

Women of Uzbekistan: Empowered on Paper, Inferior on the Ground

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On April 24, 2019, the Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan presented a draft law on equal rights for men and women. The discussions on the draft revealed a considerable gap between the state gender policy, which has women’s empowerment as a declared objective, and the current state of affairs in Uzbek society. Although state gender policy has been making gradual progress, it has been running up against traditional ways of life, which appear to be stronger than official declarations. Public discourse on women and women’s social role is one of the key indicators of the growing re-traditionalization (and Islamization) that is under way.

Uzbek society has witnessed dramatic changes over the past three decades. The country’s move to a market economy in the 1990s

saw the deterioration of social welfare programs and a decline in subsidies for families. As a result, “the burden of nurturing activities [...] shifted increasingly away from the state and into the household.” This, combined with a decline in GDP and a shrinking public sector, caused the reemergence of a traditional division of labor between men and women. These systemic changes have resulted in the “feminization of poverty.” The explicitly patriarchal nation-building discourse of President Islam Karimov, combined with the appeal of Islamic values to the broad mass of the population, only accelerated the reduction of women’s role to that of wife and mother.

The present paper aims to study the legal, economic, and cultural dimensions of this reality in order to identify the discrepancies between them. It suggests that the

legal system’s approach to women reflects public narratives on women, placing them in an inferior position in the social hierarchy. In many cases, women are unable to legally own property; they also have limited access to education and social capital. Traditional values, which have permeated all spheres of life, combined with the ineffective gender policy of the state, which demands moral purity of women while condemning them to social inferiority, compel women to face socio-economic hardships and deny them recognition for their contributions to society.

Uzbek Femininity within the Dominant Masculinity

An understanding of Uzbek femininity is incomplete without a thorough analysis of the Uzbek masculinity that was constructed by the first president of the independent country, Islam Karimov. Nick Megoran deconstructs the Andijan discourse produced by the first president as follows: “Hegemonic Uzbek masculinity (which might be termed ‘dutiful son-husband-father’) envisions men as first dutiful sons and then heads of families and providers for their own wives and children.” In this hierarchy, the ideal women is represented as a passive recipient of the man’s dominance and provision of a livelihood. Mean-

while, the precedence of the duty of son over the duty of husband puts younger women in a lower position in the social hierarchy. It is believed that they should earn their social status during marriage by demonstrating obedience, patience, and commitment.

In these narratives of masculinity, men are praised for their autonomy, which contrasts with women's supposed desire for stronger attachment. They are also expected to cut ties more easily than women. But this perception of male autonomy does not prevent women from sometimes being considered responsible for the behavior of their husbands, with the result that women who seek divorces are usually denied them.

Not only men but also women are bearers and translators of these patriarchal views. Most of the criticism of the draft law on equality and the elimination of all forms of gender discrimination, which is currently under discussion, has for instance come from women. Their main argument against the law is that it makes women absolutely equal to men, a concept that they perceive as absurd. Following Bourdieu, we might say that masculine dominance in the form of symbolic violence has "led the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves."

Bourdieu's theory about the subconscious transmission of masculine dominance habitus from body to body through sexual division of labor helps illuminate the operation of the Uzbek legal system when it comes to women's rights. The more women's rights

are abused, the more the government attempts to fix the emerging problems with ambivalent instruments, among them the Council of Mothers-in-Law and an additional quota of university places for males who have completed their military service. The new draft law on domestic violence is another example of an paradoxical approach: it does not propose criminalizing domestic violence even though doing so would be a logical step toward preventing it.

At the international level, Uzbekistan has a rather advanced position on women's rights. It has signed on to all the major conventions: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Political Rights of Women, Maternity Protection Convention, etc. The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan professes that men and women have equal rights, while presidential decrees have guaranteed women equal political, social, and economic rights. The amendment to the Law "On the elections to the Oliy Majlis" sets a quota for gender representation, requiring that at least 30 percent of all candidates nominated by political parties should be women. The Decree "On additional measures to support the work of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan" (2004) should have empowered the organization to protect the rights of women.

The last Decree was replaced by the Decree "On measures to completely improve activities in the field of supporting women and strengthening the institution of the family," signed by President

Mirziyoyev in April 2018. The latter has taken a strong stance on improving the social and economic status of women. He is believed to raise key problems related to perceptions of women in national culture in his official addresses. In June, Mirziyoyev ordered the establishment of a committee on inequality under the aegis of the Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan. On June 20, Tanzila Narbaeva, a former Head of the Women's Committee, was appointed Head of the Senate.

The entrepreneurial rights of women are formally protected by the Laws "On the guarantees of business activity" and "On family entrepreneurship," as well as by the late President Karimov's decree "On the measures of further complete improvement of the business environment and providing broader freedom to business." As of 2018, more than 8,500 women were serving as consultants on religious education, spirituality, and enlightenment in mahallas (town councils). The head of the mahalla is always a man (*oqsoqol*—an old wise man), but the main job, "preserving national values" (*milliy qadriyatlarni saqlash*), which often entails public shaming of women, is done by active local women. Those women mainly serve as guardians of national values and impart the notion of a "proper woman" to other females. (This notion will be elaborated on and further conceptualized below.)

The legal/formal dimension of women's rights protection has never been in complete accord with the real conditions of Uzbekistan's female citizens. As Ginn argues, "Kazakhstan, Uzbeki-

stan, and Tajikistan have traded the rights of women to achieve a placebo of development. Two of the largest violations of women's rights that have manifested because of the government's direct actions are domestic abuse and sex trafficking." Uzbekistan, like other states in the region, has deployed a discourse of equality partly due to inertia (as it is a legacy of the Soviet period) and partly to enable it to engage with the international discourse of the developed countries, for which gender equality is among the top priorities.

In this paper, I argue that there is a significant discrepancy between the state gender program and realities on the ground. Current efforts to improve women's status in the society risk facing insurmountable challenges in a context of re-traditionalization and the dominance of Islamic values. Meanwhile, the state discourse on the equality of men and women is inconsistent and explicitly ambivalent. The effectiveness of secular laws is usually discredited by informal directives and restrictive actions by local government bodies. In a recent interview, the current Head of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, Elmira Basitkhanova, criticized female pop stars for wearing revealing outfits and proposed to create a council of "old and powerful women" to guard the chastity of other women and thereby prevent early pregnancy and prostitution. She also believes in public shaming of women as a means of stopping violence against them. Some progressive social media activists have openly condemned Basitkhanova's views on wom-

en's issues, claiming that they can worsen the social status of females and raise the level of social pressure they face.

