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Gender Policy and Issues of Increasing the Active Participation of Women in Socio-Political Life and Entrepreneurship

(On the Example of Uzbekistan And the Asian Region, Based on A Comparative Analysis)

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Abstract: This scientific article analyzes the content and essence of these reforms, the state of women's political and economic activity, the achievements and remaining problems. It also provides specific examples and practical recommendations using the experience of some countries of the world and a case study method.

Keywords: Gender policy, women's activism, socio-political life, entrepreneurship, gender equality in Uzbekistan, women in the Asian region, comparative analysis, economic opportunities, gender equality policy, women's rights, institutional reforms, women's leadership, gender stereotypes, state policy and gender, women's entrepreneurship.

Introduction: Gender policy is a set of state and societal measures aimed at ensuring equal rights and opportunities between women and men. In today's era of globalization, ensuring the active participation of women in all spheres of society is becoming an important criterion for the development of the state. After all, the equal participation of women in socio-political life and entrepreneurship is recognized as an indicator of democratic development. In recent years, large-scale reforms have been implemented in the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Asian region to achieve gender equality. The concept of gender refers not to biological sex, but to socially determined roles and opportunities. Gender policy is a direction of state policy aimed at creating equal conditions for women and men in society and eliminating all forms of discrimination. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-2030) set a specific goal to achieve gender equality (Goal 5) . Because sustainable socio-economic development cannot be achieved without the full participation of women. Studies show that the full participation of women in the labor market significantly increases the rate of economic growth, and their education and involvement in entrepreneurship create the basis for high incomes in the long term. Therefore, ensuring gender equality is important not only for respecting human rights, but also for realizing the economic and political potential of the country. In the case of Uzbekistan and Central Asia, gender policy is becoming an increasingly urgent issue and is also the basis for regional cooperation. For example, in 2020, the first regional dialogue was held with the participation of women leaders of Central Asian countries, where issues of transforming the region into a region free from discrimination against women were discussed. Such efforts demonstrate the relevance of gender policy and the strong political will to implement it. The active participation of women in political processes is an important sign of a modern democratic society.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has seen significant positive changes in this area. In particular, the share of women

in parliament (the Legislative Chamber and the Senate of the Oliy Majlis) has reached 32%, which is in line with the UN recommendation and has helped our country take 37th place among 190 parliaments in the world. Quotas established in electoral legislation have played an important role in achieving this result: for example, according to the Election Code of Uzbekistan, at least 30-40% of candidates nominated from political party lists must be women, which has increased women's chances of being elected to parliament. As a result, the representation of women in legislative bodies has increased significantly in recent elections. Women's participation in public administration and the executive branch is also increasing. Currently, the share of women in leadership positions has reached 35% (in 2017, it was 27%). The election of the first woman, Tanzila Narbayeva, as the Chairperson of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis, and the appointment of women leaders in a number of ministries and departments are important steps towards ensuring gender balance in public administration. At the same time, the number of female deputies and activists in local councils and public structures is also gradually increasing. For example, the share of women among members of political parties is 44%, which is an indication of the increasing role of women in political parties and civil society. In the Asian region, the participation of women in political life varies from country to country. In some countries, the share of women in parliament is significantly higher. For example, countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Philippines have achieved more than 30% representation in parliament in recent years by introducing quotas for women or allocating special seats. In particular, as of 2023, it is noted that the share of women in parliaments in 6 developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region has exceeded 30%. In some other countries, the indicators are still low, for example, in East and Southeast Asia, the share of women representatives in legislative bodies is on average 23.5%. Considering that the global average is around 26.9%, Uzbekistan is among the countries that have achieved an indicator above this average. At the same time, women's participation in political decision-making is still limited in a number of countries in Asia - in some places, patriarchal values and traditional roles make it difficult for women to enter politics.

