ENSURING GENDER EQUALITY AND ENHANCING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY IN UZBEKISTAN

Sharipova Umida Yusupjonovna
Pakhtaabad Public Health College named after
Abu Ali ibn Sino, Andijan, Uzbekistan
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Abstract. This article examines the systemic reforms implemented in the Republic of Uzbekistan to ensure gender equality and strengthen women's participation in political, economic, and social life. Drawing on the 2019 Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men, the 2030 National Gender Equality Strategy, and recent analytical assessments by the World Bank and United Nations agencies, the study evaluates both measurable achievements and persistent structural barriers. Notable progress includes the rise of women's representation in the national parliament to 38 percent, a fourfold expansion in female tertiary education enrollment, substantial reductions in maternal mortality, and landmark legal reforms criminalizing domestic violence. At the same time, significant challenges persist, including a wide gender gap in labor force participation, a 34 percent wage disparity, disproportionate unpaid care burdens, and rural digital divides. The paper outlines evidence-based recommendations to close these gaps through preschool expansion, STEM education, and stronger enforcement of workplace equality.

Keywords: gender equality, women's empowerment, Gender Strategy 2030, social participation, labor market, higher education, entrepreneurship, legal guarantees.

ОБЕСПЕЧЕНИЕ ГЕНДЕРНОГО РАВЕНСТВА И ПОВЫШЕНИЕ РОЛИ ЖЕНЩИН В ОБЩЕСТВЕ В УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ

Шарипова Умида Юсупжоновна
Пахтаабадский техникум общественного здоровья имени
Абу Али ибн Сино, Андижан, Узбекистан
doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24361467

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются системные реформы, реализуемые в Республике Узбекистан по обеспечению гендерного равенства и повышению роли женщин в политической, экономической и социальной сферах. На основе Закона 2019 года о гарантиях равных прав и возможностей, Стратегии достижения гендерного равенства до 2030 года и аналитических отчетов Всемирного банка и агентств ООН проведен сравнительный анализ достигнутых результатов и сохраняющихся барьеров. Отмечены рост доли женщин в парламенте до 38 процентов, четырехкратное увеличение охвата женщин высшим образованием, снижение материнской смертности и криминализация бытового насилия. Вместе с тем выявлены разрыв в экономической активности, 34-процентная разница в оплате труда и неравномерная нагрузка по уходу за домом, для преодоления которых предложены практические меры.

Ключевые слова: гендерное равенство, права женщин, Гендерная стратегия 2030, социальная активность, рынок труда, высшее образование, предпринимательство, правовые гарантии.

O‘ZBEKISTONDA GENDER TENGLIGINI TA’MINLASH VA XOTIN-QIZLARNING JAMIYATDAGI ROLINI OSHIRISH

Sharipova Umida Yusupjonovna
Paxtaobod Abu Ali ibn Sino nomidagi
jamoat salomatligi texnikumi, Andijon, O‘zbekiston
doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24361467

Annotatsiya. Mazkur maqolada O‘zbekiston Respublikasida gender tengligini ta’minlash, xotin-qizlarning siyosiy, iqtisodiy va ijtimoiy hayotdagi faolligini oshirish borasida amalga oshirilayotgan tizimli islohotlar ilmiy-tahliliy jihatdan o‘rganilgan. Tadqiqotda 2019-yilda qabul qilingan teng huquq va imkoniyatlar kafolatlari to‘g‘risidagi qonunchilik, 2030-yilgacha mo‘ljallangan Gender strategiyasi hamda Jahon banki va BMT agentliklarining so‘nggi statistik hisobotlari asosida erishilgan yutuqlar hamda saqlanib qolayotgan to‘siqlar qiyosiy tahlil qilingan. Xususan, parlamentda ayollar ulushining 38 foizgacha ko‘tarilishi, oliy ta’limga qamrovning to‘rt barobar oshishi, onalar o‘limining keskin kamayishi va tadbirkorlik muhitidagi huquqiy islohotlar yoritilgan. Shu bilan birga, mehnat bozoridagi ishtirok tafovuti, ish haqidagi 34 foizlik farq, uy-ro‘zg‘or yumushlarining notekis taqsimlanishi va qishloq joylardagi raqamli tengsizlik muammolari ko‘rsatib o‘tilib, ularni bartaraf etish yuzasidan amaliy takliflar ilgari surilgan.

Kalit so‘zlar: gender tenglik, xotin-qizlar huquqlari, Gender strategiyasi 2030, ijtimoiy faollik, mehnat bozori, oliy ta’lim, tadbirkorlik, huquqiy kafolatlar.

