



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Tajikistan

Lost in Transition: Barriers to Educational Participation in Tajikistan

- **Topic of research**

The World Bank (1999) forecasted that in Tajikistan there would soon be a whole generation of students who had never attended school, subsequently becoming a “lost generation.” Since independence in 1991, Tajikistan has faced a devastating economic crisis and a civil war, both of which took their toll on the educational system. Many organizations, funded directly and indirectly by the United States, have contributed substantial resources for improving education in Tajikistan in the past few years. Despite the work of the various organizations, as many 25 percent of school aged children are not attending school. My research will provide an understanding of the barriers to children’s educational participation in Tajikistan.

- **Relevance and contribution to field**

One of the greatest achievements of the Soviet Union was its educational system. Early on, education was a focus of the leaders of the Soviet Union, and within a matter of years after the 1917 revolution, schools appeared in even the remotest of villages of Tajikistan (Coates & Coates 1951). By the 1970’s, the Central Statistical Administration of Tajikistan (1972) reported that, 99% of the population of Tajikistan over age 10 had finished at least primary school. However, since Tajikistan’s independence in 1991

enrollment rates have dropped as much as 20-25 percent (World Bank 2003). Why have these rates dropped? What keeps children from attending schools today?

My work contributes to the field in at least two important ways. First, although it has been well documented that fewer and fewer children are attending school, no studies have been conducted that document what keeps children from attending school. My research seeks to highlight the mechanisms which are keeping children from attending school. Second, past research has reported on generalized national patterns, but not looked at regional variation and my study compares regional differences within Tajikistan.

Concerning policy relevance, former- Soviet states are unique in many ways. In particular the Muslim states of Central Asia have caught the attention of US policy makers, perhaps because they border Afghanistan. Within my research I seek to identify factors which keep children from participating in the education system, which is a key institution of any democratic state. Helping to identify barriers to education will help us to implement projects that that will reduce the disenfranchised population of Tajikistan and reduce the security risks for the United States.

- **Summary research methodology**

While in Tajikistan, my goal was to conduct in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, and university students in Tajikistan. I wanted to ask parents about difficulties they face in sending their children to school and reasons why some of their children do not attend. The interviews with teachers focused on changes in local schools, such as lack of heat in the winter, and their influence on children's educational participation. University students were asked about difficulties young people face in attending university and why some of their peers have dropped out of school.

During my time in Tajikistan, I was able to conduct interviews with parents, teachers, and university students in the northern region of the country including, Khudjand, Penjakent, as well as a smaller town in the mountains and a village with a large Uzbek population . In all, over 50 individuals were interviewed. Informants were selected using a mixture of snowball, purposive, and quota sampling techniques. The sample was recruited through personal invitation using established contacts, resulting in a snowball sample. In each of the research sites a contact person introduced me to university students, teachers and/or parents. I used purposeful sampling techniques to make sure that the gender balance was correct and to make sure that the Uzbek population was represented. Uzbeks make up only 25-30% of the national population and my sample contains approximately 20-25% Uzbeks as well.

- **Summary of preliminary research findings**

A general picture of trends in educational attainment is displayed in Figures 1, 2 & 3. In general it is seen that there is an overall loss of educational attainment in each of the three levels: primary, secondary, and higher education. In addition, there are differences between men and women's attainment rates. However, there are important differences between the three levels. The loss of participation in primary levels is minimal, and in fact not statistically significant. In higher education the loss is also not statistically significant, and the differences between men and women narrowed. In secondary school, the loss of educational participation is drastic and statistically significant. There is also a widening gap of educational attainment between males and females.

The goal of my research was to discover the barriers which keep children from attending schools and, in effect, to find out what explains the national trends displayed in Figure 1,2 & 3. Two major explanations surfaced multiple times within my research. First, was the lack of the ability of the state to supply education and second was the inability for parents to afford education. Variation in these two factors between the levels of education explains differences in trends between primary, secondary, and higher educational attainment.

Primary education in Tajikistan is compulsory and there are strong state networks to guarantee enrollments. According to respondents, the state is able to track enrollment rate using birth records to make sure that all children are enrolled in school. If children are not enrolled in classes then teachers or administrators visit the homes of parents to find out why the children are not attending and offer help if necessary. The state has a program which offers financial help, although minimal, to families who cannot afford schooling. Respondents report that schools also give aid in the form of school uniform, books, and supplies to poor families.

