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Barriers to women's participation in the formal labor market in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the barriers to formal labor market participation for tertiary-educated women in Uzbekistan. Despite notable achievements in gender equality initiatives, women in Uzbekistan face significant societal, cultural, institutional, and legal barriers that undermine their access to and retention in formal employment. This study identifies the entrenched stereotypes, discriminatory practices, and insufficient policy implementations that perpetuate gender disparities through analyzing survey data, semi-structured interviews, expert opinions, and key international legal frameworks such as CEDAW, ICESCR, and ILO conventions.

The study shows how societal expectations, family dynamics, and traditional interpretations of religious texts can influence women's career choices in Uzbekistan. Moreover, this study shows how insufficient institutional policies like workplace protections, flexible working hours, or hiring policies can exacerbate these challenges. The study underscores the disconnect between Uzbekistan's international obligations and domestic practices and proposes reform recommendations to align the country's gender policies with global standards. Addressing these systemic barriers can contribute to unlocking the potential of Uzbekistan's educated women and achieving meaningful progress toward gender equality.

1. Introduction

The pursuit of gender equality through equal education and employment opportunities is an essential component in the battle against gender-based disparities. Within the landscape of Central Asia, Uzbekistan has been frequently lauded as a forerunner in these efforts. Uzbekistan has received attention and recognition for its gender initiatives over the past eight years. Such measures include the integration of gender agendas into national programs, an unprecedented increase in the number of women holding parliamentary seats, the distinct focus placed on women's rights by both the President of Uzbekistan and his daughters, as well as criminalization of domestic violence. This attention to gender issues has positioned Uzbekistan as a beacon of progressivism in Central Asia.

However, despite these commendable strides, the reality of de facto gender equality remains elusive within the country. Deep-seated societal views gender stereotypes, and local interpretations of Islamic texts about women's role in society persist. These factors usually shape strict gender roles and norms, limiting women's role as caregivers and wives.

Before the Soviet Union, women in this region were predominantly illiterate, uneducated, and usually excluded from formal employment. The Soviets initiated a campaign for female emancipation and a drive towards advancing women's rights. However, the post-Soviet era saw a resurgence of nationalism and a significant re-Islamization. During the first years of Independence, for instance, ideal Uzbek women were usually portrayed as housewives and

mothers in media and the government's overall rhetoric. Within a short period, this complex journey of the region shaped different attitudes toward women's role in society.

Moreover, this historical journey has left an indelible mark on educational patterns. Currently, gender representation is relatively balanced in the lower echelons of education due to the 12-year compulsory and free education policy (with almost 97% of girls enrolled in schools, compared to 99% of boys). However, a significant disparity manifests at the summit of academic and research institutions. The share of women in higher education institutions is only 38%, compared to 62% of men.[1]

This discrepancy is not just academic; it also reflects the broader labor market. Despite comparable educational achievements, most women with tertiary education do not participate in the formal labor force. Such a phenomenon was documented by Matvienko, a famous women's rights activist in Uzbekistan, in her report.[2]

The implications of education on employment are evident: a university degree often opens doors to higher-paid jobs. Yet, in 2017, only 12.5% of Uzbek women in the labor market over 25 held a university degree, compared to 20% of their male counterparts. Furthermore, the unemployment rate among women surpasses that of men and culminates in women constituting 63 percent of the unemployed population, according to a 2023 report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).[3] These trends hint at the broader context in which women are often relegated to

[1] Izabela Cytlak and Nigora Mamadaminova, "Understanding the Motivation of Uzbek Women to Receive Higher Education," *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth/Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de la Jeunesse* 16, no. 1 (2024): 76–87.

[2] Irina Matvienko, "Uzbekistan: Women Are Less Paid, Less Educated, Less Equal - CABAR.Asia," *CABAR.asia*, November 1, 2020, https://cabar.asia/en/uzbekistan-women-are-less-paid-less-educated-less-equal.

[3] Asian Development Bank, *Economic Trends and Prospects in Developing Asia: Caucasus and Central Asia, Uzbekistan*, April 2023, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/863591/uzb-ado-april-2023.pdf.

unpaid care work, lack social security, and are increasingly vulnerable to the feminization of poverty.

Women in Uzbekistan, especially those who are divorced, widowed, unmarried mothers, or part of large families, are disproportionately at risk of poverty, among other insecurities. This study seeks to understand why tertiary-educated women are sidelined in the labor market. Through interviews and surveys with employed and unemployed college graduates, this research explores potential barriers, including social pressure, familial expectations, religious interpretations, institutional, policy, legal obstacles, economic disincentives, or the undervaluation of women's financial contributions. Also, this study aims to capture the voices and intentions of these women, their initial aspirations upon entering higher education, and their current stance on employment in the absence of barriers.

This analysis is grounded in the human rights framework. Uzbekistan's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) obliges the state to adopt measures that counteract gender stereotypes and discrimination. This research also draws on key international legal frameworks, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions such as the Maternity Protection Convention and the Equal Remuneration Convention, ratified by Uzbekistan. These legal frameworks will help analyze Uzbekistan's obligations and performance in ensuring gender equality in employment and addressing barriers faced by women in the labor market. These instruments provide a normative foundation for assessing Uzbekistan's efforts and identifying areas for improvement in realizing gender equality.

2. Research Question and Significance

In this study, I seek to identify why tertiary-educated women in Uzbekistan abstain from participating in the formal labor market. This question is significant since it has the potential to identify complex factors that contribute to gender inequalities in Uzbekistan and other similar contexts. My research also seeks to identify women's most common barriers to formal employment. These barriers include societal expectations, family pressure, religious interpretations, unpaid care responsibilities, institutional constraints, legal frameworks, economic disincentives, deep-rooted cultural norms, and traditional practices. Furthermore, this work aims to provide insight into women's attitudes and perceptions toward their own roles in society. Understanding their point of view is essential, as this method will allow us to evaluate the overall picture of gender roles and norms entrenched in Uzbek society.

Education is often seen as a key to improving economic prospects and empowering women. Many studies have shown that higher education effectively decreases women's unemployment, reduces women's vulnerability to poverty, and improves women's overall status within their communities. However, the disjunction between women's educational achievements and their labor market participation raises critical questions and concerns about the effectiveness of current policies promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Uzbek society.

I aim to contribute to filling the existing gap in the literature concerning gender inequality in post-Soviet states. Moreover, this study will offer a new perspective on how gender dynamics have been shaped amidst political and religious transitions. Additionally, this study will be conducted through a human rights lens by assessing Uzbekistan's commitment to international

conventions like CEDAW. Therefore, it can offer new perspectives on Uzbekistan's commitment to human rights.

Finally, the study is designed to illuminate the disconnect between educational achievements and professional involvement among women and actively engage in the broader dialogue surrounding gender equality, labor rights, and socioeconomic development. To conclude, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the real-world experiences of Uzbek women. This work might also offer significant insights into women's situations in similar contexts worldwide.

3.Methodology

This study focuses primarily on graduates from pedagogy programs to explore the underlying reasons for the underrepresentation of tertiary-educated women in the formal labor market in Uzbekistan. The decision to focus on pedagogy stems from two primary considerations. Firstly, unlike degrees in the humanities, for instance, a degree in pedagogy equips individuals with practical skills that are directly applicable to employment opportunities. Secondly, pedagogy is one of the most popular fields of study among Uzbek women, as teaching is culturally regarded as an "appropriate" and "feminine" profession. This societal perception underscores the significance of the research question: if teaching is traditionally considered a suitable profession for women, why is there a reluctance among many to enter or remain in the education sector workforce?

While women represent a substantial share of the education sector workforce (70%), they are rarely promoted to higher leadership positions.[4] Compounding this issue, there is a persistent need for more teachers in educational institutions across all levels. Despite the growing demand for educators, rising salaries, and private institutions offering wages up to five times higher than public institutions, many women still prefer to stay home.

This study uses a comparative approach to identify and understand the barriers that tertiary-educated women face in the formal labor market. The survey and interview structure is informed by works examining barriers to women's employment, especially in Muslim-majority contexts. Alfarran, Pyke, and Stanton highlight how Saudi Arabia's Nitaqat program interacts with cultural and regulatory barriers, shaping my focus on policy and societal norms in Uzbekistan.[5] Monfared explores the influence of traditional family roles and societal attitudes in Iran, informing my questions on family dynamics and community perceptions.[6] Sidani and Al-Ariss reveal how workplace policies and recruitment practices perpetuate labor market inequality, guiding my focus on systemic workplace barriers.[7] Together, these works provided a robust framework for a methodology used in this study's interviews and survey.

Structured surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The survey provided statistical insights, while the interviews captured rich narratives and personal experiences. These methods enabled direct comparisons between women

[4] Gender Equality in the System of the Ministry of Public Education." *Uzedu.uz*, November 29, 2019. https://www.uzedu.uz/en/lists/2/71.

[5] Abeer Alfarran, Joanne Pyke, and Pauline Stanton, "Institutional Barriers to Women's Employment in Saudi Arabia," *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 37, no. 7 (2018): 713–727.

[6] Mehrang Monfared, "Cultural and Social Barriers to Iranian Women's Employment," *GSTF Journal of Law and Social Sciences (JLSS)* 1, no. 1 (2012): 67.

[7] Akram Al Ariss and Grace Chun Guo, "Job Allocations as Cultural Sorting in a Culturally Diverse Organizational Context," *International Business Review* 25, no. 2 (2016): 579–588.

employed in the formal labor market and those not and highlighted each group's unique and shared challenges. Notably, the narratives of employed women reveal the hurdles they have overcome to secure and maintain employment. The interviews offered valuable insights into systemic issues inhibiting women's full economic participation.

3.1.1 Participants

A total of 45 **participants** were involved in this study, comprising:

- **30 survey participants**: Female graduates from key public institutions in Tashkent.
- **12 interview participants**: Female graduates with diverse employment experiences.
- **3 gender experts**: Professionals in gender and labor market dynamics were interviewed to provide additional perspectives and contextual understanding.

3.1.2 Recruitment Method

Participants for this study were recruited through online platforms, leveraging email and Telegram Messenger for outreach. Recent female graduates from Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Tashkent State Pedagogical University named after Nizami, Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, and the National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek were invited to participate. These institutions were chosen because they are key centers for pedagogy in Tashkent and predominantly enroll female students. Recruitment was facilitated through institutional networks, with the assistance of faculty and administrative staff who disseminated the survey link to alumni groups and individual contacts. Additionally, targeted

messages were posted in relevant Telegram alumni groups, inviting interested participants to respond.

For interviews, participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of employment statuses, educational backgrounds, and life circumstances. Potential interviewees were approached through personal networks, with detailed invitations outlining the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and participation process. Gender experts, recognized for their expertise in labor market dynamics and gender issues, were contacted directly via email and invited to share their perspectives. This recruitment strategy ensured a wide range of insights from both survey and interview participants. This method enriched the study's analysis of barriers to employment for tertiary-educated women in Uzbekistan.

3.2 Data Collection

For this study, I employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a structured survey and semi-structured interviews to gather comprehensive insights into the barriers faced by tertiary-educated women in Uzbekistan's labor market. The survey collected quantitative data on demographic profiles, educational backgrounds, employment statuses, career motivations, and perceived barriers, offering a broad overview of respondents' circumstances and perspectives. To complement this, semi-structured interviews provided qualitative depth, capturing the nuanced experiences of both employed and unemployed women. These interviews explored educational journeys, career aspirations, labor market experiences, societal expectations, and the impact of employment or non-employment on personal and family life. This dual approach ensured a

balanced understanding of systemic and individual challenges and enabled a robust analysis of the factors influencing women's labor market participation.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis employed statistical techniques to quantify the survey responses, identifying trends and correlations across various demographics and responses. Qualitative data from interviews has been transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to extract key themes and patterns. This dual approach enriched the understanding by correlating quantitative data with the rich, detailed context of personal narratives.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to high ethical standards to ensure respect for all participants. This included obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, maintaining confidentiality, and securing approval from Columbia University’s Institutional Review Board. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Direct quotes were used only with participants’ consent.

