore, the barriers to digital access can be viewed as further limiting women’s ability to contribute to public life and peacebuilding.

The consultations’ participants stated the following reasons as the main constraints for using mobile Internet:

- Gender stereotypes: Women’s access to mobile Internet is viewed negatively, as it may entail a weakening of male and family control over women (especially young daughters-in-law).
- High cost of mobile Internet.
- Low Internet speed.

Additionally, participants highlighted that Internet access might be worse for women in post-conflict zones:

*“I think women from post-conflict zones have their own problems, especially those who have suffered a lot during the conflict. But they have a lot of restrictions. For example, they are not*

<sup>29</sup> WorldData.Info, “Mobile Communications and Internet in Tajikistan,” <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/tajikistan/telecommunication.php>

allowed to use social media”. – **Woman, age group 18–25.**

These findings are consistent with previous research and suggest that the availability of cell phones may reflect the gender order in society.<sup>30</sup> In Tajikistan in particular, Dr. Sofia Kasymova has analysed the use of cell phones in migrant families and found that increased access to communication technologies does not change or redefine women’s roles.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, global studies in other parts of the world have revealed the opposite trend: increased access to communication technologies has an impact on shifts in the patriarchal gender order.<sup>32</sup> In particular, this can happen through women’s improved access to technology and awareness, and the acquisition of new skills through online business. For example, as shown in the Uzbekistan studies, the spread of cell phones can help young women challenge the power of older women in the family and increase their mobility.<sup>33</sup>

Most of the consultations’ participants mentioned the trend of expanding the space for women’s activism, but they did not connect these processes with the development of technology. In general, women and men interviewed noted the important influence of the president in improving women’s access to decision-making (through gender quotas). On the other hand, many women participants of the consultations agreed that women’s exercise of their right to vote and advocacy for their interests depends primarily on the will of women themselves and the support of their families. At the same time, institutional, cultural, and economic limitations faced by women in the patriarchal system remained unnoticed. Among the men interviewed, there was no critical attitude towards the limitations experienced by women: with few exceptions, the men were largely unaware of the restrictions or of their impact on women.

Importantly, most of the challenges described here applied primarily to young women, in particular recently married women. Older women generally had more mobility and flexibility – which can be considered one of the reasons for their greater involvement in peacebuilding activities, as discussed next.

### Contemporary Border Dynamics and Women’s Security

The consultations’ participants assessed their sense of security in different ways. Some participants pointed out that the role of the state in ensuring the security of citizens is high and that this ensures the security of border residents. Overall, the role of the state was perceived positively. However, some participants presented a more complex picture of security challenges, indicating vulnerability due to increased conflict at the international level:

*“Living in Isfara, we know that our lives could be in danger. Especially in the last five years the*

<sup>30</sup> Sofia R. Kasymova, *Gender Aspects of Migration Processes in Tajikistan: Challenges of Time and Choice Options* (Dushanbe: Irfon, 2020), 328.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Joshua Blumenstock and Nathan Eagle, “Mobile Divides: Gender, Socioeconomic Status, and Mobile Phone Use in Rwanda,” in *Proceedings of the 4th ACM/IEEE International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development* (2010), 1–10 <https://doi.org/10.1145/2369220.2369225>; Naomi S. Baron and Elise M. Campbell, “Gender and Mobile Phones in Cross-National Context,” *Language Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2012): 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2011.06.018>

<sup>33</sup> Haruka Kikuta, “Mobile Phones and Self-Determination among Muslim Youth in Uzbekistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 2 (2019): 181–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2019.1584603>

*fear has become greater. In Dushanbe I also feel fear, as the capital is close to Afghanistan”. – Woman, age group 18–25.*

It is important to note that the consultations’ participants placed the recent events at the border (September 2022) in the broader context of international security and emphasised the different hotspots of instability in the world, pointing out that the security space is narrowing for women regardless of their geographical location. It was clear to the participants that the deterioration of security at the global level directly affects their lives and security. For example, there were instances of labour migrants returning from Russia due to the conflict in Ukraine.

