

### **Economic Reform, Poverty and Women**

#### **Economic Reform**

Since independence in 1991, the Government of Uzbekistan has followed a path of gradual economic transition to a market-based economy. The rate and depth of Uzbekistan's economic and political liberalization have been modest and tightly controlled, as the Government sought to move cautiously to establish a market economy, while at the same time maintaining social expenditures. Privatization has been very slow and prices more strictly controlled than in other Central Asian republics (CARs). Nevertheless, while macroeconomic control was achieved more slowly than in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, with inflation only dropping below 50 percent in 1997, economic growth has been higher here than in these neighboring states where reform has been more comprehensive.<sup>1</sup>

The transition to a market-based economy brings profound challenges for this former centrally planned Soviet economy. To a very high level, Uzbekistan's economy was integrated within the larger regional and Soviet economy during the Soviet era. This has implications for Uzbekistan's ability to operate as an autonomous economic and political unit in the post-independence era. The reform path followed has further consequences on the pace and success of this transition period. Both the transition itself and the particular mechanisms introduced to facilitate this transition have an impact on the socioeconomic status of women in Uzbekistan, which this report seeks to address.

During the Soviet-era, Uzbekistan's economy was only one part of a larger Soviet economy. Uzbekistan's role within the Soviet economy was that of primary producer. Primary products (particularly cotton) and natural resources (notably gold) dominated Uzbekistan's economy then and now. This division of labor resulted in underdeveloped and highly specialized industrialization (that is, highly concentrated in cotton-related industries but at a relatively low level of technological sophistication). Agriculture continues to play a pivotal role in the overall economy, accounting for about 25 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), 40 per cent of employment, and 60 per cent of exports. Other than cotton, Uzbekistan's main export commodities are mineral resources such as gold, silver, copper, other precious metals, uranium and natural gas. Uzbekistan thus depends economically upon a few export commodities, which makes the country vulnerable to world market prices of cotton and gold.

Since independence, the Government has tried to balance the transition to a market economy by retaining aspects of a command economy. Government policy has been based on two main principles: firstly, on the creation of a favorable economic environment for the development of individual and small business activities, and secondly, on the provision of support to vulnerable groups of the population. Government policies and the slow pace of reform have at times acted as barriers to the growth of industrialization and small and medium enterprises

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<sup>1</sup> This has led to a vigorous debate on the relative advantages and disadvantages in Central Asia of more gradualist approaches to economic reform in contrast to more rapid economic liberalization. See Abazov (1997, 1999) and Pomfret and Anderson (2000).

(SMEs). Since the mid-1990s, there has been increasing concern that some of the early gains of economic liberalization and economic growth will be lost due to a constantly changing legislative environment, inadequate credit and banking systems, and a growing shadow economy.

For example, the growth and robustness of the private sector is one area with pronounced ramifications on women's economic status. Not only is the private sector important in terms of employment and fuelling economic growth,<sup>2</sup> its decline also often goes hand in hand with the growth of the informal sector where conditions and incomes are largely unprotected. The Government's gradualist approach to privatization has concentrated mainly on SMEs particularly in the services sector (food processing, small-scale retail, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Promising legislative reform in the early 1990s resulted in the rapid growth of SMEs in Uzbekistan. However, since 1996 the growth rate of SMEs has declined largely due to a continuous decline in manufacturing, the lack of capital and undeveloped credit systems. In 1995, SMEs provided more than 12 percent of employment in Uzbekistan; by 1998, this share had dropped to 7 percent.<sup>4</sup> The World Bank Private Sector Survey (1997) noted that eight out of the top 10 business obstacles faced by SMEs related to issues of registration; the complex system of licensing, controls and regulations; taxation; foreign exchange convertibility; and the lack of credit. SMEs are also targets of corrupt taxation and business registration officials.<sup>5</sup> Lack of institutional support for development of SMEs is also a gendered affair, with women at a disadvantage because they have less property to put up as collateral and lack business confidence/skills.<sup>6</sup>

Uzbekistan's transition from a centrally planned to a market economy can be divided into three stages. The focus of the first stage (1991-1993) was to prevent further decline in production, attain macroeconomic stability, and create the conditions for sustainable growth. To achieve this, the Government abolished the state planning agencies of the previous centrally planned system and implemented a host of legal reforms to create the environment for the introduction of a market economy. The new system abolished legal constraints to private entrepreneurship and made progress in the areas of price liberalization, trade liberalization, taxation and small-scale privatization. At the same time, however, the Government retained its administrative monopoly and policy of centralized pricing in a number of industries such as mining, cotton and grain. It also maintained administrative control over trade.

The second stage (1994-1996) was characterized by a significant improvement in the macroeconomic situation and an acceleration of market-oriented reforms in several areas. Firstly, legislative reform of small-scale privatization was completed and new mechanisms established for large-scale privatization through the Privatization Investment Funds (PIFs). Secondly, state control of output for agricultural products except cotton and grain were reduced. Thirdly, the banking system was improved and strengthened by new monetary and credit policies.

The third stage (from 1997 to the present) has been characterized by some reversals in both the macroeconomic situation and the reform process. Economic growth slowed in 1998 by

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<sup>2</sup> In developed market economies, SMEs comprise at least 50 percent of total employment and account for 60-80 percent of gross national product (GNP). In Uzbekistan, SMEs comprise about 6 percent of total employment and account for 10-15 percent of GNP (Khalmurzaev 2000, pp. 287-8).

<sup>3</sup> Abazov 1997, p. 444.

<sup>4</sup> "Poverty Impact Assessment," Supplementary Appendix of the *Report and Recommendation to the President on the Second Small and Medium Enterprise Project*, ADB, December 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Khalmurzaev 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Report on the Status of Women in Uzbekistan* 1999, p. 14.

