

378(575.1)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.46991/ai.2022.7.1.192-201>

**FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN:  
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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Although women are generally considered good leaders and educators, they are not always the ones who occupy leadership positions in various fields, which is the case in many countries around the world and also in Uzbekistan. The aim of the paper is to examine the significance of women leaders in education in the context of Uzbekistan which is a developing country that is striving to succeed in many areas by improving the quality of education. The study reflects on the status of Uzbek women in society, including the self-perception of their rights in the family and society, the importance of female leadership, and the role of female leaders in higher education. On the basis of the presented analysis, the opportunities and challenges of female leadership in field of higher education in Uzbekistan are discussed. The paper concludes with recommendations for further development of women leadership in higher education. The considerations presented in the paper are thus guided by the following research questions: "What is the status of women in the society of Uzbekistan?", "Are women encouraged to take leadership positions in Uzbekistan?", "What problems need to be addressed to develop the field of 'female leadership in education' in Uzbekistan?" The paper explores these questions by reviewing the relevant literature published internationally and in the country. The findings of the study and the recommendations can contribute to the development of gender equality and female leadership in education in Uzbekistan.

**Keywords:** status of Uzbek women, gender equality, female educational leadership, development of female leadership, Uzbekistan

**Introduction.** The concepts of "gender equality", "women's empowerment" or "leadership" have become a popular topic for hot debate (DohaDebate; Glendon Global Debate; independent.co.uk), conferences (coe.int; coleurope.eu; un.org; unwomen.org; womenstudies.info) and they are being explored by interdisciplinary researchers (eige.europa.eu; ncbi.nlm.nih.gov; tandfonline.com; pewresearch.org). Over 25 international organizations such as UN Women, Association for Women's Rights in Development, Womankind Worldwide and others focus on women's rights and support around the world (humanrightscareers.com). Although we can observe the improvements in women's empowerment and gender equality, especially in developed countries, this area is still under-researched in Uzbekistan. Research has been mainly concentrated on topics related to the status of women in Muslim society and their role in families and the challenges they face

during or before the post-Soviet period [8; 9; 13; 14]. Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, due to the economic crisis and the political regime in the country, very few studies were conducted within the area of leadership with the focus on women leadership in the last twenty years. However, it is worth stressing that since 2017, the reforms that have taken place in the economic, social, human rights and education sectors across the country have had a positive impact on universities and researchers, regarding the freedom of expression of researchers and the accessibility of studies, broadening of the educational offer and greater possibilities for students to choose from these offers [4].

Women make up almost half of Uzbekistan's population which is equal to 49,7% (gender.stat.uz), and empowering women to become active members of society and contribute to the country's development could help to solve many economic and social problems as it is rightly pointed out by UN Women that *“Increasing women’s and girls’ educational attainment contributes to women’s economic empowerment and more inclusive economic growth”* and *“empowering women in the economy and closing gender gaps in the world of work are key to achieving the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development”* (unwomen.org). Although Uzbek women are highly encouraged to acquire knowledge, learn about their rights and receive support from the government, the problems in families, neighborhoods, workplaces and society show that there are still many areas that need improvement. Regarding the significance of the proposed topic of female leadership in education, especially in higher education, in Uzbekistan and the lack of the research on it, the paper focuses on opportunities and challenges connected with female educational leadership in Uzbekistan.

The paper is structured in this way, that firstly the status of Uzbek women in the present times, and the statistical portray of female Uzbek leaders, which includes those in the sphere of education are described. Secondly, the importance of female leadership and the role of female leaders in higher education are analyzed. Later the opportunities and challenges for Uzbek women on the path to leadership are discussed. The paper concludes with recommendations for further development of women leadership in higher education.

**Status of women in Uzbek society.** After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan faced economic crisis and women became the main victims in the process of educational development. Due to reduction of funds many schools were closed, which had a potentially negative impact on the preparation of children. An observable increase of paid services in secondary and tertiary education caused that access to compulsory and tertiary education has decreased significantly. Even teachers started to leave the profession because of poor working conditions and reduction in salaries, coupled with insecurity of payment [15]. In addition, women's participation in higher education declined in the early period due to a combination of factors, including the rising cost of education and parents' reluctance to allow their daughters to study in urban areas. As girls traditionally marry in their late teens or early 20s, the chances of their participation in higher education were low [8].

When Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017, many reforms began in various areas, especially education. The number of universities and their fixed places was increased, tuition fees were reduced, and part-time and evening studies were allowed again. This in turn helped young women who were given the opportunity to get higher education without interrupting their families, children and family responsibilities. Lower tuition fees in tertiary education also contribute to a significant increase in female students. As people become more aware of the value of tertiary education, families' attitudes

towards it are changing. The family wants a daughter-in-law with higher education because this way she has a high potential to contribute to the family budget [12].

The formation of the legal culture of individuals has become one of the priorities of the policy of Uzbekistan. It is necessary to ensure that all segments of the population, including women, have access to legal knowledge, have a high level of legal awareness and are able to apply their legal knowledge in their daily lives. The uniqueness of women's legal culture is reflected in the fact that men's attitudes towards women, recognition of gender equality and appreciation of women's unique contribution to the reproductive function are also important issues. The results of a sociological study on "Women, Rights and Violence" conducted by the "Centre for Social Thought" have helped shed light on this issue. According to the respondents, the main reasons why women are not equal in society and in the family are women's financial dependence on men, the fact that men are seen as the head of the family, the fact that men work in high positions and receive high salaries, and the fact that women face problems in recruitment and promotion in the profession. When asked if women are legally discriminated against in Uzbek society, 57.5 per cent of respondents answered that women are not discriminated against, but 33.4 per cent believe that women are often discriminated against at work and in the family. In addition, the survey found that one in five women took no action when their rights were violated. When assessing the level of legal knowledge, the majority of women (66.2) rated their own level of legal knowledge as average, 7.7 per cent as high, 17.9 per cent as low and 2.8 per cent as very low [18].

According to the research, the reasons for violence are as follows:

- Poor standard of living in the current socio-economic crisis in society,
- drugs, alcoholism,
- the low level of general spirituality, intelligence and education,
- society's indifference to violence not only in the family but in general,
- Economic inequality and the dependent position of women in the family.

Some outdated national traditions and inadequacies hinder the formation of a legal culture for women. The workload imposed on girls in the family, early marriage, their choice of profession, education, prohibition to rise to higher positions, inability to manage their hard-earned money are just some examples [18].

In conclusion, it must be admitted that public opinion in the republic regarding attitudes towards women, their place and role in society and in the family still does not meet democratic standards. Therefore, the spiritual and moral values associated with the education of true democracy in the minds of millions of people and a significant increase in the level of women's legal cultures must be maintained.

**Female leaders in Uzbekistan – statistical portray.** In recent years, the Republic of Uzbekistan has become an active subject of international law focusing on the provisions of women's rights. It is noted that gender equality is being sought to be ensured following the results of the elections to the Oliy Majlis (Parliament of the Republic of Uzbekistan) and local councils in December 2019. After the elections, the share of female deputies in the total number of deputies in the legislative chamber is 32% and the share of female senators in local senators is 25%. According to this indicator, the Parliament of Uzbekistan ranks 44th out of 190 parliaments in the world [16]. Women have been appointed to high positions in the executive and law enforcement agencies. For example, 16 women currently hold senior positions in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and 6 women have been appointed to the post of

governor. This year, for the first time in the country's history, a woman was appointed Uzbekistan's ambassador to a foreign country. According to the State Committee of Statistics, women constitute 49.7 per cent of the total population in 2021. Of the women, only 13.2 per cent have higher education, 52.8 per cent have specialized secondary education and 34 per cent have secondary education. The share of women in total economic activities shows that women are mainly employed in sectors such as education and health, then domestic and hospitality, wholesale and retail trade, and finally manufacturing, based on 2020 data. The share of women among administrative employees in government organizations is 26.5 per cent in 2020, a slight decrease from 2017. The proportion of businesses owned by women is 38 per cent across the Republic in 2021, a steady increase from 21.9 per cent in 2018. The 2020 statistics also show that the number of female lecturers and professors at higher education institutions has also increased, reaching 44.1%. In addition, the data also shows that women are active researchers in the fields of natural sciences, medicine, social sciences, humanities and philology, while male researchers are also mainly active in natural sciences, technical sciences, social sciences and mathematics. It is also worth noting that the number of female PhD students increased dramatically from 109 to 1040 between the years 2009-2020 (State Committee, 2021<sup>1</sup>).