Women interviewed in Chorkukh Jamoat, a region that was affected by the September 2022 border conflict, emphasised that they did not feel secure: *“It used to be calm, [but] now it’s dangerous here. We are all scared. Now even the sound of a car wheel we take as an explosion. We are very scared. We live a very restless life”. – Woman, age group 40–60.*

The insecurity and destruction brought by the conflict also affected the attitudes towards the Kyrgyz communities and people’s opinions about the desirability and possibility of a peace process. For example, in Somonien (Chorkuh), where 40 houses were destroyed as a result of military conflicts, participants admitted that the relations between the communities had deteriorated:

*“We used to be friends, but now we don’t even go to each other’s houses, even though we are about 12 metres away from our neighbours. We have developed hatred for each other. During the conflict we could not hide anywhere. After the conflict, we started to escort children to school together with law enforcement officials”. – Woman, mixed age group.*

Importantly, some of the sense of insecurity might be attributed to insufficient information and fear of the unknown. The majority of the consultations’ participants agreed that their sense of security had increased after they attended information meetings with representatives of different levels of government agencies. Such meetings were rated as effective in controlling panic and enhancing the sense of security.

*“For us, the government agencies’ representatives held a meeting and told us not to be afraid. We were reassured. We were happy. They calmed us down”. – Woman, age group 40–60.*

Economic insecurity was also raised by the participants as one of the consequences of the conflict. Residents of Bobodjon Gafurov District noted problems with selling agricultural products, as Kyrgyzstan has closed its border with Tajikistan due to the conflicts. Previously, they shared, Kyrgyz residents would buy their products, so the border closure deprived them of some of their clientele.

### **Women in Post-Conflict Recovery from Military Conflicts in September 2022**

Despite the new challenges and insecurities that the border dynamics have created for women,



our consultations revealed that women played an important role in humanitarian assistance after the September 2022 clashes, by providing food aid, preventing escalation by calling for ceasefires, supporting the emotional well-being of children during the active phase of the conflict, providing aid to both refugees and the military, and performing outreach to raise awareness about the available humanitarian aid and share news about the changing situation on the border.

*“The women of Isfara united and provided assistance to the affected families in the jamoats. A relief caravan called ‘Mother’s Caravan’ was organised. The caravan included food, clothing, and medicines for soldiers and affected families. Many women were involved in the reconstruction of school”.* – **Woman, age group 40-60.**

*“During the military conflict, houses were burning, women helped take things out of houses, helped put out the fire”.* – **Woman, age group 25–40.**

*“During the conflict we received people from Chorkuh and accommodated them in our homes. The wounded were placed in hospitals and taken care of. There were people in all the makhallas who accepted people in their homes. I myself took in 20 people. We calmed them down, put big cauldrons and cooked food for everyone, we did not allow them to buy food. The population collected money for the soldiers and for food”.* – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

Men who participated in the consultations appreciated women’s humanitarian contributions to post-conflict recovery:

*“I witnessed women actively helping. They shared clothes, cooked food. When we collected aid for the affected families, very often it was women who were the first to respond, and because word of mouth works very well for them, after that other women joined faster than men”.* – **Man, age group 40–60.**

It is important to note that the definition of women leaders in our data included those who had formal status (heads or employees of jamoats, teachers). The consultations showed that women’s representation in decision-making institutions had been effective both during the acute phase of the conflict and in the post-conflict recovery period. At the same time, it should be noted that male participants in the consultations did not provide examples of the involvement of women in formal decision-making roles. We may explain this by the existing gender subordination, where women’s contributions are considered secondary, after those of men.<sup>34</sup> Men appreciated women’s “everyday” contributions made through cooking and sharing clothing – activities that fell into the traditionally “feminine” domain. However, they were less keen to recognise the importance and role of women in positions of authority.

Perhaps for similar reasons, men also did not see the need to support women in overcoming the barriers they face to participating in public spaces, as illustrated by this exchange:

<sup>34</sup> For more details on gender subordination in rural communities in Kyrgyzstan, please see Aksana Ismailbekova, “Migration and Patrilineal Descent: The Role of Women in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 33, no. 3 (2014): 375–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2014.961305>

**Consultation Moderator:**

- Do you think there is a need for women from post-conflict zones to communicate their problems and their vision of peace to the wider community?

