Family resources, sitting at home and democratic choice: investigating determinants of educational attainment in post-Soviet Tajikistan

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, school enrolment, attendance and attainment rates fell across the region. In Tajikistan, there has been a decrease in average completion rates for basic, secondary and higher education, as well as a growing gender gap because girls are much less likely than boys to finish all levels of schooling. Past work on educational stratification in the region has demonstrated similar trends, but not sought to explain the processes generating these patterns. Scholars of educational participation suggest that a variety of family, community and macro-structural factors influence educational attainment. This paper broadens our understanding of the processes generating the decline in educational attainment and widening gender gap by analysing interviews conducted with parents, teachers and university students living in Tajikistan in 2006–2007. Respondents overwhelmingly attribute the drop in educational rates to increased poverty and its effects on family resources. The large decrease in girls’ attainment is rationalized by citing cultural norms dictating that they will only become housewives, ‘sitting at home’, and do not need further education. Others point to changes in educational policy as a reason for lower attainment rates because parents and children are now able to choose whether or not to continue studies in the new democratic society.

Keywords: Tajikistan; education; inequality; gender

Introduction

Education played a prominent role in Soviet society and the early Soviet period was characterized by tremendous educational expansion, even into the mountain villages of Tajikistan. Education was viewed by Soviet leaders as essential for rapid industrialization and as a vehicle for the elimination of inequality; therefore, all children were guaranteed a cost-free education provided by the state. Russian sources indicate that as of 1917 there were virtually no modern schools in the regions that would later form today’s Tajikistan. By 1939, more than 2000 schools were built and the reported literacy rate was 82.8% for the population aged 9 to 49 (Pennar et al. 1971). As early as 1945, Soviet leaders boasted that there were schools in every village and even universities established in the cities (Negmatullaev 1949, Coates and Coates 1951).

The increase in the number of students completing basic, secondary and higher education is evidence of the expansion of education in the Soviet period. Figure 1 displays average educational attainment rates for eight cohorts of Tajikistani men and women educated during either the Soviet or post-Soviet period. During the Soviet period there is an increase in average basic
and secondary attainment rates, but a decline in average attainment at the university level. At all educational levels, there is a decline in relative inequality between men and women in the Soviet period; however, men retain an advantage in completing higher levels of education.

The post-Soviet period was characterized by a drop in educational participation across all levels, but especially in secondary and higher education. Within only six years of the Soviet collapse, enrolment rates in secondary school in Tajikistan were estimated to be 15–20% lower than 1970 levels (World Bank 1999). Reports from international organizations and recent scholarship indicate that greater numbers of girls and children from poorer households dropped out of school after the transition (Baschieri and Falkingham 2007, 2009). The drop in the number of students completing basic, secondary and higher education is displayed in Figure 1. For basic and secondary education, the gap between men’s and women’s attainment widened, while at the university level the relative gap decreased. The sharper decline in men’s educational attainment narrowed the gap between men and women. Other work about educational decline in the former Soviet Union has shown similar patterns (see Gerber 2000) but not given sufficient explanation of the factors that give rise to them.

This paper seeks to expand our understanding of the mechanisms that generate the observed patterns in the post-Soviet period by demonstrating how factors at multiple levels influence educational attainment. Why have average levels of educational participation fallen and why are girls finishing school at lower rates than boys? Three of the most prevalent responses given by citizens of Tajikistan to explain the drop in educational attainment and the widening gender gap are presented. The overwhelming response of Tajikistani adults was that a lack of family resources (sharoit-i oila) plays the most important role in determining children’s educational attainment. In relation to the widening gender gap, adults commonly explained that girls would only be housewives (khonashin), ‘sitting at home’, in the future and would not benefit from additional education. Because recent legislative changes have made secondary education optional, some respondents cited the opportunity for parents and young people to exercise their democratic right to choose whether or not to continue schooling as a contributor to the decline in educational attainment. These responses demonstrate how a complex relationship between family, community and state factors influence educational attainment.

