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## Securitization and Coping Strategies of Women Sex Workers in Tajikistan

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes why and how women's sex work is securitized in Tajikistan. It argues that state actors view sex work as a threat to the nation in the context of two simultaneous processes: nation-building, centered around the family unit, and the fight against HIV/AIDS. The article explores the narratives, laws, and practices that are deployed to limit sex work. It also analyzes how security frameworks are experienced and navigated by women sex workers on a very local level. Three coping strategies are identified: hiding techniques, developing networks and befriending influential clients, and seeking companionship with other sex workers.

### Introduction

In November 2019, the head of the Khatlon region in Tajikistan made an emotional speech at a forum of local women's leaders. The official, a man in his early 50s, announced that recently two women had infected dozens of men with HIV in two nearby towns of the region. While it was not stated explicitly, it was understood that the women were sex workers. The official lamented: "Imagine, these men have families and children, what will happen to them? [...] There are more [such men] whose existence we do not know about, and who knows what numbers we are even talking about" (Asia Plus 2019, author's translation). The headline of a popular local newspaper, which reported this event, implied that the women had infected their clients "intentionally" (Russian: *osoznanno*). The official also pleaded: "We need to fight together against such tendencies. The analysis shows that the [HIV] infection rates are growing. These numbers make us reflect about the destiny of [our] society" (Asia Plus 2019, author's translation). Such a narrative does not represent an isolated incident, but refers to a broader trend of high-profile cases concerning women sex workers that has been appearing in the Tajik media since 2018 (e.g. Khovar 2018, 2019). These accounts share some common features. They allege that HIV-positive sex workers, usually portrayed as predators, deliberately pass the infection on to their male clients, who are presented as victims. Notably, only women sex workers are mentioned. It is simply assumed that an outbreak of infections occurred as a result of sexual intercourse with women sex workers, regardless of whether this is the case or not, or whether condoms were used, and if not, who exactly opted for unprotected sex. While the men's wives, who might also contract HIV from their infected husbands, are often mentioned with compassion, the families of sex workers are never acknowledged.

Sex work, which involves provision of sexual services in exchange for money or goods, is locally described as *prostitsiia* (prostitution) in Russian or as *tanfurushi* (selling one's

body) in Tajik. It is considered an administrative offense and is subject to a fine or arrest. Using the services of a woman sex worker, usually called a *fohisha* (prostitute) in Tajik, is a commonly accepted practice among men. At the same time, as in many other conservative contexts, in Tajikistan sex work is seen as physically and morally polluting. Furthermore, as the opening vignette illustrates, the topic is also subject to state intervention, thus resembling "securitizing moves" (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998) that turn a social phenomenon into a security issue that requires state intervention. Such securitization involves labeling a social process, in this case women's sex work, "as an existential threat requiring emergency measures and justifying actions out of the normal bounds of political procedure" (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998, 23–24). In Tajikistan sex work is securitized, in that it is portrayed as a threat from which the nation should be secured.

This article analyzes the securitization of women's sex work in Tajikistan from two perspectives—that of the state and that of the sex workers. First, it shows how the politics of securitization is conceptualized and how it operates in practice. The focus is on what the Tajik state "thinks": how exactly the political elites view and narrate sex work, and what laws and practical measures are deployed as a result, under the banner of "protecting the nation." I argue that securitization of women's sex work occurs in the context of two intense processes taking place simultaneously and partially overlapping: post-Soviet nation-building centered around the family unit as the cornerstone of the state, and the national fight against HIV/AIDS. Because women sex workers transgress local norms concerning the "appropriate" women's behavior and are identified as individuals who spread sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, they are blamed for negatively affecting the moral and physical health of the society (Tajik: *jomeai solim*).

To analyze the securitization of women sex workers from the state's perspective, I draw on insights from two schools of critical security studies—the Copenhagen School and the Paris School. While the former conceptualizes securitization as a process that occurs through speech acts (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998; Wæver 1995), the latter argues that securitization is a “domain of practice” (Huysmans 2006, 6; see also Bigo 2008; Balzacq 2011). In the case of Tajikistan, both discourse and practice matter, and reinforce each other. On the one hand, the discourse that securitizes sex workers translates into punitive laws and regulations, which in turn are accompanied by practices that disrupt the everyday lives of these women. On the other hand, securitizing practices—for example concerning police officers extorting bribes from sex workers—often preempt the actual laws and policies, and, eventually, become co-constitutive. In the Tajik context, sex workers are subaltern (Spivak 1988), as they occupy a marginalized place in society and serve as scapegoats who can be blamed for social problems. In addition, since the securitization of women's sex work in Tajikistan is a gender-based and gender-biased process, the article also draws on feminist perspectives on security research (Hansen 2000; Hudson 2005; Wibben 2011). Targeting individual sex workers is a symbolic action aimed at punishing all women who transgress the local gender norms and defy the role that the nation-building model ascribes to them. In this way, to paraphrase Don Kulick (2003, 211), “sexuality is one site where boundaries and roles,” still in flux in independent Tajikistan, “are being imagined and negotiated.”

Second, to complement the state's view on sex work, the article explores how the politics of securitization is enacted in an urban, but peripheral, setting within Tajikistan. It analyzes how the two aforementioned state security framings, related to family-centered nation-building and the fight against HIV/AIDS, materialize in the everyday lives of women, and how they are navigated on a local level. It focuses on sex workers in a small, southern town with a population of under 100,000, where the sex workers are far more exposed than their fellow workers in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital city. In this way, the article aims to contribute to a literature that highlights the plurality of perspectives on the politics of security (Bilgin 2011; C.A.S.E. Collective 2006; Wilkinson 2007), and urges a focus on local, highly contextual understandings of insecurity, as well as people's creative adaptation strategies (Abboud et al. 2018; Koopman 2011; von Boemcken et al. 2020).

