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In Tajikistan, Women Fill a Void

By Candice Chan Apr. 16, 2010 4

Mashid Mohadjerin was 8 years old when she and her family left their home in Iran after the revolution. She still remembers the sadness of leaving and the awkwardness of learning life in a new country. First, it was adjusting to Pakistan. Then, a year later, it was acclimating to Belgium. Now, at 33, Ms. Mohadjerin says she feels as if she has found her place as a resident New Yorker.

Her experiences have given her photographic work, which is often focused on migration and displacement, an empathetic, quiet and poignant quality. Like in this World Press Photo winning photograph from 2009 that captured a crew stopping a boat of African migrants trying to illegally enter Italy.

One can see how Ms. Mohadjerin became drawn to the migrant workers she met in the busy markets of Moscow while shooting another assignment. They were all men from 17 to 55 who had come from Tajikistan. But none of them had brought their wives or their children.

Tajikistan — roughly the size of Wisconsin and bordered by Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China — is a small country sometimes overlooked because of its larger and more notorious neighbors. Since a five-year civil war ended in 1997, the country has slowly rebuilt with industries in cotton and aluminum. But it's still the poorest of the former Soviet states, with 60 percent of the country's seven million residents living below the poverty line and about half of the labor force working abroad.

“We hear a lot about the immigration and the migration itself, but hear less about who's left behind,” Ms. Mohadjerin said. “Many times, families get separated in the process.”

For three weeks in the summer of 2007, Ms. Mohadjerin set out to find some of these separated families. She was struck by the kindness and warmth of the people she met, often asked into home after home for a warm meal or an afternoon tea. Once, she was even invited into a jam and preserves factory to taste the fruity products.

Though she had expected to find poverty, she found instead the quiet fortitude of the Tajik women. Which is how the collection “Left Behind” emerged. The series features portraits of the tenacious and beautiful women who live near the Pamir mountains in the southeast, and in a village, Nau, near the northwestern city of Khujand.

“The cliché way of portraying Muslim women is of them in certain areas where they are suppressed,” she said. “This was the antidote to that, having these strong Muslim women who are taking care of themselves.”

Since so many of the Tajik men work abroad and send remittances to support their families, the duties to care for family life, maintain community in their towns and sustain industry is left to the Tajik women. It’s a heavy burden, and Ms. Mohadjerin said she met many women like Suratmoh who work full time, while also teaching at their local school, and tending to their children. The women have even banded together to build their own businesses, like a sewing factory that produces traditional clothing and the previously mentioned fruit preserve factory. The hope is that they can generate enough funds at home so their husbands can return.

The travails these women face can be seen in the shadowed lines etched into their brows, or the mud caked around their fingers from a day in the fields. But one can also see their hope and perseverance – in the stern gaze of a women’s organization leader in the town of Khorogh, or in a teacher’s tiny smile as she wipes her child’s face. They are, if you will, the Rosie the Riveters of Tajikistan, picking up where the men have left off — but with no foreseeable end to that lifestyle.

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