![Figure 1. Women’s and men’s educational attainment.](image)

Note: Author’s own creation from a sample of over 9000 adults surveyed in the Tajik Living Standards Survey, 2003.
Family, community and state determinants of educational attainment

Studies of children’s educational attainment point to a variety of multilevel determinants, as illustrated in Figure 2. At the centre of the model is a direct relationship between educational attainment and family factors. Community factors, such as local culture, availability and quality of schooling, and employment opportunities, influence family factors and educational outcomes. Macro-level determinants such as economic change and social policies influence both community and family factors. Whereas most studies focus on only one level of analysis, the goal of this paper is to demonstrate how factors at multiple levels interact to generate educational attainment. Exploring the relationships between all the specific components displayed in Figure 2 is beyond the scope of this paper, which will focus on the relationship between educational attainment and family factors (resources), community factors (cultural beliefs and economic outcomes) and macro-structural factors (state-level policies and economic context).

Family resources

At the centre of scholarship about the influence of a family’s resources on educational attainment are discussions of the costs and benefits of schooling, exemplified by human capital theory. Education is one of the many investments towards children’s future earning potential. Families weigh the various options that will be best for their child and then make investments in schooling based on their perceptions of returns. The costs for schooling include real costs – such as money for tuition and supplies – and opportunity costs – such as skills not taught at school or income from children’s productive labour. Differences in educational attainment occur as a result of differences in the perception of costs and returns of schooling (Becker 1993). The emphasis on the returns to education highlights the importance of the community and macro-structural context of family decisions.

Scholars working in developing regions have produced work emphasizing the importance of the context in which families make decisions regarding schooling. In developing countries, the
family is the primary economic unit and families must consider long-term family welfare in
decisions about children’s schooling. In countries that have weak states, families provide
medical assistance, unemployment insurance and care in old age. In this context, Buchmann
(2000) showed how parents invest more in educating children with greater chances of finding
well paid work, or even any work at all, in the future. If the labour market promises greater
returns for men than women, then parents are more likely to send boys to school than girls.

The family economy model was developed based on studies of families in the United States
during the period of industrialization and educational expansion of the late 1800s. It speaks
directly to the context in which families make educational decisions. Walters and O’Connell
(1988) found that, although a family may desire to send their children to school, the current
household economic situation may not allow them to do so. In many places, families rely on chil-
dren’s productive labour to survive a difficult period. Recent research has also found that the
expense of education alone may keep children from attending school, but not mandate that
they work to support the families (Buchmann and Brakewood 2000, Post 2001).

**Community context**

Differing norms about the roles of women and men in society can influence family decisions
about education. Fuller, Singer and Keiley (1995) found that cultural norms determine the
amount of girls’ discretionary time in Botswana. The household work that girls were expected
to perform took much more time than boys’ work, which diminished the amount of time girls
could devote to attending school. As it is a common pattern in developing countries that
women perform substantially greater amounts of work than men (King and Hill 1993), daugh-
ters, unlike sons, may be expected to do more housework or care for children in the home,
making it more difficult for girls to attend school. Culture also influences the work lives of
adults and their potential returns to education. Potential returns to education include the
chance for finding well paid work, or even any work at all, in the future. In patriarchal societies
where women are not favoured for work in the labour force, but are expected to be in the home,
parents are less likely to send their daughters to school (Csapo 1983; Buchmann 2000; Rankin
and Aytac 2006).

There is debate about the influence of Islam on girl’s education. While some point to
the lower rate of participation in the Middle East as proof of the negative impact of Islam
(Finn *et al.* 1979), others place blame on the patriarchal society of Middle Eastern nations
(El-Sanabary 1993; Rankin and Aytac 2007). Traditional religious beliefs may lead parents to
invest more in the education of boys than of girls. The curriculum of schools is often viewed
as counter to traditional beliefs and girls are kept from attending school. The simple practice
of having girls and boys in the same classroom may be viewed as immodest from the perspective
of parents (El-Sanabary 1993). However, these beliefs attributed to religion are actually based on
a patriarchal worldview and not inherent in religious teachings. Thus, while some may use reli-
gion to justify unequal treatment of girls, it is actually a result of patriarchal beliefs and interpre-
tations of religious teachings. Harris’s (2004) work confirms that gender norms disadvantaging
women in Tajikistan are based on a patriarchal worldview and often the teachings of Islam
have been misinterpreted in support of current norms.