State Discourse on Traditions: Controlling a Woman's Body

In Uzbekistan, the period of "re-invention of traditions" accelerated with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought about a whole host of socio-economic, cultural, and value transformations. Meanwhile, the nation-building discourse produced by President Karimov, which sought the revival of glorious traditions and history, was rooted in a strict cultural code that involved male dominance over women and the responsibility of "proper women" for the purity of the nation.

Fertility is one of the dimensions in which the state's attempt at control may be out of line with traditional views. In demotic discourse, women are seen predominantly as mothers—preferably mothers of sons. It is still widely believed that the status and power of a family, and of women in particular, depends on whether or not they have a son. In the patriarchal system of values, men are considered to be a family's main breadwinners. Thus, sons are viewed as desired children for parents as they get older, particularly in a context where elderly people increasingly lack the protection of the state. Accordingly, the main objective of a marriage is to have as many children as possible in order to have a son. (According to the UN Factsheet, "son preference is stronger in

countries where patriarchy and patriliney are more firmly rooted." Pregnancies in these countries may be subject to sex-selective abortion, and Uzbekistan is no exception.) It is likely that the tense and sometimes tyrannical nature of relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is due to a power struggle over men.

The public healthcare system in Uzbekistan, which regulates every birth, is the main conduit of the state's population policy. According to discussions on a female Facebook group, local polyclinics require that immediately after giving birth to a baby a woman acquire contraceptives and sign an agreement to use them regularly—or, preferably, have an IUD fitted. The Open Democracy Foundations found that "health professionals frequently reported that medical clinics, and in some cases even individual doctors, received unwritten directives regarding IUD insertion quotas." In some cases, gynecologists inserted hormonal spirals without prior permission from young mothers.

The opposition between the state policy of either overt or covert birth control, on the one hand, and the cultural prioritization of a woman's reproductive functions, on the other, put additional pressure on women. The state has reduced its support for mothers, including by cutting paid maternity leave from two years to 126 days, of which post-natal maternal leave can be no more than 70 days. The birth payment for this period is the responsibility of the organization that registers the

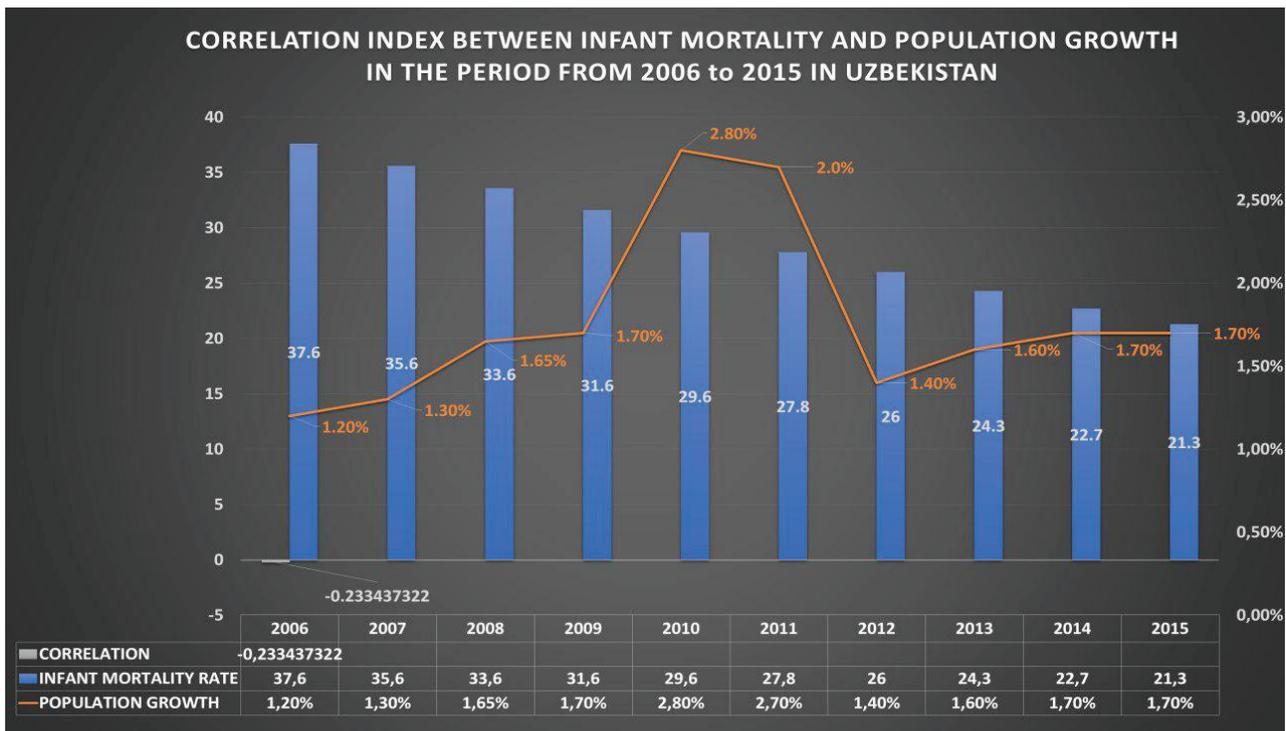
maternity leave. Under the law, any relative who is responsible for taking care of the newborn, including the father and grandparents, can register for a monthly allowance in the first two years (up to two fixed minimum wages). However, in reality the allowance is given only to low-income families and is registered by the mahalla.

The overall gender and birth control policy of the state is controversial and at times inconsistent. In a society where specific importance is placed on whether a family has a son or not, resulting in re-

peated births until a son is born, the state has long been unable to provide economic incentives to reduce the birthrate. This has remained true even though, since the socialist system left a legacy of decent healthcare for infants, there was no longer a question of bringing many children into the world in the hope that some of them would survive. As Figure 1 shows, the infant mortality rate declined in the period from 2006 to 2015 even as the birth rate remained stable at 1.7 percent annually. There is a low correlation (~0.2) between infant (under 5) mortality and population growth.