**Consultations Participant:**

- Why? They can solve their problems among themselves here. I don't see any need. – **Man, age group 40–60.**

It is important to note that the data collected show that the 2022 conflict has influenced the transformation and activism of some middle-aged women. The following is an excerpt voiced during the consultations by one of the participants:

*“I was very satisfied with myself because I was able to help the soldiers. I started realising that I can contribute to the community. I become happy and excited when I can do something. I start to believe in myself, it means I have something, I am noticed, I am proud of myself, I am happy”.*  
– **Women’s group, representatives of different age groups.**

### Key Actors in Post-Conflict Recovery: Local and International Dimensions

In assessing post-conflict recovery, the consultations’ participants pointed to the leading role of state institutions, local authorities, businesses, networks of fellow countrymen, and ordinary people as the main actors in post-conflict recovery. At the same time, the consultations indicate that it is necessary to increase the participation of international organisations and donors in post-conflict recovery, for example, in providing psychological support to the affected people. This is especially important for communities where there is experience and potential for implementation of cross-border projects.

The interviewed women noted that **they did not receive psychological support** to overcome post-traumatic stress syndrome. The consultations’ participants **pointed to the deep and devastating nature of the psychological traumas suffered, which require a prolonged programme of psychological support and assistance for women and men in the border areas of Soghd Province** affected by the September 2022 conflict.

We have not recorded any substantive, long-term psychological or material support to the affected people during the acute phase of the conflict and the subsequent phase of post-conflict recovery. The main source of support during the post-conflict recovery period were relatives; additionally, for men, it was mainly networks of compatriots, and for women, local businesses and ordinary residents. Local executive bodies of the state authorities played the main role in the reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure and housing upon the instructions of the central authorities. The consultations’ participants positively assessed the efforts of local authorities in rebuilding and improving the infrastructure of the affected areas. The construction of new houses

for the affected people, the construction of new schools and kindergartens, the paving of rural streets and provision of street lighting, and many other actions of the authorities were noted during the consultations.

The participants of the consultations expressed the common opinion that local authorities are open and effective in solving local problems:

*“If any problems appear, the residents first of all contact the local government authorities. They know the process of how to solve problems quickly. They not only work in this area, but also live here themselves, so they are quite aware of the problems and solutions”.* – **Woman, age group 25–40.**

*“After the conflict, the government agencies started to come more and work more closely with the population. They conduct awareness-raising activities, talk about living in peace. They say that everything will be fine, they reassure people”.* – **Mixed group of women, age group 18–60.**

However, not all participants agreed about the positive role of the local authorities. Some also expressed critical assessments of the role of local executive state authorities:

*“Perhaps local authorities understand well the problems, and needs of people, but because of the fear for their position, they do not speak much and demand the solution of these problems. This, I think, is wrong”.* – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

### Three Generations and Three Perceptions of Women’s Opportunities in Public Spaces

Our data clearly identify differences in the perception of the space of opportunities for women depending on the age of the women participants of the discussions.

Older women, the consultation participants of 60 and above, who were socialised during the Soviet period, positively assessed the existing opportunities for women in the public space. This group of the consultations’ participants positively assessed the changes taking place:

*“Now women are free and determined. They can actively participate in any activities and influence the situation in a positive way”.* – **Woman, age group 60 and above.**

The opinions of women in the 40–60 age group were divided, with a subgroup of working women pointing to self-imposed constraints and lack of confidence as the main problem of women’s low involvement in community issues:

*“I don’t think women can face any problems if they want to participate in the post-conflict recovery process. Because they can get support from other women. Women will support if they want to take the initiative forward. But women themselves put limitations on themselves”.* – **Woman, age**

**group 40–60.**

Another subgroup of the consultations' participants noted the cultural context: *"We have a different mentality, we are oriental people and we have our own traditions. If there is a man, then a man speaks"*. – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

In this context, some of the women in the middle age group emphasised the need to popularise the image of a successful woman as an opportunity to overcome gender stereotypes:

*"Society is patriarchal, so we need to talk about successful women. We do not know them, and we need to talk about their successes and achievements. It is necessary to popularise success stories of active women and eradicate stereotypical thinking. If a woman dresses well, it does not mean that she is bad. We need to change the thinking of the people: young people, men, leaders"*. – **Woman, age group 25–40.**

Women in the 18–25 age group consisted of two subgroups. The first did not express their opinion and avoided answering the consultation question about the barriers to women's participation, while the second subgroup pointed out structural constraints at the intersection of gender and age.