3.5 Limitations

Focusing on female pedagogy graduates from specific higher education institutions may not capture the full spectrum of challenges all educated women face in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, the conclusions drawn from a relatively small sample size may not be generalizable to all segments of the population.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Women's Rights During the Soviet Period and Post-Independence

It is essential to consider the historical context to fully understand the complexities of gender roles and women's rights in Uzbekistan today. Transformations during the Soviet period and subsequent shifts post-independence highlight the interplay of progress and regression in gender equality. Examining these periods offers critical insights into why women do not fully participate in the formal labor market today and how deeply rooted traditions, socio-economic challenges, and state have shaped their roles.

4.1.1 Women's Rights During the Soviet Period

The Soviet period marked a significant departure from traditional gender norms in Central Asia. The Bolsheviks viewed women as part of the proletariat and sought to integrate them into the workforce to achieve broader societal modernization.[8] Women in Uzbekistan, like their counterparts across the Soviet Union, were granted extensive political rights that placed them

[8] Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

ahead of women in many other Asian countries. The Communist Party emphasized women's dual roles as mothers and workers, supported by state initiatives such as maternity leave, healthcare, and accessible childcare facilities.[9] Moreover, Soviet influence significantly increased literacy rates and women's incorporation into the paid labor force.[10]

A concerted effort was made to transform societal norms, including gender roles, during the Soviet era. The most notable example was the contraversery "hujum" (attack), a campaign aimed at "liberating women from traditional constraints".[11] Policies were designed to diminish men's authority within the family and promote women's independence.[12] Despite those policies, the promotion of new gender norms and the reaction to them were complex. Women often had to navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist these new roles as they balanced state-imposed narratives with personal and societal expectations.[13] This reflects an interesting tradeoff between the state's feminist policies and women's varied responses across different contexts and communities.[14]

However, gender equality under the Soviet system was often superficial. Women faced structural and cultural barriers that undermined their ability to participate fully in public and economic life.

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[9] Marnia Lazreg, ed., *Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia*, vol. 411 (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2000).

[10] Zulfiya Tursunova, *Women's Lives and Livelihoods in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: Ceremonies of Empowerment and Peacebuilding* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014)

[11] Deniz Kandiyoti and Nadira Azimova, "The Communal and the Sacred: Women's Worlds of Ritual in Uzbekistan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10, no. 2 (2004): 327–349.

[12] Amy E. Randall, ed., *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Survey* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

[13] Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Direnberger, "Gender and Nation in Post-Soviet Central Asia: From National Narratives to Women's Practices," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 195–206.

[14] Friederike Welter, "Contexts and Gender–Looking Back and Thinking Forward," *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 12, no. 1 (2020): 27–38.

As Lazreg argues, Central Asian women were politically emancipated but constrained by patriarchal traditions. This paradox left many women in an ambiguous position—granted legal rights but socially expected to prioritize domestic roles such as childbearing and caregiving.[15]

The repression of Islamic intellectuals during the Soviet era further disrupted Central Asian women's agency. Progressive Muslim leaders, such as the Jadidists, who sought to adapt Islamic principles to modernization, were silenced or eradicated. As a result, Islam in the region was reduced to ritualistic and traditional forms, with little engagement in contemporary debates about gender and modernity.[16] This isolation from progressive Muslim thought left women vulnerable to patriarchal interpretations of Islam, which would later re-emerge after independence.

4.1.2 Women's Rights Post-Independence

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan, like its Central Asian neighbors, witnessed a resurgence of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. This period saw the reconsolidation of conventional gender roles as part of a broader effort to establish a distinct national identity. As Gunes-Ayata and Ergun note, this process involved a deliberate return to patriarchal norms, with traditional family structures and male dominance emphasized in public and domestic spheres.[17] The revival of Uzbek nationalism reinforced traditional gender roles,

[15] Marnia Lazreg, ed., *Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia*, vol. 411 (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2000).

[16] Marnia Lazreg, ed., *Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia*, vol. 411 (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2000).

[17] Ayşe Güneş-Ayata and Ayça Ergun, "Gender Politics in Transitional Societies: A Comparative Perspective on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan," in *Gender Politics in Post-Communist Eurasia*, ed. Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

resulting in declining girls' enrollment in secondary schools and higher education. Thus, there was a reversal of some of the gains made during the Soviet period.[18]

Comparative studies of gender relations in Central Asia highlight stark gender differentiation in Uzbekistan. In contrast to neighboring Kazakhstan, Uzbek society is characterized by rigid expectations that men should be household heads and decision-makers in both domestic and public affairs. Women, by contrast, are relegated to subordinate roles, with their labor often undervalued or confined to the private sphere.[19]

Additionally, the post-independence era saw a significant re-Islamization of public life. Local interpretations of Islamic teachings often promoted more traditional or conservative views on women's roles in society. This resurgence of Islam, coupled with economic restructuring and the challenges of transitioning to market economies, further complicated the landscape for women's rights.[20] These changes added more complexity to Soviet legacies, globalization, traditionalization, and economic transformations that variably affected women's rights and conditions across the region.[21]

The resurgence of patriarchy has had tangible effects on women's employment. Declining divorce rates, increased school dropouts for girls, and low female labor participation rates are

[18] Marianne Kamp, "The Soviet Legacy and Women's Rights in Central Asia," *Current History* 115, no. 783 (2016): 270–276.

[19] Meltem Sancak and Peter Finke, "Gender Relations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, ed. Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 160.
[20] Anuradha M. Chenoy, "Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly*(1996): 516–518.

[21] Marianne Kamp, "The Soviet Legacy and Women's Rights in Central Asia," *Current History* 115, no. 783 (2016): 270–276.

more pronounced in Uzbekistan compared to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.[22] These trends highlight the entrenchment of traditional gender roles in the labor market and education system, further limiting women's opportunities for economic independence. Moreover, authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, have also shaped gender norms. Paradoxically, these regimes may reinforce traditional gender roles to bolster their legitimacy, often fearing that expanded gender equality could lead to demands for democratization.[23]

Economic and social crises in the post-independence period have exacerbated gender inequalities. Women in Uzbekistan face a unique combination of Soviet-era consumerist attitudes toward women and a revival of patriarchal traditions. This duality often positions women as symbols of ethnic and national identity while restricting their agency. As Lazreg explains, breaking free from these constraints is fraught with challenges, as any deviation from tradition is viewed as a betrayal of cultural values and an embrace of despised Westernization or Russification.[24]

Furthermore, the influence of international norms and organizations has had a limited impact in the face of domestic cultural narratives. As Mounira Charrad argues, new state formations often profoundly affect women, with policies shaped by the intersection of political power and cultural identity.[25] In Uzbekistan, these dynamics have reinforced patriarchal structures, leaving women

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[22] Ayşe Güneş-Ayata and Ayça Ergun, "Gender Politics in Transitional Societies: A Comparative Perspective on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan," in *Gender Politics in Post-Communist Eurasia*, ed. Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

[23] Suen Wang, "Gender Equality Without Democracy? Higher Education Expansion and Authoritarian Values," *Governance*35, no. 1 (2022): 259–279.

[24] Marnia Lazreg, ed., *Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia*, vol. 411 (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2000).

[25] Mounira Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

with limited avenues for asserting their rights in the public sphere. The authoritarian nature of the regime further compounds these challenges, limiting democratic engagement and the expansion of women's rights.

4.2 Socio-cultural Barriers Impacting Employment and Education in Uzbekistan

An analysis of the socio-cultural landscape of Uzbekistan shows how cultural barriers notably impede women's access to education and employment opportunities. These barriers usually come from long-standing economic difficulties, domestic challenges, and deeply entrenched gender stereotypes that shape societal roles and expectations.

Central Asian women often face a dual burden as both primary breadwinners and primary caregivers. Despite their substantial financial contributions, these women are frequently viewed and valued primarily through the lens of their traditional roles within the family, a situation that Bhat notes exacerbates their economic and domestic challenges. Recent sociological research reinforces this point, revealing that more than 25% of all family arguments stem from women's desire to pursue a career.[26] Moreover, over 25% of domestic abuse cases involve violence against women who began employment without their husband's permission [27]. These findings highlight not only women's aspirations for formal employment but also the severity of domestic violence as a barrier.

[26] Bilal Ahmad Bhat, "Gender Earnings and Poverty Reduction: Post-Communist Uzbekistan," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 6 (2011): 629–649.

[27] "Ayollarni Himoya Qilishi Kerak Bo'lgan Qonun Ularni Jazolash Uchun Ham Xizmat Qilmoqda." *Gazeta.uz*, May 7, 2024. https://www.gazeta.uz/oz/2024/05/07/violence/.

Gender stereotypes remain a pervasive influence in Uzbek society, limiting women's opportunities. A study by Memesheva illuminates these biases, with significant portions of women subscribing to traditional views. For example, 42% of women agree and 34% strongly agree that their primary responsibilities should be domestic. Additionally, 74% of female respondents view men as the heads of families and primary decision-makers.[28] These stereotypes are reinforced within families, as Tokhtakhodzhaeva highlights, with men commonly seen as the main breadwinners and women's salaries sometimes allocated directly to their mothers-in-law.[29] These traditional expectations not only shape societal attitudes but also limit women's autonomy and opportunities for professional growth.

Memesheva further emphasizes that gender biases significantly influence career paths and employment opportunities, with 70% of female respondents believing men should focus on careers and financial provisioning. Women are often pigeonholed into roles associated with caregiving and domestic responsibilities, with 85% of female respondents believed to be primarily suited for parental leave, and 62% discouraged from pursuing full-time work.[30] This dynamic is compounded by household responsibilities, which Tokhtakhodzhaeva notes are overwhelmingly placed on women. The same study highlights the lack of autonomy women face in choosing their career paths, with many of these women unable to make independent decisions about their professions.[31]

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[28] Лилия Александровна Мемешева, "Гендерное равенство как один из факторов социально-экономического развития Узбекистана," *Бюллетень науки и практики* 6, no. 7 (2020): 257–261.

[29] Marfua Tokhtakhodzhaeva, *The Re-Islamization of Society and the Position of Women in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

[30] Лилия Александровна Мемешева, "Гендерное равенство как один из факторов социально-экономического развития Узбекистана," *Бюллетень науки и практики* 6, no. 7 (2020): 257–261.

