

Soviet Modernization And The Role Of Samarkand Women In Public Administration (1920s–1930s)

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Abstract: This article examines the participation of women in the social and political life of the Samarkand region during the 1920s–1930s. The study analyzes Soviet policies aimed at eliminating illiteracy, integrating women into the labor and education systems, and expanding their role in public administration. It also highlights the activities of women’s departments, literacy schools, production cooperatives, and the increasing number of female leaders through statistical data. The findings reveal how Soviet modernization transformed the lives of local women and influenced their social status, professional opportunities, and public engagement.

Keywords: Women; Samarkand region; Soviet period; modernization; literacy; social participation; gender policy; 1920s–1930s; public administration.

Introduction: The 1920s–1930s marked a profound turning point in the lives of women in Central Asia. Their lifestyle, social activity, position in society, and patterns of behavior underwent fundamental changes. This transformation was largely driven by women’s emancipation, particularly the campaign to abandon the paranji (veil). After the Bolsheviks consolidated their power in Russia, they introduced so many changes to the country’s administrative system, people’s everyday lives, long-standing religious practices, the histories and territories of various ethnic groups, and virtually all aspects of life that many communities, detached from their identity, religion, culture, history, and rights, could not foresee what the pursuit of a “new way of life” would ultimately bring.

The Communists did not limit themselves to altering the religion, history, culture, and traditions of the peoples living under their rule. As is well known, the indigenous populations of this region had long lived according to the principles of Islam, which prescribed that the man should be the provider for the family, while women were responsible for raising children at home. Most women engaged in light handicrafts during their free time. Faced with the task of transforming people’s consciousness and way of life in Central Asia, the Communists first sought to weaken the influence of Islam and draw women into public life.

For this purpose, in early 1919, the commissions responsible for conducting propaganda and agitation among women within all party organizations were transformed into zhenotdels (women’s departments) beginning in 1920. The women’s departments attached to local city and district party committees became the main organizational base, actively fighting for the emancipation of women. The task of the zhenotdels was to carry out systematic work among women, to draw every working woman into Soviet construction, to encourage their active participation in the socio-economic life of the country, to establish handicraft cooperatives, kindergartens and nurseries, and to strengthen cultural-educational activities. These efforts were to be implemented cautiously, taking into account the religious customs that still persisted.

It should be especially noted that the Party limited the activities of Muslim publishing houses and schools. Broad propaganda campaigns were launched to promote respect for women’s dignity, to gradually integrate them into public life, and to create opportunities for them to study and work [1. P.1-9].

The decree of the Turkestan Council of People’s Commissars dated 3 March 1924, “On Improving the Working Conditions of Female Workers and Employees,” emphasized the need to involve more

women in production, especially during staff reductions in institutions and enterprises. As a result, for the first time in human history, women gained equal rights with men in all spheres of social life — economic, political, and cultural.

Education played a crucial role in transforming society socio-culturally and in building the federal union. Educational policy was ideologically oriented, as it aimed to cultivate socialist citizens. In this process, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and other groups became sources of social mobilization [2. P.3].

For this reason, special attention was given to women's education, and special schools for women were established. During the 1923–1924 academic year, there were five such schools in the republic, with a total enrollment of 306 female students. The supply of textbooks and educational materials for general education schools increased, as did the amount of state funding allocated to public education. For example, while 5.6% of the state budget was allocated to education in the 1922–1923 academic year, this figure rose to 21% by the 1923–1924 academic year [3. P.688].

Cultural change and modernization, reconstruction, improvement of social life, and the promotion of culture and enlightenment required an intensive campaign against illiteracy. Strengthening the social position of women was considered essential for the establishment of a new political order [4. P.424].

At the Samarkand district education department, a two-level literacy course was opened for illiterate and semi-literate women at the Old City Women's Club. A total of 53 women attended the course, including 28 illiterate and 25 semi-literate participants [5. P.42].

The Soviet government mobilized students from higher educational institutions and workers' faculties to eliminate illiteracy. At the same time, special attention was given to training professional staff dedicated to fighting illiteracy across the region [3. P.688].

These efforts soon began to produce tangible results. For example, while the literacy rate among men in 1926 was 3.8 percent (with especially low levels in rural areas) and did not even reach one percent among women, by 1932 the literacy rate had risen to 52.5 percent and later surpassed 67.8 percent [6. P.7-9].

Illiteracy, long-standing inequality, and political ignorance among women were gradually overcome. Women began to emerge as teachers, doctors, physicians, actresses, engineers, agronomists, scholars, and leaders in state and public institutions.

In the Uzbek SSR, one out of every three women became an engineer, 57 percent of medical personnel

were women, more than 48 percent of teachers were women, and 178 women were elected to the Supreme Soviet. Of the 49,402 women elected to local councils throughout the republic, 48.5 percent were representatives of the local population [7. P.1-9].

In the Soviet system, numerous schools and educational institutions were expected to train leading and specialized personnel for all sectors of the state, cultivate the political elite, prepare technical specialists and workers for the economy, create a skilled working class necessary for science and literacy, and produce cadres capable of conveying state policies to society [6. P.7-9].