**The influence of the state**

Macro-structural factors shape the influence of both community and family factors on
educational attainment. Educational policies determine who can attend school and for how

Strong and weak states have different effects on education. In strong states the political actions of the government may positively affect school attainment through policy changes. For example, Rankin and Aytac (2007) researching educational attainment in Turkey found that family and community differences did not influence educational attainment at the mandatory primary level. State policy in this environment overrode family and community influences. Weak states face many challenges in implementing policy changes. Buchmann and Hannum (2001, p. 81) state that ‘Several studies have examined the deleterious effects of state weakness in the education sector, including excessive demand for higher education, extreme regional disparities in school supply and poor school quality.’

Research from two different regions that have experienced state decline demonstrates the effect that negative economic and/or political changes can have on educational participation. Gerber’s (2000) work in post-Soviet Russia, a country that experienced both economic decline and political changes, found that there were reductions in the number of people finishing secondary and higher education. He also found that inequality increased between lower- and higher-socioeconomic-status families at the secondary level. Despite increases in inequality at the secondary level, inequality decreased at the tertiary level for certain populations. The difference between average and low-origin men decreased while high-origin men continued to be advantaged. However, women’s probability of completing higher education did not decrease as drastically in the post-Soviet period. While Gerber’s work adequately demonstrates trends in educational participation and inequality in times of economic difficulty and political change, his work does not offer insights into the processes generating the decrease in educational attainment and the increase of educational inequality.

Work from Latin America and Africa about the period of ‘structural adjustment’, during which countries were forced to cut expenditure on education in their struggle to conquer the debt crisis of the 1980s, offers some explanations of the processes generating inequality and a reduction in attainment rates. Reimers (1991) found that in Latin America the decrease in government expenditure on education resulted in a decrease in national enrolment ratios because governments were not able to expand education to keep pace with rising population rates. The decrease in available places in schools increased competition and children from the poorest households were less likely to be enrolled in school at all levels. Evidence from Africa also supports Reimer’s basic findings (Adepoju 1993).

Eloundou-Enyegue and Davanzo (2003) lay out more direct causes for the reduction in educational participation in Africa during structural adjustment. In their work about Cameroon, they outline how economic downturns increase the actual and opportunity costs of schooling, reduce school quality, reduce family incomes and decrease the number of jobs for university graduates – all factors commonly associated with lower educational attainment rates. However, they also found that some characteristics of schooling may help to keep enrolment rates high. For one, schooling can act as child care, so despite economic difficulties parents may send their children to school. Second, the results of schooling last a lifetime and so parents may feel that the investment in education will have greater longer-term consequences than the effects of an economic downturn.

The case of Tajikistan

Tajikistan is a republic with a history of a strong state and powerful economy by virtue of its membership of the Soviet Union. However, today’s Tajikistan is characterized as a weak state with a poor economy. Tajikistan is the only former Soviet state to have gone through a
civil war, which effectively weakened the reach of the central government. In 1992 violence broke out in Dushanbe, the capital city, and southern regions of Tajikistan. Although most of the violence was contained to a few areas, the central government was left in disarray, leaving regional governments to manage themselves. Dadmehr (2003) argues that during this period the central government retreated completely from the everyday lives of citizens. In 1994, a referendum approved the constitution and an election established Emomali Rahmon as president, a position he continues to hold today. In 1997 peace accords were signed by the central government and by opposition parties. Although, the power of the central government continued to grow, unrest continued to plague the country for several years and the influence of the state in people’s lives differed by region (Dadmehr 2003).

The disruption of the education system because of the civil war can be traced across Tajikistan. While not all communities experienced the threat of violence and the destruction of homes and schools, the entire nation suffered a disruption in educational provision because of the severely reduced capacity of the central government. Teachers report of not being paid a salary during this period and many teachers left the profession in order to provide for their families. Parents discuss the lack of work and their inability to afford basic necessities, which forced them to send their children to work instead of sending them to school. Parents in areas directly affected by the violence of the civil war felt afraid to send their children to school. Other communities saw their schools destroyed, as they were commonly used as bases for soldiers during the conflict.

Economic production in Tajikistan has declined from Soviet-era levels. The country’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 1995 was less than half of what it was in 1990 (Falkingham et al. 1997). According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates, Tajikistan’s GDP per capita was US$215 in 1998, placing it among the poorest countries of the world at the time. In addition, real wages for workers declined as prices skyrocketed by 2140% in 1993 (Falkingham et al. 1997). Further complicating the situation, between 1994 and 1995 alone unemployment more than doubled (Falkingham et al. 1997). Many workers who did not lose their jobs, including teachers, experienced severe disruption in wage delivery (Falkingham 2000). Despite the economic growth that Tajikistan has experienced since the signing of the peace accords in 1997, production still remains below 1990 levels (Brownbridge and Canagarajah 2008).

