

The Visual Construction of Women Leaders in Soviet Uzbekistan: A Source-Critical and Gender Analysis of Official Photographs (1946-1991)

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Abstract: This article examines official photographs of women who held leadership positions in Party, state, Soviet, and public institutions of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Photography is treated not as a neutral illustration of historical events, but as an independent historical source produced within specific political, editorial, and ideological frameworks. The analysis focuses on how official Soviet photography constructed the figure of the woman leader and encoded political and gender meanings through representations of appearance, setting, dress, spatial positioning, and accompanying captions. The core corpus covers 1946-1991; a small number of pre-1946 images are used only as contextual precedents for the postwar visual canon. The study identifies the principal models used to represent women leaders in Soviet Uzbekistan and examines how official photography linked femininity, nationally coded identity, political authority, and Soviet ideology.

Keywords: women's history in Uzbekistan, Soviet period, women leaders, official photography, visual sources, visual representation, gender history, Soviet ideology, political image, source-critical analysis.

Introduction: During the Soviet period, photography served not merely as a means of documenting social and political realities, but also as an important ideological mechanism that shaped public perceptions of ideas, values, and social roles. Through photographs of deputies, employees of Party and state institutions, leaders of public organisations, and socially active women published in the periodical press and other propaganda media, the Soviet authorities sought to demonstrate the achievements of their policy of involving women in socio-political life. In the national republics, images of women occupying leadership positions were presented as visual evidence of Soviet modernisation, gender equality, and the emancipation of the "Eastern woman". However, the extensive visual representation of women did not necessarily indicate equal participation with men in political power and governance. The position assigned to women within the photographic frame, the activities in which they were depicted, their placement in relation to male leaders, and their representation as decision-makers or

symbolic participants are therefore important for identifying the visually acceptable boundaries of women's political agency.

Studies devoted to the history of women in Soviet Uzbekistan have primarily focused on the state's emancipation policies, the Hujum campaign, education and labour, motherhood, family relations, and everyday life. The visual representation of women who worked within administrative and governing institutions, however, has not been sufficiently examined as an independent subject of research. Official photographs have often been used merely as illustrations accompanying biographical information rather than analysed systematically as a coherent body of visual sources. Visual hierarchy, the positioning of female and male figures, the relationship between individual appearance and the ideologically constructed standardised image, and the semantic connections among image, caption, and accompanying text all require specialised source-critical analysis. Official photographs should therefore be assessed not

only as records of historical events, but also as selected, edited, and ideologically framed visual products.

The purpose of this article is to identify the principles underlying the construction of the official visual image of women leaders in the Uzbek SSR between 1946 and 1991 and to examine how the gender structure of Soviet power was represented in these images. The study analyses women's political and professional roles, their position within the frame, representations of appearance and dress, relationships with surrounding figures, and combinations of Soviet and nationally coded symbols. Where relevant, biographical and administrative information is used to contextualise formal status; photographs themselves are not treated as sufficient evidence of actual decision-making authority. The scholarly significance of the study lies in bringing official photographs into systematic analysis as independent historical sources for Uzbekistan's political and gender history. It also demonstrates that visual representation not only reflected social and political reality, but contributed to its construction, the legitimisation of the political order, and the incorporation of gender norms into public consciousness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The visual representation of women leaders in Soviet Uzbekistan lies at the intersection of several fields of scholarship, including women's history, Soviet gender policy, visual culture, press photography, and the representation of political power. The existing literature may therefore be divided broadly into two areas: studies of Soviet policies towards women in Central Asia and specialised research on representations of women in the visual culture of Soviet Uzbekistan and Central Asia.

