

# WOMEN'S POSITION IN UZBEKISTAN BEFORE AND AFTER INDEPENDENCE

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## *Introduction*

The socio-economic and cultural conditions of societies generally affect how societies deal with gender issues. The concrete historical conditions and interests of different layers of societies determine how the issues are discussed. This was clearly reflected in the history of the Central Asian nations as well. Women's position in this region, which is the former colonial periphery of imperial Russia, was mostly determined by the strict traditions and canons of Islam. The Bolshevik Revolution introduced a significant socio-cultural transformation in Central Asia. This change was reflected in gender relations and women's position in society since the Soviet authorities attempted to increase women's participation in public life to actualize the building of the socialist regime. Although we believe that the Soviet achievements should not be overlooked, the socialist experiment caused many problems as well. Some of these problems were addressed in discussions following the dissolution of the USSR.

In this article, we discuss the position of women in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. In the first part of the essay, the Soviet legacy and current gender issues are analyzed. We review the state policies concerning women and their consequences in this section. The second part of the article, on the other hand, is based on Azimova's fieldwork in the Ferghana Valley, one of the regions where traditional ways of life are largely kept alive. Here we examine the role of women as the guardians of tradition and their role in the transmission and reproduction of traditional values, particularly through rites and rituals.

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*The changing role of women in Uzbekistan*

It would be incorrect to consider that discussions on the emancipation of women started with the October Revolution. The revolution was an upheaval, a forceful penetration of the Bolshevik rule, and was supposed to have raised the question of women's emancipation in the East for the very first time. Actually, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the progressive movement of national intelligentsia, which was called "Jadidism", laid out the question of women's participation in public social and cultural life in its program of renewal and social reconstruction. Certainly, it is impossible to reject the fact that the Soviet authorities in the 1920s conducted a series of actions more acceptable to the conditions of Central Asia for the emancipation of women. These actions found support not only from the women of local nationalities, but also from the progressive part of the population. As a result of very complex work, certain success was achieved in the provision of juridical rights for women and their introduction into the production sphere.

However, in the 1930s the process of women's emancipation was halted. An authoritative-bureaucratic system was established in the countryside and the authorities announced that most of the questions were resolved although they actually were not solved at all. The woman question was declared to be a resolved one as well.

Forcefully imposed emancipation had tragic results. Without rejecting achievements such as cultural revolution, increasing educational level and the economic participation of women, we would argue that the policy of using women as a cheap labor force and equalizing their labor with that of men in the 1930s-40s had very negative consequences. This policy continued until the 1980s. The position of rural women is particularly noteworthy. They suffered from the negative consequences of cotton monoculture. The major emphasis was made on the full participation of women in public production and the most important indicator was quantity.

The problem of women's double-burden was not resolved either. In addition to their heavy household chores, women's work was equalized with that of men in terms of length and productivity expectation. Hence, the patriarchal relations were far from being dissolved; they were even strengthened to a certain extent by

leaving the old circle of family duties to women in addition to their status as worker in public production.

Women, particularly rural women, suffered from poor health conditions, high infant mortality, the lack of normal utility conditions and a shortage of kindergartens. The funds provided by the government were insufficient. All these living conditions deteriorated due to the long working hours (especially during the season of cotton collection and refining), low wages, bad labor conditions, and a shortage of drinking water and food. The conditions of women working in industry were difficult as well.

In the 1980s, the question of women's emancipation from hard physical work was still current. By the beginning of the 1980s, the share of women was higher than that of men in hard physical work in industry in 11 republics of the USSR, including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan.<sup>1</sup>

These problems were reflected in women's socio-economic and psychological problems. In 1986-1987, there were 270 cases of female self-immolation registered in Uzbekistan.<sup>2</sup> The reasons put forward included the burden of heavy household chores, the impossibility for women to realize their own potentials and articulate their needs, and hard economic conditions. At present, we do not have cases of female self-immolation and we would argue that it is due to the fact that opportunities for self-realization and employment are created for women.