The article identifies and ethnographically describes three common strategies through which sex workers in Tajikistan adapt to the insecurity resulting from their securitization: hiding techniques, developing vast networks and befriending influential clients, and seeking companionship with other sex workers. These coping strategies are embedded in local systems of power and meaning, but they also reveal these women's agency(ies)—their manifestations, possibilities, and limits. Agency, viewed in this way, is a dynamic process that Saba Mahmood (2005, 157) has described as a “modality of action.” While sex workers do not openly protest against their securitization, they should not be seen as voiceless (see Hansen 2000, 287). Using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) term, the subaltern can “speak”—meaning, is able to withstand the

imposed hardships—but without voicing their discontent aloud (Aradau 2018, 304). Importantly, agency is not synonymous with mobilization and resistance (Mahmood 2005, 20). Often, as Suzanne Lettow (2015) argued, “agency and subjection coincide,” and as this article shows, this is the case of women sex workers in Tajikistan.

So far, much of the sex work research in the post-Soviet space (both in Russian and in English), has been conducted largely in either a legal, criminological (e.g. Bulatetskiy and Kovalenko 2013; Panov 2007) or a medical, epidemiological realm, and most often with a focus on big urban areas in Russia (e.g. Baral et al. 2013; Decker et al. 2014; King et al. 2013; Zavyalov and Apaev 2020). Sociological sex work research, in contrast, has long been limited to Anglo-American societies (Weitzer 2009, 214), and it is only now emerging in Eurasia (e.g. Romanenko 2015; Rusakova 2019). This is even more the case of literature investigating lived experiences, performativity, and subjectivities of women sex workers. While such literature is gradually gaining momentum with regard to various, mostly non-Western contexts where sex work is illegal, legally ambiguous, or highly stigmatizing (e.g. Basnyat 2020; de Regt and Mihret 2020; Liu 2017; Nelson 2020; Phrasisombath et al. 2012; Shewly et al. 2020; Sultana 2015), such a lens is still rare with regard to the post-Soviet space (for an exception see Nazpary 2002). This article contributes to filling these gaps by exploring the perspectives of a state that deals with sex work and sex workers who are subjects of state interventions.

In what follows, the article explains the methodology of this research, then describes and contextualizes how women's sex work is organized in Tajikistan. In the remaining part, the article analyzes why and how sex work is securitized in the country, and discusses three coping strategies that these women have developed. The conclusion elaborates on what securitization of sex work in Tajikistan tells us about the nature of the securitization regime, women's agency, and state–society relations.

## Methodology

The empirical part of this article builds upon qualitative data collected during several episodes of field research. To discuss how sex work is securitized in relation to nation-building in Tajikistan, I refer to research conducted in 2013–2014 together with Robert Oostvogels on perceptions of sexuality and alternate sexuality in the context of the local value system, which involved interviews with 14 key social leaders from different public spheres, and five sex workers. The article also draws on my 2017–2018 research on the national and international politics of women's empowerment in Tajikistan, which included 18 interviews with women activists from the non-governmental sector. In turn, to describe the securitization of women's sex work in the context of the fight against HIV/AIDS in Tajikistan, I draw on 43 interviews that I conducted between 2018 and 2020 with key actors in the HIV/AIDS field, including doctors, public officials, and representatives from international organizations. While not all interviewees are directly quoted, these conversations form the subtext of this article. Given the small dimensions of the field and the sensitivity of the topic of sex work, the names and workplaces of quoted interviewees are

not indicated. These data are complemented by a review of Tajik- and Russian-language news articles on sex work from government (*Khovar, Narodnaia Gazeta*) and local independent outlets (*Asia Plus*), as well as foreign-funded outlets (Tajik service of RFE/RL: *Ozodi*). These data are coupled with an analysis of statistics, police press releases, laws and regulations.

In turn, the ethnographic inquiry into how insecurity is experienced on the ground is informed by observations I conducted in 2019 during a few days' stay, in a non-work setting, with a group of six women sex workers in the south of the country. This stay also allowed a spontaneous and informal focus group and in-depth interviews with the women by way of "individual dialogue sessions" (Wahab 2003, 625) to take place. Engaging with marginalized and securitized groups allows moving beyond the usual dichotomies—that is, seeing them as victims of exploitation and violence, or focusing solely on their resistance and empowerment. In the case of sex work, as Ronald Weitzer (2009, 214) writes, "the oppression paradigm holds that sex work is a quintessential expression of patriarchal gender relations." This bias has been denounced, however, in literature on sex work in other non-Western contexts (Basnyat 2020, 99; de Regt and Mihret 2020, 514). The opposite, empowerment paradigm focuses on the women's agency in taking control of their life and body (Weitzer 2009, 215; Sultana 2015, 778). Both paradigms reduce the actual lived experience to two one-sided accounts, and do not show how the marginalized groups themselves perceive their situation and live it through "specific articulations of volition, emotion, reason and bodily expression" (Mahmood 2005, 23). Concentrating on this aspect enables complex, heterogeneous articulations of agency in securitized settings to be comprehended.

As noticed by several researchers, the stigma and illegality of sex work pose methodological and ethical challenges with regard to gaining access to this group and guaranteeing the confidentiality of the research participants in the writing-up phase (Shaver 2005; Wahab 2003). To protect the women sex workers who are research participants, I changed their names and refrained from indicating their specific location, as this information is not indispensable to the argument of the article. The experiences and coping mechanisms of the women described are by no means representative of all sex workers in Tajikistan. These vignettes, nevertheless, offer a glimpse into a "security milieu" in which this social group lives. As a foreign researcher, my access to this field was greatly facilitated by my experience of long-term research in the country, fluency in the two languages spoken locally, Tajik and Russian, as well as established networks, which have proved fundamental in social science research in the region (Bekmurzaev, Lottholz, and Meyer 2018, 107–8). I was able to get to know and bond with a group of women sex workers through a "recommendation" from a local HIV organization that had connections to some of them. Undoubtedly, in a context where the social sphere is largely divided into male and female, shared female gender and similar age with some of the women also facilitated bonding. While I intended to maintain longer relations with them and visit them periodically, I gave up on this idea after being informed that my research interest might have alarmed one of the state bodies. This case demonstrates possible security concerns that might result from unsuccessful attempts to frame

a research topic locally (Bekmurzaev, Lottholz, and Meyer 2018, 111–13), but which may be inevitable in security-related research in contemporary Central Asia.

