

Revealing the Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Uzbekistan

Kamola Alieva

Tashkent State University of Law, Uzbekistan

Email: kamolaalieva@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article examines the structural barriers that continue to hinder women's political participation in Uzbekistan, focusing on socio-cultural, socio-economic, legal, and security-related challenges. Despite progress in education and employment, systemic discrimination, entrenched gender norms, and institutional constraints continue to limit women's access to political leadership and decision-making roles. This study explores the pathways to political representation and the extent to which women's political agency is shaped by external pressures and internal institutional resistance. The article argues that while policy reforms and legal frameworks are necessary, they remain insufficient without broader institutional and societal transformation. It highlights that collective action, institutional support, and a sustained shift in public perception are crucial for breaking down the barriers to women's political leadership. Drawing on qualitative research and survey data, the study underscores the intersection of legislative change, financial and mobility constraints, and gendered expectations, illustrating how these factors shape women's participation in governance. The research contributes to the discourse on political gender equity by examining how systemic forces interact with women's leadership trajectories. It calls for a paradigm shift that extends beyond numerical representation toward meaningful political inclusion, ensuring that women not only enter political spaces but also exercise real influence in decision-making.

[Artikel ini mengkaji hambatan-hambatan struktural yang terus menghalangi partisipasi politik perempuan di Uzbekistan, dengan fokus pada tantangan sosial-budaya, sosial-ekonomi, hukum, dan keamanan. Meskipun terdapat kemajuan di bidang pendidikan dan ketenagakerjaan, diskriminasi sistemik, norma gender yang mengakar, serta kendala kelembagaan tetap membatasi akses perempuan terhadap kepemimpinan politik dan peran pengambilan keputusan. Kajian ini menelusuri jalur menuju representasi politik serta sejauh mana agensi politik perempuan dibentuk oleh tekanan eksternal dan resistensi internal dari institusi. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa meskipun reformasi kebijakan dan kerangka hukum diperlukan, keduanya masih belum memadai tanpa adanya transformasi kelembagaan dan sosial yang lebih luas. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa aksi kolektif, dukungan institusional, dan perubahan berkelanjutan dalam persepsi publik merupakan kunci untuk meruntuhkan hambatan terhadap kepemimpinan politik perempuan. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dan data survei, kajian ini menyoroti keterkaitan antara perubahan legislatif, hambatan finansial dan mobilitas, serta ekspektasi berbasis gender, dan menunjukkan bagaimana faktor-faktor tersebut membentuk partisipasi perempuan dalam tata kelola pemerintahan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskursus kesetaraan gender dalam politik dengan mengkaji interaksi antara kekuatan-kekuatan sistemik dan perjalanan kepemimpinan perempuan. Artikel ini menyerukan perubahan paradigma yang melampaui representasi numerik menuju inklusi politik yang bermakna, sehingga perempuan tidak hanya memasuki ruang politik, tetapi juga memiliki pengaruh nyata dalam pengambilan keputusan.]

KEYWORDS

Gender equity, women's participation, political leadership, structural barriers, political inclusion

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 25 February 2025

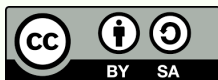
Approved for Publication: 30 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Kamola Alieva, "Revealing the Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Uzbekistan"

Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam 18, no. 1 (2025): 29-46,

<https://doi.org/10.14421/ahwal.2025.18102>.



Copyright © 2025 by Author(s)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Introduction

Women's political participation remains a critical global concern, as they continue to face systemic barriers to accessing decision-making roles, despite notable progress in education, employment, and formal legal equality. International frameworks—such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA)¹—have collectively affirmed women's equal rights to participate in political and public life. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,² through Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5 and 16, calls for inclusive institutions and full participation of women at all levels of leadership. Yet, these global commitments have not fully translated into national realities. Across many countries, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, gendered political structures, and institutional resistance continue to limit women's political representation.³ Uzbekistan reflects these global patterns. Despite visible political will and alignment with international gender equality standards, women in Uzbekistan remain significantly underrepresented in governance structures. This article explores the legal, socio-cultural, and institutional barriers that impede women's full and meaningful political participation in Uzbekistan and examines what systemic changes are required to overcome them. To situate Uzbekistan's experience within

¹ United Nations, "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action," accessed January 25, 2023, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20R.pdf>.

² Robert United Nations, "17 Goals to Transform Our World," United Nations Sustainable Development, accessed February 5, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>.

³ Joni Lovenduski, "The Political Representation of Women: A Feminist Institutionalist Perspective," in *Research Handbook on Political Representation* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020).

a wider perspective, it is essential to first examine the global context and international frameworks that shape the commitment to gender equality in politics.⁴

This study applies the theory of change to analyze women's political participation, based on the premise that overcoming gender stereotypes and patriarchal biases within state institutions, fostering a culture of resistance to these phenomena at all levels—from local to national—and engaging civil society in monitoring the implementation of gender policies can contribute to the formation of a strong and effective gender equality system. This approach assumes that active efforts to eliminate existing barriers for women in politics will lead to significant improvements in ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women, thereby contributing to the creation of a more just and inclusive political environment.

The aim of this study is to analyze and identify the root causes of gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes, as well as to determine the issues and obstacles that limit women's political rights and opportunities, with the goal of developing effective measures to overcome them and strengthen the national gender equality system.