[31] Marfua Tokhtakhodzhaeva, *The Re-Islamization of Society and the Position of Women in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

The socio-cultural challenges extend into family dynamics, where women's employment often sparks conflict. According to Gazetauz, nearly 70% of respondents in a sociological study did not consider forbidding women to work or study as a form of violence.[32] This normalization of restrictive gender roles reflects broader societal perceptions that prioritize women's domestic responsibilities over their personal aspirations. Additionally, women are often treated as extensions of their fathers, husbands, or brothers, rather than as individuals, with institutions such as the judicial system and community-based structures like the *mahalla* reinforcing this perception. The *mahalla*, a traditional neighborhood governance institution, frequently mediates domestic disputes, prioritizing family unity over individual rights and often discouraging women from reporting abuse to formal authorities. This approach is further entrenched by patriarchal norms within the judicial system, which treats women primarily as wives, emphasizing reconciliation with abusive spouses under the guise of preserving family stability, rather than addressing their individual rights and needs.[33]

Despite these constraints, some sectors show a notable acceptance of women in leadership roles, particularly in politics and education, where 75% of female respondents agree that women can participate effectively. However, acceptance does not extend as readily to business, where 37% of employers still perceive men as more suitable. Even in the education sector, where women make up about 70% of the workforce, they rarely hold leadership positions. In 2017, men held 65% of the director positions in general secondary schools, illustrating the vertical gender segregation that confines women to lower-paying roles despite their significant presence in the

[32] "28,7% женщин, подвергшихся насилию, решили развестись – исследование." *Gazeta.uz*, December 20, 2022. https://www.gazeta.uz/oz/2022/12/20/researches/.

[33] Niginakhon Saida, "A Cycle of Perpetual Violence for the Women of Uzbekistan," *The Diplomat*, June 22, 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/a-cycle-of-perpetual-violence-for-the-women-of-uzbekistan/.

workforce.[34] This sector, like many others dominated by women, is also among the lowest paid, reflecting the broader undervaluation of women's labor.

The intersection of economic and cultural pressures further complicates the landscape for women. While poor economic conditions often push women into the workforce, the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities creates significant challenges. As Tokhtakhodzhaeva observes, women's domestic chores extend beyond their own nuclear households to include care for in-laws, as well as their own children, and husbands, leaving little room for professional growth.[35] These conditions restrict their ability to engage meaningfully in education or formal employment, perpetuating cycles of inequality.

Addressing these entrenched issues involves legislative reforms to adequately criminalize domestic violence, engage civil society in policy improvement, and enhance gender-sensitive infrastructure and support for female entrepreneurs.[36] While recent studies underscore the urgent need for these reforms, they also highlight the socio-cultural resistance to change. The historical undervaluation of women's labor, combined with persistent gender stereotypes and the normalization of restrictive practices, continues to hinder progress.

The socio-cultural barriers in Uzbekistan are deeply rooted and multifaceted, impacting women's access to education and employment significantly. While there have been some improvements in women's participation in certain areas, traditional gender roles continue to dictate the opportunities available to women across different sectors. Recent research underscores how these

[34] Лилия Александровна Мемешева, "Гендерное равенство как один из факторов социально-экономического развития Узбекистана," *Бюллетень науки и практики* 6, no. 7 (2020): 257–261.

[35] Marfua Tokhtakhodzhaeva, *The Re-Islamization of Society and the Position of Women in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

[36] *Ibid*

roles are reinforced through family dynamics, legislative shortcomings, and economic pressures, creating a complex web of challenges. Addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society, including significant policy reforms, to ensure that women can fully participate in and contribute to Uzbekistan's socio-economic development.

4.3 Tertiary Education and Employment: Global Trends and Uzbek Realities

Globally, higher education is often linked to better employment opportunities and empowerment for women. Many studies suggest that tertiary education significantly reduces unemployment and lessens the impact of traditional social norms.[37] However, the situation in Uzbekistan presents a stark contrast. Here a significant proportion of highly educated women remain outside the formal labor market. In this section, I review the relevant literature and compare it with the Uzbek context.

Globally, many studies have consistently shown that higher education often acts as a protective factor against unemployment for women and mitigates the influence of restrictive social norms on their career choices. For instance, some studies suggest that educated women are generally less likely to encounter barriers such as early marriage or limited career options. This can enable women's entry into or progression within the labor market.[38]

[37] Marius-Cristian Pană and Mina Fanea-Ivanovici, "Institutional Arrangements and Overeducation: Challenges for Sustainable Growth. Evidence from the Romanian Labour Market," *Sustainability* 11, no. 22 (2019): 6459.

[38] Bontha V. Babu and Shantanu K. Kar, "Domestic Violence Against Women in Eastern India: A Population-Based Study on Prevalence and Related Issues," *BMC Public Health* 9 (2009): 1–15.

Conversely, in Uzbekistan, despite relatively high levels of education among women, their participation in the formal labor market remains unusually low. This discrepancy suggests that unique cultural, societal, or economic factors potentially prevent educated women from utilizing their skills in formal employment.

In contrast, Evans suggest that reducing the gender gap in education does not consistently translate into reduced gender disparities in labor force participation.[39] This finding might be particularly relevant for Uzbekistan. This discrepancy points to the need for targeted policies that not only promote female education but also address cultural norms and institutional practices that limit women's employment opportunities.

Similarly, Portnoy et al., concluded in their study that although there is a pattern of decreased unemployment among tertiary-educated women in many countries, the actual outcomes would also depend on a country's context. They found that cultural norms and policies, for instance, can show a reversed trend in some contexts.[40]

Moreover, other studies also suggested that societal norms and expectations[41] alongside household responsibilities and lack of access to quality jobs[42] can limit the successful translation of educational gains into improved labor force participation for women.

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[39] Mary Evans, *Gender and Social Theory* (Maidenhead, UK: McGraw-Hill Education, 2003).

[40] A. Portnoy, S. Clark, S. Ozawa, and M. Jit, "The Impact of Vaccination on Gender Equity: Conceptual Framework and Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Vaccine Case Study," *International Journal for Equity in Health* 19, no. 1 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-019-1090-3.

[41] Kristin Mammen and Christina Paxson, "Women's Work and Economic Development," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*14, no. 4 (2000): 141–64.

[42] J. Mosomi and M. Wittenberg, "The Labor Market in South Africa, 2000–2017," *IZA World of Labor* (2020). https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.475.

One of the most significant cultural factors that might be relevant and could explain the intentions behind tertiary education is the prevalent practice of assortative mating. Sometimes it is suggested that these societal expectations and traditional norms may influence educational pursuits and marital choices. Studies indicate a global trend where marriages often involve better education. This is a pattern that might also potentially explain Uzbek women's educational aspirations.[43]

In Uzbekistan, there is a significant societal pressure to marry well and possibly early. This emphasis on marriage can shift focus away from women's career aspirations and sometimes even limit their educational pursuits, with some women leaving university upon getting married. This societal expectation is compounded by the practice of *so'vchi* (matchmakers) constantly visiting universities to find potential brides. These practices are mostly common in Tashkent city, the focus of this study. Interestingly, university officials usually facilitate this activity. However, such practices, first of all, objectify and commodify educated women. Moreover, these traditional practices can also reinforce the perception that the primary role of women's education is to improve marital prospects rather than career opportunities.

In conclusion, education is a crucial element for empowering women and enhancing their economic opportunities. However, the unique cultural and societal context of countries such as Uzbekistan requires a multifaceted approach and perspective to ensure that these educational gains can translate into actual employment outcomes without any societal barriers.

4.4 Legal, Policy, and Institutional Barriers Affecting Women's Employment in Uzbekistan

[43] Munavara Abdullaeva, *Women, Health and Transition in Uzbekistan* (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2004).

Although most of the studies on women's education and employment in Central Asia and Uzbekistan focus solely on gender norms and other social aspects that shape gender dynamics in the region, we recognize that legal, policy, and institutional issues must also be taken into consideration. The landscape of women's employment in Uzbekistan is significantly shaped by various legal, policy, and institutional barriers. All Central Asian countries, in one way or another, have adopted specific laws guaranteeing equal rights for men and women. However, practical implementation remains challenging, and gender disparities persist.

All Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, have adopted constitutions that uphold male-female equality. However, the reality reflects persistent vertical and horizontal gender segregation in the labor market. Memesheva suggests this segregation indicates a significant gap between policies, laws, and implementation.[44]

Most studies have shown that gender equity is closely linked to higher female employment rates. However, deflationary macroeconomic policies in countries like Uzbekistan have disproportionately affected women's opportunities in the formal employment sector.[45] These economic policies have limited job creation in the market. Most importantly, the jobs that are created often need to align with the needs, skills, and availability of female labor.

Another significant barrier for women, mainly single parents, is the lack of reliable, affordable and quality childcare.[46] Although some support mechanisms have allowed single mothers to shift

[44] Лилия Александровна Мемешева, "Гендерное равенство как один из факторов социально-экономического развития Узбекистана," *Бюллетень науки и практики* 6, no. 7 (2020): 257–261.

[45] Shahra Razavi, "The Gendered Impacts of Liberalization: Towards 'Embedded Liberalism'?" in *The Gendered Impacts of Liberalization*, ed. Shahra Razavi (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–34.

[46] Philly Pek-Greer and Michelle Wallace, "A Study of Childcare Teacher Retention in the Childcare Service Industry," *Global Business Review* 18, no. 1 (2017): 71–86.

to jobs with more regular hours without losing earnings, these supports are not widespread or consistent.[47]

Moreover, incidents like discrimination in the workplace, especially against women with disabilities and those needing maternity leave, continue to be a formidable barrier in most countries. Legal obstacles, such as the requirement for job applicants to disclose criminal records, potentially exacerbate the difficulties faced by formerly incarcerated women.[48] Additionally, despite existing legal protections, pregnancy discrimination remains prevalent and significantly impacts women's employment.[49]

The legal framework in Uzbekistan reflects deep-seated gender stereotypes, with insufficient provisions for addressing gender-based violence beyond sexual abuse and rape. Labor codes are moving towards gender neutrality. Nevertheless, the actual job market practices continue to discriminate against women. This tends to reinforce traditional gender roles and limit women's career advancement.[50]

Abdullaeva highlights that besides socio-cultural determinants of women's wellbeing and participation in public life, employment conditions also significantly impact women's decision to work. Most employers lack policies against harassment at the workplace, for instance. These

[47] Susan M. Long, Madeline Clark, Clark D. Ausloos, Rachel Jacoby, and Carla McGhee, "The Wellness and Self-Care Experiences of Single Mothers in Poverty: Strategies for Mental Health Counselors," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 41, no. 4 (2019): 343–358.

[48] Dallas Augustine, "Working Around the Law: Navigating Legal Barriers to Employment During Reentry," *Law & Social Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2019): 726–751.

[49] Elizabeth Palley, "Social Work and Pregnancy Discrimination," *Social Work* 61, no. 2 (2016): 179–181.

[50] Лилия Александровна Мемешева, "Гендерное равенство как один из факторов социально-экономического развития Узбекистана," *Бюллетень науки и практики* 6, no. 7 (2020): 257–261.

limitations can significantly determine women's/ their families' decision to stay at home due to lack of protection.[51]

Unfavorable work conditions, such as inflexible working hours, lack of access to childcare facilities, inadequate maternity leave policies, and the absence of protections against workplace harassment, are also a common reason for unemployment among married women in countries like Uzbekistan. Gender norms further prevent women from engaging in formal work, where they are often relegated to lower positions and receive less pay than men for comparable work.[52]

There is an urgent need for legislative improvements that ensure equal opportunities and treatment for women, including the elimination of violence and harassment in the workplace. The current legislation needs refinement to address these issues adequately. Moreover, the existing maternity protection system hinders the employment of women of reproductive age by offering insufficient paid maternity leave and creating a lack of job security for women who take leave. In many sectors, women are discouraged from taking maternity leave due to fears of job loss or professional setbacks, such as reduced career progression or exclusion from key projects. Additionally, some workplaces fail to provide adequate accommodations for returning mothers, such as flexible hours or childcare support, making it difficult for women to balance work and family responsibilities effectively. It reflects a broader issue of inadequate social protection for working women.[53]

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[51] Munavara Abdullaeva, *Women, Health and Transition in Uzbekistan* (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2004).