INTRODUCTION

The development of modern society and sustainable economic growth are closely linked to the effective utilization of human capital, particularly the creation of equal rights and opportunities for women and men across all spheres. Within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is likewise established as a distinct priority [4]. Women's access to education, dignified participation in the labor market, full utilization of healthcare services, and involvement in public governance serve not only as a criterion of social justice, but also as a vital driver of national gross domestic product growth and family well-being [3, 6].

In recent years, gender equality has become one of the strategic priorities of state policy in the Republic of Uzbekistan. The adoption in 2019 of the landmark laws "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" and "On Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence" marked a turning point in aligning national legislation with international standards [1, 3]. Furthermore, the Committee on Women and Gender Equality under the Senate of the Oliy Majlis and the Republican Commission on Ensuring Gender Equality were established, introducing the practice of mandatory gender-legal expertise for legislative acts [4, 7].

Approved in May 2021 by Resolution No. SQ-297-IV of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis, the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030 established a clear roadmap for long-term reforms in the country [1]. This document aims to fundamentally strengthen the role of women in political governance, the economy, education, healthcare, and social protection systems, and its implementation is reflected in international rankings. For instance, in the World Bank's 2024 "Women, Business and the Law" report, Uzbekistan ranked among the top five countries globally implementing the fastest positive reforms in gender equality [5].

Ensuring gender equality requires not only establishing legal norms, but also achieving a balance between public consciousness, family values, and economic opportunities [3, 9]. In particular, women's roles in public health, education, entrepreneurship, and local governance systems serve as key indicators of the country's social stability [2, 3]. Narrowing disparities between rural and urban areas, guiding young women toward modern professions, and strengthening maternal and child protection systems are integral components of these reforms [2, 8].

Nevertheless, despite significant improvements in the legal framework, a number of socioeconomic and cultural factors persist in everyday life—especially in the regions and rural areas—that hinder women's economic activity, career advancement, and participation in decision-making processes [3, 9]. The purpose of this article is to systematically analyze the outcomes of legal and institutional reforms aimed at ensuring gender equality in Uzbekistan, evaluate current indicators in education, healthcare, and the labor market, and develop evidence-based recommendations to further enhance the role of women in society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in the form of an analytical literature review and comparative statistical analysis structured in accordance with IMRAD requirements. During the research process, national legislative documents of the Republic of Uzbekistan—specifically the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality until 2030, amendments to the Labor Code, and official data from the government portal—were examined [1, 7]. Additionally, the World Bank's 2024 Country Gender Assessment for Uzbekistan, Gender Data Portal indicators, the "Women, Business and the Law" index, and country reports by the United Nations Development Programme were analyzed [2, 3, 5, 8].

Reliability, official statistical substantiation, and longitudinal comparability were selected as the primary criteria for data screening. The analysis was carried out along two main dimensions. The first dimension examined positive shifts in women's political representation, higher education enrollment, medico-social indicators, and legal protection mechanisms. The second dimension identified existing disparities in labor market participation, wage gaps, unpaid domestic care burdens, youth female employment, and the entrepreneurial environment, summarizing them in comparative tables.

Furthermore, the relevance of international indicators to the national context was taken into account during the comparative analysis. Specifically, the legal frameworks, supportive institutional structures, and practical enforcement perception indicators used by the World Bank were compared against Uzbekistan's reform dynamics from 2019 to 2025 [5, 10]. This comprehensive approach enabled an objective evaluation not only of formal legislative achievements, but also of tangible changes in the daily lives of the population.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Legislative and institutional measures adopted in Uzbekistan in recent years have substantially expanded women's participation in political and social life. Following the adoption of the 2030 Gender Strategy, the share of women in the national parliament reached nearly 32 percent, elevating Uzbekistan to 37th place among 190 parliaments worldwide, while women accounted for 27 percent of leadership positions [1]. According to updated figures from the World Bank Gender Data Portal, by 2025 women held 38 percent of seats in Uzbekistan's national parliament, exceeding the average for lower-middle-income countries [2].

Ensuring gender equality in education and healthcare serves as a vital foundation for human capital development. Adult literacy rates among women and men in the country are virtually equal at nearly 100 percent, while lower secondary school completion rates are identical for girls and boys at 97.6 percent [2]. One of the most notable achievements is linked to reforms in higher education: between 2017 and 2022, tertiary enrollment tripled among men to reach 29 percent, whereas among women it grew fourfold to reach 27.4 percent [3]. State mechanisms covering tuition fees for women from low-income families have further expanded young women's access to higher education [3].