Primary education also has a higher supply of teachers. When school directors report a lack of teaching staff they most often refer to upper secondary courses. In addition, the state has less restrictive procedures for training primary grade teachers and thus there is a better supply of such teachers.

The cost of primary schooling for parents is minimal. Parents report that fees for studying in primary grades are cheaper than for secondary schooling. In addition, the students study fewer subjects, requiring the purchase of fewer books. There are also lower opportunity costs and younger children rarely work and contribute to family earnings. Their contribution is usually in the form of household chores before or after school.

As seen in Figure 2, there is a drastic drop in secondary school attainment and a widening gap between males and females. Secondary school completion is not compulsory in Tajikistan. Students must only complete the 9th grade and after which may choose to continue studies until the 11th grade, which is a complete secondary education. It is after the 9th grade, around age 15, that the loss of many students, especially girls is seen.

Secondary schools face problems supplying secondary education in many fronts. School staff report a lack of teachers in many key subjects, especially in villages. The government has not published textbooks for use in many upper level subjects and as schooling is not mandatory at the secondary level the state does not provide support for secondary study.

The costs of schooling for parents in secondary schooling increases as well. Parents report that fees are higher. In addition, there is a greater variety of subjects requiring more books and notebooks to be purchased. The opportunity costs of schooling increase as the potential for secondary school students to work to earn money for families increases. Parents often cite the need for their older children to work to provide food for the family, which prohibits them from attending school.

Concerning the lower level of girls' secondary attainment in recent years, teachers claim that an increase in conservative religious beliefs in some areas of Tajikistan explains

part of the reduction in girls' attainment. Parents in these areas only allow their daughters to study until the 6-8th grades, fewer than the required number of years to complete a secondary school education. Teachers also cite a lack of oversight by governmental and educational officials. In the past, there were severe consequences for parents who did not send their children to school, but today there are no mechanisms to ensure that girls attend school. Finally, teachers also mention that many girls primarily are seen as future brides and homemakers for whom schooling is not important, and they are thus married at early ages or kept at home to learn how to manage a home instead of attending school.

Figure 3 displays that the trend in higher education is slightly different. As mentioned above, there is a drop in overall attainment rates, but the gap between males and females is smaller. Respondents report that university education has become much more difficult for students to attain. Much of the difficulty relates to the expense of higher education. The government does not provide university education without costs now and the combination of official and unofficial payments is a great barrier for young people to overcome. Many parents and university students lament that even if one is a strong student, they must pay fees, both formal and informal to enter and study at university. Sometimes it happens that the smartest students in the class are not able to afford to study, but less talented students with means are able to continue in their studies.

Secondary and Higher educational attainment rates also have regional patterns. Urban residents report higher average attendance levels in secondary and higher education institutions than rural residents. Preliminary evidence from respondents indicates that enrollment levels in the oblast of Sugdh are higher than in Khatlon. Parents in some cities in the north report lower levels of school payments and greater supplies of teachers in schools. In addition, the northern region did not experience the tragedies of the civil war which were faced in Khatlon. In Khatlon and the south several schools were destroyed and many people migrated, including teachers, out of the region, some to the Sugdh region.

Figure 1 Predicted Probability of Primary School Attainment by Age and Residence, 2003 TLSS (N=9095)