[52] Goli M. Rezai-Rashti and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Women and Higher Education in Iran: What Are the Implications for Employment and the 'Marriage Market'?" *International Review of Education* 57 (2011): 419–441.
[53] International Labour Organization (ILO), *Advancing Gender Equality and Decent Work in Uzbekistan: A Compendium of the Conference: Pathways to Gender Equality and Decent Work in Uzbekistan with Country Cases and Policy Recommendations* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2023).

It is crucial to mainstream gender perspectives in all poverty reduction strategies and national development plans to address these complex challenges. Policies should be designed to be gender-responsive to ensure equality as well as the effective participation of women in all development structures and processes.[54] Moreover, efforts should focus on improving infrastructure to support female entrepreneurs and providing targeted education to help women overcome institutional and societal barriers.

In summary, despite some noticeable progress marked in gender policies in the last few years, certain legal, policy, and institutional barriers and limitations remain. These limitations can potentially hinder women's effective participation in the formal labor market. To address these issues, significant efforts are essential.

4.5 Gaps Identified in Literature Review

The existing literature reviewed for this study extensively focuses on issues like gender norms, roles, and the impact of the Soviet Union, along with an overview of women's education and employment in Uzbekistan. These studies provide a solid ground for further research on gender issues in Uzbekistan. However, significant gaps remain. Particularly, there is a need to understand the specific relationship between the tertiary education of women and their participation in the formal labor market.

Numerous studies and claims by activists and policymakers highlight that education is the key to women’s empowerment, economic independence, and a way to achieve gender equality.

[54] B. A. Bhat, "Gender Earnings and Poverty Reduction: Post-Communist Uzbekistan," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 6 (2011): 629–649. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909611407584.

However, the disproportionately low rate of formally employed women with tertiary education in Uzbekistan suggests that there are underlying issues within the societal, economic, and policy frameworks that continue to discriminate against women, even if they are highly educated.

Identifying these barriers is the first step to address them. Most studies have not directly addressed why women with higher education levels are not transitioning into or sustaining employment in the formal sector. This study will contribute to the existing body of literature on Uzbekistan, as well as will potentially provide a new framework for researching other similar contexts.

Through this study, I aim to fill this gap by identifying common underlying reasons why tertiary-educated women in Uzbekistan are not participating in the formal labor market at expected rates. This investigation supplements the existing body of research. It also provides actionable insights that can be used to design more effective policies and initiatives to support the employment of educated women in Uzbekistan. Through this analysis, I attempt to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender discrimination in the labor market and enhance the discourse on gender equality and economic participation in the region.

5. Results

5.1 Demographic Data

The study engaged a diverse group of women aged between 25 and 34, representing both survey respondents and interviewees. These women varied in employment statuses, marital situations, household structures, and educational backgrounds. This diversity provided valuable insights

into women's multifaceted challenges in balancing professional aspirations and domestic responsibilities.

Regarding employment, 26.19% of the surveyed and interviewed participants worked full-time, 21.43% part-time, and 40.48% identified as homemakers. Additionally, 12% were students, 7.14% were unpaid researchers, 12% provided unpaid help in family businesses, and 9.52% were self-employed, as illustrated in **Figure 2**. These figures reflect many women's challenges in accessing formal employment opportunities, despite their varying aspirations and roles.

Educational attainment among survey and interview participants was diverse, with 69% holding a bachelor's degree, 26.19% a master's degree, and 2.38% a PhD. This distribution, shown in **Figure 3**, highlights the emphasis on higher education among the group, though opportunities for advanced academic and professional pursuits remain limited for many.

Regarding marital status, 45.2% of the participants from both groups were married, 26.19% single, and 4.8% divorced. Household structures also varied: 38% of survey and interview participants lived with in-laws, 7% with their husbands, 10% alone, and 21.43% with their parents, as depicted in **Figure 1**. These arrangements often shape women's domestic responsibilities, particularly in multi-generational households with high caregiving expectations.

Among those surveyed and interviewed, almost 55% reported no children, 36% had one or two children, and 9.5% had three or four.

The following visual representations illustrate the distribution of survey and interview participants across these categories and provide a clearer understanding of their composition.

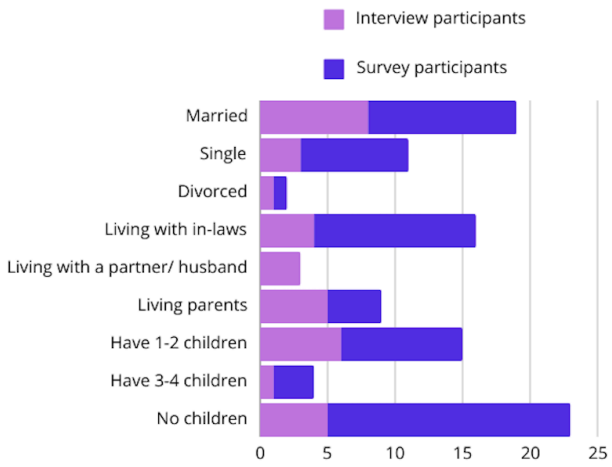

Figure 1. Marital status and household composition of the interview and survey participants shown as absolute counts

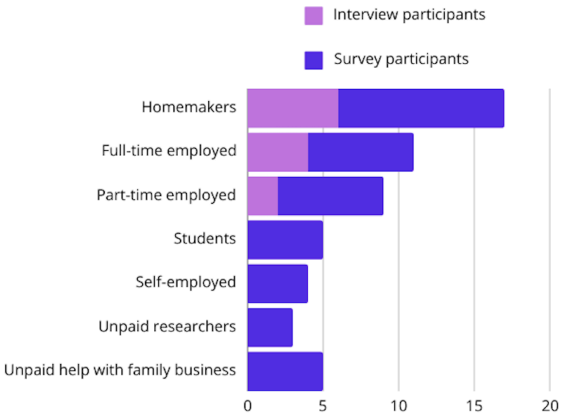

Figure 2. Employment status of the interview and survey participants shown as absolute counts

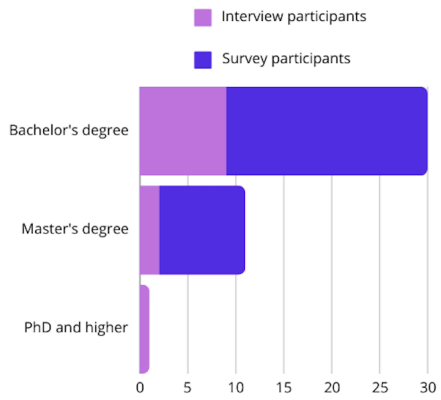

Figure 3. Highest level of education of the interview and survey participants shown as absolute counts

5.2 Diverging Paths: Education and Career experiences

Education is often viewed as a pathway to career opportunities and social mobility. Yet, many women in Uzbekistan face systemic barriers that hinder aligning their academic pursuits with their professional aspirations. This study highlights how societal pressures, institutional rigidity, and labor market realities combine to create a challenging landscape for women, particularly those in fields like pedagogy. Despite entering university with optimism, many women find themselves disillusioned with the outcomes of their educational journeys.

For many participants, the decision to pursue higher education was shaped more by external influences than personal aspirations. Survey data revealed that 33% of respondents viewed university as a way to enhance career opportunities, 30% chose their field due to familial expectations, and 50% were motivated by societal status. Pedagogy emerged as a common

choice, often perceived as a “safe” and “appropriate” profession for women. However, these initial motivations frequently changed during their studies as women began to recognize the limitations of their chosen paths. Half of the survey participants reported that their career aspirations shifted after enrolling, driven by a growing awareness of the restricted job opportunities and low wages in their fields.

The rigid structure of the Uzbek educational system compounds these challenges. Changing majors is nearly impossible, leaving students with few options to adapt their academic paths to evolving interests or market demands. Participants described the process as prohibitively expensive or logistically unfeasible. One woman interviewed explained, “We aren’t allowed to change our majors after admission. It’s either impossible or costly. I became interested in marketing, but to work in that field, I’d have to go to an educational center or start over at another university.” This inflexibility often traps students in programs that do not align with their career goals, contributing to a widespread disconnect between education and employment.

Institutional policies restrict opportunities by allowing students to apply to a limited number of universities at a time, limiting their choices from the outset. This lack of flexibility disproportionately affects women, who often face societal and familial pressures to choose specific fields. Many participants felt unprepared for the labor market due to the theoretical focus of their education and the absence of practical training. A gender expert noted, *“There’s too much theory and insufficient practical skills. Employers want experience, but it’s tough for fresh graduates to find a good job without it.”*[55] This gap is exacerbated by societal expectations that see women marrying and starting families immediately after graduation, resulting in years of lost work experience and diminished employability.

[55] Expert Interview[10.20.2024]

Job market realities add another layer of complexity. Survey data showed that 26.67% of respondents found securing a job in their field difficult, while 46.67% described the process as challenging. Only 10% felt there were ample opportunities. Many participants expressed frustration at the lack of alignment between their education and the labor market. One woman interviewed shared, *"My job has nothing to do with my education. My degree is called 'Teaching Turkish,' but now I'm doing analytics because there are no interesting vacancies in my field."*[56] Others were discouraged by the low wages in professions like teaching, which made it difficult to justify staying in their fields despite years of training.

Family dynamics also played a significant role in shaping women's educational and career choices. Some participants described how their families influenced their decisions to pursue certain professions, often prioritizing societal norms over individual aspirations. One interviewed woman said, *"My father always wanted me to become a teacher, but our desires radically differ. My mother, however, has always supported me."*[57] Another explained, *"My family usually discourages me from pursuing my career, but I prioritize my own values. My family wants me to teach—they always have—but I don't like it."*[58] These conflicting pressures often left women navigating complex dynamics between personal goals and familial expectations.

The lack of exposure to diverse career options further compounded these challenges. Three-quarters of interview participants said their parents never discussed professions like aviation, IT, or finance when they were growing up. Many believed their lives would have taken

[56] Participant Interview [11.06.2024]

[57] Participant Interview [25.10.2024]

[58] Participant Interview [11.20.2024]

different paths if they had been introduced to these fields earlier. One interviewee reflected, *"If we had been introduced to these fields earlier, I wouldn't be in the same place today."*[59]

Marriage and caregiving responsibilities often disrupted women's educational experiences, further limiting their career prospects. One interviewee shared, *"I got married at the end of my third year at university. That's when my classmates were going to fairs, volunteering, and interning. I couldn't participate because I barely had permission to attend my classes."*[60] These missed opportunities for practical training left many women ill-equipped for the demands of the job market.

The cumulative effect of these barriers paints a sobering picture. While many women enter university with aspirations of financial independence and meaningful careers, they face systemic obstacles that prevent them from achieving their goals. Addressing these issues requires a reimagining of educational policies to provide greater flexibility, practical training, and alignment with labor market demands. By addressing these gaps, Uzbekistan can empower women to pursue diverse and fulfilling careers, breaking free from traditional constraints.

5.3 Family Dynamics and Domestic Responsibilities

Family dynamics and societal expectations are pivotal in shaping women's educational and professional trajectories in Uzbekistan. Living arrangements, marital status, and cultural norms dictate the extent of women's domestic responsibilities and significantly impact their ability to

[59] Participant Interview [10.06.2024]

[60] Participant Interview [11.05.2024]

participate in the workforce. According to the survey, 68.4% of women see domestic chores as the main obstacle to pursuing their careers.