Not only do women face competing pressures from society and the state about their reproductive function, but they are also pressured by both society and state to be the bearers of national values (*milliy qadriyatlar*). For the state, this is part of the national identity narrative, while for society it is part of the Islamic code. Women are expected to maintain the purity of the nation and preserve cultural and religious traditions. Following Hobsbawm and Ranger, the reinvention of tradition contributes to legitimizing the control over and subjugation of women.

Figure 1. Correlation index between infant mortality and population growth in Uzbekistan, 2006-2015



Source: World Development Indicators, “Population Growth Rate, Uzbekistan,” accessed July 19, 2019, https://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9_&met_y=sp_pop_grow&idim=country:UZB&dl=en&hl=en&q=uzbekistan+population+growth#!ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nseml=h&met_y=sp_pop_grow&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=region&idim=country:UZB&ifdim=region&hl=en_US&dl=en&ind=false; Statista, “Uzbekistan: Infant Mortality Rate from 2007 to 2017 (in Deaths per 1,000 Live Births),” accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/807843/infant-mortality-in-uzbekistan/>.

The traditional values discourse surrounding women permeates all spheres, chief among them the economic sphere. Although the law encourages women’s involvement in entrepreneurial activity, society—including women themselves—believes that women should not try to earn more than their husbands nor proceed past a certain point in their career development. Usually, women are expected to earn money to help maintain their households but not to pursue or achieve career promotion for their efforts.

**Too Many Discrepancies:
Women’s Legal Status vs.
Realities on the Ground**

***Women’s Status under the
Law***

Formally, women’s equality in almost all spheres of life—politics, social security, and economic activity—is protected under the law. However, Uzbekistan remains in low positions on the various indexes of women’s empowerment. This is due to the overall underdevelopment of the political culture surrounding the protection of women’s rights. The members of law enforcement bodies and other institutions called upon to protect women’s rights and prevent violence against them usually hold traditional values. Therefore, formal laws never supersede the informal habitus of a traditional vision of women. Although Uzbekistan has signed a range of international documents against all kinds of discrimination, girls’ access to education and their involvement in economic life remains low.

Article 46 of the Constitution of Uzbekistan recognizes the equality of men and women. It reflects The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Under the current quota system, women must hold 30 percent of the seats in local representative bodies and the Oliy Majlis (parliament). However, the reality falls far short of the quota: women hold 17 percent of seats in the Oliy Majlis and 15 percent of those in the Legislative Chamber. This proportion has not changed since 2014.

The Decree “On measures to enhance the role of women in state and public construction of the Republic of Uzbekistan,” signed in March 1995, introduced the post of a deputy prime minister in charge of women’s issues. This post is filled by the head of the Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan (WCU). The organization is responsible for ensuring equality between women and men and for improving the role of women in social and political life. The WCU is a government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO) and is a continuation of the state gender policy. The organization’s code, like all the other normative acts, sets out the WCU’s mission to guard the “cultural and intellectual growth of women and youth” and “teach them the national and religious traditions, and the ways to follow them.”

Theoretically, women’s freedom of movement and ability to choose their residence and occupation is enshrined in law. However,

women under 35 have long been obliged to get special permission from their local municipal body (mahalla) to apply for an overseas sticker to go abroad. This was supposedly part of Uzbekistan’s efforts to prevent human trafficking. Significantly, however, a U.S. Embassy report on human trafficking in Uzbekistan found that “the government did not conduct efforts to reduce the *demand* for commercial sex acts. Uzbek women and children were subjected to sex trafficking in the Middle East, Eurasia, and Asia, and also internally in brothels, clubs, and private residences.” In 2018, the rule was annulled for those who live in the capital, Tashkent. The Family Code prescribes equality between married couples in terms of property ownership. That being said, legal nuances—combined with traditional views—usually leave women with no right to real estate after a divorce. Claims to ownership of living space and other property during or after marriage are perceived as shameful and are often condemned by relatives and the community. This presents an obstacle for a woman who seeks a divorce from an abusive husband.

In 2017, the Women’s Committee declared the creation a new Council of Mothers-in-Law. The main task of the institute is “to hold friendly talks with young people starting a new family on the following topics—‘happy family,’ ‘firm family,’ ‘prosperous family,’ ‘exemplary family’—and prepare them for a family life and share their experience.” The informal institution of the mother-in-law has become an internalized instrument of oppression

against women by women in a patriarchal society. Despite benign intentions, the formalization of the institution of the mother-in-law appears to be schizophrenic, since the key oppressive mechanisms against daughters-in-law (*kelin*) have not been addressed and may even be reinforced.

According to a survey conducted within the framework of ACT-ED projects in Uzbekistan by the NGO “Oydin Nur,” 2.5 percent of respondents said that conflicts leading to physical violence were caused, among other reasons, by the inability of elder relatives to understand young people; another 2.5 percent stated that mothers-in-law were jealous of their sons’ relationships with their wives.

Article 2 of the Family Code says that women and men have equal rights in families. However, the reality for women is far from equality. The unspoken rule in mahallas is that divorce rates should be brought down—and women have become instruments for imposing this rule. According to unofficial data, in the majority of cases, the mahalla declines to give its permission for an individual to file for divorce. The divorce procedure is part of communal life, not a personal decision, and is informally administered by the mahalla. Civil Registry Offices or courts do not accept applications for divorce unless the petitioners bring a document from the mahalla approving the divorce and affirming that the couple has undergone a conciliatory commission at the municipal body. This is in spite of the fact that,

according to lawyer Lenara Hikmatova, the court has no legal mandate to refuse to accept an application, nor does the mahalla have any authority to withhold its consent. Another incompatibility between law and practice is that in the event that a couple fails to reconcile, the court should appoint a reconciliatory term of up to 6 months. In practice, couples get the term from the mahalla, as they are not able to apply directly to the court for a divorce. Such terms may be appointed several times.

The gender aspect of discrimination is that women are often shamed publicly during these reconciliation sessions and are forced to remain in the marriage, sometimes at the expense of their physical and mental health, and even their lives. Physical violence committed against a female spouse is not usually considered to be a valid reason for divorce; members of reconciliatory commissions apply victim-blaming techniques to deprive abused wives of divorces. Meanwhile, the official number of divorces was 32,000 in 2017 and continues to grow.