4.4 percent after having tripled from 1.6 percent in 1996 to 5.2 percent in 1997. Economic growth continued to be slow during 1999, as a result of reduced cotton yields and a fall in the price of cotton fiber and gold on the world market. Market-oriented reforms have also been partly reversed in key areas such as privatization, agricultural reform, taxation and banking. At the same time, the foreign exchange market worsened with an increasing difference between official and black market exchange rates. By the end of 1999, curb market exchange rates were over five times the official exchange rate (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Real GDP Growth Rate and Inflation Rate**

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Growth rate of real GDP	-11	-2.3	-4.2	-0.9	1.6	5.2	4.4	4.4
Inflation rate	645	534	746	315		28	30	32

Source: UNDP database, *Human Development Report* (Uzbekistan 1999).

### Poverty

In general, the transition has resulted in a significant fall in living standards for most of the population. The transition period has been accompanied by (i) a decline in production, (ii) an increase in unemployment, (iii) high inflation, (iv) decreasing standards of living, and finally (v) increasing income differentiation and inequality. For example, the real average per capita income was halved from 1991 to 1996. High inflation is one critical factor here, where, according to the Ministry of Macroeconomics and Statistics, the annual inflation rate for 2000 was 26.5 percent. Unemployment is on the rise in Uzbekistan, with estimates of hidden unemployment as high as 30 percent (see Chapter 2). Aggravating this situation are the half a million young people who join the labor market each year.

Using the Family Budget Survey (FBS) and the official poverty line as 1.5 times the official minimum wage, about 14 percent of the population and 11 percent of households were considered poor in 1999. On the face of it, this represents a decline in poverty since the Soviet era, where poverty in Uzbekistan was estimated at 44 percent of the working population (57 percent in rural collective farm households and 39 percent in urban worker households).<sup>7</sup>

However, there is reason to be suspicious of such estimates. Firstly, during the Soviet era, the majority of the population considered poor did not suffer from absolute poverty. Most of them had jobs or other sources of income, had adequate housing and enjoyed free health care and education. The decline in the level of government services such as child care, health and education over the last 10 years has in fact made the experience of relative poverty far worse than during the Soviet period (see Chapter 2). Secondly, the official relationship between the minimum wage and poverty does not acknowledge the fact that minimum wage levels do not cover the actual cost of living.<sup>8</sup> There are also concerns over the underestimation of the real level

<sup>7</sup> See p. 2 of footnote 4.

<sup>8</sup> Since 1992, the Ministry of Labor has calculated a subsistence minimum income, although not widely publicized outside of the Government. This minimum income level is used in setting the minimum

of poverty. In 1998, for example, 26 percent of the population received allowances. However, according to the Household Budget Survey done by the Ministry of Macroeconomics and Statistics in the first half of 1999, 40 percent of the population of Uzbekistan should be identified as poor and hence receive allowances. (Calculations here were based on the income and real expenditure of the population.)

Finally, there are now more groups at risk of poverty than 10 years ago. According to one report, 10-15 years ago there were only three distinguishable social classes—the poor, the middle class and the rich—with the middle class comprising 80-85 percent of the population. Recent interviews reveal that people now differentiate up to six social classes—including the new categories of the very rich and the destitute.<sup>9</sup> While those most at risk of poverty are still largely rural people and vulnerable groups (such as single mothers and single pensioners), new groups of people are confronted by the problems of high inflation, cost of living and unemployment. For example, poverty occurs most frequently in families with a large number of children (38.3 percent of families have four or more children, and 19.6 percent of families have three children). And membership to what has been called “the new poor” now extends to formerly middle class professionals such as doctors, teachers, scientists and employees of enterprises facing financial difficulties associated with structural adjustments (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Share and Income of Extremely Poor and Poor Families**

	1997		1998	
	Income (sum)	% of Families	Income (sum)	% of Families
Extremely poor	668.7	18.7	791.3	14.8
Poor	752.2	4.8	926.5	5.7
Minimum wage (sum)	675.0		925.0	

Source: UNDP database, *Human Development Report* (Uzbekistan 1999).

Funding agencies and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) estimate that the level of poverty is much higher than official estimates due to problems of unemployment, wage arrears, low salaries and high inflation.<sup>10</sup> In 1994, it was estimated that 62 percent of the population fell below the poverty line.<sup>11</sup> The Human Development Report (UNDP 1998) estimated that 21.2 percent of families were “needy,” of which 15.6 percent were “very needy.” Subjective, self-ranked estimates of poverty put the figure at 40-80 percent, with estimates of 1-5 percent of the population as destitute.<sup>12</sup>

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wage. The minimum wage is in turn used as a basis for calculating social benefits, such as family allowances, child benefits, and in the selection of low-income households that will receive social assistance through the *mahalla* neighborhood administration body. In order to prevent a decrease in the living standards of the population, the Government regularly raises the level of the minimum wage.

<sup>9</sup> Expert Social Research Center, *Consultations with the Poor*, 1999 p. 6. This was a participatory poverty assessment study conducted as part of the *World Development Report 2000/01*.

<sup>10</sup> At the time of writing, no reliable household surveys were available; however, the forthcoming household survey study conducted by the Expert Social Research Center may help fill this gap.

<sup>11</sup> Expert Social Research Center, *Uzbekistan Gender Study in Transition* (October 1998, unpublished).

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 11.