The representation of women as leaders in the Ministry of Public Education system is as follows: The percentage of female teachers at the primary level is 89.5% and at the secondary level this figure reaches 64.4%. The share of female leaders in district (city) departments of methodological support and organization of public education is 14.4%, and at the level of secondary school headmasters - 34.4% (Khodjaeva, 2020<sup>2</sup>). The higher up in the management hierarchy, the more the vertical segregation of women is reflected. If in pre-school educational institutions women are in charge - 97% - then in higher education institutions and lyceums men begin to dominate - 87%, and there is only one female rector [12].

**Female Leadership – importance.** Leadership takes place in a social setting. It is influenced by both individual and group behavior, resulting in a cultural-psychological relationship. Female leadership has become the focus of much research on leadership. Statistics show that women are still underrepresented in high-level positions. Researchers also study the effectiveness of female leaders, the differences in leadership styles of both genders, and employee satisfaction with male and female leaders.

In order to successfully change women's access to leadership, there is a need to influence on the way women view their status in society and how society supports women's advancement into leadership positions [1].

There are at least three themes that could be used to explain why more women leaders are needed: equality, the need for women to be able to speak their minds and meritocracy. As far as equality is concerned, women and men should have equal opportunities to advance in their careers and reach higher positions, especially when it is no longer a matter of ineptitude. More female leaders and closing the gender gap in leadership would enable organizations to innovate and accumulate more knowledge. The nature of femininity and masculinity leads to differences in leadership between men and women. The female leadership style emphasizes cooperation, empowerment and relationship building, while the male leadership style

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gender.stat.uz/en/>

<sup>2</sup> «Bizda gender kamsitishlar yo‘q deyish — o‘z-o‘zimizni aldashdir» — Sayyora Xodjayeva – Gazeta.uz

emphasizes independence and assertiveness. Female leadership is more transformative, according to researchers. Despite the widespread belief that female leadership style is more relationship-oriented and male leadership style is more task-oriented, feminists have written a considerable amount of literature arguing for the distinctiveness of female leadership style and the usefulness of their leadership style in different circumstances. As a result, the female leadership style has gained prestige as today's leadership preferences demand cooperation and collaboration [6]. It is therefore crucial that organizations harness the expertise, skills and information that women leaders possess.

**The role of female leaders in higher education.** Leading higher education institutions is a difficult task for a number of reasons, the first of which is globalization. Globalization and its effects have put enormous pressure on higher education, increasing the complexity of these institutions both globally and nationally [5]. It encourages developing countries to increase their investment in higher education. Leadership in higher education has become more difficult due to information technology and increased diversity, leading to new expectations. Second, leadership in higher education is complicated by the increasing demands of stakeholders with different needs, such as faculty, students and administrators. These competing demands on leaders exacerbate the problems associated with their role. In light of this, Madden (2005) emphasizes the importance of women leaders in higher education to improve these institutions. Leadership must evolve in response to changing demands. In general, gender equality can lead to a number of positive socio-economic outcomes. For example, more than 57% of respondents to a survey conducted by the International Labor Organization in 13,000 companies in 70 countries confirmed that gender diversity improves business results. Nearly three-quarters of companies promoting gender diversity in government reported profit increases of 5% to 20%. (International Labour Organization, 2020<sup>1</sup>)

**Challenges.** Since it is common knowledge that children receive their first education in the family, it is important to begin reforms primarily in the family environment. One of the difficulties in raising a girl leader in a family is that for all parents their child seems to be the strongest and smartest, but gender differences can have an impact. There are stereotypes in Uzbek parents, as if a girl has no leadership qualities. If the girl's initiative is not supported, goals are not set and aspirations are not considered, the girl may have difficulty finding her own place in society in the future. A person who embodies the qualities of a leader puts the interests of others, the interests of the community, before her own, thus fulfilling the great task of building a free, democratic society [3].