*"I'm young and my husband won't let me get involved in public affairs, but adult women can. [...] Young women are not allowed to go out without their husband's permission"*. – **Woman, age group 18–25.**

The disparity of views among women can be seen as an illustration of the evolving view of gender and of women's role within society. It highlights the need for greater dialogue, through non-violent communication between generations to allow women to exchange their diverse experiences and support each other in challenging gender norms and in accessing decision-making both in their families and in their communities.

## Men's Labor Migration and the Changing Role of Women

Men's migration in Tajikistan is a widespread and normalised socio-economic process. The civil war of 1992–1997 triggered the first large-scale wave of migration from Tajikistan, which continues to the present day.<sup>35</sup> In 2022, remittances from labour migrants to Tajikistan were comparable to 53% of the GDP, as estimated by a World Bank study.<sup>36</sup> While labour migration remains predominantly male, according to our data, it tends to shift from male to family migration in border communities.

*"After the conflict, women with their children started moving to Russia with their husbands, even*

<sup>35</sup> Saskina F. Nazarshoeva, "The Civil War in the Republic of Tajikistan and Its Impact on Migration Processes," *Izvestiya Altai State University* 6, no. 110 (2019). [https://doi.org/10.14258/izvasu\(2019\)6-13](https://doi.org/10.14258/izvasu(2019)6-13)

<sup>36</sup> World Bank Group, "Personal Remittances, Received (Current US\$) – Tajikistan, Suriname" <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?locations=TJ-SR>

*taking their parents with them and getting citizenship for them*". – **Woman, age group 40-60.**

Along with this, both low-skilled migration and migration of professionals is common. This can lead to shortages in skilled staff and challenges in accessing basic services in border regions:

*"Because of low wages, our doctors go abroad for migration, so we do not have enough doctors"*. – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

The consultations' participants pointed out the following risks associated with men's labour migration. First, it is an increase in the **risk of child delinquency** due to the migration of fathers.<sup>37</sup>

*"When a parent is away, there is no control. Children go out at night, it happens that they break laws and order. Because of their father's absence, they don't listen to their mothers"*. – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

Second, migration affects the **education of children**. They have to substitute for the labour force that has left the household and help their mothers to do the work of their fathers. Because of this, they often miss school and form a social layer of children who do not perform well in school.

In terms of the impact of men's labour migration on women, the findings of the consultations demonstrated **women's increased workload, poor health, and economic vulnerability**:

*"Another major problem is that husbands are in labour migration. The family, raising children, working in the fields, everyday life – everything falls on women's shoulders"*. – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

*"Migration affects women a lot. My sister works as a teacher in a school, her husband is in migration. But her mother-in-law takes all the money because her husband sends the money not to his wife but to his mother. We try to help my sister because she has small children and they are often sick"*. – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

We have found that men's migration has a dual impact on women's mobility in public spaces. One group of women participants pointed out that migration does not increase women's participation in public spaces because patriarchal control remains:

*"Even if the husband is in Russia, there is constant control, only video calls, they constantly check where we are"*. – **Woman, age group 25–40.**

*"At the family level, the woman decides many issues. Many men have gone to work, and we have to solve almost all the issues. And we make decisions on household issues ourselves. But if we have to make major expenditures, we have to do so with the permission of our husbands"*

<sup>37</sup> During the consultations in Histevarz Jamoat, the moderator of the focus group was approached by the daughter of one of the participants, who said in her ear that she had never seen her father; the child was approximately six years old. Her mother later explained to the moderator that her husband had left for migration when she was 6 months pregnant and had not returned to the family since then.



or sons. Men still decide on their own. But we have many divorced women. In this case, her brothers most often make decisions for her. But this is true for young women. If a woman is older, then, of course, she decides for herself. It all depends on many factors”. – **Woman, age group 40–60.**

Another group of women participants indicated that the absence of men leads to increased female mobility outside the family:

“When we were building wells in the community, the women took over everything, since there were no men, everyone was on migration”. – **Mixed group, men and women.**