To sum up, in the evaluation of Uzbek women's history, the achievements of the Soviet period should not be overlooked. On the other hand, the current problems of the women following independence should not be ignored in this climate of enthusiasm. As a matter of fact, independence has brought significant alterations in the political, economic, spiritual and cultural life of the nation. The resurgence of national self-recognition, historical traditions, and a rich cultural heritage has exerted influence upon women's position. The most important problem has been the restructuring of the economy, which has caused enormous changes in women's status.

The policies of the state concerning the woman question were reflected in a whole range of decrees and verdicts related to the

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<sup>1</sup> "Pravda". 1990. 8<sup>th</sup> of March.

<sup>2</sup> "Tashkentskaya pravda". 1988, 24<sup>th</sup> of December.

social protection of woman and family. First of all, a network of special government institutions to deal specifically with the issue was developed. In 1991, the Women's Committee of the Republic was established. However, it was unable to resolve many questions that depended on authority structures. This explains the order of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan entitled "Measures for increasing the role of women in the state and society construction of the Republic of Uzbekistan" on the 28th of November 1995, by which the new position of the deputy prime-minister of the Republic was established. This position was promoted to consolidate the position of the Women's Committees by increasing their involvement in the resolution of social and cultural development issues and their participation in administration.

Apart from this, new positions such as Deputy Chairmen of the Ministers Council of the Republic of Karakalpakistan, deputy *hakim*, head of the regional and district authority structures, were created. At the same time, the department for women's work in the Cabinet of Ministers was founded. All authority structures from top to the bottom, all mahallas and enterprises have such agencies.

Furthermore, the overall government program called "For Healthy Generations" was established. This program, along with other funds such as "Mahalla", "Navruz", and "Ecosan", conducts considerable work on issues like family planning and the education of young girls and women. It has gained recognition and created associations of women-economists, entrepreneurs, and lawyers. These associations are currently providing juridical consultations, assisting women in getting business education, providing consultations on taxation issues, and conducting research on business partners.

Moreover, the employment of women gained a specific structure in Uzbekistan in the independence years. During this time, there have been two trends in the indicators of women unemployment: The first one is the rapid growth of new jobs in the non-governmental sector. And the second one is the slow tempo of structural reorganization of female employment in the economic branches.

While reviewing the ongoing processes in female employment in Uzbekistan, it is important to analyze the demographic condition. Statistics show that between 1990-1995 the birth level was insignificantly reduced in the Republic from 33.7 to 29.8; however, the

absolute number of delivered babies remained stable. A number of important changes, especially the increase in the number of marriages and the decrease in the number of divorces, have influenced this tendency. In 1990, in Uzbekistan 217,000 marriages and 30,000 divorces were registered, and in 1995 these figures were 170,800 and 21,200 respectively.<sup>3</sup> This data tells us about the orientations in the republic for the family and enables us to forecast stability in family relationships in the future. In addition, it has serious consequences for the policy of social protection of women in the labor market.

Professional and technical changes should not be ignored in the transition period either. Strict conditions in the market can render many specialization categories obsolete in future. In particular, unqualified employees can lose the opportunity of employment, because eventually the necessity for less qualified labor in the production process would disappear. The economy of Uzbekistan today has a strong demand for qualified personnel. In 1995, a significant quantity of vacancies, i.e. 40,000 of them, required high qualifications. That is why the task of the system of ongoing professional education is preparation, retraining, and upgrading of the qualifications of women personnel.

The largest part of the female population lives in rural areas. Accordingly, the most important problem is the economic support of women engaged in the agrarian sector. A lot of things have been done concerning this issue during the independence years. All obstacles which could bother women engaged in the agrarian sector and prevent a woman from considering herself a full owner of land were legally terminated. Long term rent of land with title of inheritance and with unconditional entitlement for the use of the crops of their own labor was allowed. One million hectares of agricultural land was provided for personal farming. As a result, the self-employment of women was permitted. A range of economic privileges was established for them. They are now completely free of value-added and property taxes and are exempt from income tax for two years.

