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GENDER EQUALITY AND DECENT WORK IN UZBEKISTAN: POLICY FRAMEWORK

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This paper investigates the dynamics of gender equality and employment outcomes in Uzbekistan, examining the country's formal institutional transformations aimed at achieving constitutional mandates for equal rights. Drawing on data from national development strategies, legislative reforms, and employment statistics, the study assesses the impact of social development initiatives on women's socio-political engagement, representation, and economic empowerment. Findings reveal significant gender disparities in employment, with women facing disproportionate burdens in unpaid domestic work and experiencing higher rates of unemployment compared to men. Moreover, self-employment emerges as a critical source of household income, particularly among rural populations, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address structural inequalities. The analysis underscores the importance of policy measures aimed at promoting gender equality in employment and enhancing access to decent work opportunities for women in Uzbekistan.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of gender equality and decent work for all remains a critical global endeavor, particularly in regions such as Uzbekistan where disparities persist in labor force participation and opportunities. This paper examines the deficiencies within Uzbekistan's national statistical system and policy framework concerning gender equality and decent work issues. Despite efforts to address gender disparities, significant gaps persist, hindering progress toward achieving equitable outcomes in the labor market.

The national statistical system in Uzbekistan suffers from a lack of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data, with minimal exceptions made for basic gender indicators. This deficit limits the ability to effectively analyze and address gender disparities in employment, wages, and other critical areas. Moreover, adherence to International Labour Organization (ILO) statistical standards is inconsistent, further undermining the reliability and comparability of available data. Stakeholders within the statistical community have emphasized the urgent need for capacity development in generating gender-responsive statistics and monitoring decent work indicators.

While gender equality is recognized as a social issue at the micro level, it often remains marginalized in public policy discussions concerning economic spheres. Policy initiatives predominantly address women's issues within the confines of social welfare programs, neglecting their broader economic empowerment. Consequently, ostensibly neutral policies may inadvertently exacerbate gender inequalities in the labor market. Recognizing the importance of integrating gender perspectives into macroeconomic policies, government officials have expressed openness to capacity-building efforts in this regard.

Gender biases persist within Uzbekistan's legislative and policy frameworks, perpetuating inequalities in the workplace. Despite nominal provisions for equal pay for work of equal value, practical implementation remains lacking. The burden of unpaid childcare and household work is disproportionately borne by women, contributing to a "double burden" effect. Existing legislation inadequately safeguards against workplace discrimination and fails to address systemic gender biases in family responsibilities. However, recent legislative developments, such as the Adoption of Law No. 562 of 2 September 2019, signal a positive step toward addressing gender biases and promoting equal rights and opportunities for women and men.

In light of these challenges, this paper advocates for a comprehensive approach to gender equality and decent work, encompassing robust data collection mechanisms, gender-responsive policy frameworks, and legislative reforms to dismantle systemic biases. By addressing these issues holistically, Uzbekistan can foster a more inclusive and equitable labor market, advancing the well-being and empowerment of all individuals.

Literature review

Uzbekistan is currently undergoing significant formal institutional transformations aimed at fulfilling the constitutional mandate of equal rights for both women and men. Social development has been identified as a key priority within Uzbekistan's national development strategy for the period of 2017–

2021 . This strategy specifically targets the enhancement of women's socio-political engagement and endeavors to bolster their representation, training, employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities. To achieve these objectives, various measures have been implemented, including the strengthening of institutions like the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan (WCU) and the Oila/Family Centre of Academic and Applied Research, as well as the establishment of the Public Fund for Women and Family Support. Furthermore, in 2019, additional measures were introduced to reinforce women's labor rights and provide support for entrepreneurship .

In September 2019, significant legislative milestones were reached with the adoption of laws aimed at safeguarding women from harassment and violence, along with legislation guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities for both genders . Subsequently, in March 2020, regulations were endorsed outlining the process for conducting gender-based legal evaluations of normative legal acts and their drafts. Ongoing deliberations regarding the reform of the Labour Code are focused on ensuring that the legislation is devoid of gender biases and aligns with international labor standards.

Analysis and discussions

The majority of employed women dedicate their time to unpaid childcare and household chores, while most employed men receive compensation for their work. In the third quarter of 2022, 68.1 percent of both women and men of working age were employed. However, as of 2021, 58.7 percent of the employed population were men. The female inactivity rate stood at 33.1 percent, compared to 18.9 percent for economically inactive men of working age. Moreover, 50.6 percent of women aged 25-49, whether they have children over three years old or not, were not engaged in paid work, contrasting sharply with 5.9 percent of men in similar circumstances. These figures underscore the disproportionate burden borne by women in unpaid childcare and domestic duties.