The works of D. Alimova [1], G. Massell [2], Sh. Keller [3], M. Kamp [4], and D. Kandiyoti [5] are among the most significant contributions to the study of Soviet policies towards women in Central Asia. D. Alimova's critical approach to Soviet historiography on women's history demonstrates the need to interpret official visual sources not as direct evidence of "achieved equality", but as representations selected by the state and endowed with specific ideological meanings. Although G. Massell's research covers 1919–1929, his analytical approach contributes to an understanding of women's symbolic and mobilising role within Soviet political strategy. M. Kamp draws on oral histories and women's personal writings, presenting women not as passive objects of state policy, but as historical actors who made decisions and responded to political pressures in diverse ways. This approach supports the comparison of official photographs with personal

biographies and documented careers. D. Kandiyoti's concept of the "Soviet gender paradox" provides an important framework for analysing the discrepancy between the politically active image of women leaders and the institutional limits within which they operated. Sh. Keller's study of the Soviet campaign against Islam in Central Asia examines modernisation as part of a broader policy aimed at transforming local religious and cultural institutions. From this perspective, the press image of the "emancipated", educated, and socially active Uzbek woman functioned as a visual expression of a Soviet way of life presented as an alternative to traditional and religious forms of social existence. These studies reveal the contradictory nature of Soviet policies towards women, but they do not specifically examine the postwar visual representation of women who occupied leadership positions within the Party and state administrative system of the Uzbek SSR.

E. Vikulina demonstrates how photographs of political leaders published in the Soviet press contributed to the construction of ideological concepts of power, bodily norms, and gender order [6, 7]. She analyses the size and placement of figures within the frame, gestures, direction of gaze, and distance between the principal subject and surrounding individuals as visual indicators of hierarchy. Vikulina also emphasises that the presence or absence of female politicians in representations of authority reflects the gender politics of a given society. These criteria are particularly productive for examining group photographs of women leaders in Uzbekistan: the centre of the frame, the distribution of speaking and listening roles, and the spatial relationship among figures help reveal the degree of leadership status visually attributed to women.

H. Holzberger's article "National in Front of the Camera, Soviet Behind It: Central Asia in Press Photography, 1925–1937" is one of the most important specialised studies of press photography in Uzbekistan [8]. Drawing on Roland Barthes's theory of connotation, Holzberger examines the combination of ethnographic markers, modern technologies, and Soviet symbols within a single frame. She argues that, while images of Uzbekistan promoted modernisation, they also partially preserved earlier exotic and Orientalist stereotypes of the "East". This perspective helps explain how Uzbek women leaders were visually coded as nationally distinctive through dress, styling, interiors, and architectural settings, while simultaneously being coded as Soviet through the tribune, state decorations, Party symbols, and official workplaces.

S. B. Shadmanova's studies focus on the broader socio-

cultural representation of women and the methodology of visual-source analysis [9, 10]. Her research on women's identities and images in Uzbekistan, based on photographs published in the journal "Yorqin Turmush" ("Bright Life"), is particularly relevant to the present article. It shows that photography not only represented women's modernisation and emancipation, but also combined traditional cultural markers with Soviet ideals. The journal thus functioned as an instrument of propaganda and cultural transformation that contributed to the construction of new gender roles.

Among the studies directly concerned with official photographic representations of Uzbek women, the author's previous publications occupy a distinct place [11, 12]. These articles analyse photography as an instrument of Soviet propaganda and identify the principal methods used to construct the image of the "Soviet woman". They show how the press represented Uzbek women as productive workers, socially active citizens, and beneficiaries of the socialist system. Although closely related to the present topic, these studies primarily address the generalised image of the "Soviet woman" rather than the specific visual construction of women leaders.

The study by N. E. Behzadi and L. Direnberger, based on materials from the Tajik SSR, is also important from a comparative perspective. Examining the gendered and ethnic dimensions of women's labour on the Muslim Soviet periphery between 1950 and 1991, the authors demonstrate that women's incorporation into the labour force simultaneously served economic needs and the ideological objective of "emancipation" [13]. Their approach makes it possible to interpret the image of the woman leader as a point of intersection among professional activity, ethnic identity, and state interests.