### Organization of Women's Sex Work in Tajikistan

Drawing a succinct, sociological picture of how sex work is organized in Tajikistan remains a challenging task. As in other post-Soviet contexts, academic research tackling sex work in Tajikistan has been conducted largely in health studies in relation to either the spread of HIV/AIDS or coverage of HIV services (e.g. King et al. 2016; Mirzoev 2007; Ruziev, Son, and Bandiev 2017). The reasons behind a woman's involvement in sex work and her working profile are very diverse. Yet, historicizing state approaches to sex work and describing gender structures and socio-economic conditions explain the overall conditions in which most women engage in sex work in the country.

Historically, in the former Soviet space there has been a long tradition of regulating and curbing sex work in an attempt to limit the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In Central Asia specifically, it dates back to tsarist Russia's expansion to this region and its attempts to stop transmission of STDs among Russian soldiers who were stationed in Turkestan. This resulted in the organization and legalization of brothels on purely pragmatic grounds (Gaziyeu 2019). In Soviet times, in turn, *prostutitsiia* was reframed as a capitalist form of wage labor that deliberately brings harm to the working class (Gerasimov 2009, 67–68). As a result, institutions involved in the fight against sex work included the police, known as NKVD, as well as the Committee for the Improvement of the Labor and Life of Working Women and Peasant Women (Gerasimov 2009, 68). The fight against sex work particularly intensified in the mid-1980s, with the first registered cases of AIDS in the Soviet Union (Kluczevska and Korneev 2022, 200–203).

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan's integration into the globalizing world was marked by a civil war (1992–1997). The country quickly emerged as a provider of cheap labor for markets abroad, mainly in Russia. Nowadays, Tajikistan is often described as one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world, where an estimated 1.5 out of nine million citizens, mostly young men, work in Russia for most of the year (Kluczevska and Korneev 2018, 34–35). In the context of shifting dimensions of economic and family life, the main reason pushing women toward sex work is poor socio-economic conditions: the scarcity of jobs, especially in rural areas, and low salaries in available employment (Mirzoev 2007, 24; Ozodi 2016, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The majority of women sex workers are not married (Mirzoev 2007, 81); they are either divorced or no longer living with their husbands, who frequently work in Russia and are not in touch with their wives and children. Often, these women are rejected by the in-laws, with whom married sons usually live, and not welcome back in their family homes. They are not virgins anymore and their prospects to remarry, even as second wives, are not high. In a highly patriarchal context, where men are considered breadwinners and women are responsible for the domestic sphere and, most importantly, for the upbringing

of the offspring (Harris 2004, 39–40; Roche 2016), families often become de facto matrifocal and women find themselves providing for themselves and their multiple children on their own (Cleuziou 2017, 318–21). This is why the majority of women sex workers in Tajikistan are mature women rather than women in their early 20s, as, for example, in Russia (Romanenko 2015, 137). Out of 6,000 women arrested for sex work in Tajikistan in 2018, nearly 75 percent were over 30, 25 percent between 18 and 30, and a few dozen were minors (Ozodi 2019a).

Estimating the dimensions of sex work poses its own challenge. The most recent, 2014 data of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), which echo the statistics of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (Global Fund), provide an estimate of 14,000 sex workers<sup>2</sup> in a country of 9.5 million people. The Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) indicates different numbers, based on the statistics of arrests. In 2018, for example, a total of 6,000 women were arrested across the country for sex work (Ozodi 2019a). Most probably, neither of these estimates reflects the actual picture. The social stigma attached to sex work combined with the state securitization means many sex workers go under the radar of both outreach workers and the police. It is also notable that the statistics focus only on women providing sexual services, while ignoring men sex workers.<sup>3</sup>

Sexual services are provided in street and off-street venues, including covert brothels, restaurants and nightclubs, hotels, or, in urban areas, apartments and rooms rented by the hour.<sup>4</sup> The earnings depend on the age of the sex workers, their modality of work, physical appearance, and specific location in the country. While the escort and call-girl type of sex worker in Dushanbe might charge more than 100 USD per round of service, others can work the whole month to earn this amount (Ozodi 2014, 2018). The women from smaller towns, whose experiences are described below, usually earn about 50 TJS per client (4.80 USD). However, not all clients pay straightaway and sometimes women agree to a debt system (Tajik: *qarz*), to have sex for free if they know that “the client will come back and pay back the previous times.”<sup>5</sup> Overall, as an interviewee from an international organization working with women sex workers commented, “we do not have many ‘sex workers’ in Tajikistan, in a Western meaning of this term. Most of our sex workers are on the verge of survival.”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike in many Global North contexts, women providing sexual services in Tajikistan are almost exclusively Tajik nationals. However, nowadays, sex work involving women from Tajikistan is no longer limited to within the borders of this country. With the rise of labor migration to Russia, some migrant women provide sexual services to Tajik and other Central Asian migrants (see Weine et al. 2013). There are also cases of people trafficking for sexual exploitation both within Tajikistan, especially involving minors from rural areas, and toward Russia and the United Arab Emirates. As a side effect of the trafficking of opium and heroin, instances of debt-related trafficking in people across the Tajik–Afghan border, including for sexual exploitation, have also been registered (Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2014). The insights offered in this article, however, concern women who engage in the sex

sector voluntarily, although this decision is often determined by structural factors, such as poor socio-economic situation, caring obligations, and lack of other opportunities.