Recent official statistics reveal that, on average, women spend 5.27 hours on unpaid domestic work compared to 2.15 hours for men. Approximately 70 percent of domestic work done by women is unpaid, whereas this figure for men is around 28 percent. Moreover, more than 90 percent of individuals engaged in unpaid childcare and household chores are women.

The inability of the economy to create an adequate number of decent jobs affects women disproportionately. Employment patterns have remained largely unchanged over the past decade. In 2021, women accounted for nearly half of the working population, comprising 41.3 percent of total employment. However, they represented less than half of the employment-to-population ratio, and their unemployment rate was nearly double that of men. Half of unemployed women and 35 percent of

unemployed men had been jobless for a year or longer. Youth unemployment rates were more than twice the overall rate for both genders, with young women aged 16-25 experiencing significantly higher rates of unemployment (22.6 percent) compared to young men of the same age (15.4 percent).

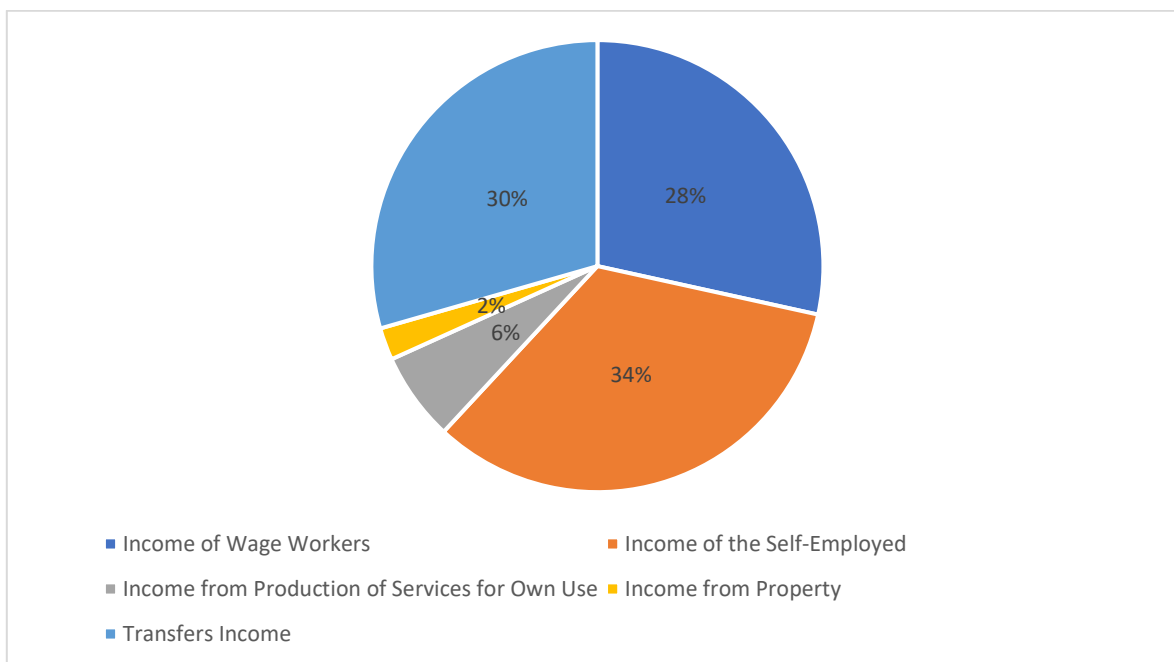


Figure 1. The Structure of the population's income, 2022 (%)

Source: Compiled by the author using the data of the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Self-employment stands as the primary source of household income in Uzbekistan, constituting approximately two-thirds of total household earnings in 2022, excluding unpaid domestic services. Conversely, income from formal employment accounts for less than one-third of household earnings, underscoring the limited availability of wage employment opportunities, particularly among the impoverished and rural populations.

Gender disparities are evident within self-employment, with men predominantly assuming roles as independent workers, such as own-account workers or employers, while women are more inclined towards dependent employment, notably as contributing family workers. This discrepancy reflects underlying gender dynamics concerning resource ownership and control. Although women comprise a larger proportion of self-employment compared to men, their representation in wage employment mirrors their overall share in the workforce.