The wide range of estimates reflects different measures of poverty as well as regional distribution (see Table 3). Incidence of poverty is much higher in the predominantly rural Fergana valley and Karakalpakstan than in Tashkent city. According to one report, 47 percent of the rural population in the Fergana valley and 70 percent of rural Karakalpakstan, as compared to 10 percent of urban Tashkent, were poor.<sup>13</sup> The higher incidence of rural poverty is compounded by rural-urban income differentials. For example, in 1996, the average monthly wage of an agricultural worker was only 54.2 percent of the average wage, and only 41 percent and 29.5 percent of the wage paid to workers in the industrial and construction/communication sectors, respectively. The average per capita income in Tashkent city is 4.2 times the level of rural Surkhandarya. Not surprisingly, the consumption of meat and dairy produce is also higher in Tashkent city than Surkhandarya (2.5 and 1.6 times higher, respectively).<sup>14</sup>

**Table 3: Distribution of Poor Families by Region and Province, 1998**  
(%)

	Province	Extremely Poor	Poor
With low income	Karakalpakstan Djizzak Surkhandarya Namangan Khorezm	18.4	27.2
With comparative low income	Kashkadarya Tashkent Samarkand Bukhara Sirdarya	11.8	19.3
With high income	Andijan Fergana Navoi Tashkent city	7.1	10.9

Source: UNDP database, *Human Development Report* (Uzbekistan 1999).

The regional distribution of social assistance also indicates areas of greatest need. For example, the largest number of families receiving social assistance in 1997 were in Karakalpakstan and the Surkhandarya region where 49 percent of families received some assistance compared to 28 percent of families in Bukhara region and 31 percent in Tashkent.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 11.

<sup>14</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Country Economic Review* (August 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Social assistance in Uzbekistan is largely administered through programs that target low-income families with children under 16. On the basis of monthly assessments made by local *mahallas*, approximately 700,000 families or 14.5 percent of all families were identified as having low income and allocated material aid in 1996 (*Human Development Report*, Uzbekistan, 1998). In order to target low-income families, the Government has involved *mahallas* in the process of identifying and distributing allowances to low-income families. *Mahalla* committees use the same criteria as other government agencies to identify low-income families, i.e., families that receives 1.5 times the minimum wage per capita per month.

## Women's Political Participation

The deterioration of the economy during the transition period has negatively impacted on women's material well-being. Not only are women affected by the general economic situation, they are also relatively more disadvantaged by the reduction in social welfare that has accompanied transition.

For some women, unemployment is a symptom of women's relative economic vulnerability in Uzbekistan: women's domestic responsibilities, combined with a trend towards early marriage, make women less competitive in Uzbekistan's tight employment situation. Women are also disadvantaged by being in the less well-paid sectors of the economy. Their concentration in the so-called "non-productive" sectors of health, education and culture has seen a their wages fall further behind the national average over the past 10 years. For example, in 1998 wages in the health care sector (where 30 percent of employees are women) came to only 61 per cent of the national average wage. In education, where women constitute 48 per cent of employees, wages came to 68 per cent of average wage.<sup>16</sup>

However, the picture is more complex given that some women are now the primary providers in the household. The issue then is one of women's onerous workload, particularly if husbands and families are not prepared to shoulder some of the domestic and child care responsibilities usually performed by women (see Chapter 2).

Accompanying general economic problems associated with unemployment and low salaries are other related social problems such as inadequate and/or expensive provision of services and utilities. For example, since independence the size of the health care budget has been gradually eroded to the point that people now pay for most health services—even in situations where the service is nominally free of charge (see Chapter 2). Problems such as the irregular supply of gas, electricity and water, and the high cost of health services and education are widespread.<sup>17</sup> The cost of basic services such as transport, energy and heating are still subsidized by the Government and the cost of wheat still controlled. However, the amount spent on subsidies overall has declined from more than 16 percent of government expenditure in 1994 to only 3 percent in 2000.<sup>18</sup> This means that increasingly people have to bear the cost of utilities and services previously subsidized. In addition, the pervasiveness of bribe taking has added to the cost of living for the majority of people. In a situation where wages are in arrears and do not cover the cost of living, bribe taking has become endemic from obtaining a job and ensuring adequate health care to securing a place at university.

Such factors have both direct and indirect social costs on women. For example, the increasing cost of health care has implications for women of childbearing age who typically have higher demands for health care and who generally have the day-to-day responsibility of their children's health care. Enrollment levels at preschool classes have also fallen as the Government and other enterprises have been unable to subsidize the cost of such centers in the post-Soviet era. Consequently, preschools have either closed or now charge fees which many families cannot afford, and working mothers can no longer draw on a network of nurseries, kindergartens and

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<sup>16</sup> *Human Development Report 1999*. Tashkent.

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 11.

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 4.

child-minding services previously available. Furthermore, there is evidence that young women are being denied equal opportunity to pursue vocational and higher education due to increasing official and unofficial costs of education (see Chapter 2).

Employment is itself no guarantee against poverty, especially in the low wage seasonal agriculture sector and informal sector. Nevertheless, the most vulnerable parts of the population are individuals and families who cannot find regular employment. This group includes pensioners without family and households in areas where the major employer has closed, leading to widespread unemployment. It is for this reason that the State has been reluctant to downsize or rationalize government enterprises.

The State administers a number of social assistance programs, including benefits paid to large and low-income families; social insurance paid to workers experiencing hardship or retirement; and a social allowance benefit paid to the elderly and the disabled. *Mahalla* committees also provide assistance to poor families in the form of subsidized prices for medicines and utilities. The number of persons receiving some form of social security has remained steady at around 12 percent of the population.<sup>19</sup> Social benefits however are far from adequate to cover the cost of living. In 1998, the average monthly old age pension given to women at 60 and men at 65 was around 1,250 sum or roughly equivalent to 2 kilograms of meat. Women accounted for 76 percent of the recipients of this allowance in 1998.<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to live on this amount without family support or another form of income or pension. This helps to explain one of the disturbing street scenes of contemporary Tashkent: elderly women forced to beg to supplement their meager pensions.