One more caveat needs to be mentioned. Undoubtedly, the insecurity experienced by women sex workers stems from multiple, overlapping types of security threats, including economic uncertainty, damage of reputation, health problems, as well as client violence (Liu 2017; Phrasisombath et al. 2012). In line with the article’s aim, in what follows I focus only on the politics of securitization that aim at securing the family model and societal health.

## Securitization of Women’s Sex Work

### *Securing the Future of the Nation: Family-centered Nation-building*

State approaches to sex work need to be understood in the context of how a given state constructs the nation and tries to define its place in the wider world (Kulick 2003). In this regard, post-independence nation-building in Tajikistan has been centered around the concept of a “morally and physically healthy society” (Tajik: *jomeai solim*), which is based upon a “solid family” (Tajik: *oilai solim*) (Kluczevska 2019, 120). This model is predicated on the binary classification of gender into man (Tajik: *mard*) and woman (Tajik: *zan*), according to biological determinants.<sup>7</sup> Such nation-building implies gendered social roles in society and family, with a traditional, complementary division of tasks and responsibilities for men and women. While men are tied to the public sphere, women are primarily responsible for the domestic sphere, which is portrayed as equally important. According to this vision, “women–mothers” (Tajik: *zan-modar*), characterized by female purity and honor (Tajik: *nomus*) (see Harris 2004, 69–79), are tasked with the mission of bringing up the future generations. This nation-building model celebrates motherhood (Roche 2016) by linking children to the future of the nation (Kluczevska 2019, 118) (Figure 1).

Women’s sex work transgresses these nation-building ideals in four ways. First, it besmirches female respectability and thus cannot be classified as “morally healthy.” Second, it refers to sex outside the family unit, whereas the nation-building model implies that the “right” sexual relations take place in the marriage bed (see Harris 2004, 149–56).<sup>8</sup> Third, its aim is not to produce offspring. However, given that sex work often leads to unwanted pregnancy, the children of sex workers are not born into the conditions characterizing a “healthy family.” Fourth, sex work is seen as physically polluting and associated with HIV, as the next section discusses. As a result, according to this securitizing logic, society needs to be secured from this phenomenon.

Sex, unlike love, is considered a taboo subject and is rarely discussed (Harris 2004, 5–6), and it is the same for sex work. As the opening vignette showed, this phenomenon is considered too shameful to be mentioned directly in public, even when it constitutes the principal subject of discussion. This is an interesting case of discursive securitization with a complex definition of the referent object (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998, 21). Securitizing speech acts in Tajikistan often do not designate the



Figure 1. Street banner: “The state protects the family, which is the basis of society.” Dushanbe, July 22, 2017, author’s photograph.

threat directly, instead relying on descriptive meta-narratives stressing the (im)moral dimension of a given phenomenon. In 2014, for example, when commenting on women sex workers’ arrests, the minister of internal affairs, Ramazon Rahimzoda, expressed his “worry regarding the increase in immoral offenses” (Russian: *beznravstvennyye prestupleniia*) (in Ozodi 2015). When in 2016, on the initiative of the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, pilot “moral classes” for arrested women sex workers were launched in the south of Tajikistan, they were described by officials as lessons for women of easy virtue, where “women are told about the ethics of behavior in society, [and] moral principles” and encouraged “to live a normal life, so that they give birth to children and are shielded from various venereal diseases” (Ozodi 2016, author’s translation). These elevated, metaphorical, narratological tools (Wibben 2011) offer a glimpse into the gender dimension of nation-building which fosters “proper” citizens through denouncing negative models of behavior.

Besides discourses, security is also a domain of practice—in Jef Huysmans’ (2006, 9) words, “a technique of governing danger.” This implies a deployment of legal and practical measures to target the securitized group. According to Article 30 of the Code on Administrative Offenses in Tajikistan, sex work is considered an administrative violation (Government of Tajikistan 2008), and it has never officially been criminalized.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the narratives securitizing women sex workers lead to periodical harshening of amendments to the law. In 2019, for example, fines for sex work were doubled and currently range from 1,100 to 1,650 TJ (107–160 USD). Each subsequent arrest is accompanied by a fine of between 1,650 and 2,750 TJS (160–267 USD), or, for those who cannot pay,

a detention of up to 15 days (Ozodi 2019a). Given that the official average monthly salary in Tajikistan amounts to 1,324 TJS (128 USD) (Asia Plus 2020), these are large sums of money. Against the background of economic hardship that sex workers frequently face, this shows that the insecurity imposed upon them through fines takes the form of economic violence, in addition to that of emotional and physical violence. The gender dimension of the politics of securitization is also clearly evident, for the law imposes fines on those who provide sexual services, not on those who buy them.

A broad range of state agencies is involved in the fight against women’s sex work. To start with, the Committee on Women and Family Affairs and its branches across the country are tasked with the identification of women sex workers and brothels. In 2013, for example, they identified 1,641 women and 189 brothels (Ozodi 2015). The most relevant state actor fighting sex work, however, is the police (*militsiia*). A common technique concerns raids on women providing sexual services on the streets and in hotels, rented apartments, and brothels. The police might receive information from, for example, hotel administration or neighbors who spotted a couple, or from other sex workers who were blackmailed to spy on their colleagues. This shows how many different actors are involved in the implementation part of the politics of securitization in practice, including voluntarily. This, in turn, demonstrates the intersubjective, cooperative nature of security (Bigo 2008, 125) and the blurring of boundaries between state and society. As Huysmans (2006, 10) posited, “technologies and everyday practice [of securitization] reiterate imaginations of the nature of politics itself—i.e. concepts of the political—and invest them in social relations.”