Another manifestation of the dominance of patriarchal values is informal polygamy. There are no official statistics on polygamy, since it is an offense under Uzbek law for a man to have a second wife. According to unofficial data, however, the number of illegal *nikah* marriages (Islamic religious marriage, which allows polygamy for men) reaches into the hundreds of thousands. Economic hardship, lack of educa-

tion among women, insufficient social protection, and general prejudices against divorced women, especially those with children, push women to seek a *nikah* marriage. It is widely believed that it is much better to have to “share a man” than to live alone or—even worse—return to one’s parents’ house. The social outcome of this situation is that neither the second wife nor her children are protected by law.

President Mirziyoyev has spoken out strongly against polygamy and berated those imams who hold rites of *nikah* that are not officially registered at Civil Registry Offices. However, no official regulation has yet been adopted to punish imams for breaking the secular law. Moreover, it is hard to provide legal proof that the ritual has been conducted. (Unofficial sources say that informal warnings have been made.)

All the government’s efforts to improve the conditions of women focus on socializing them into a system of values that puts them in an inferior position. The wide-ranging social programs and reforms targeting women prescribe the need to “strengthen families through structural reforms in the WCU and the Oila (Family) Centers.” This means that women are inevitably seen as part of the broader entity, which is superior to their individual interests and aspirations. However, women are in charge of—and objectivized by—moral purity and national values. Therefore, the legal system legitimizes the demeaning narrative on women within the discourse on national values.

Women in Education

According to the Global Gender Gap Index and the Gender Equity Index, Uzbekistan is close to gender equality in education and health. This relative balance is due to the Soviet past, when higher education was affordable and the gender balance was better than at present. Compulsory primary and secondary education kept the overall level of education equally high for men and women. Uzbekistan has continued this practice, with the result that girls' participation in primary and secondary education hovers around 92-93 percent—almost equal to that of boys.

While gender parity is nearly achieved in preschools through vocational colleges, thereafter, the share of women declines drastically: “In academic lycées, there are only 78 women for every 100 men enrolled, and only

61 women for 100 men in higher education institutions and finally, in research positions, for every 100 men, only 53 women are enrolled.”

In 2016, Uzbekistan ranked 105th out of 185 countries on the Human Development Index and was categorized as a high human development country. In the Gender Inequality Index that same year, Uzbekistan was rated 57th out of 188 countries, mainly due to high levels of higher education and labor force participation among women. In 2014, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) included Uzbekistan in its Social Institutions and Gender Index, ranking it 52nd out of 86 non-OECD countries and giving it an overall score of 0.1475 (putting it in the “medium” category).

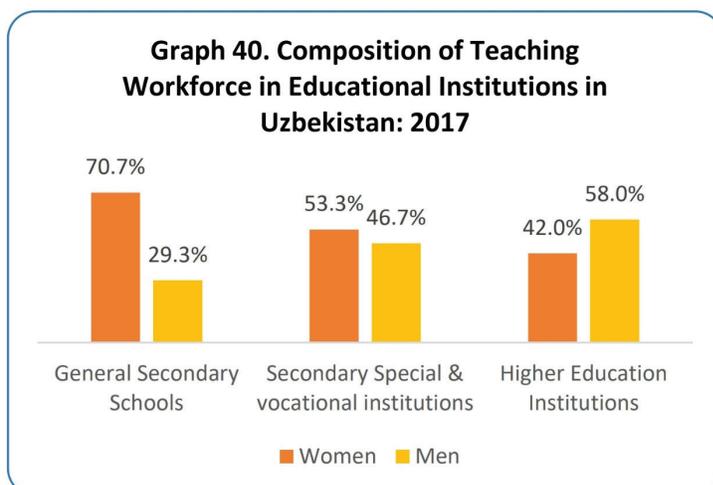
Yet according to international organizations' reports, the share

of women in tertiary education continues to decline, reflecting “a lack of funding, high tuition costs and an outdated societal expectation that young women take on traditional, household roles after secondary school.” Meanwhile, the prevalence of traditional views means that girls are less often allowed to seek out better educational opportunities far from home, much less go abroad. The patriarchal vision, in which a daughter lives with her parents until she leaves for her husband's home and does not become a breadwinner, causes families to invest more heavily in boys' education. From 2007 to 2017, the number of women enrolled in tertiary education fell to between 60 and 69 percent that of men.

A 2016 World Bank study (based on data from the State Committee on Statistics) reported that women's participation in higher education showed little progress according to areas of study: they comprised 56 percent of the total in education and culture, 40 percent in healthcare and physical training; 23 percent in agriculture; 20 percent in economics and law; and less than 15 percent in communication, construction, and transportation.

As a result, women are overrepresented in low-paid sectors such as education, healthcare, and social services. In 2006–2013, just 4.5 percent of female tertiary students were studying engineering, manufacturing, and construction, compared to 27.2 percent of men. According to the Education Sector Plan 2019-2023 under the Global Partnership for Educa-

Figure 2. Gender composition of teaching workforce in educational institutions in Uzbekistan, 2017



Source: Global Partnership, “Education Sector Plan (ESP) of Uzbekistan, 2019-2023,” <https://www.global-partnership.org/sites/default/files/2019-04-gpe-esp-uzbekistan.pdf>.

tion, the share of female teachers is much higher in secondary education (at almost 71 percent) than in secondary special and vocational education (53.3 percent) or higher education (42 percent)—see Figure 2.

Another barrier to girls' access to higher education is the preference given to men who have performed military service. Those who have completed their mandatory army service receive an additional 50 points on entrance exams. This puts women, who have no legal right to serve in the army, at a structural disadvantage when it comes to competing for places. Recently, the president proposed that graduates of the president's military school—all of whom are men—be exempted from taking entrance exams.

Uzbekistan often performs rather well on human development indexes compared to developing countries. However, recent raw data collected by social media activists show that a group of rural women—the majority of whom were victims of domestic violence—had, on average, received education only through the ninth grade. The superficial way in which the state statistics committee collects statistics makes it almost impossible to know the real state of affairs in education, literacy, and employment, leading to further problems in the labor market.

Women on the Job Market

Women in Uzbekistan, although empowered in legal documents and exalted in public discourse, remain vulnerable in terms of economic and social protection. Although they represent one of the largest driving forces behind economic growth, they suffer from inequality in workplaces and—particularly in rural households—a lack of infrastructure (transportation, logistics, gas, electricity, etc.) and utilities.