Despite these problems, Uzbekistan enjoyed modest economic growth in the second half of the 1990s, with official GDP growth rates of 1.7 percent (1996), 5.2 percent (1997), 4.4 percent (1998) and 4.4 percent (1999).<sup>21</sup> In fact, over the past decade, Uzbekistan had the best economic performance of the CARs. Uzbekistan's relatively good performance was also helped by buoyant world prices for cotton and gold—Uzbekistan's two main export crops—from 1991 through to 1996. Furthermore, some of the protective measures that the Government has pursued to reduce the shock of economic transition have helped to cushion the effects of transition, particularly when compared to the experiences of neighboring Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, Uzbekistan currently stands at an economic and policy crossroads. Despite moves towards developing a market economy, it remains unclear to what extent Uzbekistan is committed to economic liberalization. For example, in response to balance-of-payments problems following a fall in world cotton prices, the Government took what most analysts agree was a major step backwards when strict foreign exchange controls were re-introduced in 1996. Furthermore, despite positive comments from the Government with respect to the role of SMEs in privatization—particularly via family business traditions and the “bazaar” economy—the implementation of legislation to make credit more easily available has been slow.

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<sup>19</sup> Bureau of Gender and Development and the State Department of Statistics, *Women of Uzbekistan 1999: Statistical Collection* (1999).

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>21</sup> Pomfret and Anderson 2000.

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 22.

Overall, there is a need to develop those sectors of the national economy that not only promise economic growth, but also provide opportunities for female employment. Government priority areas such as mining, power industry, oil and gas refinery and the car industry hold little prospect for female employment as these areas are considered male branches of industry. The development of processing industries situated in agriculture, in particular those connected with the processing of cotton, fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products, provide more promising opportunities for women.<sup>23</sup> There is a great opportunity for rural women to establish their own small businesses in these areas too, if planned banking and credit sector reforms are implemented.

There is a case to be made that some of the Government's measures to control the rate of liberalization and reduce the shock of reform have become barriers to economic growth and poverty reduction. This seems to be particularly clear in the case of small business, where the legislative environment works against the needs of women looking for credit and microcredit facilities. Finally, while social protection measures have helped to offset some of the pain of market-economy reforms, the pensions and subsidies given fall far short of what is required.

### **Government Gender Initiatives**

Uzbekistan has introduced a number of legislative changes and legal reforms designed to guarantee the interests and status of women. In general, women in Uzbekistan are accorded equal rights with men and enjoy a number of special provisions that acknowledge and protect the position of women as biological and social mothers and in the home and the workforce. However, in practice many women are not served well by these laws because of poor or patchy implementation and a lack of compliance.

According to the Constitution of Uzbekistan, all citizens enjoy equal rights and freedoms irrespective of sex, race, ethnic origin, language, religion, social background, convictions, personal or social status (Article 18). Article 46 guarantees equality of rights for men and women. There are however some special measures that pertain only to women in the various codes, such as the Labor Code and Family Code. These conditions set out privileges and protective measures proceeding from women's biological and reproductive functions. Uzbekistan is also a signatory to the CEDAW and the United Nations Declaration and Action Platform set forth in Beijing in 1995. The Government of Uzbekistan passed a new Family Code (1998) to bring the existing family law into compliance with these international conventions and declarations.

Family and labor codes are often the systems of law most directly bearing on women's status. In the case of Uzbekistan, both of these codes in general endorse the principle of men's and women's equality before the law and both also contain measures specific to the role of women.

The Labor Code of Uzbekistan (1995) does not permit discrimination on the grounds of age, sex, ethnic origin, language, social background, marital status, or number of children. Officially, employers cannot refuse to employ a woman on the grounds of pregnancy, marital status or number of children. Originally the Labor Code decreed that a number of protective privileges be given to pregnant women and nursing mothers, including transferal to less physically demanding work at the same average salary, prohibition against overtime, and

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote 12.

pregnancy and maternity leave. Recent amendments to the Labor Code allow a woman to refuse such legal provisions. The reasoning here was that there was a contradiction between measures designed to protect women and the requirement to ensure equal treatment of all workers. These amendments were also made in the knowledge that such legal provisions were proving to be an obstacle to the employment of women in the nonstate sector.

The Family Code (1998) regulates marital and family relations, property rights and disputes. According to the Family Code, spouses enjoy equal rights. Polygamy is illegal in Uzbekistan and only civil registration of marriage is recognized as legal. (Religious ceremonies, such as *nikokh*, have no legal status in Uzbekistan). The minimum age for marriage is set at 17, and in some special cases, at 16. Both husband and wife can apply for divorce, and marriages can be legally concluded by mutual consent. On divorce, property is split jointly between the spouses and women who are pregnant or caring for common children have the right to receive alimony. Two issues not directly addressed in the Family Code are discrimination against women on the basis of their family status and the prohibition of violence against women. However, these issues are covered in either the Labor Code or the Criminal Code. The Family Code however does contradict with the provisions outlined in the CEDAW where the age of marriage is set at 18. Another area of concern is how the Family Code which allows young women to marry at 17—and even at 16—will interact with the system of 12 years compulsory education. It is feared by some women's NGOs that early marriages may lead to young women not completing their secondary education.

Women's formal high legal status is reflected in recent legislative reforms and also by a growing commitment to review existing and proposed legislation for any gender discrimination. The Institute of Monitoring Acting Legislation and the Women's Committee (through its Gender and Development Bureau) have been active in reviewing existing and proposed legislation in this regard.