As a result of such raids, women sex workers are brought to police stations and not only fined, but also video-taped; their names are added to a list of sex workers and, not infrequently, their families are informed about the women's work (Asia Plus 2018; Ozodi 2018). These largely informal practices do not apply to male clients, who frequently are released after paying a bribe to police officers, to avoid being blackmailed.<sup>10</sup> Police violence, including sexual violence, is a common component of such raids (Ozodi 2014; King et al. 2016, 428; Asia Plus 2018). This is why a big part of sex workers' earnings goes to police officers. In this context, they perform the role of pimps in that they allow these women to avoid police abuse, fines, arrest, and simultaneously they might also protect women from customer violence (Mirzoev 2007, 77; Ozodi 2014; Asia Plus 2018).

These narratives, laws, and practices illustrate the many dimensions of the politics of securitization, with their official and unofficial sides, and with involvement of both state structures and the public. On all these levels, the use of extraordinary means is justified in the name of security (Buzan et al. 1998, 26): the suspension of the personal rights and freedom of women sex workers is either lawful or de facto legitimized by the noble aim of securing the future of the nation. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the described practices often preexisted the securitizing laws and result from a particular set of moral norms and views on gender roles. In specific local contexts, especially in small towns and villages where everyone knows each other and gossip is widespread, the common understanding of morality and shared expectations about women's "proper behavior" legitimize the described securitizing practices, no less than the state policies. From this perspective, the social attitudes that stigmatize sex workers offer a fertile ground for the emergence of securitizing policies.

### Securing Societal Health: The Fight Against HIV/AIDS

The second, interrelated framework securitizing women's sex work concerns the fight against HIV/AIDS, which has intensified in the last few years (see Kluczevska and Korneev 2022, 208–13). Up until 2020, there was a total of 9,072 diagnosed HIV/AIDS cases in Tajikistan (AIDS Center 2020). Compared both internationally and with the post-Soviet region (UNAIDS 2018, 40–41), this number does not indicate a high infection rate. However, it represents a significant, nearly fourfold, increase over the recent decade. The securitization of women's sex work in such an epidemiological realm dates back to 2011, when sexual intercourse became the main way of transmitting HIV in the country and women started being portrayed as vectors of disease.

Up until then, injection drug use related to the trafficking of heroin from neighboring Afghanistan had dominated HIV statistics (Kluczevska and Korneev 2020). The rise of sexual transmissions alarmed Tajik policymakers because, as one interviewee explained, once they "start to prevail, you cannot control the infection spread any more. While a relatively small group of people injects drugs, almost all adult people have a sex life."<sup>11</sup> The policymakers became particularly worried once they noticed that, as a result of sexual transmissions, "women started giving birth to children with HIV."<sup>12</sup> In 2018, for example, 4 percent of the diagnosed HIV cases involved mother-to-child transmissions (Ozodi 2019b). Children, as previously explained, are seen as the backbone of the nation, and it is precisely in the epidemiological context of the country that the concept of a "physically healthy" society should be understood (Figure 2).

Against this background, women sex workers have become one of the main targets of the fight against HIV/AIDS in Tajikistan.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that they had previously enjoyed full freedom under the radar of policymakers, given the aforementioned long tradition of regulating and curbing



Figure 2. Street banner: "Physically and morally healthy individuals constitute a healthy society." Khujand, August 25, 2016, author's photograph.

sex work, dating back to Soviet, and even-pre-Soviet times. However, such an extensive securitization of women's sex work as a threat to public health, with wide participation of the public, is new.

Because of the multiple sexual partners involved, sex workers are globally considered to be one of the so-called "key populations" in HIV transmission. They are thus considered to be at a high risk of infection, with an estimated worldwide HIV incidence among women sex workers being 13 times higher than among adult women aged between 15 and 49 years (UNAIDS 2018, 14). Although the estimated HIV prevalence among women sex workers in Tajikistan was relatively low in the past, it has started rising in recent years. Azamjon Mirzoev's (2007, 77) research among 300 women sex workers in 2005 showed that 0.7 percent of them were HIV-positive. According to more recent UNAIDS estimates, in 2009 the HIV prevalence among this group amounted to 2.8 percent, and in 2014 to 4.7 percent (Ozodi 2015). It is important to point out that unprotected sexual relations, which contribute to the rise of HIV infections among this group, do not result so much from the women's lack of knowledge about STDs, as from their male clients' frequent unwillingness to have protected sex (Mirzoev 2007, 78). These constraints on condom use have to do with the gendered relations in Tajik society and dominant masculinity models, which accord little negotiating power to women sex workers (King et al. 2016, 425–27).

Because the securitizing narrative often goes hand in hand with securitizing practices, in addition to the aforementioned law imposing fines on sex workers, other legal documents are also deployed to target them. For example, the recent epidemiological trends resulted in legislative changes that criminalize HIV transmission. The 2018 amendments to the Criminal Code of Tajikistan (Government of Tajikistan 1998) imply a criminal liability not only on people who have intentionally transmitted HIV to other people or have intended to do so, but also on people who *pose a risk* of transmitting HIV. The law thus talks about individuals who "deliberately expose another person to the risk of contracting HIV" (Article 125) and foresees imprisonment of between five and ten years. As an interviewed lawyer commented, "the vagueness of formulation implies that all HIV-positive people might be held criminally liable for having sex."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, people living with HIV are, theoretically, deprived of a right to have an intimate life. In practice, however, as high-profile cases, such as the one mentioned at the outset of this article, suggest, this law has been used almost exclusively against women sex workers. This, again, shows the gendered nature of the politics of securitization, which in the name of the collectivity targets individuals who do not comply with the socially established heteronormative model (see Hansen 2000, 291). While wives of labor migrants, who represent another group of women among whom HIV is on the rise in Tajikistan, are portrayed as individuals who deserve compassion and protection, sex workers, described as "women of easy virtue," are not; they are viewed as the perpetrators of decent women's misfortune (see Narodnaia Gazeta 2018).

