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Tajikistan

Developing Women's' Entrepreneurship in Tajikistan

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

The purpose of this research was to identify the cultural and social reasons for Tajik women's resistance to developing their own businesses. During the last 13 years of independence, Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries have had to face complex socio-economic challenges which accompany their transition from a command to a market economy. As a consequence, poverty has increased to the level of serious threat to social-economic stability. In Tajikistan, 64% of the population still lives under the poverty limit (in 2004 down from 80% in 2000), 60% of the children suffer from chronic to acute malnutrition (USAID, 2004), and women with their children are the ones who have suffered the most from deprivations subsequent to the fall of communism. Impoverished women are particularly vulnerable, which makes them an easy target for a variety of subversive and religious propaganda. Even if some women are among the most successful Tajik entrepreneurs, access to entrepreneurship is socially restricted and even discouraged by the very women who have achieved success.

In 2003, a joint-research project (Nisolle-Yussoupov) uncovered the negative image of women's entrepreneurship in Tajikistan, and the fact that women entrepreneurs did not view their occupation as suitable for their children, especially their daughters. The goal of my research was to identify some of the cultural and social obstacles that feed and explain this negative image and which hinder the development of small businesses owned by women and prevent young women from playing an active role in the economy.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

This research enhances the understanding of the cultural environment in which Tajik entrepreneurship tries to develop. This improved understanding of the cultural determinism that limits women's entrepreneurship development should help policy makers in their enactment of adapted policies aiming at changing the roles of women in Tajik society and helping them improve their economic status. Enabling women to take an active role in the economy and create their own businesses will contribute to the development of the country and ultimately will accelerate the development of a market economy and improve the fight against poverty, which are major American Foreign Aid objectives in this region. Current USAID programs have set five strategic and two special objectives: the first of them being to promote reforms and training that foster the growth of small and medium enterprises. Our research on students' attitudes towards sales careers will improve our understanding of their motivations and will help devise culturally adapted marketing training programs aimed at improving the negative image of sales people and careers in Tajikistan.

Research Methodology

The methodology used was comparative and ethnographic. Fieldwork was conducted mainly in Khujand but also in smaller towns such as Kanibadam, Aini and Izfaravshan and several small villages. The methods used for data collection included participant-

observation, interviews (structured and non-directive), questionnaires and visits to Zacks to collect marriage data. They complemented the library research conducted in the US before departure. Interviews and participant-observation were aimed at gathering data on women's of varied ages attitudes and behaviors within their family environment, whereas one set of questionnaires was designed to measure the prevalence of Tajik young men's migration to Russia, and the other one to measure the attitude of Tajik students toward sales careers. The sales career questionnaires were first developed in the US and already used in several other countries (the US, Turkey, and France) in order to allow for comparative analyses that will enrich understanding of Tajik business mentalities. As in the other countries, the questionnaires were translated into local language (Russian) and the questions that needed adapting were rephrased, before being administered to business students of the Tajik State University of Commerce in Khujand, with the help of graduate and "aspirant" students. Over 200 questionnaires were administered, which are currently being analyzed and the results are being compared with those of France, Turkey and the US.

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

It could have been hoped that Tajik young women's situations would be improving with Tajikistan adoption of a more democratic system of government and of a market economy, and with the obvious progresses made in the standard of living of urban population since my last visit in 2003. On the contrary, the current situation is that of a crucial deterioration. Because of the lack of work opportunities in Tajikistan for young, low skilled workers, many young men leave the country to seek employment in Russia. The number of these migrant workers is officially set at 400,000-500,000 or 25% of the workforce, but estimates by the International Migrations Office reach 1,000,000. I have visited villages (around Aini for example), inhabited only by women and their children. All the young and middle-aged men were working in Russia. And nowadays, the husband race starts younger and younger. Under Soviet rule, the minimum age of marriage in Tajikistan was 18 for men and women alike. Two years ago a presidential decree lowered the minimum female marriage age to 16.

Our visits to diverse Zacks yield to the discovery of puzzling data: in this very strict Islamic country, many young women aged 17 to 19, when getting married at the Zacks, which is the civil ceremony, also declare the existence of one or two children. This declaration at the time of their marriage serves as recognition of paternity by their husband to be. This situation is particularly frequent in villages and in the south of the country. Since premarital sex is forbidden, the explanation, which was validated in interviews, is that these women got married religiously, obtaining "nicoh" at an early and illegal age (14 to 16) and were regularizing their situation and that of their children when becoming of age. Beyond the numerous health-related problems brought by early marriage, the female decreasing age of marriage in Tajikistan means that young women will not be able to pursue their education nor to acquire professional skills, before they are enrolled in their absorbing if not abusing in-laws household and before they give birth to their children. Their alienation is increased if their husband is a migrant worker, spending periods of two to three years at a time in Russia, and who is likely to send the money he earns to his parents rather than directly to his wife.

The second part of our research was aimed at discovering the image of sales activities and careers held by Tajik business students. The preliminary results show that most Tajik students, both males and females have a negative image of sales and absolutely do not want to pursue such a career. This negative image is obviously counterproductive in a country, which needs to develop its markets. An avenue for improvement of this

image could be to stress the financial success which may accompany a successful sales career, because Tajik students seem to be highly motivated by financial rewards.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas

Cultural and social research on Central Asian countries needs to be pursued. The differences with the US environment are so big that even asking the right questions to develop a new project necessitates research. Changes in the standard of living are rapid. I found a great improvement in consumer products and services availability, over my previous visit, in 2003. Unfortunately the mentalities did not change as quickly, although I have noticed a definite progress in Tajikistan this summer, where some of the previously off limit topics could now be discussed in certain restricted circles (divorce, premarital sex, forced marriage, bribery, cronyism). At the opposite of this more liberal trend however, I was also surprised by the apparition in the streets, markets and other non-religious public places of a few veiled women. Wearing heavy “abayas” in the midst of summer 120 degrees temperatures, and full, face-hiding black veils, they were a dark contrast in the bright colored, short sleeved and open necklines of traditional Tajik female dresses. These evolutions both in the mentalities and in the material environment need to be closely monitored and are a perfect field for future research.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

Tajikistan, with its relatively stable coalition government and official market economy pursuit presents in Central Asia a rare and attractive compromise worthy of western attention and support. Research is needed to shed light on the specific problems of the country because of its particular culture, combining past Soviet influences, Islamic religious values and social norms, with a high level of literacy and a very low level of economic development.

Because of Tajikistan’s small size (equivalent to Wisconsin), of the limited number of its inhabitants (6,700,000 in 2004), of the extreme level of poverty of its inhabitants (GDP per capita \$324, EBRD) and because of the political and economic options selected by the government (democracy and development of a market economy) Tajikistan could legitimately be considered as a real size laboratory for the testing of new development policies and social change implementation, the latter being indispensable for the former to be successful.

These objectives fit with the goals of US assistance programs, which support the establishment of market economies in Central Asian countries. According to USAID “US national interests in Tajikistan are to stem drug trafficking (the drugs coming from Afghanistan), to promote political and social stability through democratic and economic reform, improved quality of life and productive capacity of the people” (Program Data sheet, 2004).