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data, incorporating focus group discussions, secondary data analysis, desk research, and the study of international best practices. The study was conducted in five key cities that serve as regional centers and represent the historical, social, and economic characteristics of each region. These cities include Tashkent in the Capital Region and Tashkent Region, Fergana in the Fergana Valley, Samarkand in the Central Region, Karshi in the Southern Region, and Nukus in the Aral Sea Region, Republic of Karakalpakstan. Focus groups were conducted in these cities with the participation of women deputies from the *Kengashes*⁵ of People's Deputies, involving 10 to 14 participants per region and covering 54 participants. The composition of the focus group discussions was coordinated with the Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan before the research began. In addition to qualitative data, a quantitative study was conducted through an online survey targeting women deputies of the Legislative Chamber and female members of the Senate of the *Oliy Majlis*⁶ across all regions of the country. Overall, the research covered 54 women deputies from local councils, 32 women participants from political leadership training programs, and 29 female

⁴ Obidov Asadbek, "Gender Equality in Uzbekistan: An Overview and Prospects for the Future," *The American Journal of Political Science Law and Criminology* 5, no. 05 (2023): 17–21; Shukhrat Toshturov, "The Issue of Gender Equality in Uzbekistan in the Context of Sustainable Development," *Научно-Методический и Теоретический Журнал*, 2022.

⁵ *Kengashes* (also spelled *Kengash* in singular) refer to local councils of people's deputies in Uzbekistan, which function as elected representative bodies at the regional, district, and city levels. These councils play a crucial role in local governance, overseeing administrative decisions, regional development policies, and legislative initiatives within their respective jurisdictions. The *Kengash* system is a key component of Uzbekistan's decentralized governance structure, facilitating policy implementation at the subnational level while ensuring local representation in decision-making processes.

⁶ *Oliy Majlis* refers to the Parliament (Supreme Assembly) of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which serves as the country's highest legislative body. It consists of two chambers: the Legislative Chamber (lower house) and the Senate (upper house). The *Oliy Majlis* is responsible for enacting laws, overseeing government activities, approving the state budget, and shaping national policies. As the central institution of Uzbekistan's legislative system, it plays a crucial role in governance, legal reform, and political decision-making at the national level.

parliamentarians who participated in an online survey, making 115 women involved as targeted respondents in the study.

Global Commitments and Trends in Women's Political Participation

Women's political participation remains a critical global issue, as they continue to face systemic barriers in accessing decision-making positions despite progress in education and employment. Research has consistently shown that although women have made significant strides in these areas, they still face persistent obstacles to full and equal participation in the political sphere.⁷ This underrepresentation is not only a challenge to gender equality but also a barrier to democratic governance and inclusive policymaking.⁸ Ensuring that women have equal access to leadership roles strengthens democracy, promotes more effective governance, and ensures that the voices and perspectives of all citizens are reflected in policymaking.⁹ However, structural discrimination, gender biases in political institutions and cultural stereotypes continue to hinder women's full engagement in politics. Also, despite the formal elimination of barriers to women's participation in politics, a persistent 'glass ceiling' remains due to institutional constraints, gendered political structures, and the unequal road conditions that women face in their journey to political leadership, which continue to disadvantage them in accessing and sustaining roles in decision-making positions.¹⁰

A strong international legal framework has been established to support women's political participation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms the principles of non-discrimination and equal exercise of political rights, including the right of both women and men to participate in the governance of their country.¹¹ The Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW) protects women's right to participate in government and access public services. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) asserts that every citizen has an equal right to participate in public affairs, vote, and be elected through universal and equal suffrage, as well as have equal access to public services. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) guarantees women's equal right to participate in political and public life, including voting in all elections and public referendums, being elected to all publicly elected bodies, and taking part in the formulation and implementation of government policy. It also obligates state parties to respond appropriately to ensure

⁷ Fardaus Ara, "Barriers to the Political Participation of Women: A Global Perspective," *Society & Change* 13, no. 4 (2019): 7–22.

⁸ OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan, "OSCE Supports Second Forum on the Role of Women Parliamentarians in the Development of Uzbekistan," accessed February 5, 2023, <https://www.osce.org/project-coordinator-in-uzbekistan/515946>.

⁹ United Nations Development Programme, "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties | United Nations Development Programme," <https://www.undp.org/mongolia/publications/empowering-women-stronger-political-parties>.

¹⁰ Shauna Shames, "Barriers and Solutions to Increasing Women's Political Power," 26 (2015).

¹¹ Foluke Oluyemisi Abimbola et al., "Women's Rights in Nigeria's Indigenous Systems: An Analysis of Non-Discrimination and Equality under International Human Rights Law," *Social Sciences* 12, no. 7 (2023): 405; Gillian MacNaughton, "Untangling Equality and Non-Discrimination to Promote the Right to Health Care for All," *Health and Human Rights*, JSTOR, 2009, 47–63.

women's equal participation without discrimination. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) calls for the elimination of barriers to women's equal participation. This document set the goal of achieving gender balance in public institutions, government bodies, and the judiciary.