The narrative of women sex workers spreading HIV and the resulting laws are accompanied by largely preexisting and socially approved legal and extra-legal practices aimed at limiting the infection growth among the population. They illustrate

that, as Didier Bigo (2008, 123) states, "the practices of securing some are simultaneously practices rendering others insecure." As in the case of nation-building, the most relevant state agency involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS is the police, rather than health institutions. Prevention of HIV transmissions, in this context, implies repression of women sex workers rather than outreach of HIV services to this group. This clearly recalls a Soviet-era approach to sex work. A frequent practice in this regard concerns the monitoring and isolation of women identified as sick or potentially sick. This happens either through raids targeting specific women sex workers whom the police know to be ill (Ministry of Internal Affairs 2019), or during routine police raids when, besides mandatory registration, fines, or detention, arrested sex workers are also subject to mandatory testing for STDs, including HIV (Asia Plus 2018; Ozodi 2018). It is as a result of such kinds of epidemiological control that law enforcement bodies were able to establish the number of men with whom the women sex workers from the opening vignette, accused of intentionally spreading HIV, had had sexual relations, and who these clients were. It is also telling that HIV-positive sex workers are frequently prosecuted for infecting their clients with HIV, even when these men did not actually contract the infection (Asia Plus 2019).

Despite such a dominant securitization framework, it is important to point out the diversity of approaches to sex work within state bodies, even if alternative voices remain marginalized. Many health professionals are critical and outspoken about police violence and mandatory testing, arguing that such measures force sex workers go underground and, overall, have a negative impact on the epidemiological situation in the country (Asia Plus 2018, 2019)

Having explained how the state sees women sex workers, the next section focuses on the women's common coping mechanisms that have emerged on the ground.

## Coping Strategies of Women Sex Workers

### Hiding Techniques

Hiding is the most common mechanism that women sex workers living in a small town can deploy to navigate the insecurity associated with their work. It allows women to limit their visibility vis-à-vis not only law enforcement bodies but also a traditional, religious society that constantly observes its members and judges their morality.

One form of hiding involves social mimicry through physical appearance and clothing, which is a common strategy in contexts where sex work is highly stigmatized (see Phrasisombath et al. 2012, 6; Shewly et al. 2020, 509). Sex worker Takhmina, a divorcee in her mid-30s and a mother of several children, relies on it extensively. Not only is her dress not provocative, but it is also more than modest by local standards. In the town, women of her age often wear national dress: baggy, calf-length and crew-neck colorful tunics with elbow-length sleeves and trousers underneath (Tajik: *kurta-ezor*), and loosely tied headscarves (Tajik: *ruimol*) round their heads (see Figure 2). Takhmina, however, prefers darker, plain colors and long sleeves, and also covers her hair with a hijab. She does not wear any make-up. In the local context, she looks like a "respectable," pious woman.

Another hiding technique is related to the ways in which women navigate between public and hidden spaces. Takhmina lives in a nearby village and travels to the town to engage in sex work. She avoids discos and restaurants, because being seen in such places would automatically attribute to a single woman the label of *jalab*—a derogatory term used locally for a woman sex worker. Instead, she finds clients in specific outdoor locations in the town that are known on the local sex work market. Takhmina prefers short, anonymous interactions with clients, which are strictly limited to sexual services, and do not involve spending extra time or building longer-term relations with the men. She avoids staying in town until darkness, beyond the “respectable” timeframe for a woman to be outside the household. She is afraid of raids, fines, and arrest, as well as client and police violence, and therefore, she relies on sex work only to provide enough money for herself and her children.

Coping with securitization through hiding is not an expression of resistance, but rather, an attempt to minimize everyday insecurity. It can also be a sign of resignation to fate, as is the case with Takhmina, who has interiorized the stigma associated with her work (see Nazpary 2002, 116–20) and struggles to combine conflicting personal and professional identities of being both a mother and a sex worker (see also Basnyat 2020, 101). She finds this work “shameful” (Tajik: *aib ast*) and “dirty” (Tajik: *chirkin*),<sup>15</sup> and does not want her close circle to know, especially her teenage daughter for whom she would like to be a role model.

Hiding allows insecurity to be domesticated by using the few resources that women sex workers have at their disposal, including one’s body. As Sami Hermez (in Abboud et al. 2018, 290) argued, a body can be “a site on which violence can be enacted and [also] a resource for resisting and overcoming insecurity.” Takhmina’s body serves not only as a site that she regularly uses for sexual acts that are securitized, but also as a site where she consistently performs social mimicry to cope with securitization. Similarly, she engages her body in a back-and-forth movement between public and hidden spaces, where practicing the “wrong” sexuality and “unrespectful” female behavior is possible (Kluczevska 2019, 118–20).

Recognizing and analyzing such nuanced mechanisms of adaptation, which go beyond clear-cut resistance, requires, in Claudia Aradau’s (2018) words, an “attention to controversies, contestations, struggles, and frictions, where agency is not located with a set of dominant actors but entangled, claimed, and reclaimed.” Hiding techniques, performed daily, allow women sex workers to reclaim their agency by maintaining social respectability and avoiding unnecessary, threatening attention in contexts where state and public scrutiny are omnipresent. They do not aim at mobilization against securitization politics, however.

### **Vast Networks and Influential Clients**

Another coping mechanism, which seems to be in contrast with hiding techniques, involves developing networks of everyday utility and befriending influential clients. While the former relies on invisibility, the latter envisages (or at least allows for) visibility in the public sphere.

This is the preferred strategy of Sitora, another divorcee in her early 30s. Although she does not voluntarily attract extra attention through provocative dress or sexualized behavior in

public, she does not particularly hide being a sex worker. People sometimes point a finger at her in public and occasionally call her a *jalab*. She does not like complaining about her condition, however, and makes use of her cheerful personality and attractive appearance to mitigate various problems associated with her profession. Over the last few years, Sitora has managed to create a vast social network for herself. She has connections with trusted doctors who can help treat STDs or arrange abortions, and local NGOs providing both HIV testing and free condoms. Moreover, she maintains contacts with useful clients, including taxi drivers and bakers, all of whom “might help you in need,”<sup>16</sup> by providing transport and food.