Reforms in the healthcare system—particularly the development of public health and primary medical care—are clearly reflected in maternal and child health indicators. In Uzbekistan, the maternal mortality ratio declined from 72 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 26 in 2023 [2]. Similarly, the infant mortality rate dropped from 34.6 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 9.2 in 2021 [3]. Concurrently, access to financial services improved in 2024, with the share of women holding a bank account reaching 60.7 percent, slightly surpassing the rate for men (58.5 percent) [2].

Fundamental changes have also occurred in the sphere of legal protection. The revised Labor Code adopted in 2022 enshrined guarantees of equal pay for work of equal value, abolished restrictions barring women from a number of previously prohibited occupations, and prohibited gender-based discrimination in hiring [3, 5]. Following amendments to the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Responsibility in April 2023, direct criminal liability was established for physical, psychological, and economic domestic violence, alongside administrative penalties for sexual harassment [3, 5]. According to a United Nations report, the implementation of the "Gender Equality Seal" program in public institutions is contributing to improved governance culture [6].

Table 1 summarizes the key legal, political, and social indicators for ensuring gender equality in Uzbekistan.

Area and Indicator	Achieved Results and Dynamics	Legal and Institutional Basis	International Assessment and Significance
Women's Representation in Parliament	Women held ~32% of seats in 2021 and 38% in 2025 [1, 2]	Electoral Code quotas and Gender Strategy 2030 [1, 4]	High ranking among 190 parliaments, exceeding the lower-middle-income country average [1, 2]

Area and Indicator	Achieved Results and Dynamics	Legal and Institutional Basis	International Assessment and Significance
Higher Education Enrollment Rate	Female enrollment grew fourfold in 2017–2022, reaching 27.4% [3]	State grants and interest-free educational loans for low-income female students [3]	Gender parity achieved in lower secondary education at 97.6% [2]
Maternal and Child Health	Maternal mortality fell from 72 (2000) to 26 (2023) [2]; infant mortality dropped to 9.2 [3]	Expansion of primary healthcare and perinatal services [3]	Steady progress in population health and life expectancy [2, 3]
Legal Protection and Labor Guarantees	82 points on the WBL index; 95/100 points for entrepreneurship support [5, 10]	New Labor Code (2023) and criminalization of domestic violence [3, 5]	Ranked among the top 5 fastest-reforming countries in the World Bank WBL 2024 index [5]

Alongside these positive achievements, the analyzed sources indicate that substantial gender imbalances persist in Uzbekistan's labor market and social structure. According to World Bank data, in 2025 the labor force participation rate among the working-age population (aged 15 and older) stood at 73.9 percent for men compared to only 41.2 percent for women [2]. The unemployment rate among young women reached 15.5 percent—significantly higher than that of young men (10 percent)—while the share of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET) reached 42 percent among young women compared to 8.8 percent among young men [3].

Another acute manifestation of economic inequality is the gender wage gap. In Uzbekistan, women earn on average 34 percent less than men, substantially exceeding the global average of 20 percent [3]. According to World Bank estimates, if women participated in the national economy on an equal footing with men, Uzbekistan's national income would increase by 29 percent, and closing the gender wage gap would lift more than 700,000 citizens out of poverty [3].

The root causes of these disparities lie in persistent traditional gender stereotypes and the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic care work [3, 9]. Surveys reveal that nearly 75 percent of respondents believe women should work less than men in order to devote more attention to household responsibilities [3]. Statistically, women spend an average of 5.27 hours per day on housework and caring for children and the elderly, compared to only 2.15 hours for men [3]. Consequently, 75 percent of working-age inactive women cited family care and household duties as the primary reason for not being employed [3]. Additionally, limited access to digital technologies and STEM fields in rural areas continues to slow women's entry into high-income sectors [3, 8].

Notable institutional progress has also been observed in promoting women's entrepreneurship. Within the World Bank's "Women, Business and the Law" assessment framework, Uzbekistan scored

95 out of 100 points on entrepreneurship support criteria, outperforming regional averages [10]. Between 2023 and 2025, additional reforms were enacted to stimulate female employment and business initiatives, including the introduction of gender-responsive mechanisms in public procurement [10]. Nevertheless, men still account for a higher share of registered limited liability company owners than women, while vulnerable employment (informal and unprotected labor) stands at 22.1 percent among women and 39.4 percent among men [2].

Table 2 presents the primary factors constraining women's economic and social participation along with mechanisms to address them.