Women living with their in-laws face weighty burdens. These interview participants reported spending an average of three hours more per day on household chores compared to those living only with their husbands and children. Most of interview participants residing with in-laws reported difficulty balancing work and domestic responsibilities. It shows how traditional family structures reinforce women's domestic roles. Several interview participants noted that their ability to work depended entirely on their capacity to manage household chores, illustrating how familial control often limits professional aspirations. By contrast, women living independently with their husbands and children reported a greater ability to balance work and family life, though this balance often relied on spousal support.

Early marriages further amplify these challenges, with the average age of marriage among interviewed participants being 21 years old—typically while they were still enrolled in university. Marriage often introduced new household roles and responsibilities, significantly disrupting women's academic performance and career development. These early transitions into family life frequently sidelined professional goals, leaving many women with limited qualifications or gaps in their work experience. A gender expert observed that early marriages not only disrupt education but also push women into years of unpaid caregiving, creating barriers to re-entering the workforce.

Unmarried participants also faced substantial pressures, as they were often expected to prepare for life as a *kelin* (daughter-in-law). This role is culturally defined as one of subservience, with duties beginning early in the morning and continuing late into the night. Gender experts

highlighted that these expectations are instilled in girls from a young age, perpetuating a belief that their primary purpose in life is to serve as a wife and mother. Even childhood games among girls often replicate these societal roles, normalizing the hierarchical family dynamics that they will face later in life.

The impact of unpaid domestic work on women's careers is profound. Survey data showed that 76.67% of respondents believed unpaid domestic work and childcare significantly hindered women's professional opportunities. Women who spent over 30 hours per week on household responsibilities—approximately 33% of interview participants—struggled to find time or energy to explore career opportunities. These challenges are compounded by cultural expectations that impose a multitude of roles on women, including caregiver, housekeeper, and community organizer. Many participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by these demands, which discourage them from seeking formal employment.

Community influences, particularly through the *mahalla* (neighborhood), further restrict women's autonomy. While the *mahalla* fosters a sense of community, it also enforces traditional norms that dictate women's behavior and career choices. Community leaders and neighbors often pressure women to conform to prescribed roles, limiting their professional opportunities. One interview participant remarked that the *mahalla* determined nearly every aspect of her life, from her attire to whether she could work, illustrating the pervasive nature of these communal controls.[61]

Ultimately, family dynamics and societal expectations form a web of barriers that many women struggle to navigate. Whether through early marriages, rigid domestic roles, or

[61] Participant Interview [11.05.2024]

community-imposed norms, these pressures leave little room for women to pursue education or careers that align with their aspirations. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift in cultural attitudes, as well as policies that support women in balancing professional and family responsibilities. Empowering women to redefine their roles within families and communities is essential for fostering greater participation in the workforce and achieving gender equality.

5.4 The Role of Religion in Shaping Women's Choices

In Uzbekistan, religion is pivotal in shaping societal norms and individual decision-making, particularly for women. The intersections of faith, cultural traditions, and contemporary challenges have led to diverse interpretations of women's societal roles. These interpretations significantly influence women's education, employment, and family choices. Exploring how women perceive their roles within Islam and how these perceptions interact with local religious narratives offers valuable insights into the complexities of gender dynamics in Uzbekistan.

Survey findings illustrate a diversity of perspectives among women. Of the 30 respondents, 15 believed that local interpretations of Islam reinforce traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's domestic responsibilities and discouraging their professional aspirations. On the other hand, 11 respondents felt that Islamic gender roles inherently contrast with traditional expectations, suggesting that misinterpretations of religious texts have shaped restrictive norms. These differing perspectives highlight that the issue is not Islam itself but rather the way it is interpreted and practiced in specific socio-cultural contexts. An interview participant explained, *“Families have conservative and radical opinions about women’s roles. Religious*

misinterpretations shape these views. I do not think that even 40% of women get support from their families regarding their career choices because of these misinterpretations." [62]

The resurgence of Islam in Uzbekistan after independence has brought religious narratives back into public discourse. This revival has had both empowering and constraining effects on women's roles. One gender expert emphasized the need to challenge selective interpretations of religious teachings, stating, *"Why don't we talk about how we are equal before God or how it is an obligation for both men and women to get educated? Instead, the focus is often placed on women's household duties."*[63] This sentiment underscores the importance of addressing biases in local religious narratives to create a more holistic understanding of gender equality within Islam.

Some women emphasized the distinction between education and employment in Islamic teachings. One interview participant noted, *"Being educated is most important for women in Islam. Working is not necessary."*[64] This perspective reveals a recurring theme where religious values prioritize knowledge but not necessarily economic participation, creating tension for women balancing personal aspirations with societal expectations.

Moreover, some workplace restrictions, such as limitations on wearing the hijab or performing daily prayers, also create additional barriers. One interview participant shared, *"A religious woman should work, but only if it doesn't contradict her faith. This is the problem—there is no freedom of religion in many places. Employers often don't permit hijab or allow time for prayers."*[65] Such constraints discourage women from entering the workforce and limit their

[62] Participant Interview [10.01.2024]

[63] Participant Interview [11.05.2024]

[64] Participant Interview [10.29.2024]

[65] Participant Interview [10.27.2024]

choices. For many, wearing a hijab is a deeply personal expression of their faith. Another interview participant explained, *"Hijab is my dignity, and I will never sacrifice it for a job."*[66]

Religious values are also critical when choosing a field of work. *"Some professions are more preferred in Islam, such as teachers and doctors,"*[67] an interview participant explained. Another interview participant added, *"When considering job offers, I prioritize religion. For example, banking and credit are seen as haram (forbidden). Most of the offers I got were from the fields I was unsure about, such as bookmaking or banking. I rejected those offers because I did not want to take risks. This added an additional challenge when finding a job."* [68]

Concerns about workplace environments further influence women's employment decisions. Modesty and dignity, deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, remain central to many participants' considerations. One interviewed woman explained, *"It's not appropriate for a Muslim woman to work in places where there are a lot of men, as they may disrespect her."*[69] Such views shape whether women work and the types of workplaces they consider acceptable.

The diversity of women's experiences and interpretations of Islam underscores the nuanced relationship between faith and societal expectations. While some religious narratives reinforce traditional gender roles, others highlight the empowering aspects of Islam that advocate for education, equality, and active participation in society. A gender expert stressed the importance of reframing these narratives: "*Religious leaders have shaped both men's views and women's. We*

[66] Participant Interview [10.23.2024]

[67] Participant Interview [10.25.2024]

[68] Participant Interview [10.23.2024]

[69] Participant Interview [10.01.2024]

need to shift the focus toward doing good in society and ensuring everyone, regardless of gender, has the opportunity to contribute."[70]

An interplay of factors like faith, culture, and societal pressures shapes women's perceptions of their roles within Islam in Uzbekistan. Misinterpretations of religious teachings often exacerbate traditional norms, affecting women's access to employment and their choice of careers.

5.5 Institutional Barriers: Violations of Women's Rights in the Workplace

Institutional barriers in Uzbekistan's workplaces significantly limit women's ability to join and remain in the formal labor market. These challenges manifest in workplace harassment, lack of flexibility, discriminatory hiring practices, and unequal treatment, creating a hostile environment that disproportionately affects women.

5.5.1 Discriminatory Practices

According to the survey results, 60% of the respondents faced discriminatory hiring practices. Additionally, all interview participants who had applied for jobs reported being asked inappropriate and invasive questions about their marital and family plans. Common questions included, "When do you plan to get married?" and "If I hire you and you get married, what will I do? I'll have to hire someone else." These questions reflect a bias that views women as temporary or unreliable employees due to their perceived prioritization of family over work. One

[70] Participant Interview [11.05.2024]

interview participant expressed frustration, stating, *"The most asked question is, will I get married? This question makes me angry. Many lie about it just to get accepted to a position."*[71]

Another interview participant, who had worked in five different places, shared, *"In every interview, I was asked if I am planning to get married. When they discovered I was married, they did not initially trust me and didn't believe I could manage work and family."*[72] These accounts highlight how marital status is used to assess women's perceived reliability and productivity.

The systemic nature of these practices was echoed by an interviewed woman who worked as a hiring manager, who admitted, *"I also have to ask when candidates are planning to get married because as a rule, they leave their work after getting married. These policies are dictated by our society, which encourages women to stay at home after getting married. The exceptions are single mothers, widows, or divorced women—they will always work because they have to."*[73] This candid admission underscores how societal norms influence hiring policies, perpetuating discriminatory practices against women based on assumptions about their family roles.

A gender expert noted, *"Most people still think that women are less productive than men,"*[74] perpetuating stereotypes that discourage employers from investing in female employees. These discriminatory practices are not limited to one sector but are widespread across public and private organizations. Women's employment is often seen as conditional and temporary, especially if they are perceived as being at an age when they are likely to marry or start a family.

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[71] Participant Interview [11.05.2024]

[72] Participant Interview [10.23.2024]

[73] Participant interview [09.29.2024]

[74] Expert Interview [10.20.2024]

The demands placed on women to prioritize family over work extend beyond hiring practices and into their daily experiences in the workplace. One interview participant was reprimanded by her supervisor for taking a day off to care for her sick child. She was told to "choose between family and work," reflecting a lack of understanding and support for working mothers. Another participant shared, *"We must work overtime without pay like everyone else. But if I need to work fewer hours to cook dinner, my department head yells at me. If I delay dinner, my family yells at me. It's impossible to satisfy both."*[75]

While these barriers disproportionately impact women, men rarely face similar challenges. As a gender expert explained, *"Men do not face any type of discrimination. No one asks them if they are married or plan to get married during recruitment. No one tells them to choose between family and career. This is because deeply entrenched gender roles assign men the sole responsibility of financially supporting their families, while household chores and childcare are considered women's duties."*[76] This double standard perpetuates inequality, granting men the freedom to focus on their careers without facing the same obstacles women encounter.

These narratives reveal the untenable double burden many women face, who are expected to excel professionally while managing extensive domestic responsibilities. The lack of institutional policies to support work-life balance and societal expectations creates a hostile environment for working women. Employers' assumptions that women will eventually leave their jobs due to family obligations further discourage them from offering women equal opportunities or promotions.

[75] Participant Interview [10.25.2024]

[76] Participant Interview [10.23.2024]

5.5.2 Workplace Harassment

Workplace harassment is a pervasive issue that forces many women to leave their jobs rather than endure inappropriate behavior. Several interview participants recounted personal experiences highlighting the lack of protection against harassment. One participant shared that she had to quit her teaching job because older students frequently expressed romantic interest in her, and no measures were taken to address the situation. She explained, *"Nobody did anything to stop it, so I had to quit. My husband knows about it, and now he would never allow me to work with men again."*[77] Another participant described how her director sent his mother to propose marriage despite having no romantic relationship with her, forcing her to resign. Others reported enduring persistent unwanted compliments and flirtatious behavior from male colleagues, with one stating, *"I get a lot of unwanted compliments about my looks and clothes. I hate it."*[78] These incidents highlight the absence of effective harassment policies, leaving women vulnerable and unsupported in their workplaces.

As noted by one of the gender experts, *"There are no anti-harassment policies. I am always surprised to find out how HR directors are unaware of terms like harassment or even inclusivity. I have not seen in my experience any workshops or training programs about anti-discrimination as a part of onboarding".*[79]

5.5.3 Accessibility, Hybrid Options, and Flexibility of Working Hours

[77] Participant Interview [11.23.2024]

[78] Participant Interview [10.20.2024]

[79] Expert Interview [10.20.2024]

For many women, the lack of flexible working arrangements, hybrid options, and accessible workplaces poses significant challenges to balancing professional responsibilities with domestic obligations. Nearly all interviewees agreed that such arrangements would significantly ease their burden. One participant observed, *"There is no hybrid system in Uzbekistan. Most employers do not permit it, but it would significantly help women balance their work and domestic responsibilities."*[80] Survey data further underscores the demand for flexibility, with 60% of respondents rating hybrid options as "very important" when considering a job and 40% viewing them as "somewhat important." Additionally, 50% of respondents identified flexible working hours as critical in job selection, and 26.67% considered them essential.

