



The impact of Traditional Gender Roles on women's opportunities in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This study explores how traditional gender roles affect women's opportunities in Uzbekistan, focusing on education, employment, and social participation. In Uzbek society, women are commonly expected to prioritize family responsibilities, while men are associated with financial provision and leadership. These expectations influence women's life choices and limit their access to higher education, participation in the labour market, and representation in leadership roles.

The analysis shows that early marriage, unpaid domestic work, and cultural norms significantly reduce women's ability to pursue academic and professional development. In addition, despite existing legal frameworks supporting gender equality, social attitudes continue to restrict women's advancement in decision-making positions.

Overall, the findings suggest that traditional gender norms remain a key factor shaping gender inequality in Uzbekistan

Key words

Women's leadership, decision-making roles, gender equality, unpaid domestic labour, cultural expectations, traditional gender roles, early marriage, gender norms, Uzbekistan, women's unemployment.

Introduction

According to the United Nations, traditional gender roles are socially constructed behavioral norms that assign specific, often rigid, responsibilities to men and women. They commonly define women as caregivers and housewives, and men as primary breadwinners and providers. This definition applies to nearly all women and men in most of the countries in the world including Uzbekistan. In Uzbekistan, women's traditional roles mainly are made up by marriage and motherhood such as sharing the house with their husbands' family members after getting married, cooking food for the family, doing the household chores, taking care of their fathers-in-laws, mothers-in-



law, alongside with bringing up the children. Meanwhile, men's responsibilities are providing the family financially, protecting them and maintaining social standing. However, while these traditional roles contribute to family structure and cultural continuity, they also create significant limitations for women's personal and professional development. In particular, such expectations often restrict women's access to higher education, reduce their participation in the workforce, and limit their opportunities for leadership and decision-making. Therefore, this paper examines how traditional gender roles in Uzbekistan affect women's opportunities in education, employment, and social advancement.

Body

One of the most notable impacts of these roles is the limitation of women's access to education. This is largely due to the social pressure placed on girls to marry at a young age, often beginning around the age of 18. As a result, many young women are unable to pursue higher education or continue their academic and professional development. In many families, particularly in rural areas, girls are raised with an emphasis on becoming good wives and managing household responsibilities, whereas boys are more likely to receive financial support for additional courses to prepare for university admission. Consequently, even when girls express a strong desire to study, they often lack the autonomy to make their own educational decisions, as these choices are typically made by parents or other family members. Recent evidence suggests that girls in Uzbekistan are significantly underrepresented in higher education, with only 37% of university students being female (UNICEF, 2021). This imbalance reflects the persistent social expectations that prioritize early marriage and domestic responsibilities over academic achievement.

Despite the persistence of traditional gender roles, legal frameworks in Uzbekistan aim to promote gender equality. For instance, Law No. ZRU-562 (2019) guarantees equal rights and opportunities for women and men in areas such as social protection, family relations, and domestic responsibilities. Specifically, the law affirms women's equal access to social benefits, recognizes their rights within family decision-making, and promotes the fair distribution of domestic work between men and women. However, despite these legal provisions, traditional cultural expectations continue to shape everyday practices, often limiting the effective implementation of such policies. There are cases in which a man marries a woman with the promise that she will be able to continue her higher education and that marriage will not interfere with her studies. However, in practice, many women face increasing domestic responsibilities imposed



by their husbands' families, particularly by parents-in-law. These expectations are often justified by social norms that consider it inappropriate for a woman to neglect household duties, even in pursuit of education. As a result, the burden of managing both academic and domestic responsibilities becomes overwhelming, limiting women's ability to fully participate in higher education. This situation reflects the influence of deeply rooted cultural traditions and social expectations in Uzbekistan.

Women's employment rates remain significantly lower than men's, particularly among younger and middle-aged groups. Among those aged 25–34, 56% of women are employed, compared to 93% of men. The main reason women are out of work is unpaid domestic labour and caregiving, while men are more likely to be unemployed due to education, illness, or job-seeking.

According to the statistics, 77% of the population believe women should work less and devote more time to household responsibilities. 34% of respondents believe women should be paid less in order to “maintain balance in the family”. These figures were presented by Zeliha Unaldi, UN Women Country Manager for Uzbekistan, during the Women in Power forum held on March 6.

This happens because unpaid domestic responsibilities consume a large portion of women's daily time and energy, leaving limited opportunities for participation in formal employment or skill development activities. As a result, many women are unable to pursue career advancement, professional training, or higher-paying jobs, which restricts their personal economic independence. On a broader level, when a significant proportion of women are excluded from the labour market or participate only in low-intensity work, it reduces the overall productivity of the workforce and limits national economic growth. Therefore, the expectation that women should prioritize household responsibilities over employment not only affects individual women but also has long-term consequences for societal and economic development.

Beyond education and employment, traditional gender roles stopping women from becoming leaders in a society. Women rank better than or equal to men in seven of eight traits opens in new window relevant to leadership assessed in a 2008 national survey by the Pew Research Center. Half of the respondents ranked women as more honest than men, with 20% saying that men are more honest than women. In terms of intelligence, 38% said they viewed women as smarter, with only 14% indicating men are smarter. Women were also ranked as being more compassionate, outgoing, and creative. Even though women are seen as equally capable to lead as men or even better than them globally, in Uzbekistan, they still face barriers due to society norms since



they are from a young age encouraged to be quiet, obedient modest and family oriented. As a consequence, they may become unconfident and afraid to pursue leadership positions because of fearing societal judgements. In many cases, leadership roles are still viewed as incompatible with women's traditional roles as wives and mothers. This cultural expectation significantly reduces women's visibility in leadership positions and contributes to their underrepresentation in decision-making structures across society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, traditional gender roles in Uzbekistan continue to play a significant role in shaping women's opportunities across multiple areas of life. While these roles contribute to cultural continuity and family structure, they simultaneously impose limitations on women's access to education, participation in the workforce, and involvement in leadership and decision-making processes. As demonstrated, social expectations surrounding early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and appropriate female behavior restrict women's ability to fully develop their potential.

Although legal frameworks promoting gender equality have been established, their effectiveness remains constrained by deeply rooted cultural norms and societal attitudes. Consequently, achieving meaningful progress requires not only policy implementation but also a shift in public perception regarding women's roles in society. Encouraging equal access to education, supporting women's participation in the labour market, and promoting their inclusion in leadership positions are essential steps toward greater gender equality.

Ultimately, addressing the impact of traditional gender roles is not only a matter of individual rights but also a crucial factor in the broader social and economic development of Uzbekistan.

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