The existing literature therefore demonstrates that official photographs of women who worked in state, Party, Soviet, and public administration in the Uzbek SSR between 1946 and 1991 have not yet been systematically examined as a distinct body of visual historical sources. Previous studies predominantly focus on the "Soviet woman", the female worker, mother, collective-farm worker, or representative of national culture. The political status assigned to women within the frame, their visual relationship with male leaders, the correspondence between formal position and photographic representation, and the combination of national identity, professional status, and normatively constructed femininity within a single image remain insufficiently explored. The present article addresses this scholarly gap.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative source-critical, semiotic, gender, and comparative approach. The core corpus consists of official photographs of women leaders published between 1946 and 1991 in periodicals such as "Pravda Vostoka", "Sovet O'zbekistoni", "Qizil O'zbekiston", "O'zbekiston xotin-qizlari", "Saodat", and "Ogonyok", as well as photographs preserved in archival collections, photographic albums, commemorative publications, and news-agency holdings. The selection criteria were the depiction of women who occupied leadership positions in state, Party, Komsomol, trade-union, or public organisations, served as deputies or members of elected bodies, and whose political or administrative status was identified in a caption or related text. A small number of pre-1946 photographs are used only to trace visual precedents and are clearly distinguished from the core postwar corpus. The study does not claim statistical representativeness.

The photographs were examined with particular attention to authorship, date and place of production, publication context, editorial affiliation, possible cropping or retouching, accompanying captions, purpose of publication, and intended audience. The visual analysis considered image type, camera angle, shot scale, spatial positioning, direction of gaze, depicted action, composition of surrounding figures, clothing, political and national symbols, and gender markers.

Semiotic analysis was used to identify both the denotative content of the images and their connotative meanings associated with authority, Party loyalty, professionalism, national identity, motherhood, modesty, and symbolic equality. A gender perspective was applied to the visual distribution of power between women and men, access to central positions within the frame, active and passive gestures, situations involving public speaking or decision-making, and strategies through which women's authority was moderated or made socially familiar.

Comparative analysis focused on individual and group portraits, official and domestic settings, workplace and protocol images, and the relationship between postwar representations and selected prewar visual precedents. Because photographs construct appearances rather than directly reveal institutional practice, conclusions about actual administrative authority are made cautiously and only where supported by contextual biographical or documentary evidence.

RESULTS

Through photography, Soviet ideology portrayed Uzbek women as participants in a "new way of life" who were

capable of performing social and political functions previously regarded as exclusively male. Images published in the press and disseminated through other propaganda media did more than document particular events: they conveyed official attitudes, reflected the visual codes of the period, and articulated ideological norms concerning women's place in society. Images of women leaders and other prominent women were used as symbols of the equality and progress presented as having been achieved through Soviet policy. In the examined press materials, official photographs and their accompanying texts constructed the woman leader less as the expression of an individual biography than as a visual symbol of the state's gender-policy achievements.

Women leaders were represented as propagandists, political campaigners, deputies, delegates, Party activists, heads of public organisations, chairwomen of village Soviets, and officials of executive committees. They were framed as role models who could encourage other women to participate in public and political life. A photograph of a woman leader was therefore expected not only to display individual accomplishment, but also to validate the political claim

that the Soviet system had created new social opportunities for women.

In the examined materials, articles and photographic reports about women leaders were concentrated around International Women's Day on 8 March, Party congresses, sessions of the Soviets, elections, and other official occasions. Such publications highlighted selected examples of women in leadership positions rather than offering a representative picture of the gender composition of political institutions. Official visual representation thus functioned primarily as a means of promoting exemplary cases.

Photographs of women participating in sessions of the Supreme Soviet, Party congresses, and official meetings visually confirmed their incorporation into the Soviet political system. Their status was emphasised by their placement in the front rows, on the presidium platform, or near prominent state leaders. For example, a photograph taken by the Soviet Information Agency during a session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in October 1946 shows deputies elected from the Uzbek SSR seated in the front row, including Poshsha Mahmudova (1918-2006) (Fig. 1) [14].



Figure 1. Deputies from the Uzbek SSR seated in the front row during a session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Moscow, October 1946. Poshsha Mahmudova is second from the right.



Figure 2. Saddi Pulatova, Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR, Fourth Convocation.

The press published information about the number, biographies, and occupations of women elected to the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and the union republics. The rise of an ordinary female worker or peasant woman to the status of a stateswoman was interpreted as a major achievement of socialist society [15]. For example, the cover of the second issue of "O'zbekiston xotin-qizlari" ("Women of Uzbekistan") in 1955 featured Saddi Pulatova, a candidate for deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR, together with an essay on her life and career. Her advancement from a weaver at the Tashkent Textile Combine to a deputy

was presented as evidence that ordinary Soviet citizens could rise to positions of state leadership [16].