Nevertheless women's formal high legal status does not reflect women's legal status on the ground. Women's legal rights are frequently infringed upon. There is gross underreporting of discrimination and violence against women, particularly when it occurs in the family. The Report on the Status of Women in Uzbekistan (1999) noted that women are the first to lose their jobs, especially women with many children. Forced early marriages and the refusal to allow women to work outside the home also violate the rights of women. Families prefer to deal with—or more likely—hush up domestic and sexual violence against women and children. This makes it more difficult for authorities to prosecute and emphasizes the role that culture and lack of legal literacy play in the continuing violation of the rights of women and children in Uzbekistan.

This report identified a number of examples of discrimination against women in Uzbekistan. According to this report, cases of discrimination included:

- (i) Tension within families, because of parents' intolerance of their daughters' views and aspirations. In one such family, a young girl committed suicide by jumping from the ninth storey of a building. In another case, a daughter died as a result of severe cuts following a fight over whether she should be allowed to cut her hair. Her parents were categorically against this before her marriage.
- (ii) Women also face discrimination in court. In one case, the court made a decision in favor of the husband in settling a divorce dispute. In this case, he was awarded

ownership of their jointly owned house, and asked to pay the wife financial compensation of 15,000 sum (about US\$30-40 at the time). In another case, a woman with two children was actually deprived of her right to her share of property. This court decision was appealed against and the case was sent for reconsideration by court.

- (iii) There have also been reports in the Tashkent region of disabled women, or women with many children, being refused employment. In other cases, women working in joint ventures were prohibited from having children.
- (iv) Cases are known of husbands who do not allow their wives to work outside the home, or when religious fanatics demand that young women cover their face in the presence of men in public places.
- (v) Young girls are sometimes forced into early marriages, thus posing a serious threat physically and psychologically, particularly in the event of early or unwanted pregnancies. Moreover, in such situations, women frequently have no opportunity to consult a doctor, or to ask for legal or other help. In such cases, women are not only discriminated against, but also subjected to violence.

To date, few cases of discrimination have been brought to court and thus few precedents exist on the interpretation and effectiveness of laws against discrimination. For example, no official has ever been accused of discrimination in hiring and promotion policies or wage discrimination, no cases of sexual harassment in the workplace have come to trial, and no cases of coercion within the family have been brought before the courts.

In addition, few women have a sound understanding of their legal rights. Issues here also include no tradition of independent activism by women in Uzbekistan and the fact that most Uzbek women are subject to social and familial structures of authority that hinder their struggle for legal rights. That is why many women from the most impoverished and disenfranchised sections of Uzbekistan society become passive or, in extreme cases, resort to suicide via self-immolation, an issue that has not yet been adequately addressed. According to a survey conducted by the Center of Sociological Research “Ijtimoiy Fikr” (or Social Opinion), only 26.4 percent of women said they had a good understanding of local laws; 60.1 percent said that they ‘know something’ of local laws; and 13.5 percent responded that they know nothing. In terms of their general knowledge on the laws of Uzbekistan, only 18.5 percent of the women said that they knew them sufficiently well, with 61.7 percent reporting that they knew something about these laws.<sup>24</sup>

Outside of the legislative and legal areas, the Government has introduced a number of programs and initiatives designed to enhance women’s status in Uzbekistan. One of the most significant initiatives was the establishment of the Women’s Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Established in 1991 and proclaimed a government agency by presidential decree in 1992, the Women’s Committee has helped to direct and sustain the Government’s commitment to the status of women over the past decade. The Committee has branches in regions, towns, districts and villages throughout Uzbekistan. The main objective of these committees is to implement the Government’s policies on women.

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<sup>24</sup> “Narodnoye Slovo,” 15 December 1999, Tashkent.

This was followed by another important presidential decree in March 1995: Enhancing Women's Role in the State and Social Development of Uzbekistan. This decree set in place a formal political structure designed to encourage women's participation in public life. This political structure established the position of Deputy Prime Minister for Women's Affairs, responsible for monitoring and enhancing women's participation in society (currently held by Ms. Dilbar Gulyamova who is also Chairperson of the Women's Committee).<sup>25</sup> Similar positions at the deputy *hokim* (deputy governor or deputy mayor) level were concurrently established for women at three administrative levels of government, that is, at the provincial (*oblast*), regional (*rayon*) and city levels. It was hoped that not only would this enable better targeting of issues affecting women's status but that this might also offset the decline in the number of women at political decision-making levels.

In 1997, the Women's Committee developed and adopted the *National Action Plan for the Improvement of the Status of Women of Uzbekistan*. The twin objectives of the National Action Plan are to improve women's status in Uzbekistan and enhance their role in society. It is hoped that the objectives and targets of the National Action Plan are achieved by the year 2005. Of the 12 areas of concern detailed in the Beijing Action Platform (1995), the following nine key priority areas were selected as the focus of the Uzbekistan National Action Plan (see Appendix 1 for a more detailed summary):

- (i) Women's health, including reproductive health and promotion of family planning services;
- (ii) Education and professional and functional literacy of women;
- (iii) Women's economic status, particularly of those living in rural areas through the promotion of women's income-generating activities;
- (iv) Environmental degradation and its impact on women, and women's role in environmental management;
- (v) Equal participation in decision making at political, legislative and executive levels;
- (vi) Special programs to support girls;
- (vii) Representations of a new "Uzbek woman" in the mass media, popular culture and art to overcome existing stereotypes;
- (viii) Discrimination and violence against women;
- (ix) Women's NGOs; and
- (x) Realization of broad gender-related research.

An annual progress report summarizing the level of implementation of the National Action Plan is prepared in consideration of the reporting provisions of the Declaration and the Action Platform approved by the Fourth World Conference of Women (Beijing, September 1995).

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<sup>25</sup> The structure of the Women's Committee is closely tied to the Republic's formal political structure in that the Deputy Prime Minister on Women's Issues is also the Chairperson of the Women's Committee. The same arrangement applies at each administrative level, where for example deputy *hokims* on Women's Issues at the regional level also act as regional chairpersons of women's committees.

