

WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY OF UZBEKISTAN: BETWEEN STEREOTYPES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the need to increase the role of women in the country's economy and eliminate the causes of gender inequality in the issue of wages among women.

INTRODUCTION

Today in Uzbekistan, women play an increasingly prominent role in all spheres of life – from economics and politics to culture and education.

They actively participate in government, public organizations, make a significant contribution to the development of industry, agriculture, the social sphere and, of course, to the education of the younger generation..

A significant step in supporting women's initiatives was the "National Program for Increasing Women's Activity for 2022–2026," developed on the basis of the "UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." This document provided a powerful impetus for strengthening the social protection system, ensuring women's health, creating equal conditions for education, and unlocking girls' scientific potential. The program also aims to enhance the role of women in society and public administration. [1]

Issues of employment, gender equality, and equal pay remain pressing not only for Uzbekistan but also globally.

The path to gender equality in Uzbekistan's economy remains challenging.

However, the measures taken by the Government – expanding educational opportunities, supporting women's entrepreneurship, and involving women in management – provide grounds for optimism. The key is to transform conversations about equal opportunity into action, so that the labor potential of Uzbek women becomes not a reserve, but a driving force for the country's economic development.

Gender equality has long ceased to be a purely social or humanitarian category. In the modern world, it has become a factor in economic competitiveness and sustainable development.

For Uzbekistan, which is undergoing modernization, the issue of women's inclusion in the economy is strategic. Uzbekistan cannot afford to ignore the potential of half the population when the future of its innovation and social progress is at stake.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has made significant strides toward strengthening women's rights: laws are being improved, and government policies are changing. But the reality remains complex.

One of the key causes of the wage gap remains occupational segregation based on gender. According to World Bank data for 2022, women earn only 66% of what men earn on average. By comparison, the global figure is approximately 80%.

This indicator largely reflects professional segregation - when "female" professions (education, healthcare, services) are traditionally paid lower than "male" industries (construction, transport, industry).

According to a survey by the Institute for Forecasting and Macroeconomic Research, between 20% and 50% of respondents believe that a wife should earn less than her husband to "maintain harmony in the family." Moreover, these views are equally prevalent in both cities and villages. [1]

These attitudes inevitably impact women's position in the labor market. Women in Uzbekistan devote 22% of their time to unpaid housework and childcare, while men spend only 9%. [1] As a result, women simply don't have time to build a career, which leads to gender inequality both in the family and in the professional environment.

Most women prefer to work in the public sector, where stability and social benefits seem more reliable. However, this is where salaries are typically lowest. The lowest salaries are found in the social sector, where most women work, while high-income fields such as IT or finance are dominated by men.

World Bank experts point out that social stereotypes and discriminatory norms entrenched in public consciousness play a key role here. The perception of professions as "unsuitable" for women limits their opportunities in high-paying and managerial sectors.

These structural differences create an economic divide that cannot be addressed by a single sector or reform; a holistic strategy encompassing education, the labor market, entrepreneurship, and the social sphere is needed.

Nevertheless, in the New Uzbekistan, gender equality is becoming a top priority of state policy. Laws and regulations are being adopted aimed at supporting women, expanding their rights and opportunities, and strengthening their role in society. Among them are the "Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality by 2030," the "Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men," and the ratification of the "ILO Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women." [1]

The government is also taking concrete steps in education and entrepreneurship: quotas for female students in universities have been increased, free master's degree programs are being provided, and preferential conditions for starting one's own business are being created.

However, objective challenges remain on women's path to economic independence. Despite significant reforms and government efforts, women's low economic activity in Uzbekistan remains a pressing social problem.

According to The Global Economy, by the end of 2024, the economic activity rate for women was 39.41%, while for men it was 72.27%. [1] This gap demonstrates that despite positive changes in recent years, women's participation in the country's economic life remains significantly lower.

Experts from the Institute for Forecasting and Macroeconomic Research note that women's economic activity typically begins after age 30—after marriage, maternity leave, and childcare.

This is explained by the specificity of the family model: the average age of marriage in Uzbekistan for women is 22.3 years, for men - 27.1 years. [1]

Many young women soon begin maternity leave. Employers often view women as less flexible employees, fearing frequent sick leave and absences. Frequent interruptions associated with childbirth and child rearing are one of the key reasons for women's low representation in the labor market.

At the same time, men, traditionally, are less likely to take advantage of their legal right to paternity leave and are willing to work overtime and travel. This difference in expectations creates gender inequality in the workplace, where biological and social factors become economic barriers.

Gender equality is not just a slogan, but a real path to sustainable societal development. After all, when women have the opportunity to realize their potential, not only they but the entire country benefits.

Increasing women's economic activity is not only a matter of social justice but also a driver of economic growth. Global experience shows that women's participation in the labor market directly increases GDP and stimulates innovative development.

For Uzbekistan, key areas for addressing this problem could include:

developing flexible forms of employment, including remote work and part-time work; creating conditions for combining careers and motherhood—developing a system of preschool institutions and support programs for young mothers;

Improving women's financial literacy and entrepreneurial activity;

Reforming the wage system with an emphasis on equal pay for equal work.

The first step toward gender equality in the economy is creating equal opportunities for professional advancement. It's important for girls and women to have access to quality education.

Equally important are retraining and digital skills development programs, which can open the door for women to higher-paying sectors. After all, the modern economy is a knowledge economy, where gender and age are irrelevant, and competence becomes key.

The next focus is the development of women's entrepreneurship. For many women, starting their own business becomes a means of financial independence, professional self-fulfillment, and social engagement. But to do this, they need affordable loans, guarantee funds, and business incubators. Supporting women's startups not only increases family incomes but also creates new jobs, stimulating regional economic growth.

The problem cannot be solved solely by supporting businesses. Labor market reforms are needed: fair pay, transparent hiring procedures, access to career advancement, and non-discrimination. Flexible forms of employment that allow women to combine work and family responsibilities are also essential.

As long as childcare remains the primary responsibility of women, their participation in the labor market will be limited. Therefore, developing a network of crèches, kindergartens, and social care services is not only a social policy but also a powerful economic tool.

Women's representation in decision-making plays a special role. Economic policy, budgeting, and the management of companies and organizations—all these processes become more effective and diverse when women participate.

This isn't a question of quotas, but rather a question of quality management. Women in leadership bring new ideas, a different perspective on problems, and more sustainable strategic solutions.

However, structural reforms always go hand in hand with a reform of social consciousness. As long as stereotypes about "traditional roles" persist, women will face invisible but persistent barriers. Therefore, it is necessary to work with the media, educational institutions, and communities to create a culture where women's participation in the economy is perceived as the norm, not the exception.

Gender equality in the economy is not an abstract ideal or an imposed standard. It is the path to a strong, sustainable, and modernized Uzbekistan. It is an opportunity for every woman to realize her talent, and for the country to strengthen its competitiveness in a rapidly changing world.

Only by drawing on its full human potential can Uzbekistan confidently move forward—toward innovation, social well-being, and long-term development.

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