The economic crisis severely reduced the state’s capacity to finance the education system, leading to a reduced role for public education. Government spending on education as a percentage of the GDP has been below 3% since independence and the share of education in the public budget, which was over 20% in 1991, is much lower today (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] 2002). The constitution, ratified in 1994, decreased the compulsory level of schooling from secondary to basic education. The state has also legalized a variety of private schooling options, effectively reducing its management responsibilities.

The reduced capacity of the central government to fund the educational system has increased the costs of schooling for families. The state legalized tuition-charging schemes for extracurricular classes that have been implemented in many schools. Even public schools that do not offer extracurricular classes are demanding that families provide funds to supplement teachers’ salaries, maintain buildings and provide supplies for the classroom, although this is considered illegal. The state is not able to provide textbooks without charge, requiring families to purchase textbooks.

**Data and methods**

The data of the present study are based on interviews collected in 2006–2007 in Tajikistan. Interviews were conducted in 10 locations in four administrative regions in Tajikistan:
Khatlon, Regions under Republican Subordination (RRS), Sugd and the capital city Dushanbe. Urban, rural and mountain sites were selected so that the sample would reflect the diversity of communities within Tajikistan. Cities where interviews were conducted include Dushanbe, Kurgan Tyube, Penjakent, Istaravshan and Khudjand. Village sites include Abu Ali, a mountain village less than an hour west of Dushanbe; Rudaki, a mountain village in the Rasht Valley which experienced fighting in the civil war; Somoni, a village on the plains in Khatlon whose main economic activity is cotton production; Navoi, a majority-Uzbek village to the west of Dushanbe; and Ulugbek, a majority-Uzbek village near Khujand.

The sample consists of two specific populations chosen because of their close relationship to educational issues: parents and grandparents of school-aged children (N = 54) and teachers (N = 56). Respondents were found using snowball sampling techniques and individuals were recruited through personal invitation using established contacts. Both samples contained sexual and ethnic diversity (see Table 1 below). In addition, teachers were screened on the basis of years of experience, subject area and grade level taught.

Interview schedules were developed based on previous research about educational participation in Tajikistan. All survey guides included questions about barriers to educational participation, gender differences, school quality and changes in education since the Soviet era, but each guide also contained population-specific questions. Parents were asked what difficulties they face in sending their children to school, while teachers were asked about school-specific factors.

I personally conducted interviews in Tajik, Uzbek and Russian. Most interviews were conducted individually, but several also took place in a small-group setting. For analysis interviews were transcribed into English and then coded manually.

Results

Family resources

Interviewer: What difficulties do parents have in sending their children to school?
Respondent: That depends on the resources of the family [sharoit-i oila]. If the family has money and possibility of course there won’t be any problems to go to school. But in those villages and areas I’ve

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heard that kids might not go to school, why? They don’t have clothes, books, pens, pencils . . . so they don’t go to school. Unfortunately, in my opinion 40–50% of families in Tajikistan are like this.

Interviewer: But what is difficult for your family? Finding books, buying clothes?
Respondent: What is difficult for my family is that teachers are always bothering us. For what? Without end they are always asking for money from my son . . . Every day: ‘Bring money, bring money, bring money.’ They say, we’ll buy a heater. But nothing happens.

Every year ‘stove’. For example, it has been 20 years. In the public school where my son studies every year they get stoves [and they ask for] 10 somoni, 15 somoni. Give more for this, for that. Money, money, every day money. It bothers us.

(Parent 8, Tajik father, Dushanbe)

Teachers, parents and university students all point to a family’s resources (sharoit-i oila) as the primary determinant of children’s educational attainment. The quotation above described the stress that parents feel because of the financial burden placed on them. Some parents struggle to afford educational supplies, such as books, pens and clothing, and others are asked to provide funds for the operation of the school by purchasing stoves. The quotation also identifies the costs as a factor keeping some children from attending school.