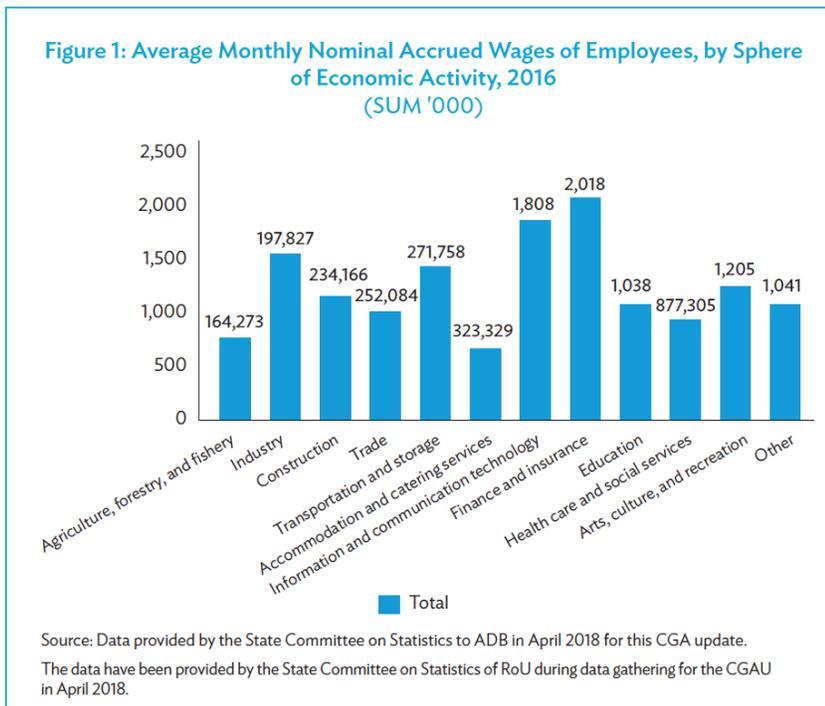
According to data collected by international organizations (ILO, World Bank), around 48 percent of Uzbekistan's women were economically active in the period from 2012 to 2017, compared to 76 percent of men. The figure for women is lower than that in developed countries and even than that in other transitional economies—in Kazakhstan, for instance, an average of 65 percent of women were economically active during the same period. In 2016, the employment rate among women was just 22.3 percent in rural areas and 34.5 percent in cities, according to the EBRD, while for men the figures were three and two times higher, respectively. Meanwhile, the ADB report, which was initially presented by the State Committee of Statistics and the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, found that women comprised 45.7 percent of workers in the for-

mal sector, with men making up 54.3 percent. (The slight differences between the numbers given by different international organizations are likely attributable to their differing methodologies.)

There is also a considerable disparity between the sectors in which men and women are represented. Traditionally, girls choose their profession in accordance with the demands of the marriage market. It is widely believed that nurse/physician and teacher are the most favorable professions for a future wife, as these are the jobs that parents look for when arranging marriages. Healthcare, arts, and education are traditionally dominated by women; they are also the worst-paid fields. By contrast, jobs in the best-paid fields—construction, transport, finance, industry, and communication—are occupied mostly by men. In all sectors, the overwhelming majority of managerial positions is held by men. Figure 3 shows the average monthly wages in various sectors.

Women may also engage in cottage industries to earn additional income for the family. According to the ADB Gender Assessment Report 2018, “Women, who work in the fields and also fulfil routine household activities, engage in home production to sell products and generate income (e.g., downy shawls from the wool of

Figure 3. Average monthly nominal wages of employees by sphere of economic activity, 2016



Source: ADB, Asian Development Bank, “Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update,” 2018, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/479841/uzbekistan-country-gender-assessment-up>

angora goats, dairy products, sewing, baking), while men are responsible for providing transport and helping women to sell products. Despite the considerable share of women in home-based production, they do not always manage the process, nor do they make their own decisions.”

Women in Business

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are a leading national employer in Uzbekistan. By the first half of 2017, 42.3 percent of the management roles in these enterprises were held

by women. Women are traditionally represented mostly in small business; services account for 34 percent of women-led enterprises, trade for 16 percent, non-food production for 16 percent, food production for 9 percent, agriculture for 5 percent, and other fields for 21 percent. A state program encourages women to start their own enterprises by offering microfinance loans and credits targeting women and young people. This has increased the representation of women in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), while their access to larger businesses

remains restricted due to the prevailing traditional mindset. Low self-esteem among women, time poverty, and a lack of appropriate knowledge and skills are cited as other reasons why women are reluctant to start businesses.

A lack of appropriate knowledge and lack of access to knowledge are common problems for a significant part of the population of the country; this problem is compounded for the female population by additional stereotypes and artificial restrictions.

Women and Property Ownership

Even if, formally, women have equal rights to property, inheritance, and entrepreneurship, the public discourse puts them under the protection and custody of men, which usually restricts them from gaining full access to the equal opportunities guaranteed by the state. Another problem is that women have no access to information and/or lack sufficient self-confidence to take action.

Among the female entrepreneurs who participated in the ADB survey, 57 percent were 40–50 years old, 22 percent were 20–30 years old, and 21 percent were 30–40 years old. The statistics demonstrate the thought patterns that are dominant among women and the expectations that society

has for them. Usually, women start an effective business after they reach a certain age, divorce, have raised their children, or inherit property from their parents, husbands, or other relatives. It is noteworthy that a very small percentage of women own real estate. Female-owned real estate accounted for instance for 29.4 percent (424,783) of all registered real estate transactions outside the city of Tashkent in 2016. However, the value of property registered to women is considerably lower, accounting for only 22.3 percent of the total value of property registered with the national real property registry and cadastre system.

Women in Informal Employment

At the end of 2018, the Ministry of Labor of Uzbekistan announced a new methodology for calculating the unemployment rate, which showed unemployment at 9.3 percent. However, this rate only looks at formal employment, even though a considerable proportion (59.8 percent) of the economically active population of both genders is involved in the informal economy. Of these, 1.6 million people are employed in temporary one-off or seasonal work, while 2.6 million are labor migrants abroad. According to a recent report by the Minister of Labor, Sherzod

Kudbiev, more than 620,000 economically active females cannot find jobs, more than one million are involved in seasonal and non-permanent work, and another two million are working without registration. The overwhelming majority of these women are rural.