The lack of flexible schedules and hybrid options makes it difficult for women to balance their work and domestic responsibilities. As one interviewee shared, *"There's no flexible schedule, and it just leads to burnout."*[81] This sentiment reflects a common struggle among women who are forced to sacrifice their well-being to meet the demands of both work and home.

The location of workplaces exacerbates these challenges. Commuting long distances or navigating difficult transportation routes is a significant barrier for many women, particularly those with children or caregiving responsibilities and those who live in rural areas. One interview participant described her daily struggle*: "I spend a lot of time and most of my salary getting to work. I take a taxi; I have four children, drop them off at school, and then take a taxi to work. But I have to work and survive as a single mother."*[82]

Another interview participant emphasized the difficulty of finding jobs near home: *"Location of the workplace is the most important part for me. Therefore, it was challenging to find one. I had*

[80] Participant Interview [09.29.2024]

[81] Participant Interview [10.27.2024]

[82] Participant Interview [10.23.2024]

to commute for long hours."[83] The financial and physical toll of commuting often outweighs employment benefits, mainly when salaries and transportation costs are high. One woman, who worked 15 kilometers from her home, explained, *"It's tough to commute; I have to use multiple forms of transportation."*[84]

5.5.4 Wages, Maternity, and Sick Leaves

This study revealed that inadequate salaries often discourage tertiary-educated Uzbek women from pursuing or remaining in formal employment. Survey data shows that 60% of respondents described salaries in their field as "very inadequate" and 26.67% indicated wages as "somewhat inadequate." This lack of financial compensation undermines the value of women's labor. The problem worsens with high expenses for childcare, education, and transportation.

Teachers are particularly affected by low wages. Most interview participants indicated that the inadequacy of salaries in teaching led them to pursue careers in other fields. One participant shared, *"I have a passion for teaching, but the salary is so low that I can't support my family. I had to find a job in another sector that pays better."*[85] Another remarked, *"Despite the fulfillment I get from teaching, the financial strain is too much. Unfortunately, many talented teachers leave the profession due to poor pay."*[86]

A gender expert highlighted a critical disparity in workplace practices. *"While base salaries may be equal for men and women in many sectors, allocating additional bonuses and benefits often*

[83] Participant Interview [10.20.2024]

[84] Participant Interview [10.23.2024]

[85] Participant Interview [10.27.2024]

[86] Participant Interview [11.05.2024]

lacks transparency and fairness."[87] The gender expert noted that benefits, such as performance bonuses, allowances, or other incentives, are typically controlled by directors or managers. *"These managers are predominantly male. This dynamic allows for bias to influence the distribution of benefits, and favors male employees over their female counterparts."* [88] The expert emphasized that this unequal distribution reinforces gender inequities and demotivates women.

The study also found that the issue of sick leave presents a significant challenge. Interview participants mentioned that obtaining sick approval in the private sector is even more challenging. One interview participant explained, *"It's hard to prove you are sick. I've been asked for detailed medical reports, and even then, my request was denied."* [89] Another noted, *"In private companies, sick leave is almost non-existent. You must keep working, even if you're unwell, because they see it as a sign of weakness."*[90] This lack of support undermines employees' health and well-being. The lack of support for women also perpetuates a work culture prioritizing productivity over employee welfare.

The study found that maternity leave policies are also problematic. The problem is even worse in sectors like education, where staff shortages usually exacerbate the issue. One interviewed woman who worked as a teacher shared, *"There are very few of us, so when I was pregnant, they told me I couldn't take a long leave because there was no one to cover my classes. I ended up working until the very last month."*[91] Another participant recounted, *"When I applied for maternity leave, they said I could take it but hinted it would affect my chances of promotion. It's*

[87] Expert interview [10.20.2024]

[88] Expert interview [10.28.2024]

[89] Participant Interview [10.23.2024]

[90] Participant Interview [11.05.2024]

[91] Participant Interview [10.25.2024]

like being punished for having a child."[92] These experiences reflect a systemic lack of support for working mothers.

6. Gender Policies and Media Representation: Progress, Contradictions, and Barriers

In recent years, there have been increased efforts to promote women's rights and empower them. For instance state officials, including President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his daughter have introduced laws, quotas, and public campaigns to empower women. In 2024, the Agency for Social Security was finally established. The primary focus of this agency is to promote women's equal representation in all spheres. However, despite these initiatives, their impact remains limited. A gender expert noted that while there are *"too many laws and too many campaigns, but none seem to address the deep-rooted societal norms and systemic barriers effectively. Instead of increasing enforcement mechanisms, all they do is introducing new campaigns".*[93]

6.1 Gender Policies and Contradictions

As already mentioned, Uzbekistan's recent policies frequently addressed women's rights, including the right to work. For example, the number of quotas for women has significantly increased in government agencies, ministries, and other public-sector organizations. However, gender experts noted that messaging often conflicts with traditional nation-building policies and reinforces conservative values.

[92] Participant Interview [10.20.2024]

[93] Expert Interview [10.20.2024]

For instance, female politicians frequently emphasize their roles as wives and mothers, with one gender expert observing, *"They often say, 'We are first kelins, wives, and mothers, and only then politicians.'"*[94] Such statements reflect the pervasive traditional mindset that limits the effectiveness of the policies they promote.

A gender expert also mentioned replacing the Senate's Committee for Women with a Committee for Morality and Ethics. According to her, this may indicate the government's reluctance to embrace substantive gender equality. *"In my opinion, the new Committee is likely going to promote traditional gender roles and limit women's potential. The government should instead focus on challenging these harmful social norms to achieve gender equality."*[95] According to the gender expert, this shift hints at the tension between promoting progressive ideals and preserving traditional values.

6.2 The Role of Mahalla

Mahallas play paradoxical roles in women's rights in Uzbekistan. While mahallas provide guidance on family, youth, and spiritual education, they also enforce traditional gender roles. Gender experts noted that mahallas often prioritize cultural traditions over progressive policies, encouraging women to conform to roles as kelins (daughters-in-law), wives, and mothers. On the one hand, as one of the gender experts mentioned, *"...Mahalla is responsible for promoting gender equality through fighting women's unemployment, as well as supporting women's social welfare. Mahalla is intended to be a platform for government-led awareness campaigns on*

[94] Expert interview [10.20.2024]

[95] Expert interview [10.28.2024]

women's rights, health, and education. Their activities include providing vocational training programs for women, which sounds great..." [96]

On the other hand, however *"... if you look closer at its activities, you can see the opposite of gender equality. For example, mahallas are tasked with addressing unemployment but frequently offer women traditional "feminine" jobs or classes on how to please in-laws. Even in cases of marital conflict, such as disputes over a woman's right to work, mahallas often side with traditionalist views, teaching women that their happiness is at home. If we analyze its vocational training programs for women, they often promote traditional gender roles".*[97] Unfortunately , this approach reinforces societal expectations rather than challenging them, perpetuating inequality. This paradox also hints at a broader issue of gender politics in Uzbekistan.

6.3 Women in Media

Uzbek media narratives exacerbate women's position in society. Most TV shows, for instance, promote traditional gender roles. All three interviewed gender experts agreed that Uzbek media depicts an "ideal Uzbek woman" as a housewife who is fully committed to serving her in-laws and husband and caring for her children. Although the Uzbek National plans usually mention the promotion of gender equality through media campaigns, these campaigns are typically small-scale.

As one expert noted, *"On one channel, you'll see news about gender equality, and on the rest, you will see films about the ideal housewife and daughter-in-law."* [98]

[96] Expert interview [10.20.2024]

[97] Expert interview [10.20.2024]

[98] Expert interview [10.28.2024]

These portrayals discourage women from pursuing careers, as they rarely see role models of successful professionals or leaders. Instead, these narratives promote women's roles as homemakers and caregivers. These narratives make a woman think that her in-laws are the only issue in her life. To please them, she should abstain from her career and education.

Gender experts also frequently referred to the politics of nation-building, which significantly impacted Uzbek women's lives. *"Promoting the "ideal Uzbek women's" portrayal is a significant part of the politics of nation-building. After the independence from the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan made efforts to establish a distinct national identity, differing from its Soviet past, often drawn from its pre-Soviet traditions."* [99]

Although current politics in the country favor gender equality, Uzbek women's portrayal in the media is still biased. *"Censorship and fear of backlash also hinder progress. Many media outlets avoid addressing gender equality issues openly, fearing criticism or reputational harm. While international organizations have produced content advocating women's rights, such materials are rarely disseminated widely."* [100] The absence of diverse representations limits women's aspirations. It is especially harmful to younger generations. Media targeting children frequently normalizes scenes of women in subservient roles, shaping their perceptions of gender from an early age.

6.4 The Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

Uzbek government initiatives, such as media campaigns, present a paradox. The government, on the one hand, seems to be very committed to achieving de-facto gender equality; on the other hand, these

[99] Expert interview [10.20.2024]

[100] Expert interview [10.20.2024]

campaigns ignore traditionalist practices. On the one hand, the government promotes quotas, laws, and campaigns to improve women's rights. On the other hand, institutions like the mahalla and media narratives reinforce traditional roles, effectively negating these efforts.

7. Discussion

7.1. Examining Barriers Through the Lens of International Legal Commitments

The underrepresentation of women in Uzbekistan's formal labor market presents a significant disconnect between the country's international legal obligations and the lived realities of Uzbek women. Uzbekistan has ratified key international treaties, including the CEDAW and ICESCR, which obligate the state to eliminate discrimination and ensure equal opportunities for women in education and employment. Uzbekistan has also ratified key ILO conventions, such as the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111).[101] However, systemic barriers in the form of societal norms, institutional practices, and policy gaps contravene these commitments.

7.2. Societal and Cultural Norms

Societal norms are the most significant barrier to women's employment opportunities. CEDAW Article 5(a) requires states to modify social and cultural patterns to eliminate stereotypes[102]. Survey participants and interviewees frequently referred to the societal expectation that women must prioritize family roles as

[101] *International Labour Organization (ILO). "Convention Concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value" (No. 100), adopted June 29, 1951, entered into force May 23, 1953.*

[102] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted December 18, 1979, United Nations Treaty Series 1249, no. 13 (1981).

daughters-in-law, wives, and mothers over professional aspirations. This narrative is often perpetuated by the mahalla system, which frequently promotes patriarchal norms. These norms significantly discourage women from pursuing careers despite their qualifications.

Religious narratives in the Central Asian region further complicate this dynamic. Interview participants mentioned their awareness of Islamic teachings with empowering aspects. However, specific interpretations by Uzbek religious leaders and society favor patriarchal narratives. The Uzbek government must collaborate with religious leaders in its incentives toward gender equality.