Schools have multiple ways of collecting fees for the day-to-day running of the institution. The quotation above indicates that teachers ask students directly for funds and other parents report that they receive requests through the parents’ committee (see below). There are also schools that have gone through the necessary steps to register as private or semi-private, which allows them to legally charge tuition, while other schools simply charge illegal fees. The following quotation demonstrates that schools often employ multiple techniques to collect funds and one of the elaborate schemes to distribute the funds.

Interviewer: Is your daughter’s gymnasium expensive?
Respondent: No, we’re a public school, except for the gymnasium classes. Officially it is free, but we give money, [US] $5 every month . . . We give $5 every month, but at the [parent’s committee] meetings sometimes they ask for 10 sumoni [more] . . . Parents, we each – legally this is not possible – have come to the agreement to give $5 dollars. And in the recent meeting we decided to give 10 somoni. Sixty per cent goes to teacher; of the remaining 40%: 1[0]% goes to school money, 1[0]% goes to the director, the remaining 2[0]% goes to repairs.

But, besides that at the end of the year they asked for more for repairs. 25 sumoni in May.

(Parent 11, Uzbek mother, Dushanbe)

The increasing amount of fees charged to families, both legal and illegal, is a significant barrier to children continuing their schooling. Tajikistani adults blame a lack of family resources for children not completing a basic education, for children discontinuing schooling after ninth grade and especially as a barrier to completing university, as demonstrated by the following two transcripts:

Interviewer: What grade did your daughter study until?
Respondent: She didn’t study until 11th grade, because we didn’t have the resources [sharoit] . . . this school has up to 11 grades, but it is expensive, those that do not have the resources drop out . . . The quality of the school is good, people study; but people don’t have money. What are they supposed to do?

(Parent 10, Tajik mother, Dushanbe)

Interviewer: What is difficult for parents to send children to school?
Respondent: Everything is difficult. I don’t have money and now they enter university via money. Twenty thousand monthly salary [using pre-deflation amounts]. What kind of salary is that? I wanted him [her son] to study, but we can’t afford it . . . Schools take money. In order to enter university you have to have money. No one is accepted without money.

(Parent 2, Tajik mother, Abu Ali, a mountain village)
Sitting at home

Community conditions, such as cultural norms, constrain choices that individuals and families make concerning education. Tajikistani adults often invoke cultural expectations when explaining the gender gap in educational attainment. Most prominently, they refer to different roles for men and women in the community. Boys are expected to become the family breadwinner and girls are expected to become a housewife (*khonashin*), ‘sitting at home’, as demonstrated in the following responses:

Interviewer: And your children, up to what level will they study?
Respondent 1: You know, I have three daughters. I’ll try to see if they learn a craft [*hunar*]. Maybe if there are correspondence courses they could attend the pedagogical institute.
Respondent 2: First, we have to think about giving them a husband.
Respondent 1: True, for girls they should study a craft. If a good candidate [for marriage] comes along, why wouldn’t I give her to him? If she gets to be 22/23 they’ll think she’s an old maid [*kari kizi*]...
Respondent 2: I have three boys and one girl. If I give to the university $3000 for my daughter [to study], will she find work after five years?
Respondent 1: This is a bit of a problem.
Respondent 2: Look, our own aunt’s son, she paid $5000. He knows English really well, studied at the state commercial institute, knows computers and everything well, but he sits in the bazaar at Korvon selling things. There isn’t work.
Respondent 1: Everything first of all is work. That is why even when our boys are young we are thinking about them. First, we think about our boys, then our girls. Our girls need to marry.

(Parent 16, Uzbek mothers, Dushanbe)

This quotation reveals much about the factors that parents weigh when deciding about education beyond basic studies. First, there is the concern for their children’s future well-being. Parents report that boys will be the provider for the family, so they must gain skills to get a good job. For girls, the path to a good future is through marrying well. Because of their constrained role in the community, it is only appropriate for them to learn a craft or perhaps study to be a teacher. If the family allows her to complete a traditional university study a girl may be passed over for marriage because of being considered an ‘old maid’.

Second, as marriage is the key strategy parents employ to assure their daughter’s future well-being, girls are sometimes kept out of school in order to be married off. In the quotation above, the mothers mentioned that they were willing to give their daughters in marriage any time a good candidate appeared. Other parents reported that they kept their girls out of school so that they did not become overeducated, which could be a negative factor in the marriage market. In a society in which the gender norm is for husbands to be more educated than their wives and where fewer men are attaining higher levels of education, girls are kept out of higher levels of education to secure their future marriage prospects.