Besides these networks of everyday utility, Sitora seeks to befriend influential clients, such as high-ranking police officers and employees of the procurator’s office and court. Her older children are already teenagers and take care of the younger ones when she is away from home, and so she can spend more time with clients, including even nights with police officers when they work night shifts. For example, she came to our meeting directly from a long date in the police station with a man in his mid-20s, who, as she said, “is very ambitious and has a brilliant career ahead.”<sup>17</sup> With her clients, Sitora attempts to build relations that are not limited to sex, but are more affectionate and long-term-oriented. These networks, and particularly friendships with influential clients, allow her to avoid official fines and arrests for sex work. Moreover, thanks to these connections, Sitora is not subjected to police violence during raids and bypasses the usual scheme of making informal payments to police officers so that they close their eyes to the women’s work. Finally, when other clients demean or abuse her, or refuse to pay for sexual services, a phone call to influential clients can help solve the problem.

Such coping mechanisms might seem a luxury, because not all sex workers can benefit from similar strategic friendships with clients who occupy positions of power. However, Mirzoev’s (2007, 77–78) research showed that 73 percent of sex workers tended to have regular sexual partners, and 22 percent of their clients were police officers. The technique of keeping regular, screened clients, and in particular developing relations with police officers, is common in the post-Soviet space (Nazpary 2002, 113; Rusakova 2019, 75) and is also widely cited in sex work literature in other contexts (Phrasisombath et al. 2012, 6; Nelson 2020, 1026; Shewly et al. 2020, 8). This coping mechanism reveals the largely performative nature of the securitization regime, which can be relatively easily bypassed through personal connections. This is possible because the state is a heterogenous actor, and the enactment of policies and policing itself occurs on different levels and involves actors with different rationalities and interests. Importantly, by permanently postponing the articulation of securitizing outcomes, this coping strategy alleviates the way in which securitizing policies operate in daily practice.

Although the two strategies, hiding and creating networks, largely oppose each other, neither of them is a strategy of resistance, but both aim at risk mitigation. By mobilizing networks when in need, sex workers learn how to effectively exploit dominant gender relations in Tajik society and local power structures (see Lettow 2015, 506). By relying on influential men for protection, they play by the rules of the

securitization game and exploit the informality that is inscribed in it. Moreover, this coping strategy pays off well, yet it is not an undemanding one: it requires constant effort to uphold networks and maintain the patrons.

Sitora's case is also illustrative of the unintended consequences of securitization of women sex workers on a local level. As we were talking, Sitora's mobile phone rang several times. She read aloud the incoming messages from one of her clients. He asked her how she was doing and when he could see her again, in a way that suggested some emotional attachment. She also received a phone call from another regular client who asked for a sex date, but also offered a ride out of the town to enjoy nature together. Often Sitora ends up listening to her clients and even advising them on their family problems. She says that she is perhaps the only woman with whom her clients can discuss life freely, and she believes that they appreciate it and respect her for that. The state securitization narrative has identified Sitora as a dangerous individual who needs to be demeaned and isolated because she transgresses the family-centered nation-building model. In practice, however, it is precisely for this reason, and the fact she is so at ease with it, that her relations with befriended clients—free of social conventions and circumventing the rigid social roles ascribed to men and women—are so desired by the men she interacts with.

### Companionship

Besides mimicry and useful connections that are sought by sex workers, another strategy allowing insecurity to be reduced is companionship. It refers to a sense of closeness, familiarity, and acceptance among women who share similar experiences that are uncommon for other societal groups. Companionship, however, does not extend to all the sex workers in a given locality. As in many other countries where sex work is not legal, the women often see each other as rivals, and fear that others might snatch clients who pay well or deprive them of clients by spreading rumors that they are ill, and also collaborate with police officers on targeted arrests (Phrasisombath et al. 2012, 7; Nelson 2020, 1024–25; Shewly et al. 2020, 508). This is why companionship is usually limited to smaller, scattered groups of women (see Nazpary 2002, 107–8).

Within the group I met, companionship is expressed through mutual support on a broad range of everyday crucial and banal matters, ranging from health to beauty. The six women involved share contacts of trusted doctors who can help cure STDs, or exchange tips on self-medication. They advise each other how to lose weight, because, as Aziza, one of the women, complained, “recently clients started to prefer skinny prostitutes [*jalaboi harob*].” Self-deprecating jokes are part of these conversations (see Nazpary 2002, 111). For instance, while helping Sitora apply the *usma*, a leafy green paste used to tint eyebrows, Zarrina commented: “A proper prostitute [*zani fohisha*] needs to have well-groomed eyebrows.” Humor is clearly a way to overcome the insecurity related to their work. By calling themselves and each other by words that have derogatory connotations in public contexts, such as *fohisha* and *jalab*, sex workers reappropriate these terms and give them new, affectionate meanings. The women also make fun of the looks and sexual performance of their

clients, whom they playfully describe as *kavalero*—a Tajikized (in a southern dialect) old-fashioned Russian word corresponding to an English “gallant.”

Humor also enables women sex workers to reimagine their current lives by inventing alternative scenarios, including very improbable ones. For example, to the amusement of other women, Aziza was fantasizing aloud about getting married:

Imagine the wedding, I am sitting there with my groom, behind a beautiful table on the podium, with a long white dress and a transparent veil covering my face, looking down [as it is expected from a bride]. I raise my eyes discreetly and look at the guests sitting in the room. All my loved ones, my *kavalero* are here, they came with their families. They are waving at me, they are here to celebrate my success.