To accelerate the training of teaching personnel, seven vocational schools were opened, including one specifically for women, along with five pedagogical technical colleges, two pedagogical institutes, and several short-term training courses. In 1921 alone, 850 short-term teacher-training courses were organized across the republic. Additionally, seven educational institutes were operating in the region, with a total enrollment of 1,145 students [3. P.688].

The "Central Commission for the Localization of the State Apparatus" prepared annual plans. Starting from 1925, three-month and one-year short-term training programs were launched with the aim of educating local personnel for the state administration. For example, in 1926, the commission planned for 135 individuals to undergo technical staff training for the state apparatus in Samarkand [8. P.404].

Under the leadership of the Communist Party, the Soviet people accelerated the construction of communism. Building communism, creating its material and technical base, and forming communist social relations required the education of a new type of individual. As in all union republics, Soviet Uzbekistan witnessed women standing alongside men—working, gaining knowledge, living more freely, and participating in communist society. From among them emerged thousands of mechanizers, pilots, engineers, poets, artists, scholars, as well as leaders in state and public institutions [9. P.3-7].

According to statistical data, women constituted 36 percent of the workforce in society. A total of 240,000 women were employed as engineering and technical specialists. Moreover, 86.8 percent of women worked in the agricultural sector; in cotton cultivation alone, more than 3,000 women were employed as tractor drivers and mechanical operators. Over 40,000 women worked as teachers, and more than 9,000 served as physicians [10. P.30].

In order to further strengthen the involvement of women in socio-political life, the central government

issued instructions to ensure their equal participation with men in leadership positions. After the adoption of the resolution of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) on 15 June 1929, titled “On the Party’s Next Tasks Regarding Work Among Working and Peasant Women,” the fate of Uzbek women began to be determined from the center, and they started to be appointed to leadership positions. According to data from 1930, the number of women employees working in district and regional organizations was as follows: 13 women in Surkhandarya district, 31 in Andijan, 5 in Khorezm, 3 in Zarafshan, and 19 women in Samarkand.

Furthermore, on 18 February 1928, the Central Executive Committee of the Uzbek SSR and the Council of People’s Commissars adopted Joint Resolution No. 2420 “On the Uzbekization of the State Apparatus.” Based on this resolution, measures were planned to increase the number of local nationals within the governmental and economic administrative structures. According to data from the Samarkand Province Commission on Uzbekization of the State and Economic Apparatus as of 3 October 1928, out of 65 employees of the provincial executive committee, 20 were local nationals; out of 30 employees of the provincial court, 8 were locals; out of 14 employees of the Samarkand city soviet, 5 were locals; and only 1 out of 11 employees in the provincial health department belonged to the local population. In the statistics bureau, 4 out of 32 employees were locals, and in the departments of statistics, law, trade, housing, public works, and municipal services of the local economic administration, 2 out of 23 employees belonged to the local nationality. At the regional hospital in Samarkand, only 10 out of 113 workers were local nationals [11. P.473]. In the early 1930s, Samarkand alone had 730 registered communist women, 469 of whom were representatives of the local population.

In the following years of the Uzbek SSR, the number of women with higher and secondary education doubled. Women constituted 34.9 percent of the deputies of the Supreme Soviet, and 48.5 percent of the 49,400 women elected as deputies were representatives of the local population. The republican branch of the Communist Party included 121,000 women, and at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, women made up 34 percent of the delegates. There were 12,000 female scholars in the republic, among whom 115 were Doctors of Science and 3,000 held the degree of Candidate of Science [7. P.1-9].

By the second half of the 1930s, the educational level of Uzbek women had noticeably improved. For example, by 1937, a total of 273,637 women in Uzbekistan had completed literacy-elimination schools. During this period, 183 women served as kolkhoz

chairwomen, 242 as deputy chairwomen, and 606 women held the position of brigade leader. In 1938, women accounted for 82.3 percent of workers in sewing production, 65.5 percent in confectionery production, and nearly 88 percent in the textile industry. By 1940, the number of female workers and employees had reached 232,000, which amounted to 40.7 percent of the total workforce in the republic; among them, local Uzbek women constituted 21.1 percent. The determination and diligence of Uzbek women were also evident in the fields of science and culture. Nearly 400 women participated in the first conference of female scholars held in Uzbekistan in 1937 [3. P.385].

CONCLUSION

During the 1920s–1930s, the Soviet government’s political, social, and cultural reforms brought significant changes to the lives of women in the Samarkand region. Increasing women’s literacy, involving them in the labor force, and promoting their participation in state administration and public organizations became key tasks of Soviet modernization. The establishment of women’s clubs, literacy courses, handicraft cooperatives, and pedagogical institutions enabled thousands of women to acquire new professions and actively participate in public life.

As a result, by the mid-1930s women’s literacy improved sharply, their social activity expanded, and the number of women in leadership positions in the region increased considerably. These changes strengthened women’s social status, contributed to their economic independence, and fostered their political engagement.

At the same time, these reforms were implemented within the framework of Soviet ideology and often conflicted with local traditions and religious values. Nevertheless, the historical developments of this period demonstrate that the 1920s–1930s played a crucial role in shaping the participation and status of women in the social and political life of the Samarkand region.

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