Finally, the quotation above shows that community conditions related to future work prospects also influence parent’s decisions about education. Given the difficult job market for men – demonstrated by the example of the nephew who has a degree but is working in the bazaar – the mothers assume that the chances of their daughters finding work will be even more remote. The mothers then choose not to invest in their daughter’s education because of the cost of education and the likely difficulty of finding work in the future, even with a university degree.

A second quotation demonstrates the community-specific basis of the cultural constraints that shape educational decisions in Tajikistan. In the quotation below mothers in Penjakent report no differences in educational attainment based on gender. One mother even refers specifically to how the culture of her city is different to that of other regions of the country.
Interviewer: In this region, after ninth grade, do both girls and boys study or is there a difference? 
Respondent 1: They study until the end. 
Respondent 2: If a child’s knowledge is low, maybe they only got 3s or so, after ninth grade we’d ask, ‘Do you want to study?’ and they say, ‘No, I’ve had enough,’ then the child goes to a PTO [technical vocational school]. 
Interviewer: Is there a difference between girls and boys? 
Respondent 1: No difference. It depends on their knowledge. If their knowledge is low they stop [studying] . . . The culture of Penjakent is high, in relation to Kuylab, Voseh and Moskovski. 
(Parent 27, Tajik mother, Penjakent, a small city in the north)

Democratic choice

Interviewer: In your opinion, did more students study until the 10th/11th grade in Soviet times or less? 
Respondent: More. There was a plan. At that time there was a plan and there would not be more or less. A part [of the students] went on to university without missing one class. It was mandatory [hatman] that they got a basic and secondary education. Now it is a choice. 
Interviewer: At that time did more girls study or is it the same as now?
Respondent: Fewer [now]. Because it has become a choice to study in 10th and 11th grade, for that reason fewer girls study. Now it is by choice, it is not compulsory for anyone, for that reason it is fewer. In the Soviet times it was compulsory [majbur]. No one could be without it. 
(Teacher 17, Somoni, rural village in the south)

The quotation above introduces a key public policy factor that Tajikistani adults commonly associate with the reduction in educational attainment since independence: democratic choice. The teacher attributes the lower participation rates since independence directly to the change in national policy concerning education, which now allows secondary education to be a ‘choice’ versus the ‘plan’ of the past. This change in policy is also directly linked to the increasing gender gap in educational attainment. Many respondents, especially teachers, gave similar responses indicating the importance of state policy and often making a connection between democracy and choice, as demonstrated in the quotation below:

Interviewer: Why did more children study until the 10th grade in the Soviet era? 
Respondent: Listen, it is a democracy, so it [secondary study] is optional; before it was compulsory that people should go until the 11th form. Now, it is a democratic system, it depends on the parents’ wishes. 
(Teacher 22, Navoi, an Uzbek village near the capital)

A prominent component of Soviet educational policy was the ability to enforce compulsory education. Teachers, like the one above, commonly state that there were set quotas and plans regarding the number of students from each region who had to continue to secondary and post-secondary education and ultimately into various professions. If the quotas were not met, school directors, teachers and even parents could face sanctions. The socialist state was the organizing force of many aspects of life, including work and education. However, the link between work and education has been broken since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This breakdown in the system of enforcement of educational policy is often cited as a reason for children’s lower attendance rates, although there has been improvement in enforcement in recent years, as indicated by the following respondent:

Respondent: Our nation is 15 years old and you can separate the times . . . This [students not attending school] was a big problem; now it is a small problem. Year by year it is better. The number of students who are not attending school is small, but there are students not coming. 
Interviewer: Did more students come to class during the Soviet times or is there no difference? 
Respondent: Now, year by year, day by day the law is working well . . . There are few people who aren’t going to school now. We are working and making it compulsory [majbur] that you must go to school. 
(Teacher 14, Kurgan Tyube, a small city in the south)
Conclusion

Explanations of the recent drop in educational attainment of Tajikistani adults interviewed in this study point to a complex relationship between multilevel factors, which include family, community and macro-structural factors. According to respondents, the primary factor determining children’s educational attainment is family resources. While this may be true, evidence shows that community factors, such as cultural norms, also influence parents’ educational decisions, especially with reference to expectations concerning gender roles. Macro-structural forces also influence families’ decisions: the changes in the country’s economic situation increased the costs of education for families and the decrease in the legally compulsory level of schooling gave families the opportunity to choose whether or not to send children to secondary and higher education.

