American Journal Of Social Sciences And Humanity Research

VOLUME Vol.05 Issue05 2025
PAGE NO. 324-326
DOI 10.37547/ajsshr/Volume05Issue05-64

Media Coverage of Female Suicide During the Transition Period

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Received: 31 March 2025; **Accepted:** 29 April 2025; **Published:** 31 May 2025

Abstract: Suicide is the highest point of a person's socio-spiritual helplessness, helplessness, powerlessness, and lack of will. The increase of this situation in a society, its frequent repetition, the popularization of suicide methods means an "emergency call" about serious social and political problems. Although Uzbek intellectuals have studied the suicidal situation through several psychological and sociological studies, the issue of its coverage in the press has not been researched a lot. The main purpose of the article is to research the reasons for the increase in the dynamics of suicide by women at the beginning of the 1990s, why this particular method was chosen, and how these cases were reflected in the media. For this, we studied the 1989-1991 issues of Saodat magazine for women.

Keywords: Suicide, transition period, Perestroika (economic reconstruction), Glasnost (transparency), self-immolation.

Introduction: During various historical processes, especially during transitional periods from one regime to another, an increase in suicide cases among people has been widely studied through sociological and psychological research.

The methods of suicide are closely tied to the time, place, available means, and also to the gender and personality traits of the individual attempting it (Demirji, 2022). Naturally, these methods differ between men and women due to the latter's emotional sensitivity, stability, and motivations.

Transitional periods often become a source of intense psychological stress for both the state and its citizens. This is because such times are marked by uncertainty about the future, occasional hopelessness, the need to adapt from an old lifestyle to a new one, and the inability to envision the future, which leads to inner fears and doubts. In Uzbekistan, the "Perestroika" reforms initiated in the USSR in 1985 created exactly such a "space and time" of socio-psychological tension. At first, there were sparks of hope that everything would improve rapidly due to acceleration and openness, but by 1989, those sparks began to fade. This was reflected in a growing sense of despair and loss of hope among the population. The peak of this emotional downturn manifested in demonstrative suicides. During those years in Uzbekistan, 32.7% of completed suicides were committed through self-immolation. In other words, nearly one in three individuals who committed suicide chose to burn themselves.

On April 23, 1985, at the Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the CPSU held in Moscow, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected as General Secretary. He announced his ideological principles and new path to the public. His vision for the Soviet society included a comprehensive renewal of state and party bureaucracy, radical economic reforms, and democratization of social life. Gorbachev's Perestroika aimed to redirect the economy not according to central plans but according to societal needs, avoid unnecessary investments, halt unproductive expenditures like military defense, armament, and aid to third-world countries, and increase worker

participation in production nationwide (Andijan, 1996). However, by the 1990s, the failure of Perestroika and the parallel Glasnost policy led to economic crises, food shortages, devaluation of farmers' labor, a series of ecological problems, a shortage of educational staff due to migration or career changes, an underperforming healthcare system, and water supply deficiencies. As a result, people began to question the ideology and faith in the "great Soviet state," leading to a prevailing mood of hopelessness.

In the second half of the 1980s, a rise in socially alarming trends was observed, including an increase in orphans with living parents, deteriorating child health, anemia among mothers, rising youth crime, suicide, self-immolation, expulsion of elderly parents from homes, overuse of women in physically demanding labor, and more.

These issues prompted society to investigate their deep roots and take preventive action (Alimova, 2020). Topics that were previously untouched by the media began to be openly discussed.

One alarming trend observed in the late 1980s in the republic was self-immolation among women. In 1986, there were 132 such cases; in 1987 – 143; in 1988 – 245; and in 1989 – 233 women committed self-immolation (Qodirova, 1991). These figures rose to 246 in 1990, 265 in 1991, and 224 cases were registered in the first 10 months of 1992.

The transition from the Soviet Union to a new system is seen as an unexpected outcome of the Perestroika and Glasnost policies. The political, economic, and social decline of the Union gave hope to the republics for building their own nation-states. After the collapse of the USSR, the Baltic states declared independence, and the failure of the State Committee for the State of Emergency (GKChP) in Russia created political conditions for other nations to secede. In this context, Uzbekistan declared independence on June 20, 1990, and on August 31, 1991, the First President I. Karimov officially proclaimed Uzbekistan an independent state.

Although the country gained independence, Russia retained most of the material and spiritual assets as the legal successor of the USSR. As a result, former Soviet states like Uzbekistan, which were primarily raw material suppliers, lost their markets and fell into a spiral of economic crisis. The ensuing food shortages, unemployment, public health issues, and housing problems affected Uzbek women, who bear significant family responsibilities, leading to both physical and psychological depression.

During those years, particularly among women in our country, cases of self-immolation as a method of suicide were on the rise. Psychologist E. Usmanov, who studied these phenomena from a psychological perspective, writes the following: "The choice of self-immolation as a method of suicide among women in our republic is characterized by a certain ‘advantage’ from the perspective of the individual performing the act: that is, this method leaves a strong emotional impression on those around, portrays the suicidal individual as a 'victim,' and is marked by a certain degree of demonstrativeness."