Formal participation in legislative bodies, however, should not automatically be equated with autonomous influence over major political decisions. The photographs establish women's public presence and formal status, but they cannot by themselves reveal how authority was exercised within Party institutions or informal political networks.

This distinction is consistent with D. Kandiyoti's concept of the "Soviet gender paradox": women

received formal rights and access to education and public activity, while male dominance persisted within many influential mechanisms of power [5]. The visual presence of a woman in an official political setting therefore does not in itself prove that she functioned as an autonomous decision-maker.

A prewar photograph reproduced in a photo album marking the tenth anniversary of the Uzbek SSR provides a contextual precedent for this postwar visual



Figure 3. Stalin with representatives from Uzbekistan at the Fourteenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), December 1925.

The prewar precedents also show how social and political status could be communicated through outward appearance. Plain, restrained clothing, short hairstyles, military-style tunics, boots, belts, and document folders drew on visual markers conventionally associated with masculine public activity. Such representations shifted attention away from delicacy or physical attractiveness and towards discipline, courage, social engagement, and readiness to perform state responsibilities.

A striking example is the representation of Tojikhon Shodieva, one of the public faces of the Hujum campaign, who later held political and economic posts. In the 1935 commemorative photo album, she appears in a military-style tunic and a cap then worn predominantly by men [17]. Her appearance contributed to an image of an active woman whose courage and discipline were presented as equal to those of men engaged in building the Soviet state. Shodieva's biography – her forced early marriage as one of several wives, escape from that situation, rejection of the paranja, and subsequent involvement in political and economic administration – was incorporated into the ideological narrative of the “new woman liberated from the old way of life”. Such women were presented as vivid examples of female ability realised in public administration and as embodiments of the equality proclaimed by Soviet legislation.

language. The photograph shows participants in the Fourteenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), including an unidentified Uzbek woman seated near Stalin. Her name appears neither in the album caption [17] nor in the available delegate list [18]. Although the image falls outside the core period of 1946-1991, it illustrates an earlier practice in which a woman's presence could symbolise Soviet nationality and gender policy while her individual identity remained secondary.



Figure 4. Tojikhon Shodieva in a military-style tunic and cap, reproduced in the 1935 commemorative photo album.

In postwar photographs, the image of the woman leader became more clearly institutionalised. The formal suit, restrained hairstyle, deputy's or congress delegate's badge, orders, and medals served as markers of affiliation with the state and Party system. In some cases, national dress, decorative patterns, architectural settings, and elements of traditional life created an easily recognisable image of a representative of Uzbekistan. At the same time, political symbols, captions, and composition incorporated her into the wider all-Union political space.

The resulting image expressed a dual identification: the woman leader was expected to appear both as a modern Soviet political figure and as a visually recognisable representative of Uzbekistan.

Following Holzberger's formulation, such images may be read as “national in front of the camera, Soviet behind it” [8]. National dress and decorative motifs identified the woman as a representative of Uzbekistan, while the tribune, formal suit, state decorations, deputy's badge, and Party symbols located her within the all-Union political system.

Exhibition materials prepared for the Congress of Women of Uzbekistan in 1958 show that women's participation in public administration was presented through a carefully organised visual programme. A

special section was planned to include photographs of a secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, ministers and deputy ministers, officials of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, secretaries of city and district Party committees, chairpersons of executive committees, and trade-union leaders [19]. The list included Zukhra Rakhimbaboeva, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan; Halima Mukhitdinova, Head of the Central Committee's Propaganda Department; Yodgor Nasriddinova, Deputy Chair of the Council of Ministers of the Uzbek SSR; Khadicha Sulaymonova, Minister of Justice; Vasila Sodiqova, Minister of Social Welfare; Jamila Ilhomova, Secretary of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet; and other women leaders.

The exhibition plan indicates that the image of the woman leader was constructed not arbitrarily, but through a deliberate visual policy. Many selected figures were presented as women who had risen from the ranks of ordinary workers, peasants, or lower social strata. The article "Scholar and Stateswoman", devoted to Kh. S. Sulaymonova (1913–1965) – a leading legal scholar, Doctor of Legal Sciences, academician of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, and Minister of Justice-emphasised that she was the daughter of an ordinary employee [20]. Such biographies reinforced the themes of Soviet social mobility and gender equality and encouraged women's participation in labour and public affairs.