Parents often employ language that mimics human capital theory’s explanation of educational decisions. They mention their desire to ensure the future success of their children. After weighing the various options and the family’s resources, they decide whether or not to send their children to school. Community expectations limit the future options available for children and, ultimately, their participation in school. As Buchmann (2000) found, because the role of women in some communities is limited to that of a housewife, parents may choose not to send girls to school. In other communities, the culture does not constrain women’s educational attainment. This has important implications for policymakers, as it should be noted that community norms are an important part of parents’ decisions and that plans to increase children’s enrolment must also address local norms and expectations.

Past analyses of educational decline in the former Soviet Union merely outlined changing patterns of educational attainment. A complete picture of the effects of variables at all levels is difficult to achieve, but this analysis takes us further in understanding how factors at various levels work to generate patterns of educational attainment and inequality. The general drop in educational attainment is attributed to the decrease in families’ resources in an environment of increasing educational costs. The drastic decrease in the completion of secondary education, as opposed to basic education, is related to new policies that reduce the compulsory level of schooling and allow parents and/or students themselves to choose whether or not students should continue in their studies beyond a basic education. The increased gender gap is explained by cultural norms that demand that boys be breadwinners, necessitating higher levels of education, and that limit women to being housewives, making their formal education beyond a basic education unnecessary.

Notes

1. Scholars often question official reports and it should be noted that even in the late Soviet period there were not schools in every village.
2. ‘Tajikistani’ is used in this paper to refer to citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan, as the sample is multi-ethnic.
3. Adults in the sample used for analysis from the 2003 Tajik Living Standards Survey ranged in age from 20 to 60.
4. In Tajik the word for housewife (khonashin) is composed of the word ‘house’ (khona) and ‘sit’ (shin) giving the impression that housewives simply sit at home.
5. The model was adapted from Buchmann and Hannum (2001).
6. The Republic of Tajikistan was one of the most economically backward republics of the Soviet Union, but because of its membership in the Union it was integrated into a larger economic system and experienced the benefits of participation in that system.
7. Most of the violence and destruction of the civil war occurred in 1992, with sporadic violence in following years. However, peace accords were not signed until 1997.
8. At the time of his election his last name was Rahmonov, but he recently changed his name to remove the Russian ending.

9. It is also important to note that GDP has plummeted, further reducing the amount of money allocated to education.

10. Article 41 of the constitution of Tajikistan, adopted in 1994, states that ‘Each person has the right to education. General basic education is obligatory. The government guarantees free high school, trade, and, in accordance with ability and on a competitive basis, specialized high school and university education. Other forms of education to be provided are determined by law.’ This article reduced the compulsory level of schooling from secondary to general basic education.

11. The new structure of Tajikistan’s educational system reflects the organization of the Soviet structure. Students enter school in first grade at age seven and the completion of basic education ends in ninth grade. At ninth grade students decide whether or not to continue studies in either the academic track (10th and 11th grades), leading to university study, or the vocational track (in separate technical vocational schools or specialized secondary schools).

12. The state has developed a textbook rental programme which has reduced the costs of textbooks for families, but books are still a prohibitive cost for many families, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

13. Badakhshan was excluded only because of practical difficulties in carrying out research in the region.

14. Village place names are changed to protect the anonymity of respondents.

15. Interviews with parents were not conducted in Istaravshan or Ulugbek.

16. Interviews averaged 30 minutes and the longest interview was over 2.5 hours long.

17. Tajikistan requires a school uniform, which is often expensive, and most complaints about the affordability of ‘clothing’ in the context of education refer to the expense of the school uniform.

18. The parents’ committee is organized rather like parent–teacher associations in the United States. Parents and teachers meet together regularly to participate in activities related to the school.

19. The gymnasium described below is one such school. It is a school that is divided between a public track and gymnasium track. Students in the gymnasium track are charged tuition for classes beyond the state-mandated curriculum. However, it is obvious from the parents’ explanation that students in the public track are also being charged tuition.

20. Twenty somoni or $7 in 2006.

References


