

“All paths lead to the school” – and its charismatic director

ABSTRACT: Forty years ago, the young teacher Natalja Hikoloaevna Sharipova moved from the Ukraine to a small village in the Rasht Valley, Tajikistan. As a school director, she today also opens class rooms to conduct trainings and working sessions for rural women.

“With her knowledge and her open-minded attitude, she stated a positive example to all of us”, says Bargigul Khodjieva when thinking back about her schooldays with teacher Natalja Sharipova. Today, the former student and the still active teacher work together as members of the self-help group “Bakhor”. Local women from Nusratullo Makhsum, a remote Jamoat (municipality) in the Rasht Valley, have set-up this group in order to revive the tradition of cloth-making and handcrafting with products created particularly for brides.



Natalja Sharipova and the self-help group “Bakhor” discuss their joint work.

Open-mindedness and consciousness of tradition – these two principles form the central themes of the story that tells the life of Natalja Sharipova. When she graduated from the Pedagogical College in Makeevka, Western Ukraine, in 1974, the Tajik Ministry of Education invited her together with twenty other young teachers to a work stay in Tajikistan. At that time, the Soviet republic lacked Russian language teachers. Natalja Sharipova accepted the invitation – and has stayed in the Rasht Valley, where a teacher position was offered to her, to the present day.

Notwithstanding the contrast between the urban lifestyle of her study years and the deeply rural environment of the Rasht Valley, Natalja Sharipova smoothly adapted to her new life: She took up an interesting work, met her husband Davlat and got introduced by her mother-in-law into the Tajik culture and food. She still considers it as a privilege to have become part of an “international” family with members from different Soviet republics.

Today, Natalja Sharipova is the mother of six children from whom she has been gifted fifteen grandchildren. School No. 83 of Nusratullo Makhsum, which she has headed over the past 17 years, equally means family to the vivid woman. With her human, yet disciplined leadership, the school director ensures that girls and boys of the village receive a profound education. At the same time, she opens the schoolrooms as a space where rural women can come, learn and work together.

Most significantly, for the open doors Saodat Takdirova, says: “All paths lead to the school.” Saodat Takdirova is the mobiliser responsible for the coordination of women self-help groups in Nusratullo Makhsum. Since summer 2014, 60 groups have been established in the Rasht district within the Joint UN Programme “Empowering Communities with Better Livelihood and Social Protection”. UN Women in close cooperation with its local implementing partner, the NGO Najibullo, provides the over 500 group members trainings to develop their vocational and entrepreneurial skills and to implement joint economic initiatives.

Natalja Sharipova offers the atmospheric environment, which allows rural women to share and jointly develop ideas, stresses Saodat Takdirova. School No. 83 is thus also the place where clothes are sewed, designs and materials discussed, and earnings and expenditures calculated. “Our meetings offer women, who have so many duties at home, a space to find self-fulfillment”, explains Natalja Sharipova. “We talk about handicrafts, marketing and budgeting, about social support and women rights – and these discussions open all of us the way to economic self-reliance, which again is the key to our happy future.”



A strong leader and team player: Director Natalja Sharipova in front of her school building. © UN Women