Women in rural areas bear the bulk of the responsibility for maintaining households, which is one of the key factors in their social underrepresentation and low incomes compared to men, according to a World Bank Group report from 2017. In some rural areas, women's work opportunities are impeded by poor household conditions such as a lack of infrastructure, water, gas, and electricity. Women have more limited prospects for developing their farming activities, as they cannot travel long distances and communicate with men from outside their families. Meanwhile, by working in private gardens (*tomorqa*), women are able to earn money and provide their family members with fresh food. It is worth noting that these activities are usually not considered to be a contribution to the family budget and are taken for granted. The available income-generating activities do not upgrade the social status of women in families.

Often, women are paid less than men for daily work—10–20,000 soms per day compared to up to 30,000 soms for men—but the situation is different in cotton-picking. According to data provided by the report, up to 90 percent of pickers in some regions are women. They are seen as more motivated since they have fewer opportunities to earn income in other fields.

According to unofficial data, the number of female *markider* (those who do day work, one of the most underpaid and low-qualification jobs) is huge and continues to grow. *Markider* markets are developing in regions and cities across the country. Men and women of different ages wait for customers to pick them up for various jobs at their homes or farms, or sometimes for municipal jobs paid by official bodies, including seasonal cotton pickups. Depending on the region, a day laborer will make between 25,000 soms (\$4) and 100,000 soms (\$12) per working day. Customers trust female workers more than male workers, as they usually do not fall into cheating and do the same job as male workers no matter the physical burden—even though it is technically illegal to hire female workers for heavy labor that may be detrimental to their health. In many cases, female workers are subject to sexual harassment and oth-

er violations of their rights by their employers, making them the most vulnerable stratum of the workforce. In some cases, they are even deprived of payment since the employment is illegal and not registered.

Prostitution is another consequence of socio-economic instability and gender inequality in Uzbekistan. There are no official statistics for prostitution, but unofficial figures range from 22,000 to 32,000 people or even more. The market for sex work is growing rapidly, especially in big cities, even as female sex workers are stigmatized and publicly shamed, represented as deviants who are out of touch with traditional values. Prostitution is a criminal offense: as of 2019, the fine has been raised from 3 minimum wages to 7 for the first offense, and from 7 to 10 for a repeat violation.

The situation on the ground cannot be understood from the data provided by official agencies and international organizations. In spite of the fact that the government is engaging in various strategies to tackle gender issues (without calling it a “gender” problem), the results are limited since the problems are addressed within the popular traditional discourse of female inferiority. As a result, many programs by the state and international organizations alike appear to

be counterproductive, contributing to the gender imbalance rather than redressing it.

Unpopular Women’s Empowerment in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan

President Mirziyoyev has become the first political leader in Uzbekistan to speak openly about the deplorable state of women in Uzbek society. He has discussed tense relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, addressed the problem of divorces, and initiated a number of laws and social projects. Activists for women’s rights have been able to relaunch their social projects and operate relatively freely.

In April, the minimum age of marriage for women was raised from 17 to 18, making it the same as that for men. According to the head of the WCU, the legal norm reflects realities on the ground: today’s young people are not eager to marry too early. Outside the capital city, however, girls as young as 16 can be pushed into arranged *nikah* marriages that lack official registration.

The president’s February 2018 Decree “On measures to fundamentally improve activities in the field of supporting women and strengthening the institution of the family” focuses on preserving traditional family values and improving the con-

ditions for women in difficult situations. The bulk of the responsibility for implementing the decree falls on the WCU. The law is similar to the one from 2004 but more focused on existing problems.

As a GONGO, the Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan is an active conduit of the gender policy of the state, and it has been encouraged to become an active protector of women’s rights, initiating numerous draft laws and projects. The WCU has initiated a draft law that would equalize rights and opportunities for women and men. The key paragraphs include equal opportunities in workplaces, including at decision-making levels. The draft introduces the term “indirect discrimination” and states that “household work cannot be considered a basis for gender discrimination as it is carried out by both men and women.” For the first time, a draft law on women’s issues includes the point: “Behavior based on rituals, traditions and culture that contradict the requirements of the law of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the norms of international law are not allowed.”

Discussions on the draft law ended on May 8. The reaction to the draft law among social media users was mostly negative. The majority of comments on news posts by various on-

line newspapers expressed fear of women becoming equal to men in duties. Both female and male commenters said that they would not like the rights of the two sexes to become absolutely equal. In some cases, the argumentation contrasted the evil “Other”—Western liberal feminist values, which contradict national ones—with the benign “Self.” Increasing equality is widely believed to be toxic for the future of the society.

In 2018, the WCU initiated another draft law, this time on domestic violence, which is not criminalized in Uzbekistan. The document defines the following terms: victim of domestic violence, asocial behavior, domestic psychological violence, domestic economic violence, domestic physical violence, and domestic sexual violence. It also proposes that victims of domestic violence should be allowed to get a restraining order against their attackers. The draft law focuses predominantly on the prevention of domestic violence, not entrenching domestic violence in the criminal code.

Survey on Domestic Violence

The ruling of the President “On measures to improve the social rehabilitation and adaptation system, and also prevention of family and domestic violence”

from July 2018 mentions the need to collect statistics on domestic violence. These do not exist, since bringing a domestic violence claim runs counter to the traditional values that discourage taking a family quarrel outside the home. The majority of social institutions and law-enforcement bodies take the traditional approach, backed up by the absence of a legal basis criminalizing any kind of domestic violence.

In the absence of such statistics, I conducted a small-scale anonymous survey to determine how reported domestic violence is addressed by those bodies that are responsible for preventing it. The survey was conducted on the Facebook social-project page NeMolchi.uz (Do Not Be Silent), an independent information project against domestic violence that accepts anonymous stories from readers and has around 10,000 followers. The survey spread among those who have been victims of domestic violence. It collected 87 responses to its questions about reporting domestic violence and the responses of law enforcement organs and mahallas. Most of the respondents were from Tashkent and Tashkent region. The survey included six questions on whether women experienced domestic violence; whether they reported it; if not, why not; if so, what measures were taken by the

law enforcement bodies; and what the overall reactions to the domestic violence were.