Among the problems of female employment, there is one which requires careful consideration. It is the improvement of working

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<sup>3</sup> Archive of Women's Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

conditions and job security for female employees. The issue is fully reflected in a new Labor Code, which was approved in December 1995 and put into force on the 1st of April 1996. It provides significant privileges and social protection for working women engaged in industry with heavy and hazardous labor conditions. Some of these are the right to term retirement on pension, a reduced work-week, the prolongation of labor vacation and free meals. In addition, it was prohibited to use female labor in certain types of work.

The economic support of women was expanded during these years by a number of measures for their social protection: the increase in the minimum wage, material help for poor families, the introduction of a new scale of subsidies as a means of providing economic support to families with many children, the increase to two years of the length of paid vacation given to mothers for child-care, the stimulation of private entrepreneurship for women, an increase in wages, salaries, pensions, stipends, and subsidies.

The formation of a non-governmental sector led to the emergence of new spheres for women's activities, which provide opportunities for the development of their abilities. This sector, first of all, permits women to engage in private entrepreneurship in small and medium size businesses. Today in the republic, according to the official data, out of 64 thousand there are 15 thousand women entrepreneurs—1790 of which work in Tashkent, 944 run farms, and 300 are the heads of small and joint venture private enterprises.<sup>4</sup>

However, woman entrepreneurship in the republic still bears an elite character and according to the opinion of experts has not yet acquired a mass character. Presidential orders on the creation of a support fund for private entrepreneurship and small business, on the creation of an agency for insurance protection of private entrepreneurship and small businesses, on the stimulation of the development of small and private entrepreneurship and so on form the conditions for free competition, plan additional measures for the support of entrepreneurship, and provide privileges on loans, taxes and rent. However, female entrepreneurship encounters the

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<sup>4</sup> Archive of the Women's Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

opposition of local authorities. The inertia of the old mentality is still strong.

To overcome this, as a result of a proposal made by the Women's Committee, the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic adopted a plan to create the "Women's Fund for the promotion of small business and private entrepreneurship" in 1996. This "Women's Fund", i.e. *Bunjdakor ajl*, which is the government special organization, assists women, supports their entrepreneurship activities in private medium and small size businesses, and helps create new jobs especially in the agrarian sector.

*Women's survival strategies: Their role in keeping traditions alive*

While taking into consideration the changes in Uzbek women's lives and the problems they are encountering, it is important to analyze women's organization of their daily lives, particularly in rural areas, and their survival mechanisms. As is well known, women are considered to be the guardians of traditions and must carry out the function of transmitting them to the next generation.

The daily life in Uzbek villages, particularly those of the Fergana valley, is divided into *male* and *female* areas, which is reflected in the segregation of space. In the *ichkari*, inside yard, women are separated from men when they have wedding, burial, and other rites whereas the *tashkari* (outside yard) is the men's domain. This division of space into two parts is obvious in all spheres of the Uzbek family life and daily activities. The transmission of information about ethnic and religious traditions occurs in the female domain, *ichkari*, by means of observation and participation in the rites.

A village in Uzbekistan consists of a network of neighborhoods, which are called *mahalla*, in which the traditional life of the Uzbek people goes on. Each mahalla has its own government and traditions. Neighborhood relations are carried out by groups of women. Naturally, women of one mahalla mix with those of others. However, we can gain the fullest picture of the activity of these women's groups by taking a single one as an example.

Women's collective life is centered on participation in family events, public and family rites, decisions concerning children's upbringing, the organization of women's private life and their pos-

terity. When we take a closer look at female gatherings, we can see that the oldest generation (women aged 55-80) gathers during the celebration of religious rites. Moreover, they take part in all cycles of the rite system. As a token of respect for their life experience, they are invited to all events. Thanks to their presence, the importance of these events increases. Not a single family event can be conducted in the mahalla without women of this age group. The exceptions are the rites where representatives of other age groups gather together. This group plays an important part in the burial rite, as the keepers of the traditional religious legacy. Particularly in this cycle, Islam and pre-islamic elements are the most clearly expressed.