UNICEF's report, Rise and Youth Union states, "The key to solving the youth problem is to create access to education and employment" (Gazeta.Uz, 2020). According to a survey, 74% of youth problems in Uzbekistan are related to education and 61.8% to employment. The majority of young people (54.6%) do not study, are not employed or do not take up vocational training after leaving school. The figure is quite high for women over 18, and 74% for women aged 25-30. It is important to ensure the equal participation of young women and their active participation in the economic, social and political life of society by changing their lifestyle [7]. Another problem is that due to the early age of marriage in Uzbekistan, active learning and working life and reproductive age go hand in hand among Uzbek women. During this period,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thediversitycouncil.com/ilo-women-in-business-and-management/>

women are caught between choosing a specific profession, acquiring professional skills and starting a family and raising children. Research on this topic has shown that in modern societies, women's desire to balance their personal and professional lives leads to an increase in social problems [2].

The next challenge for women can be found in the workplace. The heads of companies and institutions, under various pretexts, try not to hire women with children or girls who might become mothers in the future. Most people, especially managers of different ranks, have the stereotype of considering women as unreliable workers. The seemingly good provision in the labor legislation that gives a woman leave to take care of a child up to the age of three turns against her, as neither the state nor the organization makes payments and kindergartens refuse to take in children under the age of three. A woman with a child is faced with the choice of either staying with the child or going to work and leaving the baby unattended [19].

The only female rector in Uzbekistan, Gulchekhira Rikhsieva, the rector of Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, explained in her interview the special aspects of being a female leader in Uzbekistan. She mentioned that as an Uzbek woman, she experienced the same challenges as other Uzbek women in her marriage. She explained that as a mother of two children, she did not forget her family responsibilities during her doctoral studies. While raising the children, she found the strength to write her dissertation. She also highlighted the support she received from her mother-in-law, who was proud of her achievements and gave her moral support. She also pointed out that there were many female graduates from her university who wanted to pursue a PhD program and find their own place in society and in the family. There were also many female students with young children who were doing independent research and worked at a distance with their supervisors despite their young age (Rakhmatova, 2020<sup>1</sup>).

**Opportunities.** In order to promote gender equality and improve social conditions for women, the Presidential Decree of 12 June 2020 "On the parameters of the state order for admission to higher education institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the academic year 2020/2021" provided for a number of benefits for women's study at higher education institutions. Low-income widows, single mothers raising two or more children under the age of 14, daughters of women living apart from other relatives, homeless women renting a flat can benefit from this privilege by acquiring knowledge at state universities free of charge [17].

Reforms to improve the role of women in social and political life and entrepreneurship should also be recognized. These include, for example, reforms to secure women's employment, improve their working conditions, support young women in rural areas, and prepare and support women as entrepreneurs and leaders in various fields. This can be seen in the growing number of women working in key areas of political, social and economic life in the country. On 1 May 2019, the Women's Entrepreneurship Centers were established, which have the status of a non-governmental non-profit organization. The main tasks of the centers, in cooperation with the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations, are to retrain and support the employment of women on long-term parental leave and in difficult economic situations in the labor market; to involve women in the centers who want to engage in entrepreneurial activities and to support them in organizing entrepreneurial activities; to

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<sup>1</sup> Rahbar bo'lish osonmi? O'zbekistondagi yagona ayol-ректор bilan intervyu - 07.03.2020, Sputnik O'zbekiston (sputniknews-uz.com)