The official image was constructed not by presenting every aspect of an individual biography, but by selecting ideologically significant stages. Origins in a poor or ordinary family, commitment to labour, support from the Party and state, and advancement to the status of deputy or leader formed the principal elements of this biographical model. Administrative pressure, gender discrimination, domestic burdens, and informal barriers to women's advancement were largely absent from the official photo-textual narratives examined here.

Women who held leadership positions in agriculture occupied a distinct place in the materials analysed, reflecting the substantial proportion of women employed in that sector. According to contemporary data, women constituted 65 per cent of the republic's agricultural workforce in 1959. More than 500 women worked as collective-farm chairpersons, deputy chairpersons, agronomists, and brigade leaders, while over 2,000 served as unit leaders. Fifty-seven women had received the title Hero of Socialist Labour [21]. In 1958, 157 women were employed as collective-farm chairpersons and deputy chairpersons [22].

In press coverage of women engaged in agricultural administration, the primary emphasis was on labour and production. The protagonists of articles, photographic reports, and photo essays included A. Asronova, chairwoman of the Timoshenko Collective Farm in the Vodil District; Durkhonim Rakhimova, chairwoman of the "Inqilob" Collective Farm in the Khonqa District and a Hero of Socialist Labour; H. Yusupova, chairwoman of the "Bolshevik" Collective Farm in the Tashkent District; Sh. Barakaeva, a unit leader at the "October" Collective Farm in the Qorako'l District of Bukhara Region; Khursand Egamova, chairwoman of the "Red October" Collective Farm in the Karmana District; and S. Bobojonova, chairwoman of the "Kommuna" Collective Farm in the Yangiariq District of Khorezm Region [23]. In the examined examples, these women appeared in administrative offices, cotton fields, collective-farm meetings, production sites, or direct interaction with workers. The compositions presented the leader not as an official confined to an office, but as an organiser involved in the production process.



Figure 5. Toshkhon Hojiqosimova, Chairwoman of the Yangi Turmush Collective Farm in Central Fergana.



Figure 6. Yodgor Nasriddinova, Chair of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR, with her grandchildren.

Photographs accompanying essays about Nazira Yo'ldosheva, chairwoman of a collective farm in the Sirdaryo District and a Hero of Socialist Labour, depicted her in her office, among women working in the fields, with silkworm breeders, and beside machine operators sowing cottonseed. These representations legitimised her status by emphasising proximity to the workforce [24]. Similarly, Toshkhon Hojiqosimova's appointment as chairwoman of the "Yangi Turmush" Collective Farm in a newly developed area of Central Fergana was framed not as an act of personal initiative, but as a response to the Party's call and the fulfilment of political duty [25]. A photograph of Fotima Qosimova reading the resolution of a Party plenum to collective farmers presents the woman leader not only as an administrator, but also as an ideological educator [30]. In these images, leadership was represented less through autonomous political decision-making than through the ability to implement Party resolutions locally, mobilise labour collectives, and fulfil state production plans. The effectiveness of the woman leader was therefore framed primarily through Party loyalty, organisational ability, and executive discipline. Kinship-based vocabulary also shaped the representation of women's managerial authority. An article about Turdikhon Teshaboeva, chairwoman of the Qo'rg'ontepa District Executive Committee, was entitled "Rayon onaxoni" ("The Respected Matriarch of the District") [26], while material on collective-farm chairwoman Sh. Mirsultonova and Party organisation secretary M. Hasanova appeared under the title "The Two Matriarchs of the Farm" [27]. The Uzbek term Matriarch can denote a mother, a respected senior woman, or a female elder; translating it only as

"mother" would overstate one part of its semantic range.

Such expressions placed women's managerial activity within a socially familiar model of senior female care and moral authority. The leader was represented less as a distant bureaucrat than as a respected elder who cared for workers and managed the collective as an extended family. This framing could enhance her public authority while also adapting the exercise of power to established gender expectations and moderating the image of autonomous political subjectivity.