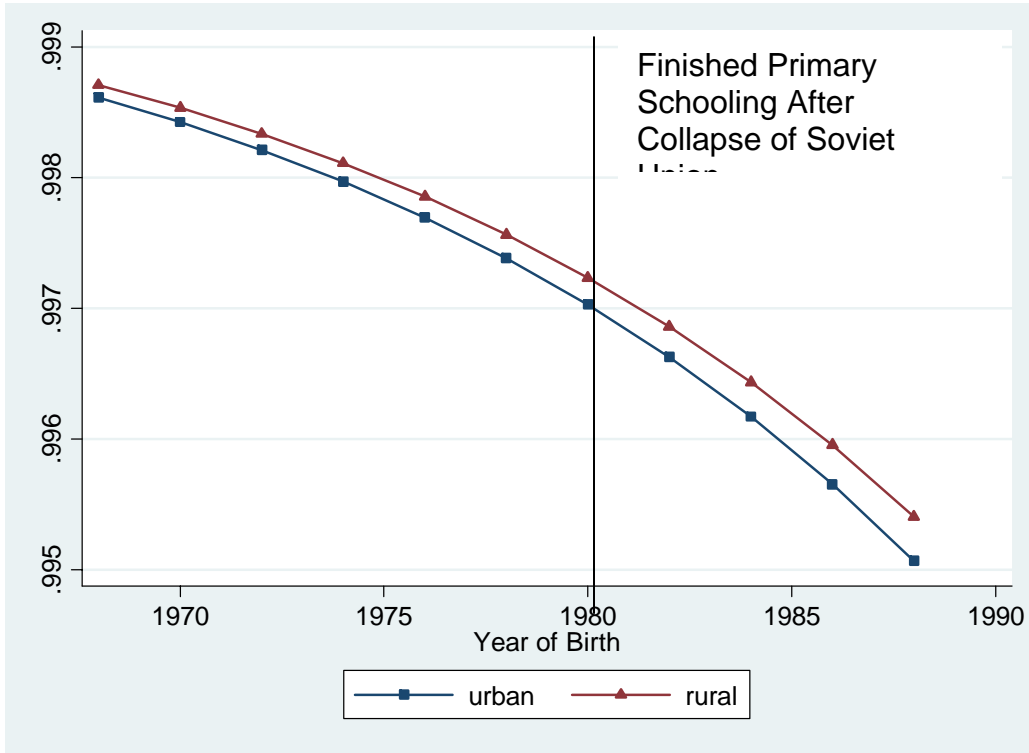


Figure 2 Predicted Probability of Secondary Attainment by Age and Sex, 2003 (N=7423)

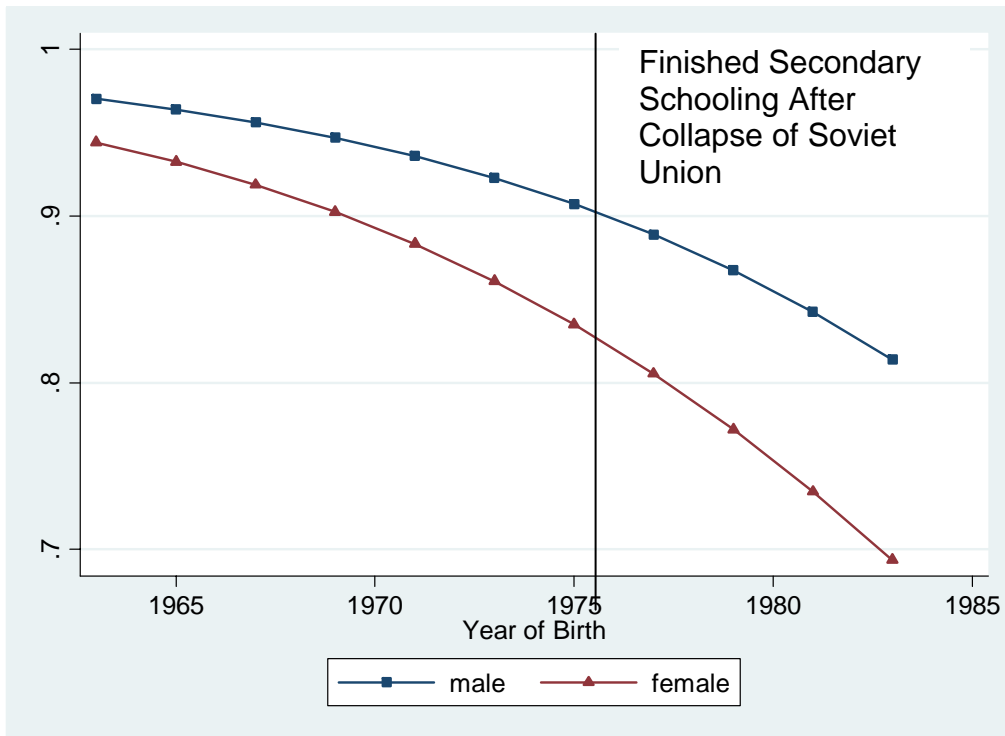
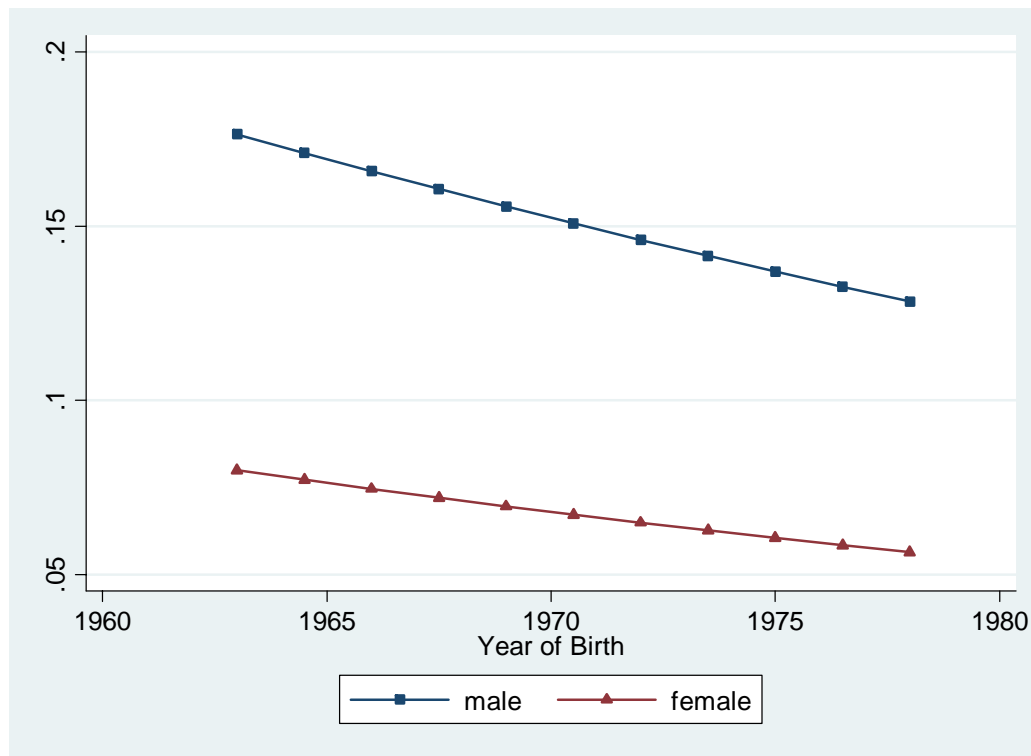