“In our community, women are free to express their opinions because many men are in labour migration, and women have become heads of households”. – **Mixed group, men and women.**

“Men see the problems we face, we have become more active, men don’t get in the way”. – **Women, age group 40–60.**

The consultations’ participants also highlighted the multidimensional impact of migration on women, characterising contemporary processes as a combination of contradictory dynamics:

“We have difficulties, but we also have changes for the better. The difficulty is that we have an opinion that women come second. There are cultural, psychological factors, no one has cancelled them. On the other hand, due to the fact that most of the men leaders are in migration, there is some chaos. In many jamoats, women are appointed as leaders at the moment. They are the leaders, but they don’t have the will. And it is clear what the reason for this is. But we need to rely on them and on women entrepreneurs, to build a platform for dialogue around them”. – **Man, age group 40–60.**

It is important to note that our data indicate that women whose husbands were in migration at the time of the events were a particularly vulnerable group during the escalation of the border conflicts:

“During the border conflict, we were here in the village. No one wants war, we were afraid because usually during any war it is generally the peaceful people who suffer. My husband was in Russia, so we were fully prepared to go to our relatives. The first thing I felt was fear, as I lived with my daughters and we were afraid that things would go too far. We lived in fear, heard different bad news every day, and it was very dangerous to go outside. I was very afraid for my children. Many men sent their families to their relatives and went to the border themselves. There were slogans like ‘We will give our souls for Vorukh, but we will not give our land to anyone’. All the men were very determined, it was a very dangerous situation. And the children were very scared, and so were their mothers. Everyone was just talking about it, wherever you went, whoever you met, there was only one topic”. – **Woman, age group 25–40.**

Several women participants noted the problem with evacuation during the acute phase of the

conflict and pointed to the important role of neighbours in the *makhalla* who came back to the communities to take out women, children, and the disabled who were without men's support and transportation.

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## Conclusion

We have found that during the acute phase of the military conflict on the border in September 2022, the role of women was visible in especially vulnerable communities. In particular, women called for peace rather than involvement in the conflict. Our analysis shows that women living in the direct conflict locations supported rapid reconnection and normalisation of life through restoring neighbourhood relationships. We have found a desire for dialogue in villages located in the most vulnerable jamoats of the border communities.

Importantly, the consultations' participants were unanimous in their assessments of the resumption of political dialogue with Uzbekistan after 2016. The consultations' participants reported that their feelings of security significantly increased after the normalisation of relations between the countries. They positively assessed the efforts of the presidents and governments to establish and facilitate mobility of people, trade, and any form of interaction across borders.

We have revealed that the challenges faced by women living in cross-border communities are compounded by men's labour migration. Labour migration has a profound multiplier effect that has a predominantly negative impact on women, children, and the elderly. At the same time, labour migration helps to ensure households' economic security. Thus, women have to balance constraints and opportunities in the context of the men's labour migration process.

The state is making large-scale efforts to improve the situation of gender equality in the country. In particular, women's quotas have been introduced for women's representation and participation in all government bodies, and special educational quotas exist for girls from remote and mountainous regions, which allow them to receive education in any specialty within the country at the expense of the state. However, as our data indicate, these efforts are understood by communities in different ways. On the one hand, the consultations' participants noted that the actions taken by the government have significantly improved the situation of women's representation in decision-making institutions. On the other hand, the consultations' participants stated that these actions do not fully address the process of gender roles and patriarchal norms and values entrenched in the society, which affect women's gender socialisation, as well as the society's attitudes towards them.

It is important to note that women from post-conflict zones on the Tajik–Kyrgyz border are experiencing deep and devastating consequences of the conflict and need a long-term programme of psychological and social support. The activation of the projects of civil society and international organisations would contribute to improving the situation.

The consultations' participants emphasised the important role of local state executive authorities in communicating and solving problems of cross-border communities at both local and regional levels. They actively referred to and provided specific examples where local government representatives had helped them to solve problems.

Initiatives aimed at changes in the dominant gender norms and women's gender socialisation can be an important element in conflict prevention strategies at the local level. Women in

Tajikistan have extensive experience in peacebuilding and it is important to integrate it into development strategies at the local and national levels.