7.3. Institutional Practices: Violation of Equal Employment Rights

This study revealed the pervasiveness of discriminatory hiring practices in private and public sectors. This contradicts CEDAW Article 11(1)(b) and ILO Convention No. 111, which mention the prohibition of discrimination in hiring.[103] All of the interviewed women reported being subjected to invasive questions about their marital and family plans during interviews. This harmful practice comes from the deeply entrenched stereotypes about women's roles in society. The practice violates the principles of equal opportunity enshrined in ICESCR Article 6 and CEDAW Article 11(1)(c).[104]

Many interview and survey participants shared experiences regarding job insecurity during pregnancy and postpartum. Although legal protections exist, these insecurities indicate insufficient enforcement of existing legal frameworks, such as the Law of the Republic of

[103] International Labour Organization (ILO). "Convention Concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation" (No. 111), adopted June 25, 1958, entered into force June 15, 1960.

[104] International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, United Nations Treaty Series 993 (1976).

Uzbekistan On the protection of the reproductive health of citizens, adopted in 2019.[105] Finally, the challenges faced by working mothers are exacerbated due to the absence of workplace flexibility, hybrid options, and limited childcare facilities. This violates provisions in CEDAW Article 11(2)(c).[106] These gaps perpetuate gender inequities in the labor force and prevent women from balancing professional and domestic responsibilities.

7.4. Economic Inequalities: Gender Pay Gaps and Occupational Segregation

Due to patriarchal norms and unequal representation of women in the formal labor market, there are significant disparities between women and men in Uzbekistan. This violates CEDAW Article 11(1)(d), ICESCR Article 7(a)(i), and ILO Convention No. 100, which guarantee equal economic opportunities and pay regardless of gender. As the interview findings of this study suggest, the wages are inadequate, and the allocation of benefits and bonuses is unfair in both public and private sectors.

Occupational segregation further compounds these issues, as women are usually employed in lower-paying sectors, such as teaching. This trend perpetuates economic inequality and undermines the state's obligations under ICESCR Article 6 to provide equitable opportunities for all workers to realize their professional potential.

7.5. Disconnect Between Education and Employment

The Uzbek government has taken significant steps to support women's education and increase female enrollment rates. For example, in the last 5 years, Uzbekistan has increased the number of

[105] Republic of Uzbekistan. Law on Protection of the Reproductive Health of Citizens. Adopted February 15, 2019, and approved February 28, 2019. Accessed. https://lex.uz/docs/5149968.

[106] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted December 18, 1979, United Nations Treaty Series 1249, no. 13 (1981).

scholarships exclusively for women, introduced new quotas for women and girls, and offered fully-funded Master's programs for all women in Uzbekistan.

However, this study's findings indicate that the transition from education to formal employment remains weak. Many participants identified a lack of job placement programs and mentorship opportunities as critical barriers. These gaps contravene ICESCR Article 13(2)(b), which recognizes education as a means to enable effective participation in society, including the labor market.

Government policies have failed to address the societal and institutional barriers that prevent women from entering the labor market. The failure undermines the principles of equal access to economic and cultural rights under ICESCR Articles 3 and 6.

7.6. Insufficient Enforcement of Protections

Uzbekistan's legislative framework, including the Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence Act and amendments to the Labor Code, demonstrates a formal commitment to gender equality. However, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, as required by CEDAW Article 2(d). Participants consistently reported dissatisfaction with the lack of accountability for workplace discrimination and harassment. This reflects a gap between legislative intent and practical outcomes, underscoring the need for stronger monitoring and compliance systems.

7.7 Intersection of International Commitments and Domestic Realities

Having ratified the ILO Conventions Nos. 100 and 111, Uzbekistan must ensure equal remuneration and eliminate workplace discrimination. Nevertheless, as suggested above, the lack of systematic enforcement exacerbates economic and professional disparities for women.

Similarly, as a state party to ICESCR, Uzbekistan must realize the human right to work and favorable working conditions. However these rights remain unrealized because of the institutional and societal barriers analyzed in this study.

While the government has implemented initiatives such as vocational training programs and gender audits, these measures have not addressed the root causes of inequality. The pervasive influence of patriarchal norms, combined with inadequate legal protections and weak enforcement, undermines progress and perpetuates gender disparities in the labor market.

8. Recommendations for Aligning Domestic Practices with International Obligations

It should be noted that Uzbekistan has made significant progress toward gender equality through its legislative reforms, national strategies, and ratification of international conventions, especially in the last 5 years. Nevertheless, persistent institutional and societal barriers still hinder the full implementation of these commitments. Addressing these challenges is the obligations of Uzbekistan under the CEDAW, ICESCR, and key ILO conventions. I propose the following measures to align Uzbekistan's policies with international standards:

1. Workplace protections must address discrimination and harassment. Although the 2019 Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men and the amended Labor Code (2022) prohibit sex-based discrimination, enforcement mechanisms remain weak. This limits the practical realization of these rights. Employers must develop anti-discrimination

and harassment policies in workplaces. Independent oversight bodies should regularly audit workplace practices, while employers and human resource personnel should receive training to identify and eliminate gender bias. Building on the legal framework outlined in the Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence Act, workplace-specific anti-harassment measures must include mandatory reporting mechanisms, penalties, or behavioral correction programs.

2. Addressing the gender pay gap. As Uzbekistan has ratified the ILO Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration, it should take significant steps to follow the standards set in the Convention. Despite legislative guarantees of equal pay for equal work, disparities exist due to occupational segregation and the undervaluation of women-dominated fields. The steps can include regular audits in the public and private sectors, a gender-neutral job evaluation system, and financial incentives. These measures would align with CEDAW Article 11(1)(d) and ICESCR Article 7(a).

3. Balancing work and family responsibilities is another critical area for reform. We should note Uzbekistan's significant efforts to address this issue. For example, it has expanded early childhood education programs. This policy can help women balance their work with caring for their children. However, significant problems perpetuate inequities, including insufficient childcare facilities and limited promotion of flexible work arrangements. To align with CEDAW Article 11(2)(c) and ILO Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, the government must expand state-funded childcare services, particularly in rural areas, and incentivize employers to provide on-site childcare. Introducing and normalizing flexible work arrangements, such as remote work and job-sharing, will further support working parents. Paid paternity leave should also be institutionalized to promote shared caregiving responsibilities, reducing the stigma often faced by working mothers.

4. **Societal norms** remain a significant barrier to gender equality, as highlighted in Uzbekistan's follow-up report to the CEDAW Committee (CEDAW/C/UZB/FCO/6). Multimedia campaigns should also challenge harmful stereotypes by positively portraying women in leadership roles and emphasizing the importance of shared domestic responsibilities. Collaboration with religious and community leaders can also help to reshape cultural narratives, especially in rural areas. Uzbekistan can meet its international obligations under CEDAW Article 2 (b) and 11(3) through a strengthened legal framework. Expanding the labor code to include psychological and economic abuse as forms of harassment explicitly is critical. Additionally, labor laws must be regularly reviewed and updated to align with international best practices.

5. **Challenging established gender stereotypes.** This could be done through the promotion of programs that encourage men's active participation in caregiving and domestic responsibilities are necessary to normalize shared duties. Public campaigns showcasing men taking paternity leave or engaging in household work can help challenge gender stereotypes. Gender equality concepts must also be integrated into school curricula to challenge stereotypes from an early age. Supporting female religious scholars in interpreting reigious texts and hearing female voices can help reshape established religious narratives.

6. **Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must also be strengthened.** National action plans, such as the parliamentary oversight of 2022–2025, represent progress. However the absence of independent monitoring bodies limits accountability. Re-establishing a dedicated gender equality commission would address this gap. Regular collection of gender-disaggregated data on employment, education, and violence is also essential to inform evidence-based policymaking.

7. **Educational and training opportunities for women** should be expanded to address persistent barriers in the transition from education to employment. While Uzbekistan has

increased tertiary enrollment for women and introduced scholarships for STEM fields, high dropout rates due to early marriages and limited vocational training opportunities remain concerns. Mentoring and internship programs should be established to connect tertiary-educated women with job opportunities.

8. **The mahalla system should promote gender equality at the community level.** This can be done through conducting gender sensitivity training for mahalla leaders or establishing quotas for women's representation in decision-making. Community dialogues can challenge harmful stereotypes and promote shared caregiving responsibilities. Mahalla can collaborate with organizations like UN Women and UNDP which can offer technical support. Establishing legal accountability mechanisms will ensure mahalla decisions align with Uzbekistan's national policies and international commitments under CEDAW and ILO conventions.

9. Lastly, it is essential for Uzbekistan to continue and expand its **international collaboration**. Uzbekistan is a state party to key ILO Conventions Nos. 100, 111, and 122, which lay a strong foundation of labor rights. However, ratifying additional conventions, like the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190), would enhance workplace protections. Partnerships with UN agencies, civil society, and academic institutions should also be expanded.

Conclusion

This study is intended to contribute to the broader discourse of women's rights in Uzbekistan and, potentially, in other similar contexts, including post-Soviet states or Muslim-majority countries. In this study, I proposed a holistic approach through legal reforms, policies, societal

transformation, and institutional support that can contribute to a meaningful change in women's representation in the labor market in Uzbekistan and beyond.

Although Uzbekistan has made significant progress towards gender equality, the challenges that Uzbek women face persist daily. Norms and expectations set by the Uzbek society, together with patriarchal family structures and practices like living with in-laws, unfortunately, negatively impact women's lives. Women's situation is further complicated because of insufficient institutional policies, such as discriminatory hiring practices, inadequate maternity protections, and insufficient workplace flexibility.

Uzbekistan, having ratified key legal frameworks such as the CEDAW, ICESCR, and ILO conventions, is bound under international law to undertake measures towards gender equality, provide favorable working conditions, and satisfy the inherent human right to work regardless of gender, marital, or societal status. The lack of effective enforcement mechanisms and societal resistance to progressive policies limits the impact of Uzbekistan's commitments under international law.

This thesis recommends targeted reforms, including robust enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, expansion of flexible work arrangements, promotion of wage transparency, and provision of adequate childcare facilities. Addressing societal norms is a critical step toward gender equality. This can be done through large-scale awareness campaigns and engaging religious and community leaders to foster a cultural shift toward women's equal representation in society and the formal labor market. If these measures are implemented, Uzbekistan can better align its domestic policies with international standards and empower Uzbek women to contribute to Uzbekistan's social and economic development.

In preparing this thesis, Grammarly AI and DeepL were used to assist with grammar refinement, language clarity, and translation tasks. The author critically reviewed and edited all content to ensure accuracy and alignment with academic standards. These tools were used solely for language enhancement and did not influence the substantive content or analysis presented in this work. The confidentiality of all sensitive data and information was strictly maintained. No personal or identifying information was shared with external tools or platforms.

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Annexes

Annex A

Survey

The survey is crucial to this study as it is designed to systematically collect a broad spectrum of data. It enabled me to analyze women's current circumstances and perspectives on various factors affecting their career paths deeply. Through the structured questionnaire, I captured detailed quantitative data, providing foundational insights into the respondents' demographic profiles, educational backgrounds, employment statuses, and personal experiences.

Sections of the Survey:

1. Demographic Information

This section collects essential data such as age, marital status, number of children, and household composition. It also includes the respondents' highest level of education, fields of study, current employment status, and employment history.

2. Motivations and Expectations

This section helps to investigate the primary motivations for pursuing higher education, career aspirations at the time of university enrollment, and any shifts in career goals post-graduation.

3. Perceptions and Attitudes

This section assesses the respondents' views on their societal roles, their perceptions of the formal labor market, and personal career preferences.

4. Barriers to Employment

This section identifies specific obstacles to entering the formal labor market, such as societal norms, family obligations, economic factors, hours spent on unpaid care, household work, and perceived inadequacies in job opportunities or work conditions.

Survey questionnaire guide in English is provided below. The survey was translated and conducted in Uzbek and Russian languages for the convenience of the participants.