Sixty percent of respondents never reported domestic violence. The main reasons for this were: lack of trust in the system, lack of knowledge, fear of condemnation and shaming, fear of a perpetrator, etc. Those who did report it faced either ignorance or/and victim-blaming while reporting/suing the abuser. Women reported having been told, “We get used to beaten wives, it’s normal” or “You have to stay quiet so as not to get beaten,” or having district policemen tell their husbands, “You shouldn’t have left bruises when you beat her.” In some cases, the abusers were forced to pay an administrative fine to the state budget—but the fines are usually an additional burden on the family budget, which may discourage women from reporting violence. Just four percent of cases resulted in legal prosecution of the abuser. Usually, law enforcement officers use the phrase “no body, no case” to describe the absence of a legal basis for prosecuting an abuser.

In a 1,000-respondent survey, UReport looked at public opinion on domestic violence. Eighty-three percent indicated that the problem of domestic violence is real, while another part responded that the prob-

lem is not openly discussed. Among the latter group, 52 percent of respondents were female. Forty-eight percent have witnessed violence, while 52 percent have never encountered it. According to the answers, 60 percent do not know where to report domestic violence if they witness it or become victims thereof. To the question on whether one should tolerate domestic violence for the sake of preserving the family, 54 percent responded that it depends on the situation, while 34 percent think that one “definitely should not.”

***Growing Feminist
Activism on Social Media***

The issue of domestic violence is almost exclusively discussed on social media. The NeMolchi.uz project, started by activist Irina Matvienko, has become one of the first platforms on which it is possible to speak openly about domestic violence, LGBTQ+ issues, poor social protection of women and children, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. Faina Yagafarova is another individual activist; she writes daily on Facebook about issues facing women and how to fight against domestic violence within the existing legal system, as well as participating in social projects and meetings promoted by the WCU. Activism on social media, in partic-

ular on Facebook, is starting to substitute for underdeveloped civil society activism.

The overall tendency of the governmental organs toward increasing openness, combined with concerns about Uzbekistan’s public image and the feminist movement on social media, has pushed the WCU to develop some accountability. The organization has begun to address some individual cases of despair and violence among women and has developed a system for aiding those who are in need of urgent help. To date, 136 shelters have been opened across the country and a helpline has been launched. However, the objective structural problems—such as a lack of communication, lack of infrastructure, and public administration issues—as well as subjective problems like the population’s traditional views continue to impede women’s development.

To learn about the intangibles of the state gender policy, I conducted open-ended interviews with 11 social media activists who considered themselves feminists.

Respondents universally agreed that the main problem that prompts women to approach them is domestic violence. This is followed by inequality at work and home, objectification, and lack of so-

cial protection in difficult situations. Women are left without property after divorces, they usually lack legal knowledge on social protection, and they have no clue whom to approach in the event of disability for them and their children. The system of social protection is underdeveloped, while the environment of violence is normalized.

In response to the question “What are the main reactions to your publications and social media posts?” respondents cited reactions related to victim-blaming. They indicated that society is reluctant to speak openly about the problem, which is interpreted differently by different people, and that gender equality is considered an alien concept.

According to the activists, the roots of discrimination against women are the following (in order of decreasing importance):

- Strictly patriarchal values and traditions;
- Non-compliance with laws; and
- Imperfect legal system.

Asked “What should the state do to combat discrimination against women?” respondents recommended the following policy moves:

- Change the narratives related to women in the society, diversify

the female image, and not reduce the role of women to maternity and marriage;

- Criminalize domestic violence;
- Recognize the real problems and start to talk about them openly; and
- Develop gender sensitivity and involve women in political decision-making following CEDAW recommendations.

One of the activists called for a more sustainable program for empowering women, explaining that in her opinion, the major steps taken in the recent period are closely connected to the upcoming submission of a report to CEDAW and a desire to improve the international image of the country.

According to my respondents, the most popular image of an Uzbek woman is someone who is submissive and tender, obedient and wise, a mother and good wife. According to a survey conducted by the NGO “Oydin Nur,” 18 percent of self-government leaders consider that domestic violence is caused mainly by the sharp tongue of women, 26 percent stated that husbands consider their wives to be lazy and bad housekeepers, and 5.6 percent said it happens because women are disobedient. Financial

reasons are also among the key factors causing conflicts and violence. In some areas, husbands’ alcohol addiction is the main reason that they commit violence against women (up to 90 percent in some mahallas in the Samarkand region).

The question about what type of women usually become victims of domestic violence was answered similarly by self-government leaders in different mahallas: around 20 percent think uneducated, illiterate, spiritually underdeveloped women; 13.8 percent frivolous women; 13.8 percent modest, naïve, hardworking women; and 5.5 percent women who are sick and/or have mental or physical disabilities. Meanwhile, 33.3 percent consider that scandalmongers and gossips usually become the objects of violence. Around 3-5 percent stated that the reason for violence can be financial inferiority and a woman’s poor social and economic background.

According to a report by Jamilya Vafaeva for ACTED, in some surveyed areas, physical violence toward women is habitual and has become a part of men culture. In addition, to men, the term “discrimination against women” means mainly physical violence, the survey found. Other types of violence, such as violent jokes or a ban on visiting parents, were not

mentioned, demonstrating that they are seen as part of the cultural reality in those areas.

Conclusion

This analysis of three dimensions of women’s participation and representation—legal, economic, and cultural—showed a dramatic discrepancy between the government’s stated objective of women’s empowerment and the real situation on the ground. The women of Uzbekistan are empowered on paper but de facto put in an inferior position in the labor market, education, business, social relations, and public discourse. The legal basis of gender equality proves to be controversial and difficult to follow due to explicit contradictions between laws. Moreover, informal habits, which reflect traditional perceptions of women and their social roles, are much more powerful among citizens than legal regulations.

The growing re-traditionalization of Uzbek society, along with decreased trust in the economic system, have led not only to the feminization of poverty, but also to the feminization of public pressure. Women bear the main responsibility for preserving national values and family values, and have been put in charge of the moral purity of the nation.

The Soviet-era discourse on equal rights has been borrowed by independent Uzbekistan and has been left on paper for box-checking purposes and to improve the overall international image of the state. Meanwhile, the demotic discourse can be described as explicitly patriarchal and intolerant of all types of women's empowerment.

The repressive policies of the Karimov era, a poor level of upward mobility, and the deteriorating quality of secular education brought about retrogression to traditionalism among the broad mass of the population. The re-traditionalizing discourse clothes its arguments in particular interpretations of Islam and puts women in so-called traditional roles. This results in the neglecting of concrete social and economic problems and shifts the focus of attention to the issues of chastity, spirituality, and national values.