Problem Area	Existing Statistical Disparity	Root Causes and Barriers	Strategic Solutions and Recommendations
Labor Market Participation	Women 41.2%, men 73.9%; NEET rate among young women is 42% (vs. 8.8% for young men) [2, 3]	Shortage of preschool institutions and heavy caregiving burdens [3, 11]	Expand preschool coverage and introduce flexible work schedules [3, 11]
Wage and Income Inequality	Women's wages are 34% lower than men's (vs. 20% global average) [3]	Concentration in low-paying sectors and underrepresentation in leadership [3, 9]	Promote STEM and digital careers and strengthen equal-pay enforcement [3, 8]
Housework and Caregiving Burden	Women spend 5.27 hours/day vs. 2.15 hours/day for men [3]	Traditional stereotypes (75% of respondents believe women should work less) [3]	Promote paternity leave culture and expand social care services [3, 9]
Legal Norms and Practical Enforcement	Legislation scores 82 points, whereas practical implementation perception scores 57 points [10]	Insufficient legal literacy and weak regional oversight [9, 10]	Raise public legal awareness and expand free legal and psychological aid [6, 9]

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that while Uzbekistan has built a strong institutional and legislative foundation for gender equality, ensuring that adopted norms operate fully in daily life requires a systemic socioeconomic approach [3, 10]. In the World Bank's "Women, Business and the Law" index, the contrast between a score of 82 for legal frameworks and 57 for practical implementation clearly highlights the gap between law and practice [10]. This underscores the need for rigorous local monitoring of legislative enforcement, particularly at the district and rural levels [9, 10].

Developing the preschool education system and public health infrastructure plays a decisive role in enhancing women's societal standing. Expanding the network of preschool institutions simultaneously addresses two critical objectives: on one hand, it supports early childhood development, and on the other,

it frees young mothers from full-time childcare duties so they can pursue education, engage in entrepreneurship, or return to the formal labor market [11]. Similarly, equipping young women enrolled in secondary specialized vocational institutions—such as medical and public health colleges—with modern professional competencies, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial skills will help reduce the 42 percent NEET rate among young women [3, 8].

Furthermore, supporting women's leadership in governance and decision-making systems requires dedicated attention. Although the 38 percent representation in parliament serves as a positive benchmark [2], expanding mentorship programs, talent pipelines, and transparent competitive selection mechanisms is advisable to further increase the share of women in executive positions across local government, corporate governance, and research institutions [9]. Meanwhile, collaborative educational and awareness initiatives involving academic institutions, mass media, and mahalla (community) institutions play a vital role in overcoming societal stereotypes regarding women's professional potential [3, 9].

In this context, strengthening women's health and reproductive rights assumes particular significance as an integral component of gender equality [2, 3]. Protecting maternal and child health, fostering health literacy among adolescent girls, and improving the quality of preventive screenings in primary healthcare facilities ensure longer and more active working lives for women [2, 3]. Public health colleges and medical institutions not only train qualified female specialists for the healthcare sector, but also act as leading advocates promoting healthy lifestyles and gender culture within local communities.

Moreover, amid ongoing digital transformation, expanding women's access to information technologies and remote employment opportunities is an urgent priority [8]. As noted in the United Nations Development Programme's 2025 evaluation report, while digital skills and STEM education programs contribute to women's economic independence, persistent gaps in rural internet infrastructure and digital literacy must be bridged [8]. Developing distance learning and e-commerce platforms also creates supplemental income opportunities for women engaged in household and childcare responsibilities.

Looking ahead, empirical research should be expanded at the regional level—including across the districts of Andijan Region—to regularly monitor female employment, job placement among vocational education graduates, and the gender composition of business leadership. Such data will enhance the targeting of state programs and allow support measures to be tailored to the specific sociodemographic characteristics of each region.

In summary, raising women's legal literacy and actively integrating them into socioeconomic life requires multi-level cooperation [4, 9]. Fostering a culture of gender equality within educational institutions, strengthening career guidance, and promoting responsible parenting principles among young families yield lasting positive outcomes [3, 9]. Concerted efforts by state bodies, civil society institutions, and the education system will help build a society of genuinely equal opportunities in Uzbekistan.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring gender equality and strengthening the status of women in society have become a consistent and systemic priority of state policy in Uzbekistan. The 2030 Gender Strategy, the revised Labor Code, and anti-violence legislative reforms have elevated the country's standing in international rankings and laid the groundwork for raising female parliamentary representation to 38 percent and expanding higher

education enrollment fourfold. At the same time, addressing persistent challenges—such as the 32.7 percentage-point labor force participation gap, the 34 percent wage disparity, unequal distribution of household duties, and rural digital divides—requires expanding preschool networks, guiding young women toward STEM and modern professions, providing financial support for women's entrepreneurship, and strengthening the practical enforcement of laws.

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