The importance of these international commitments is widely recognized, yet achieving full gender parity in political representation remains an ongoing challenge. Despite the establishment of a strong international legal framework to promote women's political participation, the persistence of gendered political structures and institutional barriers continues to hinder women's full engagement in decision-making positions, as seen in various national contexts, where women's political representation has stagnated despite formal commitments to gender equality.¹²

Expanding women's political rights and opportunities is not only essential for gender equality but also for achieving sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹³ prioritizes gender equality as a fundamental component of global progress, emphasizing the importance of women's full participation in governance. Sustainable Development Goal 5 is dedicated to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, while Sustainable Development Goal 16 emphasizes inclusive institutions. A key target under Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Target 5.5) calls for ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. Indicator 5.5.1 tracks the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments, providing a measurable framework for assessing progress. These commitments underscore the urgent need for governments to implement policies that eliminate barriers and create equitable opportunities for women in political leadership.¹⁴ Despite international commitments such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, women's political participation remains constrained by deeply ingrained cultural and institutional barriers, as seen in other countries, where female mayors face male-dominated political structures, gendered political language, and traditional gender roles that undermine their leadership and credibility.¹⁵

Around the world, women continue to face systemic and persistent barriers to political participation, despite the existence of strong international legal frameworks and global commitments to gender equality. Key instruments such as the UDHR, CEDAW, ICCPR, and the Beijing Declaration have affirmed women's rights to participate fully in public and political life. Similarly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—particularly SDGs 5 and 16—has emphasized inclusive institutions and the need to ensure women's leadership across all levels of decision-making. Yet, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, institutional resistance, and gendered

¹² Melanee Thomas, "Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Canada," *UNBLJ* 64 (2013): 218.

¹³ United Nations, "17 Goals to Transform Our World."

¹⁴ UN Women, "SDG 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls," UN Women – Headquarters, 5, accessed February 5, 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/node/36060>.

¹⁵ Ahu Sumbas, "Gendered Local Politics: The Barriers to Women's Representation in Turkey," *Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2020): 570–87.

political structures continue to limit women's representation, with many countries struggling to turn formal commitments into meaningful political inclusion.

Uzbekistan reflects these global trends, as women remain underrepresented in government and decision-making roles. However, there is clear political determination and growing public interest in enhancing women's political participation.¹⁶ The government has taken significant steps to promote gender equality in political leadership, aligning with international frameworks to increase women's engagement in governance. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has emphasized the necessity of integrating women into political and public life, stating: "We consider it our most important task to actively continue state policies aimed at protecting maternal and child health, ensuring employment opportunities for women in consideration of their living conditions, easing their burdens, and enhancing their role and authority in the country's socio-political life."¹⁷ Additionally, he has stressed that "today, every woman must not be a passive observer but an active and initiative-driven participant in the democratic transformations taking place in the country."¹⁸ Uzbekistan's policy direction aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, which calls for increasing women's representation at all decision-making levels.¹⁹

Despite these political efforts, women's representation in leadership positions remains low. The article on women's political participation highlights the need for eliminating biases, strengthening institutional support, and creating pathways for women in political leadership.²⁰ Addressing these barriers is essential for not only gender equality but also for strengthening democracy and fostering more inclusive governance structures. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's "Women in Politics" global ranking places Uzbekistan 38th among 190 national parliaments, indicating both progress and areas for improvement.²¹ To further advance gender equality in governance, it is necessary to adopt policies that promote women's leadership, encourage their engagement in political parties, and ensure equal access to decision-making processes at all levels.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Uzbekistan

The root causes of women's underrepresentation in Uzbekistan's political landscape are multifaceted and deeply entrenched. Researches indicate that socio-cultural norms, institutional biases, and lack of access to resources and power networks are among the primary barriers that hinder women's political advancement.²² Societal attitudes and gender stereotypes play a significant role, as traditional patriarchal

¹⁶ OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan, "OSCE Supports Second Forum on the Role of Women Parliamentarians in the Development of Uzbekistan."

¹⁷ Shavkat Mirziyoyev, "Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the 20th Plenary Session of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan," Uza.uz, <https://uza.uz/uz>.

¹⁸ Shavkat Mirziyoyev, "Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the 20th Plenary Session of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan."

¹⁹ UN Women, "SDG 5."

²⁰ "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties | United Nations Development Programme."

²¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments," *IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliaments*, n.d., accessed March 9, 2025, <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/>.

²² Hamida Bibi, "The Socio-Political Obstacles behind the Scanty Political Participation of Women Parliamentarians," *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies* 6, no. 4 (2020): 1457–61.

values often relegate women to domestic and caregiving roles, limiting their perceived suitability for public leadership.²³ As one source notes, "negative attitudes [are] an important factor for lower participation of women in politics".²⁴ Deeply ingrained gender norms and expectations can make it challenging women to gain the confidence, support, and recognition needed to successfully navigate the political sphere.²⁵

Another key barrier is the lack of access to resources and power networks. Women in Uzbekistan often face disproportionate barriers in securing financial resources, media coverage, and political connections necessary for effective campaigning and political success. Researches indicate that as a result, they are less likely to be nominated for leadership positions or receive the backing and support required to advance in the political arena.²⁶ Based on the results of the FGDs, the online survey, and data analysis, several key barriers to increasing women's political participation were identified (table 1). To systematize these barriers, they have been classified into three main categories:

Table 1. Key Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Uzbekistan

Key Barriers to Women's Political Participation		
Socio-cultural	Socio-economic	Security Factors/Threats
Stereotypes	Financial barriers	Harassment and intimidation
Public opinion	Limited Mobility	Persecution

Socio-economic factors have a significant impact on women's ability to participate in political institutions. Key obstacles include family obligations, lack of education and financial resources, as well as harassment, discrimination, and social pressures.