It is worth noting that in the history of the Asian region, there are also exemplary cases of women reaching high political positions. In countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, women have previously served as prime ministers and presidents. In Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbayeva became the country's first female president in 2010. Such examples demonstrate the high leadership potential of women. At the same time, in most Asian countries, improving legislation, changing political culture, and softening social stereotypes remain a priority for women's full and equal participation in socio-political processes. In our opinion, ensuring gender equality in economic life is an important condition for the well-being of society. Since women make up half of the population, it is difficult to achieve sustainable economic growth without their active labor activity and participation in entrepreneurship. In recent years, a number of works have been carried out in Uzbekistan to expand women's economic opportunities. In particular, amendments were made to labor legislation, abolishing the list of industries where women's work is prohibited, and only a list of recommendations for certain jobs that have a negative impact on health was retained. This decision opened up opportunities for women to work in many professions and positions in the labor market that were previously closed to them. According to official data, the level of participation of women in the formal labor market remains lower than that of men. According to the results of 2021, the labor force participation rate of women in Uzbekistan was 28 percentage points lower than that of men, that is, while men make up a significantly higher share of the working-age population, this indicator for women is observed to be around 40%. This gender gap is even higher than the average difference in Europe and Central Asia (19 points). The unemployment rate among young women is 15.5%, significantly higher than that of young men (10%). In addition, 42% of women aged 15–24 are not only not working, but also not in education (NEET indicator), while this indicator among young men is only 8.8%. These figures indicate that many women spend time on unpaid work, such as housework and childcare, and are excluded from economic activity. At the same time, it is noted that the average monthly salary of women employed in the formal sector is 34% lower than that of men (the global average gender wage gap is around ~20%) . Thus, the gender imbalance in the labor market is still significant, and eliminating this imbalance creates a great opportunity for economic development. Research and international experience show that increasing women's economic activity directly affects the well-being of the nation. According to World Bank estimates, if women in Uzbekistan participated in the labor market on an equal basis with men, the gross domestic product (national income) would increase by 29%. It is also estimated that if equality in remuneration for women's labor were achieved, that is, if the gender wage gap were eliminated, the living standards of more than 700 thousand people living in poverty in the country could be improved. Thus, the full involvement of women in economic life is not only a requirement of social justice,

but also a matter of economic interest.

In recent years, special attention has been paid to the development of women's entrepreneurship in Uzbekistan. At the initiative of the head of state, a number of preferential programs have been implemented to support women's business. For example, over the past 5 years, the number of women entrepreneurs in the country has doubled, and the number of women entrepreneurs who have started their own businesses has exceeded 205 thousand. In 2023 alone, more than 279 thousand women were allocated loans totaling more than 13 trillion soums for their entrepreneurial projects, in addition, 57 thousand women were provided with state subsidies of almost 300 billion soums, and about 200 thousand women were trained in entrepreneurship, which is giving great results in the labor market. In addition, special mortgage loans were allocated for women, more than 25 thousand families acquired their own homes, and thousands of women were allocated subsidies for paying the initial installment of a housing loan. The “Women's Book” system is also of great importance in terms of financial support for women. Through this mechanism, women in need are registered by address, and funds are allocated from the state budget to solve their problems. For example, the fact that the problems of 994 thousand women were solved through the “Women's Book” in 2022 alone, and 1 trillion 234 billion soums were allocated for this work, is evidence of the effectiveness of the system. In this way, needy families were identified through household surveys, more than 690 thousand families were provided with social assistance, and the environment in 116 thousand families in difficult social situations was improved. Such measures create conditions for women to have not only financial support, but also to have an independent source of income by starting their own business and learning a profession.

There are various models for promoting women's entrepreneurship in the Asian region. One of the most popular methods of supporting women's entrepreneurship in the world is the microfinance (microcredit) system. The experience of Bangladesh is often cited in this regard. In Bangladesh, the practice of providing small loans without collateral to low-income women has been established since the 1990s based on the Grameen Bank model. Currently, more than 90% of microloans in Bangladesh are women, and this has led to the formation of a new type of small business class in our country - the class of female microentrepreneurs. The microfinance institution has served to increase their status in society by allowing women to earn income through their own labor activities, start independent businesses, and increase their status. This experience has shown that creating financial opportunities for women not only improves their family well-being, but also brings significant benefits to the economy - women have also gained attention for their timely repayment of small loans received and their responsibility in business management. A number of projects aimed at developing women's entrepreneurship are also being implemented in Central Asian countries. For example, in Kazakhstan, "Women's Entrepreneurship Development Centers" have been established, which are engaged in teaching women business skills and helping them acquire financial resources. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with the support of international organizations, small credit lines have been opened for women, and training programs have been launched. Such efforts are helping to increase women's economic activity in the region. Of course, since each country has different historical and social conditions, the results are also different. However, the general principle is that in Asia, there is a growing need to strengthen their position in society by involving women in entrepreneurship.

