



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDEPENDENT UZBEKISTAN: SOCIO-CULTURAL AND LEGAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: This article examines the evolution of women's issues in Uzbekistan from 1991 to 2024, analyzing the historical, socio-cultural, and politico-legal dimensions of gender equality. It explores the Soviet-era policies, and their impact on women's roles, followed by the transformative reforms in independent Uzbekistan. The study highlights key legislative measures, such as the 2019 Gender Equality Law, and initiatives like the "Women's Notebook" system, which have enhanced women's socio-economic and political participation. Despite significant progress, challenges such as domestic violence, legal illiteracy, and limited political representation persist. By comparing Uzbekistan's gender policies with international practices, the article proposes recommendations for further advancing women's rights and gender equality.

Key words: Gender equality, Women's rights, Soviet policies, Hujum campaign, Women's Notebook, Socio-economic empowerment, Legal reforms

The role of women in Uzbekistan's societal development has been a critical area of focus, particularly since the country gained independence in 1991. Historically shaped by Islamic traditions and Soviet policies, women's issues have evolved through significant socio-cultural and legal transformations. The Soviet era introduced ideological campaigns like "Hujum" to "emancipate" women, often at the cost of cultural suppression. In contrast, post-independence Uzbekistan has prioritized gender equality through legislative reforms, educational advancements, and economic empowerment programs. This article analyzes the trajectory of women's issues from 1991 to 2024, assessing the impact of state policies, societal changes, and

international influences. It aims to identify achievements, ongoing challenges, and future directions for gender equality in Uzbekistan.

During the Soviet period, women's issues in Uzbekistan were heavily influenced by the Communist Party's ideological framework. The "Hujum" campaign, launched in 1927, aimed to liberate women from traditional constraints, such as wearing the paranja (veil), and integrate them into public life through education and labor. While this led to increased literacy and workforce participation, it often disregarded local cultural norms, resulting in social tensions and resistance. As Alimova (1992) notes, the campaign's rushed and ideological nature caused social violence and suppressed national values, undermining its emancipatory goals. Despite these challenges, women made significant contributions, particularly during World War II, with 4,555 Uzbek women serving on the frontlines and many more supporting the war effort in industries and agriculture (Ismoilov, 1996).

The Soviet regime's policies, while promoting gender equality on paper, often served state interests, using women as a cheap labor force in collectivized agriculture and industry. The suppression of religious and cultural practices further alienated women, limiting their autonomy and political agency. These historical dynamics set the stage for the transformative changes in independent Uzbekistan.

The current lifestyle of our women cannot be compared with the marriages recorded and documented in the pages of history. Just as modern women's rights and interests were absent, it would not be wrong to say that the rights of our mothers were restricted, their access to political education beyond secondary school was limited, and the challenges they faced were significant. Protecting women's rights has always been crucial, not only in our country but also on a global scale.

In many countries around the world, issues related to women's rights remain among the most pressing. Let us list some key elements that highlight these problems:

Gender Inequality: The primary issue remains the disparity between men and women. This applies to wages, educational opportunities, and options for commercial and political participation.

Violence: Millions of women worldwide suffer from violence against women. This category includes human trafficking, sexual violence, domestic violence, and other violations of rights.

Access to Education: Women still face barriers to accessing high-quality education in many parts of the world. This hinders their professional and personal growth.

Healthcare: Women's access to high-quality medical services, particularly reproductive healthcare, is limited in several countries. This can negatively impact their well-being.

Leadership and Political Participation: Despite progress, women in many countries are underrepresented in high-level leadership roles and politics.

Violence and Child Marriage: Many girls face violence and forced marriages, which violate their rights and have harmful social and psychological impacts.

Access to Technology: Due to limited access to digital resources and information technologies, women in some countries face additional barriers to education and development.

Since independence, Uzbekistan has made significant strides in enhancing women's roles in society. The Constitution of Uzbekistan (Article 46, revised as Article 58 in 2023) guarantees equal rights for men and women, forming the legal foundation for gender equality. The "New Uzbekistan Development Strategy (2022–2026)" emphasizes women's socio-political and economic empowerment, with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev highlighting the importance of strengthening women's roles in governance and society.