Traditional Gender Stereotypes on Women's Role in Society: Household Responsibilities to Late Entry into Politics

One of the most influential cultural factors affecting women's political participation is the persistence of traditional gender roles.²⁷ These roles are shaped by socialization practices and ideological narratives promoted by families, the education system, and the media, which significantly influence women's confidence

²³ Bibi, "The Socio-Political Obstacles behind the Scanty Political Participation of Women Parliamentarians."
²⁴ Ara, "Barriers to the Political Participation of Women."
²⁵ Bibi, "The Socio-Political Obstacles behind the Scanty Political Participation of Women Parliamentarians."
²⁶ N Toliboeva, "The Women of Uzbekistan on the New Step of Development," *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering* 8, no. 9 S3 (2019): 166–68.
²⁷ Monica C Schneider and Angela L Bos, "The Application of Social Role Theory to the Study of Gender in Politics," *Political Psychology* 40 (2019): 173–213; Nancy Burns et al., "The Politics of Gender," in *New Directions in Public Opinion* (Routledge, 2015).

in public life and their perception of politics as an appropriate and desirable sphere of engagement.²⁸

During focus group discussions with local-level female deputies, participants discussed not only how traditions define their position in society and politics but also shared personal experiences of overcoming these cultural barriers. Many explained that they face resistance not only from society, which expects women to prioritize their roles as mothers and homemakers, but also from their own families, particularly from husbands who are sometimes unwilling to support their political ambitions.²⁹

One of the most common reasons for a lack of support from husbands is the fear that their wives' political careers and success could lead to a shift in social and professional status, potentially resulting in the husband being perceived as subordinate. This, in turn, may provoke negative reactions from the social environment and undermine the husband's traditional role within the family. In addition to these challenges, other factors further complicate women's political ambitions. Some men fear that their wives' political engagement may lead to jealousy and concerns over working in a predominantly male environment. These anxieties are reinforced by doubts about women's ability to balance domestic responsibilities with a political career and by social stigma against men who allow their wives to pursue politics.³⁰ As a result, women seeking political careers must navigate not only external cultural and social barriers but also intra-family conflicts. This reflects deeply embedded socio-cultural norms and expectations that continue to shape gender roles in families and society, ultimately limiting women's political engagement. Discussions also revealed that for many women, entering politics is not just a struggle for a place in public life but also a complex process of negotiation within the family, requiring significant effort and compromise. Participants expressed confidence that achieving gender equality in politics requires collective action and changes at all levels, from individual relationships to national legislative reforms.³¹

Findings from the focus groups indicate that stereotypical gender perceptions strongly influence women's political engagement. Participants noted that public attitudes remain highly critical of women who choose non-traditional paths, such as politics, as they are seen as deviating from their expected family responsibilities.³² It was emphasized that society has historically supported the exclusion of women from politics, viewing it as an inappropriate domain for female involvement.³³ Participants also highlighted the prevalence of double standards in leadership perception, where authoritarian behavior in male leaders is more acceptable than

²⁸ M Kent Jennings et al., "Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (2009): 782–99; Madeleine Arnot, *Reproducing Gender: Critical Essays on Educational Theory and Feminist Politics* (Routledge, 2002).

²⁹ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, April 1, 2024.

³⁰ Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

³¹ Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

³² Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, April 1, 2024.

³³ Pamela Paxton et al., *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

the same behavior exhibited by women. Beside the focus groups, the results of the online survey revealed the barriers and stereotypes faced by women parliamentarians in Uzbekistan. The main obstacles include gender stereotypes, cultural norms, societal expectations, and biased attitudes towards women's leadership qualities.

An analysis of the responses showed that a significant number of respondents encountered perceptions that women are less competent and less effective in handling crisis situations compared to men.³⁴ These stereotypes undermine women's confidence and limit their career advancement opportunities. While some respondents stated that they had not personally faced gender stereotypes, the majority acknowledged their presence in the political sphere.

Additionally, cultural norms regarding women's roles in society significantly hinder their participation in politics. These deeply rooted societal beliefs create additional barriers to women's political engagement. The survey results also indicated that society expects female politicians to focus more on social issues than their male counterparts.³⁵ These expectations restrict their ability to engage in other political areas and fields. Common statements that women should prioritize family responsibilities further limit their political involvement. This creates additional challenges for women trying to balance a political career with family obligations. Many women have encountered bias against their leadership qualities due to gender stereotypes. This biased perception makes it more difficult for them to effectively fulfill leadership roles and advance in their political careers.³⁶

Responses to questions about professional backgrounds and the number of election campaigns in which women had participated demonstrated that women with diverse experience and educational backgrounds actively seek involvement in political life. However, despite their professional achievements and expertise, they still face the aforementioned obstacles. Another societal tendency is to view women in leadership roles as overly dominant in relation to their husbands, which is considered undesirable in patriarchal societies. Women who attain high-ranking positions frequently encounter labels such as "harsh women acting like men,"³⁷ which undermines their social acceptance and affects the overall perception of women in politics. These insights underscore the significant role that negative perceptions of female leaders play in discouraging women from pursuing political careers, demonstrating the urgent need to challenge gender stereotypes and create more equitable conditions for women's participation in political life.