The Republic of Uzbekistan has created a solid legal basis for ensuring gender equality. In accordance with Article 58 of the new edition of the Constitution, it is stipulated that “Women and men have equal rights. The state ensures equal rights and opportunities for women and men.” This provision in our fundamental law indicates that the issue of ensuring gender equality is being given constitutional attention. Uzbekistan has also undertaken a number of international obligations. For example, in 1995, it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and undertook to ensure women's rights within the framework of documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These international norms are being implemented into national legislation. At the national level, two important laws that form the basis for gender policy were adopted in 2019. The first is the Law “On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men”, which established measures to introduce the principles of gender equality in the activities of state bodies, introduce gender expertise mechanisms into legislation, and prevent direct or indirect discrimination on the basis of sex. In accordance with this law, gender advisory councils have been established in all ministries and departments and their activities have been launched. The second is the Law “On Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence”, which was also adopted in March 2019 in accordance with the Presidential Decree. This

document strengthens legal mechanisms against harassment and violence against women and introduces a system of "Protection Orders" to protect women victims. This law establishes the formation of a zero-tolerance attitude towards harassment and violence against women in public life as a priority of state policy.

It should be noted that an institutional structure has also been created to ensure gender equality. In 2019, the Republican Commission on Gender Equality was established, chaired by the head of the upper house of parliament. Also, the Family and Women's Committee (later in the form of an agency) operates within the Government and is engaged in solving women's problems at the local level. As part of the state gender policy, the "Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan by 2030" was adopted in 2021. This National Strategy is a programmatic document that sets long-term goals and objectives in the field of gender. It includes priority areas aimed at creating equal opportunities for women and men in various aspects of life. In particular, the main chapters identified in the strategy include creating equal opportunities in the exercise of electoral rights, ensuring gender equality in the public service and governance, improving conditions for women in the education, science and healthcare systems, providing equal rights in socio-economic spheres, preventing violence against women, strengthening cooperation in family relations and child rearing, and improving gender statistics. A Comprehensive Program of Measures for the Implementation of the Strategy for 2021-2022 was approved, which sets out specific objectives and indicators for each area. This strategy is fully aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2030), and its implementation is subject to constant monitoring and control. As a result of the above legal framework and state policy, Uzbekistan has improved its position in a number of international rankings in recent years. For example, in the 2020 report of the World Bank's Women, Business and Law Index, Uzbekistan was included in the list of 27 countries that have achieved the greatest reforms in ensuring women's rights and gender equality, improving its position by 5 places and taking 134th place. In 2024, Uzbekistan was recognized as one of the top 5 fastest reforming countries in the world on the path to gender equality according to this index. In our opinion, this certainly indicates that changes in legislation and practical measures are being recognized internationally.