develop women's skills in business organization and management, to provide advisory support in the preparation of business ideas, including the preparation of a business plan, the selection and application of different tax systems, accounting; organizing training on the use of modern information technologies and other areas; where appropriate, assisting women entrepreneurs to allocate premises in vacant community buildings; providing advice and practical support to women entrepreneurs and women wishing to start their own businesses, including finding reliable partners, assistance in purchasing mini-technologies and equipment, assistance in selling the products produced; Registration of women artisans engaged in informal activities; practical support in obtaining taxes and other benefits through membership in the Craftsman organization, and in obtaining low-interest loans. Another example is the legal solution to the painful problem of women's employment. In particular, Article 224 of the Uzbek Labor Code prohibits refusing to hire or reducing the salary of a pregnant woman with a child under the age of three. Ensuring equal rights and opportunities for men and women in education will also help to strengthen the role of women in society. The adoption of the "Strategy for Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2020-2030" and the beginning of its implementation can be observed and witnessed by the nation of Uzbekistan through many reforms in different spheres [10].

**Recommendations.** The paper focuses on the challenges and opportunities for women leaders in Uzbekistan. It can be observed that gender equality reforms in many areas started only a few years ago. The positive impact of reforms in education and employment on gender equality should be seen in the near future. At the moment, the challenges are still persistent and the status of women in Uzbekistan is not yet at the desired level. It can be concluded that the majority of both men and women still have the obsolete ideas about gender equality in the Uzbek family and society. Although the number of women leaders within the field of higher education is increasing, it is still very important to raise the awareness and knowledge of women to inspire them to become future leaders and contribute to the growth of society. Due to the small number of highly educated women in Uzbekistan, most of them are not sufficiently informed about their rights and opportunities. Therefore, it is appropriate to highlight the importance of education in this area. Lack of knowledge and ignorance among women are the main problems hindering the growth of female leaders. Increasing the number of women leaders in education can bring many benefits to society, considering that education is a key to success. Taking into account the mentioned problems in gender equality and women leadership, the following recommendations are given:

- To organize motivational campaigns for women to boost their self-confidence;
- To strengthen women's self-confidence and self-motivation in the family and society by educating them about human rights;
- To ensure the implementation of decrees and orders of government agencies on gender equality;
- To create leadership trainings or even schools for future female leaders;
- To organize bias trainings for all leaders of both genders;
- To encourage experienced and knowledgeable women to take up leadership positions in higher educational institutions;
- To set goal at all governmental and private educational institutions to create an environment where women can flourish.

To conclude, it is important to highlight the great potential of women in all areas of life. Encouraging them to develop their personal and professional skills and to know their rights would be great asset in their families and to society.

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## ЖЕНСКОЕ ЛИДЕРСТВО В ОБЛАСТИ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ: ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ И ВЫЗОВЫ

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### Аннотация

Несмотря на то, что женщины обычно считаются хорошими руководителями и педагогами, они не всегда занимают руководящие должности в различных областях; это происходит во многих странах мира, в том числе и в Узбекистане, который является развивающейся страной, стремящейся к успеху во многих областях за счет повышения качества образования. Целью статьи является изучение важности роли женщин-лидеров в сфере образования в Узбекистане. В исследовании отражено положение узбекских женщин в обществе, в том числе понимание своих прав в семье и обществе, важность женского лидерства и роль женщин-лидеров в высшем образовании. На основе представленного анализа рассматриваются возможности и вызовы женского лидерства в сфере высшего образования в Узбекистане. Статья завершается рекомендациями по дальнейшему развитию женского лидерства в сфере высшего образования. В основе исследования – поиск ответов на такие вопросы как: «Каково положение женщин в обществе в Узбекистане?», «Созданы ли условия для того, чтобы женщины могли занимать руководящие должности в Узбекистане?», «Какие проблемы необходимо решить для развития сферы «женского лидерства в образовании» в Узбекистане?» В статье эти вопросы изучаются на основе обзора соответствующей литературы, опубликованной за рубежом и в стране. Полученные выводы и рекомендации могут способствовать обеспечению гендерного равенства и женского лидерства в системе образования в Узбекистане.

**Ключевые слова:** положение узбекских женщин, гендерное равенство, женское образовательное лидерство, развитие женского лидерства; Узбекистан.

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*Получено: 14.03.2022*

*Рассмотрено: 25.03.2022*

*Принято: 06.04.2022*

*Received 14.03.2022*

*Reviewed 25.03.2022*

*Accepted 06.04. 2022*