The Uzbek government is trying to improve its international image by declaring its commitment to universal rights and values, which inevitably include the equality of women and men. An institutional system of gender equality has not yet been established and creating new government bodies and committees is likely to be insufficient, as intangible factors of cultural resistance are

still strong. The ongoing massive changes in the legal system should be accompanied by a comprehensive reformation of social life and cultural habits. As such, I propose the following recommendations to supplement the ongoing reforms on gender balance, creating equal opportunities and preventing violence against and among women.

Recommendations

1. Design a nationwide publicity campaign using TV commercials, videos, and billboards that would show family relationships involving educated working women. The campaign should promote egalitarian relationships within the family.
2. Hold interactive trainings for law enforcement officers with an emphasis on role-playing to stimulate empathy outside of the context of their family setting. The aim should be to develop officers' conflict resolution skills and foster an attitude of zero-tolerance vis-à-vis domestic violence.
3. Introduce NGOs that can provide mediation for families. The approach of the professionals should be impartial and they should

have deep knowledge of Islamic theology. The main focus should be not on preserving a family, but on preventing violence and figuring out possible solutions for both sides.

4. Create a Domestic Violence Resource Network. The Network should embrace victims of domestic violence, law enforcement agencies, health organizations, and influential individuals and provide the organizations with up-to-date information, methods, and research.

Notes

¹ Pierella Paci, "Gender in Transition," The World Bank, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Region, May 21, 2002, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/892681468751807453/pdf/multiopage.pdf>.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Ibid., xiii.

⁴ Globally, there is a growing perception that poverty is being feminized—that is, that an increasing proportion of the world's poor are female. The idea is that the costs of transition have not been distributed evenly among the population and that women are more likely to fall into poverty than men. See Valentine M. Moghadam, "The 'Feminization of Poverty' and Women's Human Rights," *SHS Papers in Women's Studies/Gender Research* 2 (July 2005), http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Feminization_of_Poverty.pdf; Sylke V. Schnepf, "The Feminization of Poverty in Transition Countries: Evidence from Subjective Data," working paper, 2004, https://miao.my-x.hu/osiris/content/docs/fao_seminar/women/feminizationofpovertyppr.13A.SVS.pdf.

⁵ Nick Megoran, "Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov's Account of the Events of 13 May 2005," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 1 (2008): 15-31.

⁶ Suzanne Keller, *Beyond the Ruling Class: Strategic Elites in Modern Society* (London: Routledge, 2017).

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⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 42.

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po voprosam zhenshchin i gender-nogo ravenstva," *Gazeta.uz*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/06/22/women/>.

¹⁰ OHCHR, "Informatsiia natsional'nogo tsentra Respubliki Uzbekistan po pravam cheloveka na Voprosnik UVKPC OON v kontekste vypolneniia Respublikoi Uzbekistan Rezoliutsii SPCh OON 35/10 'Aktivizatsiia usilii v tseliakh iskoreneniia nasiliia v otnoshenii zhenshchin: vovlechenie muzhchin i mal'chikov v preduprezhdenie i presechenie nasiliia v otnoshenii vseh zhenshchin i devochek,'" accessed July 3, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/MenAndBoysGenderEquality/States/Uzbekistan.pdf>. In 1993, the Uzbek government reorganized mahalla councils as bearers of "Uzbek nationhood" and "morality," effectively reproducing Soviet-style state domination over the society. Mahalla councils are formal structures run by committees (headed by chairs called oqsoqols) and regulated by the government. See "Mahalla (Uzbeks)," *Revolvy.com*, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Mahalla-%28Uzbeks%29>.

¹¹ Megan A. Ginn, "A Comparative Study: Women's Rights in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan" (BA thesis, University of Central Florida, 2016).

¹² "Ekskliuzivnoe interv'iu s predsedatelem Komiteta zhenshchin El'miroi Basitkhanovoi," July 14, 2019, <https://repost.uz/basitxanova>.

¹³ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Gender and Nation," in *Women, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*, ed. Rick Wilford and Robert L. Miller (London: Routledge, 2004), 23-35.

¹⁴ In many societies, the family lineage is carried on by male children. The preservation of the family name is guaranteed through the sons. With the exception of a few countries, such as Ethiopia, a girl takes her husband's family name, dropping that of her parents. The fear of

losing a name prompts families to wish to have a son. Some men marry a second or a third wife to be sure of having a male child. Moreover, in many communities in Asia and Africa, sons perform burial rites for parents. Parents with no male child cannot expect to have an appropriate burial that will "secure their peace in the next world." Religious leaders play a major role in the perpetuation of son preference: in almost all religions, ceremonies are performed by men; priests, pastors, sheikhs, and other religious leaders are men of great status to whom society attaches great importance. See Women's UN Report Network, "Fact Sheet No. 23, Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children," OCHCR, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet23en.pdf>.

¹⁵ S. Correa and R. Petchesky, "Exposing the Numbers Game: Feminists Challenge the Population Control Establishment," *Ms.* 5, no. 2 (1994): 10-7.

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¹⁷ Pregnant women must register at public polyclinics according to their living address and provide their pregnancy history.

¹⁸ The discussion can be found on the "Ya-MAMA!" Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/224305077630604/search/?query=заставляют%20спираль&era=SEARCH_BOX.

¹⁹ Natalia Antelava, "Forced Sterilization of Women in Uzbekistan," Open Society Foundations Policy Report, December 2013, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/9b3b427b-444b-4ba4-9a33-160a31932976/sterilization-uzbek-20131212.pdf>.

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²⁸ Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan, “Uzbekiston khotin-kizlar kumitasi ustavi,” January 25, 2013, <http://wcu.uz/uploads/docs/6836d0aa3de74c344f4ee10def61ab3.pdf>.

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⁴⁹ This point was made by activist Irina Matvienko in a Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/matvienko.irina/posts/2191953064197632>.

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xvi.

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⁵⁷ Asian Development Bank, “Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update,” 62.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35; United Nations Development Program and Japan International Cooperation Agency Chamber of Commerce and Industry, “The Portrait of Business Women of Uzbekistan: The Survey Conducted under Business Forum of Uzbekistan Project. Phase 2,” Tashkent,

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