The dual burden of professional and familial responsibilities significantly limits the political participation of women in Uzbekistan. Societal expectations traditionally prioritize women's roles as caregivers, which confines them primarily to the private sphere of home and family. This cultural norm dictates that women, even when active in politics, should first fulfill their duties as mothers and wives, leaving limited time and energy for public and political engagement. Researches

³⁴ The results of an online survey involving 29 female parliamentarians, June 6, 2024.

³⁵ The results of an online survey involving 29 female parliamentarians, June 6, 2024.

³⁶ The results of an online survey involving 29 female parliamentarians, June 6, 2024.

³⁷ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, February 26, 2024.

state, that such stereotypes not only hinder women's entry into politics but also affect their persistence and effectiveness in these roles.³⁸

Analysis of responses collected during focus group discussions with female local-level deputies confirmed that the most significant barrier to their political participation is a lack of time, resulting from the need to balance family and professional responsibilities. Participants emphasized that society traditionally expects women to care for their families, including husbands, children, and elderly relatives, leaving little time for active engagement in public and political life. Additionally, full-time employment combined with domestic responsibilities creates substantial difficulties for women seeking political involvement.³⁹ An interesting perspective shared by some deputies was that women tend to enter politics later in life, usually between the ages of 40-45 and older, when they have fewer immediate family obligations and childcare responsibilities.⁴⁰ This observation was supported by personal experiences and reflections, indicating that women can actively participate in politics only after securing family stability.

Cultural perceptions that question the suitability of political arenas for women discourage their early involvement in politics. It is observed that women often enter the political field in their middle ages, primarily when they are relatively free from direct childcare responsibilities. This late entry is typically seen as a time when they can leverage their life experiences beneficially. However, this delayed start can also mean less time to build a substantial political career and fewer opportunities for reaching higher echelons of power, which are often influenced by seniority and long-term networking.⁴¹ Some deputies noted that the perception of a late start in a political career as a positive factor stems from the belief that with age comes valuable life experience, which is an essential asset in working with constituents.⁴² Thus, postponing a political career is seen not as a disadvantage but as an opportunity to accumulate the knowledge and skills necessary for effective political representation.

Another factor influencing women's decision to enter politics later in life is financial stability. Participants emphasized that local-level political work is often voluntary, requiring them to combine politics with their primary professions. For many women, achieving financial security before engaging in political activities makes the decision more practical and manageable.⁴³ Despite support from spouses and relatives, many female deputies reported experiencing guilt for not being able to devote enough time to their families, particularly their children. This highlights the complex challenge of balancing personal and professional life, which remains a significant concern for women pursuing political careers.

³⁸ Denise Baer et al., *Shifting Gears: How Women Navigate the Road to Higher Office* (2017), <https://www.politicalparity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Shifting-Gears-Report.pdf>.

³⁹ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 20, 2024.

⁴⁰ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 19, 2024.

⁴¹ Ruth Igielnik and Kim Parker, *When Should a Woman Who Wants to Run for Office Have Kids?* (2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/05/09/when-should-a-woman-have-children-if-shes-thinking-about-running-for-office/>.

⁴² Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

⁴³ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 22, 2024.

In discussing barriers to political participation, some focus group participants also expressed that successfully managing both domestic responsibilities and a political career largely depends on individual determination and dedication.⁴⁴ They emphasized that women motivated to succeed in politics can manage both spheres effectively if they possess the necessary ambition and perseverance. Thus, findings from the focus groups clearly demonstrate that existing socio-economic conditions and cultural expectations significantly impact women's ability to participate in political processes, highlighting the need for measures to ease these barriers.

Financial Constraints and Limited Institutional Support and Mobility: The Socio-Economic Factors

Economic barriers are particularly challenging, as women disproportionately occupy lower-paying jobs and thus lack the financial resources essential for launching and sustaining effective political campaigns. The financial implications of political engagement, coupled with the unpaid nature of many political roles at the local level, place a significant financial strain on women.⁴⁵ This lack of financial support discourages many potential women candidates from pursuing or sustaining political careers.

Analysis of responses collected during focus group discussions confirmed that financial constraints are one of the key barriers to women's political participation. Participants highlighted the high concentration of women in low-paid sectors, which limits their access to the financial resources necessary for effectively fulfilling their duties as deputies. It was noted that candidates for local Kengash positions are often selected from individuals who hold senior management roles and high-paying positions, as these roles provide additional support in working with constituents' concerns.⁴⁶ However, many women lack opportunities to obtain such positions, creating another obstacle to their political engagement. Additionally, financial barriers related to unpaid political work in local Kengashes were emphasized. Participants pointed out that the absence of financial compensation for local deputies and the requirement to personally cover transportation costs for meetings with constituents place a significant financial burden on women in politics. This challenge is particularly problematic for those who do not hold high-paying jobs in addition to their political responsibilities.⁴⁷

The geographical challenges and the lack of institutional support for transportation exacerbate the difficulties women face in political engagement. Effective political representation often requires traveling extensively to meet constituents, engage with stakeholders, and participate in political events, which can be both time-consuming and costly.⁴⁸ Without adequate support mechanisms,

⁴⁴ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, February 26, 2024.