List of Questions used in the survey:

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. **Age:**
    - Under 25
    - 25-34
    - 35-44
    - 45 and above
    - Other (please specify)
2. **Marital Status:**
    - Single
    - Married
    - Divorced
    - Widowed
    - In a relationship
    - Other (please specify)
3. **Number of Children:**
    - None

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5 and above

4. **Household Composition (select all that apply):**
    - Living with a spouse
    - Living with children
    - Living with extended family
    - Living with in-laws
    - Living alone
    - Other (please specify)
5. **How many hours per week do you spend on unpaid care and household work?**
    - Less than 10 hours
    - 10-20 hours
    - 21-30 hours
    - More than 30 hours

Section 2: Education

6. **Highest Level of Education:**
    - Bachelor's Degree
    - Master's Degree
    - PhD or higher
7. **Field of Study:**
    - Pedagogy
    - Humanities

- Sciences
- Engineering
- Other (please specify)

8. **What motivated you to pursue higher education? (select all that apply):**
    - Personal interest
    - Career opportunities
    - Family expectations
    - Financial independence
    - Social status
    - Other (please specify)
9. **What were your career aspirations at the time of university enrollment? (select all that apply):**
    - Teaching
    - Research
    - Administration
    - Business
    - Work for the government
    - Other (please specify)
10. **Have your career goals changed since graduation? If so, how?**

- Yes (please specify how)
- No

Section 3: Job-Seeking and Employment

11. **Current Employment Status (select all that apply):**

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Homemaker
- Student
- Self-employed
- Volunteer
- Helping with family business
- Unpaid researcher
- Other (please specify)

12. **Employment History (select all that apply):**

- Never employed
- Previously employed, currently unemployed
- Currently employed

13. **In what field are you currently employed?**

    (Open-ended question)

14. **How do you view your role in your family? (select all that apply):**

- Primary caregiver
- Breadwinner
- Equal partner in household responsibilities
- Other (please specify)

15. **What are your personal career preferences? (select all that apply):**

- Full-time employment

- Part-time employment
- Self-employment
- Homemaker
- Other (please specify)

16. **What obstacles have you faced when entering the formal labor market? (select all that apply):**

- Lack of job opportunities
- Discrimination based on gender
- Family responsibilities
- Societal norms and expectations
- Lack of adequate qualifications
- Other (please specify)

17. **To what extent do societal norms and family obligations impact women's decisions regarding employment?**

- Significantly influence
- Somewhat influence
- Have a minimal influence
- Do not influence

18. **How do local religious beliefs affect women's roles in society?**

- Strongly reinforce traditional roles
- Somewhat reinforce traditional roles
- Neutral/No significant effect
- Somewhat challenge traditional roles

- Strongly challenge traditional roles

19. **Have you encountered any barriers related to hiring policies when applying for jobs?**

- Yes (please specify how)
- No

20. **How accessible are workplaces in your field?**

- Very accessible
- Somewhat accessible
- Somewhat inaccessible
- Very inaccessible

21. **How important is flexibility in working hours for you when considering a job?**

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Unimportant
- Very unimportant

22. **How important are remote or hybrid working options for you when considering a job?**

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Unimportant
- Very unimportant

23. **How do you perceive the wages in your field?**

- Very fair and adequate
- Fair and adequate
- Neutral
- Unfair and inadequate
- Very unfair and inadequate

24. **What are your professional goals for the future?**

    (Open-ended question)

25. **What policies or societal attitudes need to change to support women's participation in the labor market? (select all that apply):**

- Change in societal norms
- Enhanced legal protections
- Improved workplace policies
- Greater public awareness and support
- Other (please specify)

Annex B

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a selection of participants to gain deeper insights. These interviews included both women who are actively employed in the formal sector

and those who are not. This method facilitated a balanced view of the barriers and enablers influencing labor market participation. The interviews followed the structure below:

1. **Introduction and Background Information**

   The interview began by establishing a rapport with the participant. Initial questions focused on the participant's general background, such as current activities, family life, and recent professional experiences. This section was crucial as it contextualized the participant's responses in the subsequent sections, providing a baseline of their current life situation and easing them into more detailed discussions.

2. **Educational Journey and Career Aspirations**

   This section traced the participant's educational background and initial career aspirations. Questions explored the reasons behind choosing their field of study, their experiences during their pedagogical program, and their career expectations upon graduation. Understanding these elements has been vital for identifying where deviations from initial career goals occurred and how these changes have influenced their current employment status.

3. **Experiences in the Formal Labor Market**

   For employed participants, this section delved into their experiences within the formal labor market. It covered the job search process, their first employment experiences, and the realities of their current job roles. This exploration provided insights into the successful transitions into the labor market and the challenges faced, such as negotiating job offers, adapting to workplace cultures, or balancing professional and personal responsibilities.

4. **Barriers to Employment**

   This critical section identified obstacles preventing or discouraging participants from entering or continuing in the formal labor market. The discussion included societal expectations, family responsibilities, perceived inadequacies in job opportunities, and workplace discrimination. Understanding these barriers has been essential for pinpointing the systemic, social, and personal factors that inhibit employment and can inform targeted interventions.

5. **Societal Expectations and Personal Choices**

   This section's questions investigated how societal norms and personal choices impacted employment decisions. This involved discussions on societal roles, family and community expectations, and how these influences shaped the participants' career paths. Distinguishing between external pressures and personal preferences in career decision-making clarified the factors driving employment decisions.

6. **Impact of Non-Employment or Employment on Personal Life**

   This section examined the broader effects of employment status on personal well-being, family dynamics, and societal status. Participants were asked about the implications of their employment or lack thereof on their personal and family life, including any social stigmatization or support received. This exploration has been crucial for understanding the personal costs and benefits associated with employment or unemployment.

7. **Future Aspirations and Perceived Changes Needed**

   Towards the end of the interview, participants shared their views on their professional futures and the changes they believed were necessary to improve women's employment rates in Uzbekistan. This included discussions about future career plans, necessary

societal or policy changes, and their views on initiatives that could support women in the labor market.

Interview script for employed and unemployed women. This script was translated into Uzbek and Russian. A participant's preferred language was used during the interview.

Introduction and Background Information

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself (e.g., age, marital status)?
2. What is your current occupation or main activity?
3. Could you describe your household composition? Who do you live with?

Educational Journey and Career Aspirations

4. Why did you choose to pursue a degree in your field of study?
5. What were your career aspirations when you enrolled in university?
6. How have your expectations about your career changed since graduation, if at all?
7. Can you describe any significant experiences during your university studies that influenced your career path?

Experiences in the Formal Labor Market (Employed Participants Only)

8. How did you find your current job? Can you describe your job search process?
9. What was your first job after graduation, and how did it compare to your expectations?
10. What challenges did you face when starting your first job?
11. How do you balance your professional responsibilities with personal life?
12. Have you faced any discrimination or biases at work? How did you handle them?
13. How accessible are your workplace and its facilities (e.g., physical or logistical barriers)?

14. How flexible are your working hours? Does your employer offer options for flexibility?
15. Are remote or hybrid working options available at your job? How common are they in your organization?
16. How do you perceive wages in your field? Are they fair and adequate for the work you perform?
17. Have you encountered any issues with workplace policies, such as maternity leave or other benefits?
18. Based on your observations, what are the main institutional barriers preventing women from seeking employment in your sector?

Job-Seeking Experiences (Unemployed Participants Only)

19. Have you looked for a job after graduation? What was your experience like?
20. What are the main reasons you are not currently employed in the formal labor market?
21. Have you encountered barriers related to hiring policies when applying for jobs? If so, what were they?
22. How important is flexibility in working hours for you when considering a job? Do you think there are enough job opportunities with flexible hours?
23. How important are remote or hybrid working options for you? Are there enough job opportunities offering these options?
24. How do you perceive wages in your field? Do you think they are fair and adequate?
25. How do you feel about the availability and adequacy of maternity leave, sick leave, and other benefits in your field?
26. Based on your observations, do other women face significant institutional barriers to employment? If so, what are they?

Societal Expectations and Personal Choices

27. Have you ever received support or discouragement regarding your career choices?
28. What are the expectations from your family and community regarding your professional life?
29. How do you balance external expectations with your personal career aspirations?
30. Have you felt pressure to conform to traditional gender roles? How has this affected your decisions about work?
31. How do you perceive women's roles in society (e.g., homemaker, caregiver, breadwinner, equal partner)?
32. What kind of support or discouragement do women receive from society and their families when they decide to work?
33. Are there any religious teachings or practices shaping the role of women in your society? What are they?
34. Do religious interpretations influence family dynamics and women's responsibilities at home? If so, how?
35. How do you feel about balancing religious expectations with personal aspirations for women in your community?

Impact of Employment or Non-Employment on Personal Life

36. How does your employment status affect your personal well-being and family life?

- For employed participants: How does working impact your role within the family and community?

- For non-employed participants: How does not working impact your role within the family and community?

Future Aspirations and Changes Needed

37. What are your professional goals for the future?
38. What changes are necessary to improve employment opportunities for women in Uzbekistan?
39. How do policies or societal attitudes need to change to support women's participation in the labor market?
40. What initiatives could help more women enter and stay in the workforce?

Annex C: Interview Questions for Gender Experts

These questions have also been translated into Uzbek and Russian and an expert's preferred language was used

General Understanding of Gender Issues in Uzbekistan

1. Can you provide an overview of the current state of gender equality in Uzbekistan?
2. What are the main barriers that tertiary-educated women face in joining the formal labor market in Uzbekistan?
3. How do societal norms and cultural expectations influence women's decisions regarding employment?

Family Dynamics and Responsibilities

4. How do family obligations and responsibilities affect women's employment decisions in Uzbekistan?
5. In what ways do religious interpretations influence family dynamics and women's roles within the household?
6. How do you think Uzbek families balance religious expectations with modern societal changes?

Influence of Religion on Women's Roles

7. How do local religious interpretations shape women's roles in society in Uzbekistan?
8. Are there specific religious teachings or practices that significantly impact women's participation in the workforce?
9. How do religious leaders in Uzbekistan address issues related to women's rights and gender equality?
10. Can you provide examples of how religious beliefs have supported or hindered women's personal and professional growth?

State's Role in Shaping Women's Roles and Ideals

11. What role does the state play in shaping women's roles and ideals in Uzbekistan?
12. How do state policies and initiatives influence women's participation in the workforce and their societal roles?
13. In the context of nation-building, how has the state promoted or hindered gender equality and women's rights?
14. How do television and other media in Uzbekistan promote the concept of the ideal woman?

15. What characteristics are emphasized in these portrayals?
16. How do these media portrayals influence societal expectations of women?

Institutional Barriers

17. What are the most significant institutional barriers that women face when seeking employment in Uzbekistan?
18. How do current hiring policies impact women's ability to secure jobs in the formal sector?
19. What physical or logistical barriers do women encounter in the workplace?
20. How important is flexibility in working hours for women in Uzbekistan?
21. How common are remote or hybrid work opportunities in Uzbekistan?
22. How do you perceive the wages in fields commonly pursued by tertiary-educated women in Uzbekistan?

Policy and Societal Impact

23. What are some government initiatives aimed at improving gender equality in Uzbekistan?
24. How effective are these initiatives in addressing the barriers tertiary-educated women face in the labor market?
25. How do you perceive the future of gender equality and women's participation in the workforce in Uzbekistan?

Conclusion

26. Is there anything else you would like to share about the impact of religion or societal norms on women's roles in Uzbekistan?

27. Do you have any recommendations for policymakers or organizations working to improve gender equality in Uzbekistan?