Although the roles of worker, public activist, and leader were foregrounded, the ideal representation of womanhood also retained the figures of the caring mother, devoted wife, and capable homemaker. A photograph of Yodgor Nasriddinova, Chair of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR from 1959 to 1970, surrounded by her grandchildren presents a familial image markedly different from her official political portraits [28]. The photograph contains none of the visual markers commonly associated with state authority, such as a tribune, official documents, decorations, a deputy's badge, or a government office. Instead, the domestic setting, the gathering around the table, the children's spontaneous movements, and the physical proximity of family members present Nasriddinova primarily as a grandmother and family member. Her atlas dress, together with the doppi and nationally styled clothing worn by one of the children, gives the image a distinct national and cultural meaning. The photograph foregrounds not institutional status, but connection to an Uzbek family and domestic environment.

From a gender perspective, this image balances the

official representation of political authority with conventional attributes of femininity, motherhood, and grandmotherhood. Soviet visual culture often portrayed women in senior positions as determined and professionally active, while family photographs suggested that political engagement had not displaced affection, care, and devotion to the family. A 1957 photograph preserved in the Central State Archive of Film, Photographic, and Phonographic Documents of Uzbekistan depicts Minister of Justice Khadicha Sulaymonova with her family. From right to left, it shows her mother, Otincha, who had worked as a cleaner for more than twenty years and for two years at the Andijan grain-processing plant; her son Shavkat, a sixth-grade pupil; her elder sister Gulbaram, Deputy Director for Research at the Institute of Blood Transfusion, Doctor of Medical Sciences, and professor;

and Khadicha Sulaymonova herself [29]. The portrait links a senior state official to her social origins and familial roles. Images of this kind may be interpreted as an editorial strategy that made women's political authority more socially familiar by emphasising family values.

Education and political literacy were also important visual characteristics of women leaders. Holding a book or newspaper, reading Party resolutions to workers, delivering a report at a meeting, and working with official documents presented women as modern, educated, and ideologically trained [30]. These actions suggested that the woman leader was responsible not only for production and administration, but also for the political education of the population.



Figure 7. Fotima Qosimova (right), Chairwoman of the Kaganovich Collective Farm in the Samarkand District, reads the resolution of the June Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee to collective farmers.



Figure 8. Tukhtakhon Mahkamboeva, Chairwoman of the Sverdlov Village Soviet in the Yangiyo'l District and Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR, celebrating 1 May with members of her family.

Women leaders were also presented as cultural role models associated with a Soviet "new way of life". Some photographic reports represented domestic and festive practices as signs of modernity and political loyalty. Among scenes from the life of Tukhtakhon Mahkamboeva, Chairwoman of the Sverdlov Village Soviet in the Yangiyo'l District of Tashkent Region and Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR, one photograph shows her raising a toast with family members on 1 May "to peace and the long life of the great leader Stalin" [31]. The scene links a family celebration to official political ritual and offers a normative visual script for observing Soviet public holidays.

Orders, medals, deputy's badges, and the Gold Star of the Hero of Socialist Labour served as important visual markers of state recognition. Contemporary press

placed individual Uzbek examples within a wider all-Union culture of awards: between 1955 and 1959, 69,959 women across the USSR received orders and medals, and 314 were awarded the title Hero of Socialist Labour [32]. In 1961, 72 women received the title Hero of Socialist Labour and 27,510 received orders and medals [33]. These figures provide context for the prominence of decorations in official visual propaganda, although they do not describe the distribution of awards within Uzbekistan specifically.

Decorated women were presented not simply as individual achievers, but as exemplary products of socialist labour, discipline, and Party loyalty. State awards enhanced the represented political and social status of women leaders and simultaneously encouraged other workers to pursue higher production results.

In the examined photographs and captions, leadership and success were commonly associated with fulfilment of production plans, increased productivity, and commitment to Party directives. Independent views, managerial strategies, and direct influence on political decision-making were not central elements of these visual narratives.

Source-critical analysis shows that the meaning of a photograph was shaped substantially by its title, caption, or accompanying essay. Because the same image can acquire different meanings when paired with different texts, an official photograph studied in isolation cannot fully disclose its ideological function.