⁴⁵ Tanya Jakimow et al., "Campaign Costs Impeding Women's Political Representation in Indonesia," May 16, 2024, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/campaign-costs-impeding-womens-political-representation-in-indonesia/>.

⁴⁶ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 20, 2024

⁴⁷ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 22, 2024

⁴⁸ UN Women, *What We Do: Leadership and Political Participation: Our Solutions*, n.d., accessed February 6, 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation>.

such as transportation subsidies or allowances, women may find it difficult to maintain an active presence in their constituencies, especially those in remote or rural areas.

In addition to financial barriers, participants identified mobility issues as a major obstacle to their political activities. They stressed that effective engagement with constituents requires traveling to remote areas, even when their electoral district is located elsewhere. This necessity imposes additional time and financial costs on female deputies, further complicating their work.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the lack of systematic support for transportation from local authorities significantly worsens the situation, forcing deputies to cover travel expenses independently.⁵⁰ This not only increases their financial burden but also makes organizing meetings with constituents more difficult and logistically challenging. These challenges collectively create significant barriers to political participation, limiting women's ability to fully engage in and sustain political careers.

Harassment, Intimidation and Pressure during the Performance of Their Deputy Duties: The Security Factors

Harassment and intimidation are serious barriers that women face in the political landscape.⁵¹ Gender biases and the male-dominated nature of politics create environments where women are subjected to both subtle and overt forms of harassment. From sexist remarks to more aggressive forms of intimidation, these experiences can deter women from actively participating in politics or from seeking higher office. Additionally, the professional repercussions of standing up to such behaviors, such as ostracization or professional setbacks, can further discourage women from continued political engagement.⁵²

Focus group discussions highlighted specific incidents that illustrate the unique challenges faced by women in politics. Participants shared personal experiences of various forms of harassment and persecution, which create additional obstacles to their political engagement. One of the key issues faced by women entering the political arena is harassment, often motivated by their youth and their entry into a predominantly male sphere.⁵³ This reflects gender biases and stereotypes that shape the perception of women in politics. Anonymous testimonies from training participants further support the discussions held in focus groups. During one of the training sessions, a woman shared her story:

While working in my position, I experienced harassment from my supervisor. He made an inappropriate proposal, which I firmly refused. Following my rejection, he created a hostile work environment for me, organizing a biased inspection to discredit me. I decided not to remain silent and filed a complaint with higher management, detailing the harassment and pressure I had faced. My complaint was reviewed, and

⁴⁹ Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

⁵⁰ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 19, 2024

⁵¹ *What We Do: Leadership and Political Participation: Our Solutions.*

⁵² Emily Lockwood, "Breaking Down Barriers for Women in Politics," Pivotal Ventures, June 23, 2023, <https://www.pivotalventures.org/articles/women-in-politics>.

⁵³ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, February 26, 2024

the supervisor was removed from his position. This experience showed me that harassment can and should be fought against, and that defending one's rights is possible.⁵⁴

Another participant shared her experience:

I never imagined that my career as a deputy would bring such challenges. Once, a high-ranking official offered to improve my career prospects in exchange for an intimate relationship with an influential figure. This was humiliating and against all my principles. I was terrified, knowing that refusing could harm my career, but accepting was simply not an option for me. Despite my fears and the potential risks, I refused. The situation left a deep mark on me, but it strengthened my belief that I must remain true to my principles. I decided not to stay silent and to continue fighting for my rights and dignity. This experience only reinforced my determination to succeed through honest work and professionalism.⁵⁵

Additionally, cases of workplace harassment were reported, where female deputies faced retaliation after questioning government officials during Kengash sessions about their professional conduct.⁵⁶ These instances demonstrate that women in politics must overcome additional barriers to fulfill their public duties and advocate for their constituents' interests.

Training participants also mentioned cases where female politicians and women appointed to leadership positions were subjected to online hate speech and cyberbullying.⁵⁷ Such incidents frequently act as deterrents, discouraging women from expressing their views in the media. This issue is particularly serious, as there have been cases where female deputies, known for their critical speeches, have been discredited and subjected to online attacks after intimate videos involving them were leaked online.

Participants in the focus groups also pointed to widespread stereotypes among voters, suggesting that women in politics are supported by male patrons and are involved in politics not due to professional qualifications but because of personal relationships.⁵⁸ This perception undermines their independence and professional achievements, reinforcing gender biases that limit women's political participation. Questions about why female deputies engage in politics if they have families and husbands reflect deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that confine women's roles to household and family care, ignoring their potential contributions to public and political life.

In addition to the challenges of harassment and intimidation, women deputies at the local level also face significant pressures related to their duties. Participants in discussions highlighted cases where they were persecuted at their workplaces not only for posing inconvenient questions to leaders but also for their principled stands against corruption and their courage in performing their deputy duties.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

⁵⁵ Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

⁵⁶ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, April 1, 2024

⁵⁷ Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

⁵⁸ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 20, 2024

⁵⁹ Interviews with women local deputies who participated in the "Political Leadership Training" (April 15–19, 2024).