The Women's Committee actively involves representatives of NGOs in its operations. Due to a productive relationship between the Women's Committee, NGOs and funding agencies, there have been a number of achievements in the area of monitoring legislation and statistical collection. For example, a Bureau of Gender and Development was established in 1996 within the Women's Committee with funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). One task undertaken by the Bureau was to assist the Department of Statistics in the collection, analysis and publication of gender disaggregated statistics.<sup>26</sup> As a direct consequence of this collaboration between government and funding organizations, Uzbekistan has begun to develop the necessary expertise not only to monitor and comment on legislation from a gender perspective, but also to continue the task of mainstreaming the collection of gender disaggregated statistics.

Further collaboration between the Women's Committee, the Bureau of Gender and Development and numerous women's NGOs resulted in the joint publication *Report on the Status of Women in Uzbekistan* (1999). Funded by UNDP, this report contains the findings and views of independent writers, including representatives of women's organizations, media analysts and journalists, lawyers, and economists, and is indicative itself of the level of awareness of, and commitment to resolving, gender inequality in Uzbekistan. Such collaboration has only been possible because of the groundswell in women's NGOs in the past five years in Uzbekistan.

Another initiative that indicates a commitment to women's status in Uzbekistan was the presidential decree that made 1999 the "Year of Women." This move was designed to draw attention to gender-related issues that adversely affect women's ability to participate in society.

It is gratifying to see a number of recent government initiatives designed to combat the loss of women's political and social status. However, despite the high level recognition of the importance of women's issues that the previous initiatives denote, considerable problems remain at the implementation level. In particular, women's related policies and programs are not evenly implemented—or even well understood—at all levels of government. Furthermore, women's issues are still marginalized in government and in policy making. For these reasons, there is a genuine and pressing need to further build gender capacity at all levels of government (see Chapter 3).

### **Women's Political Participation and NGOs**

The growth of women's NGOs is the one of the most positive achievements in terms of women's political participation in Uzbekistan. In 1991 there was only one women's NGO—the Business Women's Association. Currently, there are 40-50 women's NGOs in Uzbekistan (see Appendix 2 for more details). Women's participation in the formal political structure of Uzbekistan is less promising. Women's level of representation in government has fallen, despite the presidential decree that introduced the position of Deputy Prime Minister for Women's Affairs and associated deputy *hokims* (see Table 4).

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<sup>26</sup> See footnote 20.

**Table 4: Representation of Women in Parliament, 1980–1998**

Year	Members of Parliament	Share of Women	
		No.	%
1980	510	178	35
1985	510	183	36
1990	500	47	9
1994	250	15	6
1998	250	19	8

In Uzbekistan, the head of state controls the central Government in Tashkent as well as local government through the appointment of governors (*hokims*). *Hokims* head local councils or “parliaments” and thus extend the president’s power down to the local level. The head of state also controls the 250-member *Oliy Majlis* or Supreme Council and appoints the Supreme Court justices. The *Oliy Majlis* operates similarly to a Soviet-style “national parliament” where the members meet once every few months to debate laws prepared by the Government.

The abolition of a quota system for women in the 1980s produced a sharp decline in the number of women in Parliament and other decision-making positions. Women accounted for 35 percent of members in the Supreme Soviet of Uzbek SSR. By contrast they accounted for only 7 percent of parliamentarians in the *Oliy Majlis* in 2000 (that is, 17 out of 250 members). The same decline is observed at local government levels, where the proportion of women in the highest administrative and management positions such as deputy ministers and deputy directors of enterprises is 17.5.<sup>27</sup> This dramatic drop is said to be one reason for the establishment of the position of Deputy Prime Minister for Women’s Affairs in 1995.<sup>28</sup> In response to this drop, the reintroduction of a parliamentary quota has been set as an objective of the National Action Plan (see Appendix 1).

On average, there are 1.4 women per party faction. This implies that parties and organizations that have taken part in elections do not place their trust in women as politicians or acknowledge an acute shortage of female leaders. Given a decline in the share of women among highly qualified professionals and the leading elite, women’s chances of being elected to the Parliament are much less than that of men. This situation is somewhat mitigated by the fact that women currently hold the positions of Vice Spokesman, the head of a Parliamentary Committee, and of Ombudsman, the human rights and legal advocate. These are important positions because they are in contact with the executive branch of the Government and thus able to advise on women’s needs.

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<sup>27</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 12.

**Table 5: Representation of Women among Provincial and Regional Authorities, 1998**

Type of Council	Total of Female Members of Parliament	Number of MPs in Each Council	Female MPs Per Council	
			Number	%
Provincial Councils (total 14)	61	60	4.3	7.2
Regional Councils (total 163)	465	30	2.9	9.7

From the data presented in Table 5, we can conclude that the proportion of female parliamentarians is around 7-10 percent. The share of women in executive bodies is similarly small, and swelled by what amounts to a quota system (that is, the appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister for Women's Affairs and related positions). Only three women work for the Government as Deputy Minister with no female Minister. Women also occupy the position of district *hokims* in four out of 163 districts. There are no women among the provincial *hokims*.

There is however a much higher representation of women in the national courts, where there is one female judge to every five. Yet, courts often deal with cases where female interests are paramount—for example, divorce and violence against women—so there is a need for greater gender equity here too. The problem partly lies in a lack of qualified women, which is likely to get worse as fewer women are given access to higher education (see Chapter 2). Even in “feminized” spheres such as health care, social welfare and education, men dominate in executive positions. This situation may be observed at both the central and provincial executive branches of government. According to the Fergana Province Department of the Ministry of Macroeconomics and Statistics, despite the prevalence of women working in the areas of health, education, agriculture, information technology, culture and art, administrative positions at the provincial level of those sectors are occupied almost exclusively by men.