The psychological essence of the behavior of women who commit suicide includes the expression of rebellion, a desire for revenge, and a cry for help—factors that influence their choice of this particular method.

When examining women who committed suicide, it was found that most had secondary education, were economically dependent, obedient, selfless, and possessed clearly expressed psychological traits of sacrifice and devotion. Considering that 80% of these incidents occurred in rural areas, and that tools such as fuel, matches, and tandoor stoves were readily accessible in women’s immediate environments, this might have made this method more accessible and thus more commonly chosen.

Researcher E. Usmanov identifies the motivations leading to suicide as: conflicts in personal and family life, the threat of divorce, unresolved women’s issues and disputes in local communities and workplaces, lack of economic independence, poor living conditions, monotonous nutrition, domestic violence, and forced marriage.

It was also revealed that completed suicides were more common in old age, demonstrative suicides were prevalent in adulthood, and affective suicides were frequent among youth.

To determine how such tragic issues were covered in the press, and whether the problems mentioned above were reflected in media materials, we examined the 1989 issues of Saodat, the largest women’s magazine in the republic. It became clear that several materials were directly dedicated to the topic of suicide among women.

In the Saodat magazine, journalist K. Bahriev, in an article titled "The Revolution of a Woman’s Soul," emphasizes the need to abandon one-sided approaches when discussing suicide cases. He notes that the root of the issue lies in the economic impoverishment of 8.8 million people (at that time, Uzbekistan's population was about 20 million). He stresses that women, even those working in asphalt laying or heavy lifting jobs for better pay, were not entitled to any benefits related to child-rearing. Furthermore, there were no facilities in villages for

meaningful rest or spiritual relaxation after work, and even if such opportunities existed, there was no funding. The journalist laments, “In our villages—there is no hairdresser, no bathhouse, no dry cleaner… the woman herself is all of these.”

Another piece, a problematic essay by publicist Shokirali Nuraliyev titled "A Woman’s Will," mainly focuses on family planning. He writes that the Soviet state failed to address this issue—i.e., due to the very limited availability of contraceptives in Uzbekistan, many women were forced to undergo abortions or give birth repeatedly, falling into economic and moral dependence, which ultimately led to suicide.

Another article titled “You Are Needed in Life, Dear Friend!” presents a reader’s heartfelt appeal. It calls for a nationwide study into the lives of rural women, who, due to everyday hardships, cotton harvesting, and household burdens, are becoming increasingly distanced from education and traditional values.

In Saodat magazine, numerous in-depth analytical materials addressed the issues of women being engaged in hard labor, the near absence of time for spiritual rest, the lack of opportunities and conditions for self-development, and a range of other problems affecting women’s health. At the same time, the publications repeatedly touched upon government officials’ indifference to these issues and the fundamentally flawed division of labor between men and women at the policy level.

Different forms of domestic violence, sexual abuse by close relatives, and the inability of women—who, under economically difficult conditions, were shouldering labor as heavy as men—to find solutions to their physical and emotional exhaustion and thus viewed suicide as a final resort, were vividly described in Kholtosh Usmonova’s article titled "Is Her Precious Life So Worthless?" Remarkably, the author published letters sent to the magazine about incestuous abuse (by fathers, brothers, fathers-in-law, etc.), a topic previously unaddressed in Soviet media. Usmonova attempted to dissuade women from suicide, warned of its religious consequences, and called upon the Women’s Committee to pay attention to the issue.

In interviews and dialogues featured in the magazine during those years, a notable trend was the effort to obtain responses from socially respected individuals regarding the growing rate of suicide among women. One such interview was the dialogue "A Homeland Is a Better Partner Than Any Spouse" between publicist Nurali Qobil and writer Sobir Unar. In it, Qobil suggested that the root causes of female suicide often lie in the pressure and negative influence from those around them.

CONCLUSION

Upon examining the issues of Saodat magazine over the three-year period from 1989 to 1991, when female suicide rates were at their highest, it becomes evident that this issue was most directly and extensively covered in 1989. In the following two years, however, mentions of the issue appeared more sporadically—within interviews, in articles about rural living conditions, and in discussions of labor rights.

Given that such a serious social issue as suicide among women was at least somewhat covered in the press, one might reasonably ask: were there any materials focused on practical measures to eliminate this problem? During our review of the magazine issues, we did not find any coverage dedicated to concrete actions taken against this issue. The content was limited to discussions of the problem, statistical data on suicide, and expert analyses of its causes and consequences.

Perhaps it is appropriate to recall how Salomat Vafo, in her 1992 article "Family Freedom", criticized the damage inflicted by socialist ideology on the institution of the family. She noted the process of secularization, the alienation from traditional Uzbek values, and described how in the 1980s, a district party committee secretary in charge of ideology proudly reported a decrease in female suicide rates—as if it were part of a bureaucratic plan or performance chart. Vafo argued that no genuine efforts were made to address the root causes of the crisis.

Those tumultuous years devastated the lives of countless women. If one may put it this way, this period entered history as a time when vulnerable women, lacking protection from society, sacrificed themselves in protest against the oppressive system and harsh living conditions.

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