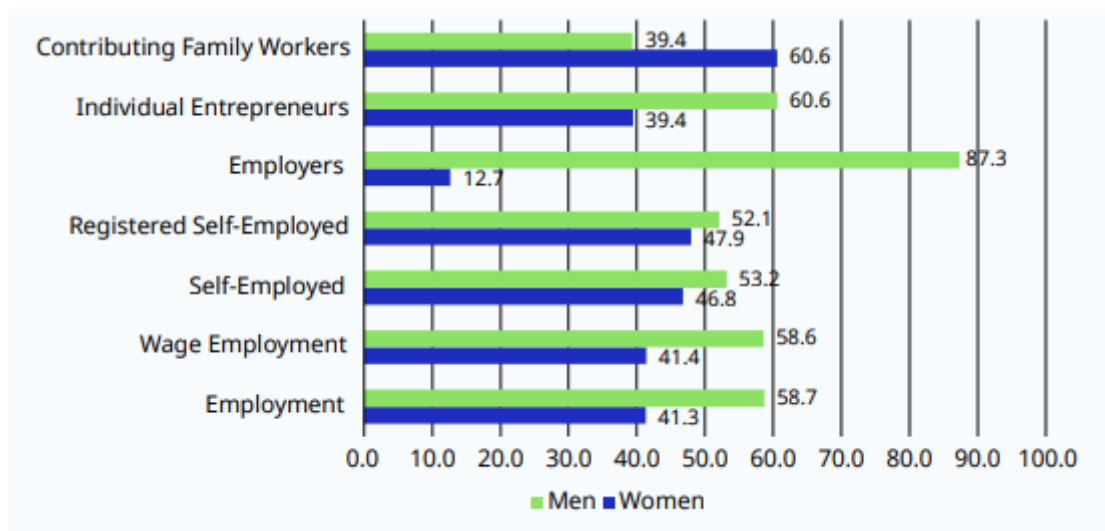


Figure 2. Status in employment (share of men and women in % in particular employment statuses), 2021

Source: Compiled by the author using the data of the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Women often shoulder the responsibility of unpaid care work within households, exacerbating their workload and creating a dual burden. Despite men having a higher incidence of wage employment, women are more commonly found in the public sector, particularly within sectors like education, healthcare, and social services, where state dominance prevails. The proportion of women employed in the private sector remains notably lower, indicative of a preference for the public sector due to perceived job stability and more favorable conditions, including maternity protection.

The reliance on the public sector for employment underscores women's pursuit of decent jobs with adequate social protection, emphasizing the importance of stable employment opportunities. Any reduction in the size of the public sector is likely to disproportionately impact women as wage earners, potentially exacerbating existing gender disparities in the workforce.

The impact of insufficient job creation on both men and women varies significantly. In 2021, the official unemployment rate stood at 9.6 percent overall, with women experiencing a 93 percent higher unemployment rate compared to men—13.3 percent for women and 6.9 percent for men. Additionally, nearly 30 percent (29.3 percent) of young people aged 16 to 24 were neither in education nor employment.