However, women are politically active in other ways, particularly in the growing nongovernment sector. Here the growth of women's NGOs is very promising, given that many of these NGOs are committed to enhancing the political and legal status of women, and have extensive grassroots networks. Governmental concern over women's status during the transition period is the main factor accounting for this growth. Another has been the number of funding agencies and international NGOs looking to establish partnerships with local NGOs.

The primary foci of women's NGOs in Uzbekistan are improvement of women's status in the family and society; protection of women and of women's legal rights; and expanding women's access to new income and business opportunities. In most cases, these foci are pursued in an integrated manner, so that for example vocational training courses include training on legal literacy and discussions of barriers to women's participation in public life. The greatest strength of these NGOs is in fact the women and men who staff them. On a shoestring budget and often on a volunteer basis they conduct training workshops and seminars, staff crisis centers and telephone advice lines, and provide countless women with practical support on a wide range of issues.

Strong local women's NGOs in Uzbekistan go beyond issues of political participation. These organizations have important grassroots knowledge and networks. They are in the front

line and can quickly discern the legislative, social and economic barriers to women's well-being. Given the high representation of urban professional and middle class women in NGOs, it would be an overstatement to characterize all NGOs as grassroots organizations. However, it would also be misleading to see NGOs as having only weakly developed links with their constituencies.<sup>29</sup> Women's NGOs in Uzbekistan tend to be responsive to the needs of women, and a good example here is the shift within some women's NGOs to provide greater training and support in the area of small business.<sup>30</sup> In addition, women's NGOs have the flexibility of small, independent organizations.

On the downside, there have been some concerns over the duplication of activities, lack of coordination and small-scale nature of the projects such NGOs undertake. Many NGOs are well aware of these problems and have taken measures to address them. One initiative here was the creation of the Union of Women's NGOs in Samarkand in 1999, which was established as an umbrella organization for women's NGOs in the region. Under this umbrella, several new women's NGOs have been created with the more experienced NGOs providing advice on how to attract financial support from international funding agencies and NGOs. NGOs within the Union also avail of the range of computing support that it provides. Many make regular use of the computer and Internet facilities that are found at the Union's headquarters inside the Alisher Navoi Library at the University of Samarkand.

There is also a general desire for better communication and coordination between government and nongovernment women's organizations. The Government must take some responsibility for this, however. A recent initiative to overcome some of these problems is the creation of an umbrella organization—called *Mekr*—to act as a forum for all government, non-government, professional and other organizations committed to improving the status of women in society. The Women's Committee is expected to play a major role in facilitating this network. Activists spoken to in late 2000 were hopeful that a stronger partnership between government and women's NGOs would lead to faster resolution of barriers faced by NGOs at the grassroots level. There were some reservations expressed that women's government organizations would come to regard women's NGOs as an arm of the Government. It was promising, however, to hear that most activists felt very positive about the *Mekr* initiative and openly welcomed government involvement.

While women's political participation and organizational capacity is strong in the area of NGOs, more attention needs to be given to increasing women's participation in formal political structures. Certainly the presidential decree introducing the position of Deputy Prime Minister for Women's Affairs and other related positions is important. However, the tendency to appoint women to positions related to women's affairs can also reinforce the marginalization of women and women's issues in politics. In particular, women need to be appointed to nonwomen-related Cabinet Ministries and elected as general members of Parliament. Further research is also needed to identify how gender stereotypes operate to discriminate against women in the selection of candidates prior to elections and in the appointment of nonwomen-oriented Cabinet Ministries. In particular, research is needed to assess the impact of more traditional gender ideologies that

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<sup>29</sup> See Ula Ikramova and Kathryn McConnell (1999) for an overview of women's NGOs in Central Asia.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the Sabr Crisis Center in Samarkand plans to introduce a microcredit scheme with funding from a Netherlands NGO to facilitate small business loans for women. Such loans are already available from existing microcredit projects in Nukus and Karshi.

prescribe a rather narrow role for women in terms of political activities. Here it would be useful to analyze the extent to which women's greater political participation is blocked by traditional values (that were not so much abolished as forced underground during the Soviet era) or more practical considerations (such as lack of money, lack of time, lack of childcare, etc.).

### **“Tradition,” Islam and Gender**

There is growing interest in both Islam and Uzbek cultural traditions in Uzbekistan, although it is impossible to separate Islam and “tradition” in this context as any exploration of Uzbek history, language and culture will necessarily include aspects of Islam. Popular discussions of the role of Uzbek traditions and Islam in an independent Uzbekistan can be found in the media and often emanate from government sources. One of the most visible signs of this renewal is the increasing number of women and girls wearing *hijab* (that is, ankle-length dresses and closely-fitted white scarves that surround the face and drape over the shoulder). Although the Government is concerned that traditional and Islamic influences may negatively impact on economic development, the Government has deployed Uzbek cultural symbols to mark the transition from Soviet control to independent nationhood. An example here is the reintroduction of Uzbek as the language of government, and over time, of education. Furthermore, the Cyrillic script is to be gradually replaced as a matter of government policy.

