



Policy Context for Gender Equality Reforms in Education in Central Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality, as a universally embraced policy objective, traverses boundaries, with numerous nations and international entities committed to its realisation (Lombardo et al., 2009). However, the interpretation and implementation of gender equality are subject to diverse perspectives and debates, allowing for varied applications in different contexts (Verloo, 2007). Therefore, a comparative analysis of gender policies is relevant from a research standpoint (Dombos et al., 2012).

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Central Asia has been relatively well investigated concerning gender issues and gender policies (Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016). However, few studies have been conducted from a comparative perspective (Li, 2019) or have focused on education. This chapter intends to fill the gap by conducting a comparative analysis of gender equality policies in the educational sector across Central Asian countries, drawing on academic and grey literature.

The chapter first provides an overview of the historical policy landscape, focusing on the impact of Soviet gender equality policies on women in Muslim Central Asia. Next, it analyses the complex interplay between the Soviet legacy, globalisation, neoliberalism, and nationalist discourses, shedding light on their influence on contemporary gender equality policies and identities. Additionally, the study explores post-independence gender equality frameworks and policies, highlighting key stakeholders, international gender equality commitments, and policy structures unique to each Central Asian nation. Finally, the significance of gender social norms as a primary barrier to the effectiveness of gender equality policies and initiatives within the region is discussed.

SOVIET'S APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

The "Liberation" of Muslim Women

The Soviet approach to addressing "*zhenskii vopros*" [the woman question] evolved from a late imperial Russian discourse on women's rights and roles, highlighting women's enduring inequality in Soviet society (Kamp, 2009). Academic discussions have scrutinised whether the Soviet modernisation of gender relations in Central Asia and beyond stemmed from genuine progressive ideals or mirrored European imperial projects in colonised countries (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016). In contrast to the ad hoc and reactionary strategies of Western imperial powers, the Soviet state substantially intervened in gender relations through policymaking (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016), although the extent to which it succeeded in transforming Central Asian societies remains open to debate (Constantine, 2007).

Following the Bolshevik victory in 1917, the Communist Party appropriated the discourse of women's emancipation for divergent objectives (Kandiyoti, 2007). By expanding state control into previously untouched

domains, the Soviets actively intervened in societal norms. By the 1920s, secular family laws replaced *shari'a* courts for sedentary communities and customary *adat* laws for nomadic regions, leading to the prohibition of practices like polygyny, underage and forced marriages, as well as bride price payments (Kandiyoti, 2007). These transformations were also central to the *Jadid* movement, an indigenous reform effort within Uzbek society aiming to modernise and elevate women's status, yet its influence on altering these practices was limited (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016; Khalid, 2015).

While the Soviets prioritised the “emancipation” of Central Asian women, unveiling as a policy objective emerged after land reforms and anti-religious efforts failed to achieve their anticipated outcomes (Northrop, 2004). The veil symbolised “the primitive East”, creating a stark contrast between seclusion and the bright promise of a Soviet future (p. 80). Unveiling was seen as necessary for the active participation of Central Asian women in the workforce, thereby contributing to industrialisation and supporting the growth of a native proletariat (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016). The *hujum*, an unveiling campaign, was launched on 8 March 1927. It is notable that while sedentary women predominantly wore veils, nomadic women seldom veiled.

The *hujum* encountered fierce resistance in Uzbekistan, leading to violence where many unveiled women were killed by relatives or rebels (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016). Unveiling was viewed as violating community dignity and honour (Akiner, 1997), with the murder of unveiled women being lauded by communities, transforming the veil into a symbol “of religious virtue and national-cultural identity” (Northrop, 2004, p. 171). By contrast, in Kazakhstan, where the veil lacked symbolic importance, the *hujum* did not provoke party activism or community resistance. Instead, the Soviet attacks on traditional lifestyle and the collectivisation campaign, which resulted in famine and displacement among Kazakhs, caused resistance among nomadic groups (Dave, 2007). While unveiling encountered no resistance in nomadic Turkmenistan, women were killed for divorcing their spouses, engaging in party activities, or defying community gender norms (Edgar, 2006).

