



HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES IN TAJIKISTAN

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Introduction

Tajikistan is a mountainous landlocked country in Central Asia, with a population of approximately 7,627, 200¹, and children aged 0 – 14 years account for 33.9% of the total population. Tajikistan became an independent country in 1991 after the collapse of Soviet Union. After independence, the country suffered from a devastating civil war which lasted from 1992 to 1997. The end of the civil war culminated into the newly-established political stability and foreign aid inflow, allowing the country's economy to grow. The main export of cotton and aluminum wire has contributed to the improvement of the country. Despite of the economic growth, about 20% of the population still lives on less than US\$1.25 per day. According to The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) more than 800,000 Tajik citizens work in Russia. The majority of Tajik labour migrants who work irregularly in Russia and other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are vulnerable to exploitation and subjected to considerable hardship.

Tajikistan has ratified a number of international laws, including the UNCRC in 2003 and the CEDAW in 1993. National laws have also been introduced to prevent the discrimination against women and protection of children, such as the law prohibiting marriage of children below the age of 17 and requiring all marriages to be registered. On the other hand, amendments to prevent violence and discrimination have failed, for example, an amendment that would prohibit domestic violence and consider it to be a crime. While traditional practices that perpetuate discrimination against boys and girls are not widely spread in Tajikistan, there are other practices that affect the survival and development of both the boy and girl child, that need to be urgently addressed. These include the practice of *binding and putting children in the cradle for an average of 20 hours a day* and the practice of *Kolak*, which involves cutting of the back of 5 – 6 day old children in order to remove "bad blood".

Save the Children has been working in Tajikistan since 1994, implementing both emergency and development projects in child protection, food security/livelihoods, water, sanitation and hygiene, shelter, health and education.

This paper explores these two traditional practices in Tajikistan.

1) Use of Cradle (*Gavora*)

Historically, Tajik people have cared for newborn children in a low, small traditional rocking cradle. The process involves binding the child in a tightly wrapped swaddle and using a special apparatus to keep the infant dry. To put the child in the cradle, the baby is clothed, covering the chest area and the head. The baby is then put to lie down in the cradle and a "tuvak" or vessel is placed underneath a hole in the bottom of the cradle to collect urine and solid waste, and a tube called a "sumak" is used to drain urine away directly from the infant into the *tuvak*. After the apparatus have been put, the arms of the child are straightened at its side, and the child's feet are also straightened. The mother then takes a special cloth and binds the child to the cradle, with the child's arms at its sides. The cloth is wrapped round the cradle



¹ CIA World Fact Book

and is tied off at the top handle of the cradle. Another piece of cloth is used to bind the child's legs to the cradle in a similar manner, with the cloth being tied off at the top handle of the cradle. In this way, the child cannot move its arms and legs, and can not turn from side to side, only the head can be moved slightly sideways. This is done to ensure that the child does not fall off from the rocking cradle and the mother can continue going about her business until they hear the child crying.

This practice of caring for children, especially at the newborn stage, is one of many cultural traditions that have been passed on from one generation to another for over a century.

Methodology

In order to find out more about traditional cradle use and the local population's point of view of this tradition today, a structured discussion on this topic was held with women. Of the seven women who took part in one of the discussions, 3 were from the village named "1st of May" in Tursunzoda district, and 4 were from Navobod village in Shahrinav district.

Save the Children staff also conducted 3 Focus Group Discussions with women in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast region in 3 locations: Khorog city, Darmorakht District and Gund District.

Findings

On average, the age range of children kept in cradles is from 2 to 20 months². The discussion revealed that most newborn infants (70%) are placed in the cradle as early as 5 - 7 days after birth. Infants typically spend up to 20 hours of a 24-hour day in the cradle. The younger the baby, the more time he or she spends in the cradle. The baby stays in the cradle until he/she begins to cry, and at this point, the child is not unwrapped and removed from the cradle, but the cradle is rocked until the child goes back to sleep. Mothers try as much as possible to breastfeed without freeing infants from their swaddling or taking them out of the cradle. A woman in Khorog city said *"I put my child in the cradle at 9 am and take her out at 2 pm for about 1 hour; I feed her and put her back till 8 pm. At 8 pm I take her out, and at 10 in the night I put her back till morning"*. Even when the child is taken out of the cradle, she/he will be tightly covered in a sheet. Typically, a child uses the cradle for up to 2 years until he/she outgrows it.



Another tradition in Tajikistan is that for the first child, the newlywed bride and groom receive a new cradle as a gift, as well as a new traditional ceramic tuvak and other necessary items. The first child grows up using the cradle and the family devotes a great deal of attention to this child. As time goes on, the family uses this same cradle and implements (or as the original items break, substitutes such as glass jars are found for use). The cradle may get broken or damaged, and in general can get dirty and

² <http://www.babyblog.ru/user/mkhamraeva/1933473>

unhygienic from repeated and prolonged use. In families where there are fewer resources and less information is available about hygiene and disease prevention, there can be less attention paid to keeping the cradle clean and in good condition.