Texts devoted to women leaders repeatedly used formulaic expressions such as “from an ordinary worker to a stateswoman”, “responding to the Party’s call”, “a leader worthy of the people’s trust”, “a caring mother”, and “an active public figure”. These formulations assigned a predetermined meaning to the depicted person’s actions and incorporated her into the broader Soviet narrative of social progress.

The denotative level of the photograph—a woman seated on a presidium platform, walking through a field, or delivering a speech—was thus supplemented by connotative meanings conveyed through text. Captions presented her as courageous, loyal to the Party, devoted to the people, educated, or caring. From the perspective of Roland Barthes’s theory of connotation, the ideological force of official photography emerged through the combined operation of image and text.

The materials analysed show that Soviet press photography was not a neutral form of visual documentation, but an institutional product shaped by the objectives of the Party and state. Studies of Soviet press photography demonstrate that images were subject to editorial selection, captioning, cropping, retouching, and censorship [6–8]. The published photograph should therefore be read as the outcome of an institutional workflow rather than as a transparent record of reality.

Consequently, the press image of the woman leader represented selected individuals and situations that met editorial and ideological requirements rather than the full range of women’s lived experiences. Conflict, administrative failure, exhaustion, domestic burdens, gender barriers to leadership, and political disagreement were largely absent from the visual field. Women were instead portrayed as active, disciplined, reliable, industrious, and satisfied.

The official media image was shaped by the political conditions of the period, communist ideology, nationally coded motifs, editorial policy, and the

photographer’s professional choices. Photographs of women leaders should therefore be understood not as complete reproductions of historical reality, but as selected and visually reconstructed representations of it.

Overall, the findings reveal several interrelated characteristics of the official visual construction of women leaders in Soviet Uzbekistan. First, the woman leader was presented as a symbol of gender equality and social mobility said to be ensured by the Soviet system. Second, her visual agency was often framed around the implementation of Party resolutions, mobilisation of labour collectives, and promotion of state policy at the local level. Third, formal suits, state decorations, deputy’s badges, official documents, and tribunes signified political and professional status, while national dress and traditional decorative motifs identified her with Uzbekistan. Fourth, women’s authority was visually and textually moderated through motherhood, senior female care, modesty, and devotion to family.

Official photographs therefore did more than document women’s political and social activities: they helped define the acceptable visual boundaries of women’s authority. The woman leader was expected to be active, educated, and disciplined while remaining loyal to the Party hierarchy; she could perform functions conventionally associated with men without abandoning recognised attributes of femininity. This model reflected a central contradiction of Soviet gender policy – the coexistence of formal equality with a persistent hierarchy of political power.

CONCLUSION

The analysis supports the following conclusions.

First, official photographs of women leaders in the Uzbek SSR formed an important part of the Soviet policy of visual legitimation. Through these images, the state presented women’s participation in social and political life as a major achievement of socialist modernisation.

Second, a broad visual presence did not necessarily amount to recognition of autonomous political subjectivity. Spatial positioning, depicted activities, the presence of male leaders, and accompanying captions could reproduce a hierarchical model of authority even when women occupied formally prominent positions.

Third, the official image of the woman leader was constructed at the intersection of political loyalty, professional competence, nationally coded identity, and normatively defined femininity. She was represented as educated and capable, but not confrontational; active, yet disciplined; modern, while

retaining recognisably Uzbek visual attributes.

Fourth, the corpus reveals the coexistence of several visual modes: monumental group images, protocol-based official portraits, workplace scenes, and domestic or family photographs. The evidence examined here does not support a simple linear evolution across 1946–1991; a fuller diachronic conclusion would require a larger corpus distributed more evenly across the entire period.

Fifth, official photographs possess considerable value as historical sources, but they must be studied alongside captions, editorial texts, archival descriptions, meeting records, and biographical or administrative documents. Such comparison allows the researcher to distinguish visual claims about authority from evidence concerning institutional practice.

Official photographs of women leaders in Soviet Uzbekistan did more than demonstrate women's presence within the political system. By combining professional competence with Party loyalty, nationally coded identity, and controlled forms of femininity, they helped define the socially and politically acceptable forms of women's authority.

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