Figure 3 Predicted Probability of Higher Educational Attainment by Age and Sex, 2003 TLSS (N=5061)



- **Suggestions for future research**

I suggest that research be conducted concerning implications of the “lost” generation. Now that time has past and the children who were not educated in the 1990s are young adults we should learn more about the affects of not having finished school. Are they able to find jobs and support the family? Did they gain literacy and numeracy form other sources? Are there government projects to educated the young adults who are illiterate?

- **Recommendations for the US policy community**

The situation the of former- Soviet state of Tajikistan regarding education is unique among the poorest nations in the world. Although they are one of the poorest nations of the world, they score very high on educational matters such as adult literacy. However, many of our educational programs meant to develop the educational system were adapted from models created in the developing world and may be inadequate for Tajikistan and other former- Soviet nations. For example, a struggle of developing countries is developing institutions for training teachers and finding educated adults to become teachers. In Tajikistan there are many trained teachers who are not working simply because the wages are too low to provide a living for their families. In addition, each year hundreds of newly trained teachers do not report to a teaching position because of the low pay. Thus, efforts to increase skilled teaching staff in Tajikistan

should focus on increasing the government's capacity to provide a living wage, not necessarily on developing institutions to train teachers.

In addition, as the government institutions in charge of education were centralized during the Soviet Union and had little decision making power, the current national ministry of education has little experience managing educational affairs. Efforts should concentrate on developing the legislative and managerial skills necessary to run a national education system.

Finally, a great barrier to learning in the country is the lack of textbooks. The government has produced a limited number of texts of poor quality. The writers of the text were inexperienced and the level of writing is too high for many students. There is still a lack of textbooks in many subjects. In particular, there is a lack of textbooks for minority groups. If an effort was made to create more textbooks of higher quality it would greatly aid education in Tajikistan.