When asked why they prefer to use the cradle in caring for their babies, women gave the following answers:

- ✚ It is our cultural tradition, which our mothers passed on to us.
- ✚ My child always stays warm and dry and sleeps well in the cradle, which is especially important in winter. (It should be noted that during the winter, most of the rural areas in Tajikistan have no electricity which is needed for heat)
- ✚ Another reason for cradle use is lack of water. If mothers do not use the cradle and the tube and vessel combination to keep the baby dry, they need to change and wash the baby's swaddling clothes several times a day. Use of cradle is efficient since there is not need to buy diapers.
- ✚ For mothers who have a lot of work at home and in the fields, the cradle is a convenience because it allows them to complete their work with less interruption or difficulty.
- ✚ For babies in large families or households with several small children, using a cradle can be a way to ensure the infant's safety and prevention of accidental injury.
- ✚ Women believe that in the cradle the child's head will take an appropriate shape (flat and firm at the back), his/her hands and legs will not be crooked and his/her back will take a straight shape.
- ✚ The community believes that those children who were not put in the cradle are limping.

The Harm caused by use of the cradle

When asked what harm cradle use might cause to the child, most women responded that it causes no harm. Only two respondents noted that some children can become physically weak or that their physical development can be delayed because of cradle use, and that extremely vigorous rocking of the cradle can cause infants brain damage. Mothers who took part in the discussion noted that, among their children, those who spend over 10 hours per day in the cradle during infancy show some signs of delayed physical and mental or cognitive development when compared to other children of the same age who were not raised from infancy with extended periods of time in the cradle. Because infants and small children who are kept in cradles are also kept tightly bound in swaddling, there is a tendency for these infants to have very little freedom of movement. Often they do not develop the ability to sit at the age when developmentally they ought to, and they can be delayed in learning to walk. Often mothers do not engage in any physical movements or play that specifically targets physical development and emotional bonding with their babies, such as performing hand and feet movements, or even sitting and walking. For this reason, babies also often do not get enough sunlight, causing delayed emergence of teeth and rickets disease from lack of vitamin D.

Physical development milestones that infants ideally should be reaching in the first year of life include the following on average: the baby should be able to lift up her head while lying in a prone position (stomach down) by about the age of 1-2 months; should be able to roll from side to side by about the age of 3-4 months; teeth should begin to emerge and the baby should be able to sit steadily by average age of 6-7 months; the baby should be able to crawl at average age of 7-8 months; and she/he should be taking steps and beginning to walk alone at 11-12 months.

According to the discussion with a doctor at the local hospital in Darmorakht district of GBAO, the cradle can cause harm to a child. The doctor noted that violently rocking of children in the cradle may lead to mental/emotional problems for a child. She also noted that most women breastfeed the child while he/she lies in the cradle, causing improper circulation hence the child ends up vomiting the milk. Consequently, mothers think that the child is not able to feed this way and hence stop breastfeeding.

2) *Kolak* (Use of blade to remove newborn child's blood)

When a new born child cries most of the time and his/her skin turns from pale to a darker shade³, it is believed that the child's blood is "dirty", will get thick and hence the blood needs to be removed. Traditionally, in Eastern part of Tajikistan people remove the newborn child's blood after 5-6 days of birth by cutting the back, chest, tummy around the navel and palate (roof of the mouth) with a blade and some blood will be removed. This practice is done for both girls and boys and people call this blood that is removed "dirty blood". The child is taken to a woman who has the skills of cutting. Usually these women have learnt it from their grandmothers. This practice is done 3-4 times each week until the child stops crying most of the time. In another case, when a child cannot suckle the breast milk, drools and the lips look dark, his palate (roof of the mouth) will be cut with blade to remove the thick blood. Presently, doctors recommend a "potassium permanganate" that the women can add into the water and clean their child with it. After this the child becomes much calmer. This practice is now not allowed by doctors but women believe it is a cultural tradition which is helpful. The practice therefore continues.

During the focus group discussion held with women, children as young as 1 year old were observed to have the cuttings on their backs, evidence that the practice still goes on.

Recommendations

- The Government of Tajikistan should acknowledge the practice of the cutting and ban it. The government should raise the awareness of the community on the physical harm, pain and suffering it causes to children;
- The use of the cradle, while acknowledged to be a practical process, should be limited and combined with emotional connection between child and caregiver. The government should ensure that its citizens are aware of all spheres of development that a child needs, particularly in the early stages of life. This includes physical, emotional and cognitive growth;
- The Government should invest and raise awareness on early childhood development through trainings, seminars and sharing information materials for medical personnel at hospitals and social workers. Medical personnel and social workers are a useful media for sharing information with mothers on early childhood development.

³ According to a doctor at a local hospital, the baby's skin turns "darker" (red) due to crying, which is normal for a new born