These instances confirm that women in politics often face double pressure: they must navigate gender stereotypes and oppression while also contending with systemic issues like corruption and injustice. This dual burden necessitates special courage and determination, emphasizing the need for effective mechanisms to protect and support women deputies, enabling them to safely and effectively exercise their powers, serve the community's interests, and contribute to the development of democracy and justice.⁶⁰

Similar trends have been observed in other countries. According to an Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) study on harassment and violence against women, nearly 82 percent of 55 female parliamentarians from 39 countries admitted to experiencing psychological violence at some point in their careers. Additionally, 44 percent of respondents reported receiving physical threats while in office.⁶¹ Women in politics often face significant pressure not only from the broader society but also from within their families. The fear that a woman's political success could overshadow her male counterparts or disrupt traditional family dynamics can lead to a lack of support from spouses and relatives.⁶² This familial pressure can be a formidable barrier, as it often forces women to choose between their political aspirations and their family life.

Concluding Remarks

The barriers faced by women in Uzbekistan's political sphere are deeply intertwined with socio-cultural norms, economic realities, and security challenges that disproportionately affect women's public roles. Overcoming these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that includes legislative changes, societal attitude shifts, and robust support systems to encourage and sustain women's active participation in politics.⁶³ Addressing these issues is crucial not only for the empowerment of women but also for the broader goal of achieving a truly representative and equitable democratic process.

Addressing these barriers is essential for creating a more inclusive and representative political landscape in Uzbekistan. Legislative changes are needed to ensure that women have equal access to financial resources and opportunities for political advancement. Additionally, societal attitudes and stereotypes regarding women's roles in politics must be challenged and reshaped. Moreover, establishing support systems such as mentorship programs, childcare assistance, and transportation subsidies can help mitigate the socio-economic challenges that hinder women's political participation.⁶⁴ Providing a safe and inclusive environment

⁶⁰ Minna Cowper-Coles, *Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy* (King's College London, n.d.).

⁶¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments."

⁶² UN Women, "Facts and Figures: Women's Leadership and Political Participation," UN Women – Headquarters, June 12, 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation>.

⁶³ Democratic Audit UK, "Lack of Access to Funding Is a Huge Challenge for Women Seeking to Enter Political Life," *Democratic Audit*, March 21, 2014, <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2014/03/21/lack-of-access-to-funding-is-a-huge-challenge-for-women-seeking-to-enter-political-life/>.

⁶⁴ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 22, 2024

free from harassment and intimidation is also critical for empowering women to take on leadership roles in the political arena.

Furthermore, raising awareness about the importance of women's participation in governance and decision-making processes is imperative for fostering a more equitable democratic system.⁶⁵ This can be achieved through educational campaigns, community outreach, and media initiatives that highlight the value of diverse perspectives and contributions in political leadership.⁶⁶ By addressing these multifaceted barriers, Uzbekistan can unlock the full potential of its female population and pave the way for a more inclusive, representative, and responsive political system that serves the needs of all citizens.⁶⁷ This not only serves to benefit women but also contributes to the overall progress and development of a more inclusive and representative democracy.

Breaking the structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's political participation in Uzbekistan requires more than individual effort—it demands systemic change at multiple levels. While progress has been made in gender-inclusive policies, the findings of this study suggest that the opportunities created for women in politics remain uneven and constrained by institutional and societal limitations. The presence of women in political leadership has not yet resulted in a substantial shift in gender dynamics within political institutions. Instead, many women continue to struggle against persistent stereotypes, financial constraints, and security threats, which limit both their access to and longevity in political office.

The study highlights that while legislative and institutional mechanisms exist to promote gender equality in politics, they have yet to dismantle the deeply ingrained social and economic structures that restrict women's full participation. Women's leadership in political institutions remains precarious, as they are often expected to conform to traditional roles or face social and professional consequences. Societal perceptions still confine women to issues related to social welfare and family policies, restricting their ability to engage in broader governance matters. Moreover, the challenges of harassment, intimidation, and political persecution create an environment where women must constantly navigate risks that their male counterparts do not face.

Gender equity in political representation is not just a matter of numerical inclusion but of meaningful participation and influence. The limited impact of current interventions suggests that isolated efforts—such as individual empowerment programs or policy adjustments—are insufficient to challenge entrenched gender biases. Instead, a paradigm shift is needed, where women's political engagement is supported not only through legal frameworks but also through structural and cultural transformations that make political spaces more accessible and equitable.

Women's leadership in politics, despite its constraints, has contributed to a gradual shift in gender awareness and has laid the groundwork for further progress.

⁶⁵ Focus group discussions with women deputies of local councils, March 20, 2024

⁶⁶ Jo Silvester and Madeleine Wyatt, "Developing Strong and Diverse Political Leaders," *The Psychologist* 28, no. 5 (2015): 368–71.

⁶⁷ Mavluda Gaffarova, "WOMEN OF UZBEKISTAN: A MODERN VIEW OF REALITY," *Theoretical & Applied Science*, no. 1 (2018): 114–16.

However, without targeted institutional support, including financial resources, mentorship, protection from harassment, and gender-sensitive political infrastructure, these gains will remain fragile. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive strategy that not only ensures women's representation in decision-making processes but also strengthens their agency in governance.

Uzbekistan stands at a crucial point where meaningful progress can be made by implementing policies that move beyond symbolic inclusion towards substantive political participation for women. By fostering an environment that supports women's leadership and by removing the systemic obstacles they face, the country can work towards a more inclusive, democratic, and representative political system. The findings of this study emphasize that the true measure of gender equality in politics is not merely increasing the number of women in office but ensuring their influence and impact within the political landscape.