During wedding rites, the presence of this female group is also desirable, as they give advice about how to conduct the celebration. Who else could be better informed about traditional rites, which are typical for the Uzbek village of the Fergana valley. Every family tries as much as they can to conduct their rites in accordance with all the traditional standards, because public opinion demands it.

Some of the most respected women of the oldest age group, together with other participants of the wedding procession, accompany the bride to her new home. They stay there until the next day to conduct the rite of *yuzotchi*, the uncovering of the face. The children's rites, *beshtoy* and *chilya-guzaron*, the rites in honor of a newborn child, also cannot take place without their participation.

We can divide the next age groups into two subgroups: the 40-50 year olds and the 50-55 year olds. The latter subgroup takes an active part in religious rites. They, with their contemporaries and young women, take part in the preparations for celebrations, such as cooking meals for the guests. Some women of the former subgroup, who are near neighbors, or the relatives of a hostess, as a rule do not sit during the religious rites but serve the guests instead.

From the group of women 40-50 years old is chosen the *yanga*. She is an adviser and a mediator between the bride and groom. The *yanga* always has blood ties with the bride—she is either an aunt or the uncle's spouse or a daughter-in-law of this age group. The *yanga* accompanies the bride and stays with her during the first days. She helps the bride adjust to her new home, but she is not present for more than two or three days. Most importantly, the *yanga* is present on the wedding night, when she is a witness to the



girl's virginity. Upon informing the relatives about it, she receives a present from the groom's mother. On the whole, we can say that the *yanga* carries out the role of a second mother in the bride's life.

The aforesaid reveals the main function of middle aged women: the presence and active participation in religious rites. Besides this, they also make other preparations for the rites; e.g. *kurpa-khashar*, making baked goods for the *fotiha-toy* and other rituals.

The third group of contemporaries is the young women. They are those who have recently married and have not yet reached the age of 40. In public life, they carry out the preparatory work for the celebrations: cleaning the house and yard, cooking meals, and preparing the *dastarkhans* and so on. All work or services are their responsibility. Sometimes, the *yanga* is chosen from this group according to family relations.

Every age group differs not only by degree of activity in the rites, but also by their relations to them. Old women, whose children are already married, usually pay the most attention to the religious or burial rites. This is how they prepare for life after death. Middle aged women are occupied with wedding rites and children's rites, so they need to know everything about them in order to carry them out according to existing traditions. They also take part in religious rites, which have a prominent place in the traditions of the Fergana Valley. Women of the third group, dream of conducting their own rites as well as other people's. At this age, it is not secret that they are preparing for the *sunnat-toy* for their sons (the circumcision), then they will compile a dowry for their daughters and their future daughters-in-law.

We should note that every age group listens to the advice of their elders. At the same time, such rites as preparing *sumalyak*, wedding rites, visiting holy places, and others require the presence of women of all age groups.

Rites in the mahalla are carried out by certain groups of inhabitants, who form mahalla councils. Two women are also included in this council: *otincha* and *dasturkhonchi*. These two figures play an active role in all traditional events. The *otincha* is a woman who knows the Arabic script, who can read religious books and who strictly follows all Islamic regulations. She is an active participant in the burial ritual cycle and religious rites. As a rule, she teaches the family in which the misfortune occurred how to execute the rites

and how to behave during mourning. She necessarily attends all ceremonies. During the burial rites, she reads religious books.

*The dasturkhonchi* is a very energetic woman, learned in traditions and at the same time a very helpful person. She holds this position until old age. She plays an active role in all wedding ceremonies. Her duty is to inform the women's part of the community (mahalla) about all coming of wedding celebrations. For instance, she gathers members of the community to prepare provisions, to bake bread, etc. When the wedding is about to start, her activity increases. At the wedding party after all the women have gathered in the women's side, she entertains everybody, accepts gifts, and makes sure that every guest is attended to and given something to eat. In addition, the mothers of both the bride and the bridegroom discuss with her all the stages of the wedding ceremony and all the preliminary preparations.