Despite the above-mentioned achievements, a number of problems and obstacles remain in the field of gender equality. First of all, it is necessary to emphasize the issue of socio-cultural stereotypes and patriarchal values. The traditionally formed views in society that “women are mainly responsible for raising the family, and men are the breadwinners” prevent women from being active in their careers and public affairs. A study conducted by the UNDP in 2022 confirmed that these patriarchal norms are the main factors leading to gender inequality and violence against women: “The study confirmed that gender stereotypes and patriarchal views are the cause of ongoing gender inequality and violence in Uzbekistan” . Thus, although equal rights are guaranteed by law, changing stereotypes that have become entrenched in the minds of women will take a long time. Attitudes such as “a male leader is better than a female leader” that hinder women’s political activity still exist. Secondly, gender imbalance in the labor market remains a serious problem. Despite the fact that the share of women with higher education is increasing (for example, in the last 5 years, the number of women completing higher education has increased fourfold to 27.4%). In addition, most women are still not officially employed, but are busy with domestic work and child care. Infrastructural factors - for example, the lack of kindergartens and educational institutions, and the lack of conditions for women with children at work - also play a role. It is no secret that some employers lack the courage to hire women, and they hire them less often, saying that “having children will distract them from work”. Such situations contradict the prohibitions in the Labor Code, but are one of the problems encountered in practice. In addition, in the economic sphere, women are mainly concentrated in sectors with lower wages - for example, education, healthcare, and services. The share of women in high-paying sectors such as oil and gas, construction, and finance is relatively small. This creates a gender gap in overall incomes (a 34% difference in monthly wages is a clear example of this). Third, the problem of gender-based violence and harassment has not been completely eliminated. According to official data, according to statistics, complaints about domestic violence are increasing every year, which, on the one hand, shows that women are demanding their rights, and on the other hand, the scale of the problem is still large. The law adopted in 2019 and the introduction of the practice of "Protection Orders" in accordance with it were a positive step. However, in practice, some women still hesitate to obtain protection orders or contact the police in cases of violence - the reasons for this may be psychological inhibition, fear for family honor, or distrust of law enforcement agencies. Much work remains to be done to improve the skills of law enforcement officers on gender issues and to create an environment of “zero tolerance” for violence against

women. This issue is not only legal, but also a socio-educational one: any form of violence must be condemned in the family, at school, and in the media, and an environment of respect for women must be created. Fourth, the participation of women in leadership positions and in big business is still insufficient. Of course, while the 35% mark in the civil service is a great achievement, there are only a few women among the heads of ministries, and the share of women among members of the government is still low. The number of women is also low on the boards of directors of large enterprises, banks, and companies. According to statistics, the majority of managers in the private sector in the country are men. This may be due to gender stereotypes in appointing such high-ranking positions or the difficulties women face in striving for leadership. Fifth, gender issues in rural areas have a specific character. Women working in agriculture often perform unskilled, labor-intensive work, but their work is undervalued. Although early marriage is legally prohibited in Uzbekistan, some families rush to marry off girls after they reach the age of 18. This can prevent girls from obtaining higher education or pursuing a career. Also, traditional views on gender roles are more strongly held among rural residents than in urban areas. In such regions, advocacy on the topic of gender equality and measures aimed at raising women's legal awareness are of particular importance. Based on scientific research, it can be said that in Uzbekistan and a number of Asian countries, a number of social barriers to gender equality remain, in particular, social stereotypes, inequalities in the labor market, issues of violence, inequalities in decision-making, etc. Solving these problems requires a comprehensive approach - the simultaneous implementation of legal, economic, social and cultural measures. Based on the above analysis and existing problems, the following practical recommendations are proposed for improving gender policy and women's socio-political activity and participation in entrepreneurship: a) improving the legal framework and strengthening its implementation; b) fully implementing existing laws and regulations, in particular, it is necessary to strictly monitor the implementation of the Law "On Protection from Harassment and Violence". At the same time, it is necessary for law enforcement agencies to take prompt action in cases of violence and to increase the effectiveness of the practice of issuing protection orders. It is also necessary to ensure the determinacy of punishment for violations of labor and gender legislation (for example, to prevent discrimination against women in hiring). c) it is necessary to change social awareness and strengthen propaganda, in particular, it is necessary to conduct wide-ranging information campaigns to reduce gender stereotypes. It is important to include gender equality topics in school and higher education curricula, and to portray positive images of women in the media and social networks. At the same time, attention should also be paid to changing the mindset of men - promoting the division of responsibilities in the family, increasing the participation of fathers in raising children, etc. Preparing and popularizing stories about examples of women who have achieved success not only in the family, but also in management and business, will instill the idea of gender equality in the public consciousness. d) Increasing the share of women in political and leadership positions: in this regard, additional mechanisms are needed to promote women in political parties and the civil service planning system. It is proposed to prepare women for leadership in the internal regulations of parties and introduce special training programs for them. It is also advisable to take initiatives to increase the share of women in local councils and other elected bodies. For example, it is necessary to recommend more female candidates in elections to local Kengashes of People's Deputies and to intensify their work among the population. In the corporate sector, “soft quotas” can be established - recommendation indicators to increase the number of women on the supervisory boards or management of companies. e) It is important to expand economic opportunities and improve working conditions, in particular, to create conditions for women to be active in the labor market. In this regard, measures such as improving the infrastructure of childcare services (expanding the network of nurseries, organizing children's rooms at workplaces), supporting the possibility of remote and part-time work are necessary. Creating decent working conditions for women in enterprises and providing benefits for employees who are mothers (for example, flexible organization of working hours in agreement with the mother and child) will encourage them to stay at work. Also, the gender pay gap can be reduced by increasing wages in areas and sectors where women work more (for example, education, medicine) and appreciating their work. Support female entrepreneurs and facilitate their access to financial resources: The banking and financial system should increase preferential loans, small grants, and startup funds for female entrepreneurs. In particular, it is possible to establish a practice of providing loans to women who are just starting their business without collateral or under a state guarantee. It would be effective to establish special “women’s entrepreneurship centers” in each region, through which they would provide ongoing consultation in areas such as business planning, accounting, and marketing. It is also important to introduce mentoring programs between experienced businesswomen and