References

- Abimbola, Foluke Oluyemisi, Stanley Osezua Ehiane, and Roman Tandlich. "Women's Rights in Nigeria's Indigenous Systems: An Analysis of Non-Discrimination and Equality under International Human Rights Law." *Social Sciences* 12, no. 7 (2023): 405.
- Ara, Fardaus. "Barriers to the Political Participation of Women: A Global Perspective." *Society & Change* 13, no. 4 (2019): 7–22.
- Arnot, Madeleine. *Reproducing Gender: Critical Essays on Educational Theory and Feminist Politics*. Routledge, 2002.
- Asadbek, Obidov. "Gender Equality in Uzbekistan: An Overview and Prospects for the Future." *The American Journal of Political Science Law and Criminology* 5, no. 05 (2023): 17–21.
- Baer, Denise, Heidi Hartmann, Celinda Lake, and Bob Carpenter. *Shifting Gears: How Women Navigate the Road to Higher Office*. 2017. <https://www.politicalparity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Shifting-Gears-Report.pdf>.
- Bibi, Hamida. "The Socio-Political Obstacles behind the Scanty Political Participation of Women Parliamentarians." *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies* 6, no. 4 (2020): 1457–61.
- Burns, Nancy, Ashley E Jardina, and Donald Kinder. "The Politics of Gender." In *New Directions in Public Opinion*. Routledge, 2015.
- Cowper-Coles, Minna. *Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy*. King's College London, n.d.
- Democratic Audit UK. "Lack of Access to Funding Is a Huge Challenge for Women Seeking to Enter Political Life." *Democratic Audit*, March 21, 2014. <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2014/03/21/lack-of-access-to-funding-is-a-huge-challenge-for-women-seeking-to-enter-political-life/>.
- Emily Lockwood. "Breaking Down Barriers for Women in Politics." Pivotal Ventures, June 23, 2023. <https://www.pivotalventures.org/articles/women-in-politics>.
- Gaffarova, Mavluda. "WOMEN OF UZBEKISTAN: A MODERN VIEW OF REALITY." *Theoretical & Applied Science*, no. 1 (2018): 114–16.

- Igielnik, Ruth, and Kim Parker. *When Should a Woman Who Wants to Run for Office Have Kids?* 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/05/09/when-should-a-woman-have-children-if-shes-thinking-about-running-for-office/>.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. "Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments." *IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliaments*, n.d. Accessed March 9, 2025. <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/>.
- Jakimow, Tanya, Aida Harahap, Yumasdaleni, and Asima Siahaan. "Campaign Costs Impeding Women's Political Representation in Indonesia," May 16, 2024. <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/campaign-costs-impeding-womens-political-representation-in-indonesia/>.
- Jennings, M Kent, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers. "Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined." *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (2009): 782–99.
- Lovenduski, Joni. "The Political Representation of Women: A Feminist Institutional Perspective." In *Research Handbook on Political Representation*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020.
- MacNaughton, Gillian. "Untangling Equality and Non-Discrimination to Promote the Right to Health Care for All." *Health and Human Rights*, JSTOR, 2009, 47–63.
- OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan. "OSCE Supports Second Forum on the Role of Women Parliamentarians in the Development of Uzbekistan." Accessed February 5, 2023. <https://www.osce.org/project-coordinator-in-uzbekistan/515946>.
- Paxton, Pamela, Melanie M Hughes, and Tiffany D Barnes. *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.
- Schneider, Monica C, and Angela L Bos. "The Application of Social Role Theory to the Study of Gender in Politics." *Political Psychology* 40 (2019): 173–213.
- Shavkat Mirziyoyev. "Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the 20th Plenary Session of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan." Uza.uz, 1754987227. <https://uza.uz/uz>.
- Silvester, Jo, and Madeleine Wyatt. "Developing Strong and Diverse Political Leaders." *The Psychologist* 28, no. 5 (2015): 368–71.
- Sumbas, Ahu. "Gendered Local Politics: The Barriers to Women's Representation in Turkey." *Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2020): 570–87.
- Thomas, Melanee. "Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Canada." *UNBLJ* 64 (2013): 218.
- Toliboeva, N. "The Women of Uzbekistan on the New Step of Development." *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering* 8, no. 9 S3 (2019): 166–68.
- Toshturov, Shukhrat. "The Issue of Gender Equality in Uzbekistan in the Context of Sustainable Development." *Научно-Методический и Теоретический Журнал*, 2022.
- UN Women. "Facts and Figures: Women's Leadership and Political Participation." UN Women – Headquarters, June 12, 2025. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation>.

- UN Women. "SDG 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls." UN Women – Headquarters. Accessed February 5, 2023. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/node/36060>.
- UN Women. *What We Do: Leadership and Political Participation: Our Solutions*. n.d. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation>.
- United Nations. "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action." Accessed January 25, 2023. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20R.pdf>.
- United Nations Development Programme. "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties | United Nations Development Programme." <https://www.undp.org/mongolia/publications/empowering-women-stronger-political-parties>.
- United Nations, Robert. "17 Goals to Transform Our World." United Nations Sustainable Development. Accessed February 5, 2023. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>.