To encourage women's participation in the workforce, the Soviet state established a network of daycare centres, freeing women to engage in productive labour outside the home (Michaels, 1998). Despite the increasing involvement of Central Asian women in paid labour beyond the household, they continued to shoulder the majority of domestic

responsibilities, similar to women in other modernising states. An effective mechanism for empowering Central Asian women during the Soviet times was the establishment of *zhensovet* (women's council), an institution dedicated to addressing women's concerns (Turaeva, 2018). The *zhensovet* aimed to involve women in political and economic spheres through literacy campaigns, economic empowerment, community involvement, and leadership support. It played a pervasive role in various state agencies responsible for women's affairs, whether in the workplace, educational institutions, or within organisations.

State interventions led to bringing Central Asian women out of their homes into paid employment. In the late 1980s, Kazakh women were the most economically productive among Central Asian women, with higher representation in both blue- and white-collar jobs (49% compared to 43% for Uzbek women and 39% for Tajik women) and as enterprise directors (5% compared to 2.7% for Tajik women and 2.5% for Uzbek women) (Michaels, 1998). In terms of farm work, Uzbek women had the highest participation rate at 55%, followed by Tajik women at 52% and Kazakh women at 38% due to the country's geographical locations and the availability of agricultural land.

Although Central Asia exhibited high literacy rates and active female workforce participation, it also displayed high fertility rates, large families, and traditional gender roles due to social welfare policies and the strong emphasis on motherhood as a societal duty (Kandiyoti, 2007). In contrast, men were primarily expected to engage in wage labour and socio-political activities, distancing them from household responsibilities and childcare duties, as highlighted by Peshkova (2014).

Soviet Education Policy

Alongside political, legal, economic, and social interventions, education policy was pivotal in the construction of the emancipated Soviet woman. The Soviets envisioned the ideal citizen as someone diligent and loyal to state objectives, possessing the necessary skills to advance socialist ideals. The Soviet educational policy aimed to instil these qualities in both men and women (DeYoung & Constantine, 2009).

Upon the establishment of the Soviet Union, Central Asia faced widespread illiteracy, with limited educational options (Johnson, 2004). Russian schools primarily served the children of political elites, while Islamic education predominantly targeted boys in the region. However,

a growing number of “new method” schools initiated by *Jadids* advocated for female education as well (Khalid, 2015). In Kazakhstan, Ybyrai Altynsarin made early efforts to develop methodological books, set up rural and boarding schools for gifted children, and establish a girls’ school (Abdrakhmanova & Gapbassova, 2021).

To create the liberated Soviet woman, the Soviet regime expanded educational opportunities and promoted adult literacy, particularly focusing on girls’ and women’s education (DeYoung & Constantine, 2009). Women were actively encouraged to pursue education, resulting in a substantial number of highly educated women in Central Asia (Turaeva, 2018). Policies were implemented to ensure women’s access to university education and men who obstructed their wives’ and daughters’ educational paths were penalised (Zhussipbek, 2017). Women from rural areas could attend free higher education institutions in major Soviet cities with financial support from the state (Turaeva, 2018). Following graduation, female graduates were dispersed across the Soviet Union through the state quota system. By the 1980s, the Soviet Union achieved universal literacy, with 54% of Central Asian women enrolled in higher education (Gündüz, 2015). In 1970, Kazakh women (45%) boasted the highest participation in higher education in Central Asia, followed by Uzbeks (33%) and Tajiks (23%) (Michaels, 1998, p.196).

GENDER POLICY POST-INDEPENDENCE: DISJUNCTURES AND CONTINUITIES

Following independence, gender policies in the region underwent significant changes, although remnants of Soviet influence persisted. During the transition period, women encountered various forms of discrimination, including male-dominated wealth appropriation, gender-based dispossession, and violence (Nazpary, 2002; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2023). As Central Asian nations shifted towards capitalist economies, embraced globalisation, and adopted neoliberal principles, state support for public services aiding women in their dual roles as mothers and employees diminished. Consequently, there was a reduction in women’s political involvement, a rise in female unemployment, and the elimination of social protections for working women (Kandiyoti, 2007; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2023).