Apart from domesticating the present together, the women reimagine their futures. Besides anxiety and fear, as Hermez argued (in Abboud et al. 2018, 290), “love and hope are just some affective states that are invoked within social relations in contexts of (in)security.” Such focus on an alternative future is not unique to sex workers in Tajikistan, but is also frequently mentioned in sex work research elsewhere (see Nazpary 2002, 119–20; Basnyat 2020, 108). The women discuss their dreams about, for example, migrating to Russia one day and having a fresh start there (Takhmina), or their hopes for their children, especially their daughters, to go to university and have a better life than their mothers (Nargis and Zarrina).

These micro-relations of support and care embedded in the experiences of living insecurity once again show that the women do not resist their securitization. Through companionship, as through the other two coping strategies described here, sex workers do not change the rules of the game. They are not able to desecuritize themselves. Unlike women sex workers in several other contexts, sex workers in Tajikistan do not attempt to develop alternative, compassionate narratives to place themselves out of the security realm (see Basnyat 2020, 103–5; Phrasisombath et al. 2012, 7), or engage in an emancipatory political struggle to defend their personal rights and freedom (see Sultana 2015, 780–81). The women, however, are not devoid of agency, although this agency is highly constrained by structural violence resulting from the political and legal environment, extra-legal policing practices, gender hierarchies, and labor market conditions, as well as their individual social backgrounds and family trajectories. Nevertheless, through a careful assessment of the situation and self-reflection, they manage to creatively navigate the securitized context within which sex work is practiced. They do so through the limited means that they have at their disposal—making use of their modest or appealing looks, deploying communication skills, and exploiting gendered social relations.

### Conclusion

This article has analyzed how sex work is securitized in Tajikistan (discursively, legally, and in practice), in relation to family-centered nation-building and the fight against HIV/AIDS. It also explored coping mechanisms through which women sex workers simultaneously consent to the securitization framework and navigate it. There are three implications arising from this analysis.

First, coping mechanisms reveal the largely performative nature of the securitization regime in everyday practice. On the outside, the state approach to sex workers, and measures deployed against them both legally and illegally, seem rigid and oppressive. At the same time, in practice, securitization can be fairly easily bypassed. For example, personal connections of sex workers allow them to relatively successfully navigate and even avoid the various repressive legal and extra-legal mechanisms implicated in the securitization of sex work. As a result, because of so-called human factors and the high levels of informality involved, we witness a permanent postponement of the articulation of securitizing outcomes.

Second, women's coping strategies reveal multiple, subjective understandings of insecurity on the ground, including how these women respond to insecurity and build alternative, micro-level securities for themselves. Even in a context of constrained agency, sex workers were able to use the few resources available to them to circumvent the securitization. Yet their ability to domesticate and navigate threats should not be mistaken for resistance, as the women are not able to desecuritize themselves, nor is this their aim. This shows that in the Tajik case women's agency and subjection can coexist without friction.

Third, in the politics of securitization of sex work the state-society dichotomy does not fully hold. The securitization literature typically sees the state as the source of securitization, and society, or some specific groups of it, as the victim of securitizing narratives, policies, and practices. In the Tajik case, however, society plays a dual role as both victim (sex workers) and co-perpetuator (general population) along with the state. Many legal and illegal practices, for example concerning the blackmailing of sex workers and bribe extortion by police officers, did not emerge as a result of state-imposed securitizing narratives and policies. Arguably, such practices had preempted both the Soviet-era and post-Soviet laws targeting women sex workers. Stemming from societal views on gender norms and local visions of morality, they were simply given legal grounds. In this way, securitization of sex workers, enacted and implemented by both state and societal actors, should be seen as co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing.

## Notes

1. See Nazpary (2002), Chapter 5, on similar, sexualized strategies of economic survival in Kazakhstan in the 1990s.
2. UN data, "Sex Workers: Population Size Estimate." Accessed January 4, 2021. <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=UNAIDS&f=inID%3A111>
3. As a man sex worker commented (interview, October 31, 2013), in this sector "there is also a small number of men, and a large number of transgender people [Russian: *transgendery*]." Ignoring the existence of transgender sex workers and silencing the fact that men also work in this sector contributes to gendering subjectivities—as if this work was reserved only for women. In the local male honor-and-shame system (Harris 2004, 79–80), homosexual sex, and, even more, men's sex work, go beyond the possible scenarios of male gender performances that are considered inappropriate (Kluczevska 2019, 118).
4. As a result of the low speed and relatively high price of internet connections, the online sex industry has not yet developed in the country.
5. Interview with a woman sex worker, undisclosed location, April 10, 2019.
6. Interview with an employee of an international organization working in the HIV/AIDS field, Dushanbe, December 14, 2018.
7. This distinction implies that the possibility that transgender people might exist is not acknowledged.
8. While women's extra-marital sex damages their social respectability, in the man's case it might demonstrate their power over women and, as a result, add to their reputation (see Harris 2004, 79).
9. This is a prohibitionist model that penalizes the actual transaction of providing sexual services (although without criminalizing it), and not only third parties' benefiting from the sex work of others. See Kulick's (2003) discussion on the Swedish prohibitionist model.
10. These and similar practices often extend to women in general who engage in extra-marital heterosexual sex in rented apartments in the absence of other available venues at their disposal. In case of police raids they also might be arrested, asked for bribes, and registered as sex workers—a practice that does not apply to their male partners (see Asia Plus 2018).
11. Interview with a former high-level public health official, Dushanbe, February 14, 2019.
12. Interview with a former high-level public health official, Dushanbe, February 26, 2019.
13. Along with young, male labor migrants, who often get married and start a family on returning to Tajikistan.
14. Interview with employees of an HIV/AIDS-related NGO, Dushanbe, March 1, 2019.
15. Interview with a woman sex worker, undisclosed location, April 9, 2019.
16. Interview with a woman sex worker, undisclosed location, April 10, 2019.
17. Interview with a woman sex worker, undisclosed location, April 10, 2019.

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