Digitization is a fundamental characteristic of modern society and a functional tool for achieving sustainable development. Access to digital tools and technologies opens new prospects for social collaboration. Digital technologies are key factors in enhancing women's civic engagement, communication, and mobility. The use of digital devices increases the impact of women's organizations in addressing gender issues and shapes perspectives on the women's agenda on the global internet. While digital activism and online social communities may not soon replace offline activism, they can support women's demands and assist activists in organizing communities and movements. Evidence also confirms that digital technologies play a significant role in democratic processes, self-organization, mutual aid, and peer learning. Access to high-quality digital services and broader information access enables more women to participate in these processes. Mobile internet and online platforms impact the mental well-being of migrant families and communities, including refugees. Studies confirm that mobile technologies help migrant women reduce stress related to social isolation, stay connected with relatives, access information on protecting their rights, and share information within migrant communities. It is also important to emphasize that digitization and digital tools not only provide vast opportunities for expanding women's capabilities but also pose threats to their safety and rights.

Education has been a cornerstone of women's empowerment. Over 90% of Uzbek women are literate, and approximately 4 million women are enrolled in higher education, with 5,000 engaged in scientific research (Mirziyoyev, 2021). Programs like the Renaissance Education University and STEM initiatives for women have expanded access to modern professions, with over 2,000 women trained in technology and engineering fields by 2021. The "Technovation Girls" program further promotes IT skills among young women, enhancing their competitiveness in the job market. Socio-economic initiatives, such as the "Women's Notebook" system introduced in 2020, have provided targeted support to economically vulnerable women through grants and loans. The "Entrepreneurial Woman" association has facilitated small business development, enabling women to achieve financial independence. In 2021, a conference organized by this association produced recommendations for advancing women's entrepreneurship, contributing to economic prosperity and social progress.

Uzbekistan's commitment to gender equality is evident in its legal reforms and international engagements. The 2019 Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men marked a significant milestone. Uzbekistan's accession to the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1995 positioned it as a regional leader in gender policy. The "Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy sets ambitious goals, including increasing women's representation in governance to 30% and strengthening anti-violence measures. The establishment of rehabilitation centers for victims of domestic violence, inspired by Sweden's "FREDA" method, has provided legal and psychological support to over 5,000 women in 2020 alone. However, challenges remain, with over 10,000 reported cases of domestic violence in 2020 highlighting the need for continued efforts. Women's political representation, while improved, remains low, with women constituting only 16% of local councils, 17.5% of the Legislative Chamber, and 15% of the Senate. Despite progress, Uzbekistan faces persistent challenges, including domestic violence, legal illiteracy, and economic disparities, particularly in rural areas. American scholar Marianna Kemp notes that Uzbek women often navigate a balance between tradition and modernity, with societal

expectations limiting their autonomy in rural settings (Kemp, cited in the document). Political participation remains lower than desired, with women underrepresented in decision-making roles.

Despite significant progress, challenges persist in fully realizing women's empowerment. Domestic violence remains a pressing issue, with over 10,000 reported cases in 2020, indicating the need for stronger enforcement and awareness campaigns. Rural women face disproportionate barriers, including limited access to education and economic resources, which contribute to lower socio-political participation compared to urban areas. Political representation, while improved, remains below global benchmarks, with women comprising only 16% of local councils and 17.5% of the Legislative Chamber.

Cultural norms sometimes clash with modern aspirations, particularly in rural settings, where traditional expectations often confine women to domestic roles. Legal illiteracy also hinders women's ability to assert their rights, necessitating expanded education programs. However, these challenges present opportunities for growth. Uzbekistan's commitment to gender data collection, evidenced by the gender.stat.uz platform, has positioned it 56th out of 185 countries in the 2023 Open Data Watch "Gender Data Compass" ranking. This transparency enables evidence-based policymaking, offering a pathway to address disparities.

International experiences provide valuable lessons. Rwanda's success in achieving high female parliamentary representation and Sweden's innovative anti-violence strategies could guide Uzbekistan's efforts. The UN's "Generation Equality" initiative highlights the need for sustained investment, estimating a global requirement of \$360 billion annually to achieve gender equality by 2030. Uzbekistan can leverage these insights to refine its strategies, tailoring global best practices to its cultural context.

Recommendations

1. Increase funding for rehabilitation centers to support victims of domestic violence, integrating international best practices like Sweden's "FREDA" method.
2. Enhance women's political participation by implementing quotas and leadership training programs to boost representation in local and national governance.
3. Expand economic empowerment initiatives, such as the "Women's Notebook" and "Entrepreneurial Woman" programs, to include more rural women and provide affordable housing and childcare support.
4. Improve gender data collection and transparency through platforms like gender.stat.uz to monitor progress and align with global standards, such as those set by the Open Data Watch's "Gender Data Compass."

These measures, combined with continued alignment with international frameworks like CEDAW, will strengthen Uzbekistan's gender equality framework and enhance women's contributions to sustainable development.

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