young businesswomen, and to strengthen women's business associations. For example, it is possible to increase the capabilities of organizations such as the "Tadbirkor Ayol" association and develop women's cooperation in the regions through them. f) It is necessary to improve gender budgeting and statistics. It is necessary to strengthen the gender perspective in the distribution of state budget funds. That is, analyze the extent to which women and men will benefit from the resources allocated to each socio-economic program or project. Gender budgeting can ensure that adequate funds are allocated for projects that benefit women (e.g. maternity protection, women's vocational colleges, microcredit programs). In this regard, the conclusions of gender advisory councils within decision-making bodies should be taken into account. In addition, all indicators in official statistics should be disaggregated by gender, and the database should be updated. For example, data on unemployment, the composition of managerial personnel, education and health indicators - all of which should be analyzed separately for men and women, which will help to make the right decisions in the future. Most importantly, it is advisable to expand regional and international cooperation. It is important for Uzbekistan to continue cooperation with international organizations (UN Women, OSCE, World Bank, etc.) in the field of gender equality. It is possible to form a permanent mechanism for dialogue on gender equality issues between the countries of Central Asia (for example, by holding an annual regional forum). These forums will provide an opportunity to exchange experiences on problems and solutions, to conclude agreements aimed at jointly solving urgent issues in neighboring countries. It is also necessary to study the best practices of developed countries in gender policy (the experience of Scandinavian countries, which has been very effective in recent times, the quota system in countries such as Rwanda, etc.) and adapt them to local conditions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the issue of gender policy and women's participation in socio-political and economic life is becoming a priority direction of state policy in Uzbekistan and the entire Asian region. In the case of Uzbekistan, we have seen that in recent years, significant achievements have been made through improving legislation, implementing specific programs to support women, and forming institutional mechanisms. This is clearly evidenced by the increase in the share of women in parliament and government, the doubling of the number of women in entrepreneurship, and the expansion of women's participation in science and education. However, the analysis shows that, in addition to the results achieved, there are still major tasks ahead - such as overcoming gender stereotypes, reducing disparities in the labor market, and comprehensively protecting the rights and interests of women. Only through open recognition of existing problems and a consistent policy aimed at eliminating them can true gender equality be achieved in public life. There is no doubt that through the joint efforts of the state and society, the establishment of a culture based on the equal partnership of men and women, the participation of women in socio-political processes and entrepreneurial activities in our country will rise to even higher levels. In this regard, if each of us - whether a politician or an entrepreneur, a teacher or a student - practically supports the culture of gender equality, we will contribute to the further growth of Uzbekistan's social development and human capital.

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