Uzbekistan is not alone here. An interest in cultural heritage and ethnic identity appears to have popular support in all the newly independent Central Asian republics (CARs). For various reasons, a renewed cultural heritage and heightened ethnic consciousness has been a feature of post-Soviet states, whether we are discussing the Baltic states, the Caucasus or other CARs.<sup>31</sup>

There are of course many currents of Islam in Uzbekistan, including a number of diverse philosophical and ideological positions. These incorporate the influential Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Mavarannakhr (the former spiritual Islamic Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan), the Sufi order, the Brotherhood Naqshbandiah, and the relative newcomer, the Islamic fundamentalist Vakhabits centered in the Fergana valley.<sup>32</sup> In regard to this report, it is important to consider the reappraisal of cultural traditions in terms of the possible impact on the status of women and gender relations more broadly.<sup>33</sup>

During the Soviet Union era, many earlier customs and religious observances were discouraged. Mosques were closed and religion brought tightly under the control of the State. Women were supported and encouraged to pursue public, political and professional lives. A number of initiatives were introduced such as a female quota in government and legislative reforms and labor regulations designed to ensure equal rights and employment for women. These led to the emergence of female intellectuals, professionals and state administrators and the

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<sup>31</sup> For a general discussion of this in relation to CARs and the Caucasus see *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union: Domestic and International Dynamics*, edited by Mohiaddin Mesbahi, University Press of Florida, 1994.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, in particular see Zahid I. Munavvarov, “Uzbekistan,” pp. 139-147 “Islam and Spiritual Revival.”

<sup>33</sup> In the case of Uzbekistan, some caution needs to be observed when linking women's subordination to Islam because of a general tendency to view Central Asian womanhood as downtrodden and oppressed by an Islamic patriarchy. This was certainly the line taken by the Soviet Union to legitimize its occupation of Central Asia. See Gregory Massell's *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929* (Princeton University Press, 1974).

achievement of a near 100 percent literacy rate for women and men. This was ideologically buttressed by a view of the equality between men and women aggressively propagated in the Soviet mass media.<sup>34</sup> While this remains central to the ideal male-female relationship in Uzbekistan, economic hardships and the renewed interest in tradition have “changed the contours of such equality.”

Increasingly, the discussion of gender relations and the representation of masculinity and femininity reflect a preoccupation with understanding gender relations in terms of tradition rather than in terms of a Soviet-style concept of equality.<sup>35</sup> There has also been greater public discussion of women’s personal behavior and deportment as part of the discussion of an “Uzbek model” of modernization and economic development. At a conference in November 2000, the Deputy Prime Minister for Women’s Affairs openly endorsed modesty of dress and behavior as aspects of true Uzbek womanhood.<sup>36</sup>

The most celebrated heroic Uzbeks of recent years are all men (such as the conqueror Timur and poet Navoiy). An idealized Uzbek femininity is most visible in the form of young women dressed in *atlas* silk costumes dancing at public events or as the demure, modest daughter and good, respectful wife in historical dramas shown on state television. An example here is the popular Uzbek-language talk show “Bride and Groom” aired on Uzbek TV Channel 1, where these forms of the stereotypical “oriental” woman prevail.<sup>37</sup> The Expert Social Research Center has noted the emergence of a group of intellectuals promoting the idea that women should reject the opportunity to participate in public life and seek to fulfill a subordinate position within the family and society more generally. A typical statement here was published in *Markazzi Asiya Madaniyati* (The Culture of Central Asia):

In correspondence with the physical composition and natural ambitions of a man who provides for the family, he is the family’s spiritual leader, while a woman is the custodian of spiritual values which are subordinated to the man. This is where the essential difference between man and woman lies. It is for this reason that men dominate in the progress of their society, in its material production and its management. Women, due to their physical frailty and weakness, satisfy their needs with the help of men, they depend on and are subordinate to men. This is the essential foundation of the family. The Koran, the central text of Islam, states, “Men dominate over women”... The family will be stronger as long as it observes this order.<sup>38</sup>

While there are other articles in the media and television programs (typically in Russian) that feature Uzbek women who have successful careers and support the modernization of society

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<sup>34</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>35</sup> I am not suggesting that the Soviet Union did not have its own particular brand of gender ideology operating to discriminate against women. The state is always a highly gendered affair. The Soviet endorsement of large families (by providing benefits for large families) and ideological praise of women as mothers of the nation *and* workers promoted not only a heavy workload for women but also the association between women and social and biological reproduction.

<sup>36</sup> This was not an endorsement of *hijab*, however, as the Government frowns on what it sees as the influence of a radical Islam. See footnote 12.

<sup>37</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Markazzi Asiya Madaniyati* (The Culture of Central Asia), No. 1, 1998, cited in report under footnote 12.

along Western lines, the revival and reaffirmation of traditional Uzbek values has led to a greater emphasis on gender dichotomy in Uzbek popular culture. In particular, Uzbek women's role in the family has been increasingly emphasized in certain quarters over their public and professional roles. As women's organizations and sections within the Government realize, it is important that Islamic resurgence is not used to justify and reassert patriarchal gender structures. The Government has a crucial role in legislating and acting to protect women's equal access to and participation in educational and employment opportunities. Women's NGOs also play an important role by providing a forum for women to play more public roles and to participate at decision-making levels. More needs to be done here particularly in terms of supporting the leadership and legal literacy programs of independent NGOs.

It is also important to consider the interrelationship between material hardship and the appeals of ethnic nationalism and religion. While many women's NGOs report a link between poverty—or at least declining economic well-being—and religious or traditional attitudes, there is a lack of qualitative/ethnographic research to explain this nexus. For example, women's withdrawal from the workplace may have had as much to do with the closure of state subsidized nurseries as Islamic ideologies. Furthermore, the effects of transition are not the same everywhere and views on the domestic division of labor and women's mobility are sometimes re-evaluated when women become the main economic providers in the family. For example, following recent ethnic and nationalist tensions between Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbek women from Andijan have become increasingly responsible for trading agricultural produce across the border in the regional market of Osh. Women have taken on this task as a way to circumvent the increased tension and bribe taking directed at Uzbek men at the border.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, it is clear that women's participation in economic activities and continued involvement in higher and vocational education are important strategies in working against gender stereotypes that restrict women to the home. Such strategies are in addition economically important, given women's crucial economic contribution to their households during the current economic difficulties.

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<sup>39</sup> See footnote 12.