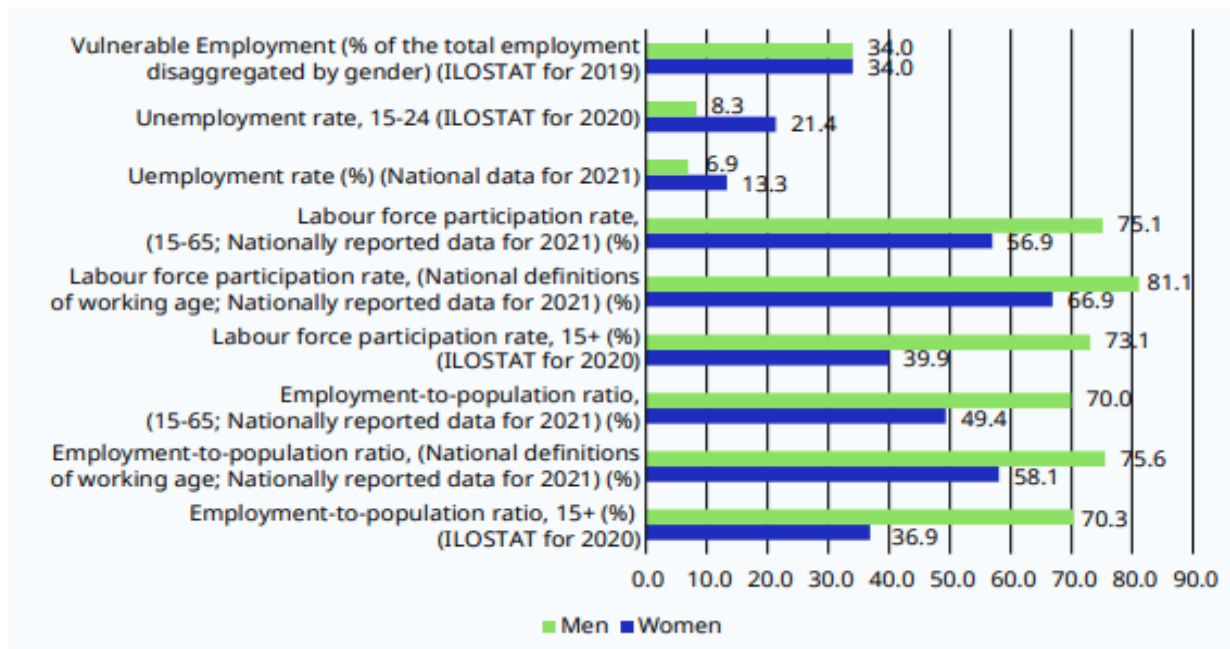


Figure 3. Gender differences in employment outcomes in Uzbekistan

Source: Compiled by the author using the data of the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and ILOSTAT

Changes in the methodology for measuring unemployment by the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (MEPR) in 2018 led to a 61 percent increase in the official unemployment rate between 2017 and 2018. Consequently, the Labour Force Survey (L2CU) of 2018 reported higher unemployment rates and lower employment rates. Compared to men, women had nearly half the labor force participation rate, less than half the employment-to-population ratio, and more than double the unemployment rate in 2018. Around a third of employed individuals were in vulnerable employment in 2019, with women being equally as likely as men to be in such precarious positions.

Official statistics indicate a loss of approximately 300,000 jobs in Uzbekistan due to the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. However, by the end of 2021, the economy had fully recovered the lost jobs, reaching the level of 13.44 million jobs in 2019. Despite this recovery, the unemployment rate did not revert to pre-crisis levels, increasing by 0.6 percentage points in 2021 compared to 2019, primarily due to sluggish employment growth and a significant influx of young people entering the labor market.

Long-term unemployment is prevalent, with 50 percent of women and 35 percent of men being unemployed for a year or longer in 2018. In 2021, the youth unemployment rate among men aged 16-25 was over 50 percent higher than the national average, indicating challenges in transitioning from education to employment, particularly for young women, whose unemployment rate was more than double the national average.

Most job seekers relied on public employment offices or private job centers for employment opportunities. However, the fact that half of job seekers did not utilize public employment services highlights its inadequacy in meeting their needs, partly reflecting institutional and structural deficits in the economy. The effective governance of both public employment services and private employment agencies is crucial in assisting both men and women in finding suitable employment opportunities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis presented in this paper highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by women in Uzbekistan's labor market and the broader economy. Despite significant efforts to address gender disparities and promote equal rights and opportunities, substantial gender gaps persist, particularly concerning employment and income generation.

The findings underscore the disproportionate burden borne by women in unpaid care work and household responsibilities, which significantly impacts their participation in formal employment. While self-employment remains a significant source of household income, gender disparities persist within this sector, with women more likely to engage in dependent employment roles.

Moreover, women's overrepresentation in the public sector, coupled with limited opportunities in the private sector, underscores the importance of stable employment with adequate social protections. Any reduction in public sector employment is likely to have adverse effects on women, exacerbating existing gender disparities in the workforce.

The analysis also highlights the significant gender disparities in unemployment rates, with women experiencing higher rates of unemployment compared to men. Long-term unemployment remains prevalent, particularly among women, indicating systemic challenges in transitioning to employment opportunities.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the need for comprehensive policy interventions to address gender biases and structural inequalities in the labor market. Efforts to strengthen public employment services and private employment agencies are essential to assist both men and women in accessing suitable job opportunities.

In conclusion, achieving gender equality in Uzbekistan's labor market requires concerted efforts to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive policies that ensure equal rights, opportunities, and protections for all individuals, irrespective of gender. Such efforts are essential not only for advancing

women's economic empowerment but also for fostering sustainable and inclusive economic growth for the nation as a whole.

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