When comparing women with men, one can see that it is the women who are the keepers of traditional customs and rituals. Their active role is the result of the fact that men rarely interfere in the conduct of the rites. Their role is to support the financial expenses for the events. One may explore the rites much better by receiving information from women than from men. Besides, quite unlike the way that males participate in the rites, women have their own traditions: burial, which is connected with revival of nature in spring; wedding, *yuz-otchi*; children's rites, i.e. *chilya-guzaron*, *beshtik-toy*; and others.

In recent years, much has been written about the daily life of women and of women's rights within the family. However, little attention has been paid to the fact that women have always sought to lessen their burdens in everyday life through the help of other women. Women spend the majority of their lives within the family. Their time is consumed by family cares, which narrow their circle of acquaintances and their possibilities for coming into contact with contemporary knowledge and culture. Women, much more so than men, have preserved the system of traditions and religious rites, which includes both Islamic and pre-Islamic elements.

After Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the legal Islamic clergy voiced disapproval of several of these pre-Islamic traditions. Despite this, women of the Fergana valley continue to practice them; in fact, these rites are more widely followed than before. Actually, Uzbek women consider them as

their original ethnic rituals. These rites, called *Bibi-seshanba* and *mushkulkushad*, are celebrated by old women on purpose to facilitate the solution of problems in the private lives of women of all age groups.

Throughout periods times when social and economic shocks occur, women strictly maintain traditional rites and customs. Their interaction with each other during the observance of these rites helps them feel more comfortable. The point is that women have not retreated into their families. In the community environment, they find support from other members. Today as before, an important function is carried out in women's world: the transmission of the spiritual heritage to the next generations.

### *Conclusion*

Although the government is sensitive about the gender issues and has developed policies addressing women's problems, there are still many problems due to the hardships of transition. First of all, there is the problem of female unemployment. According to the official statistics, the ratio of women in the overall number of unemployed was 48.3% in 1994. In 1995, 115 thousand women were registered on the labor exchange.<sup>5</sup>

The other problem is the decrease in the number of educated women, although women in Uzbekistan have a very high level of education on the whole. The share of women in high and middle educational institutions was 41% in 1991, whereas it dropped to 39% in 1994. The percentage of educated women in industry has significantly dropped from 25.4% in 1992 to 18.7% in 1994.<sup>6</sup>

There has been a reduction in the number of women working in fields such as science and scientific services. Low wages and salaries in this area led to a 50% decrease in the number of women. A significant decrease has also been observed in areas such as trade and the service sector (from 200.900 in 1990 to 168.700 in 1993).

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<sup>5</sup> Ubaidullaev R.A. "Problemi zanyatosti jenshin Uzbekistana i puti ih resheniay v usloviyah perehoda k rinku" Uzbekistan: strukturnie preobrazovaniya v economice I zanyatost.

<sup>6</sup> Uzbekistan: strukturnie preobrazovaniya v economice I zanyatost jenshin. Tashkent, 1996, page 49.

However, the increase in the share of economically active women results in equilibrium. At the present time, there are a lot of women working in new spheres like the private sector and small businesses. Economic difficulties push women into the market, and it is important to note that this, in turn, naturally exerts influence on internal family relations. Women, whose earnings are the core income in the family budget, have a higher status.

Therefore, we see that there are a lot of problems yet to be resolved. Many of them are the heritage from the former Soviet regime; others have been brought about by market economy. However, the discussion of gender issues has dramatically changed in comparison with the Soviet period.

Uzbekistan, by virtue of having its own way for national, political, social, economic, and spiritual development, provides itself with free self-determination in all spheres of life. For the full development of the republic, it is necessary to have the full participation of women in these processes. They constitute 51% of the population and the main labor force. It should be stated that, notwithstanding the difficulties, the feeling of independence and freedom, the development of cultural and national traditions, and the restoration of an objective history of a nation help to overcome economic obstacles. We believe this can best be understood by those nations, like Uzbekistan, which suffered from totalitarianism and dependence for many years.