The ideological revival in newly independent Central Asian states and the construction of their national imaginaries revolved around the “official

restoration of male privilege as an item of national culture” (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 613). However, it is essential to emphasise that the ideal image of the modern Central Asian citizen integrates traditional values with forward-looking perspectives that are adaptable to economic needs and developmental projects (Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2023).

Alongside the retraditionalisation of gender discourses, globalisation and the spread of Western liberal perspectives on women’s societal roles (Kandiyoti, 2007) have heightened women’s expectations regarding full-time employment, salaries, professional advancement, and workplace equality (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2021). However, they have also introduced elements of sexism and fostered a diminished perception of women through messages in popular culture and mass media. The intersection of globalisation, Westernisation, calls to protect “national” culture, the rise of neoliberal market economies, and the decline of socialist welfare have created diverse conditions for Central Asian women (Ozawa et al., 2024).

Despite Central Asian states distancing themselves from their Soviet legacy and emphasising positive connections to their ancient ethnic histories, the principle of gender equality established during the Soviet era persists, albeit without overtly celebrating Soviet gender equality initiatives (Kamp, 2016). All states have enshrined gender equality in their constitutions, guaranteeing free access to quality education for all (DeYoung & Constantine, 2009) and ratified international human rights treaties. The newly adopted constitutions and laws in Central Asian nations, including education laws, are designed to uphold gender equality in alignment with the human rights conventions they have ratified (Silova & Abdushukurova, 2009).

GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORKS AND POLICIES

Actors

Apart from government agencies, multilateral organisations play a significant role in gender discourse and policy developments. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the concept of “gender” entered policy discourse in Central Asia through development initiatives led by entities like UNESCO, the United Nations (UN), and the World Bank (Kamp, 2009). The UN assigned the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to launch a regional project focused on establishing

Women in Development (WID) Bureaus in all five Central Asian republics (Liczek, 2005). This period also witnessed a surge in NGOs (Kamp, 2009). Simpson (2006) describes this phenomenon as “globalising gender politics”, highlighting the increasing integration of gender considerations by “national, international, and transnational actors, working within Western frameworks of development, democratisation and civil society” (p. 9). International actors championed gender equality as a facet of democratic governance, ensuring state stability, countering religious extremism and global terrorism, and providing economic advantages for both national and international enterprises (Hoare, 2016; Shakirova, 2015). International funding supported gender-focused NGOs, offering a new avenue of employment and income, particularly for women.

In Kazakhstan, international organisations backed and financed the integration of gender equality (Shakirova, 2015), and donor engagement in Kyrgyzstan led to the development of a thriving NGO sector (Hoare, 2016). Tajikistan experienced a Civil War (1992–1997), leading to a significant surge in aid. Foreign donors emerged as pivotal champions for gender equality and women’s empowerment in the country (Kluczevska, 2022). Turkmenistan required women’s NGOs to register under the Women’s Union, a structure established under the Soviet Union enabling activism and the development of the women’s movement in Turkmenistan (Liczek, 2005). Likewise, most Uzbekistani initiatives were based on international organisations’ principles and policies (Ibodova, 2020). However, across the region, women’s NGOs tend to focus on less contentious areas of women’s rights, such as education and healthcare, as dissenting voices challenging the prevailing gender norms are frequently undermined by labelling them as agents of the West (Kamp, 2016).

In recent years, NGOs have faced heightened surveillance and restriction, with Central Asian republics, except Kyrgyzstan, progressively restricting foreign-funded NGOs (Hoare, 2016). Accusations of working against the state and serving foreign interests have led to a crack-down, severely limiting civil society activities in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where non-sanctioned NGOs are deemed illegal. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan impose strict controls on NGOs receiving external funds. Conversely, Kyrgyzstan stands out where the development sector has been firmly embedded (Pares, 2021).

International Commitments to Gender Equality

In 1995, all Central Asian countries participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, endorsing the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (Liczek, 2005). All are signatories to several international treaties, policies and conventions on gender equality (Kamp, 2016), such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Furthermore, all states endorsed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All countries have submitted their voluntary national review on the implementation of SDGs to the UN. Kazakhstan submitted reports in 2019 and 2022, Tajikistan in 2017 and 2023, Uzbekistan in 2020 and 2023, Turkmenistan in 2019 and 2023, and Kyrgyzstan in 2020.

Policy Frameworks and Structures

The gender equality policy landscapes and outcomes within each state are shaped by the historical context, national economy, political landscape, and integration into the neoliberal economy. Across the region, the Soviet approach, emphasising sex over gender in addressing the “woman question”, constrains the understanding of gender relations as relational categories rooted in socially constructed and idealised notions of masculinity and femininity (Kamp, 2009; Liczek, 2005). Furthermore, the paucity of rigorous research on monitoring and assessing the outcomes of policy initiatives and programmes, as well as implementation gaps, are reported across all countries. Within education, a lack of sufficient attention to gender equality issues in policies, curriculum documents, and textbooks has been reported (UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017).

Kazakhstan

Historically, Kazakhstani nomadic women on the steppes enjoyed significant freedom and mobility, contributing substantially to the nomadic economy and household management despite men holding nominal household leadership roles (Aldashev & Guirking, 2012). They also played crucial roles in the military during wartime (Abdikadyrova et al.,

2018). During the Soviet period, the Kazakhs became the most Sovietised Muslim nation (Dave, 2007, p. 2), resulting in Kazakh women particularly benefiting from Soviet initiatives for women's empowerment in education, politics, and the economy (Michaels, 1998). Kazakhstan has experienced significant economic growth since the 2000s, fuelled by market-oriented reforms, mineral resource extraction, and substantial foreign direct investment, elevating the country to an upper middle-income economy (Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2023). As a key partner of OECD countries in Eurasia, gender equality discourse enables Kazakhstan to enhance its international standing, project a modern image, and garner support from its female electorate.

The National Commission on Women's Affairs and Family and Demographic Policy is the national entity that promotes gender equality. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2018a) acknowledges Kazakhstan's firm commitment to gender equality and its proactive engagement in global initiatives. A concise summary of policy developments and milestones is presented in Table 2.1.

While the country's constitutional and human rights provisions guarantee equality, there are implementation gaps, particularly due to the lack of clear mechanisms in the constitution for women and other groups to exercise their rights effectively (International Commission of Jurists, 2013). While the Gender Equality Strategy for 2006–2016 achieved milestones over a decade, such as a gender parity in education, improved maternal health, sustained women's labour force participation, increased women's ownership of businesses, enhanced women's representation in political bodies, and the promotion of gender equality values through media messages, it had shortcomings (Sarsembayeva, 2017). The strategy lacked clear implementation methods, budgetary plans, accountability measures, and robust monitoring systems. Despite emphasising women's political and economic empowerment, the strategy frequently linked women's roles to motherhood, family, and demographic policies (ADB, 2018a), highlighting the need to separate family and gender policy objectives to ensure that the role of women is not confined to the family domain (OECD, 2017).

A significant initiative in education was the establishment of the Central Asian Network for Gender Studies in Almaty in 2002 to advance gender equality discourse throughout Central Asia (Shakirova, 2015). In 1999, gender courses were introduced in Kazakhstani universities, and classes on gender equality and women's rights were introduced into the curriculum

Table 2.1 Key policies, initiatives, and milestones addressing gender—Kazakhstan

1.	In 1995, the <i>National Commission for Women, Family, and Demographic Policy was founded</i> to establish an institutional framework for ensuring gender equality
2.	Gender has been integrated into economic planning since 2001
3.	In 2005, President Nursultan Nazarbayev (1991–2019) approved the <i>Gender Equality Strategy for 2006–2016</i> , aiming to foster partnership between the sexes and ensure women’s equal participation in social development. The strategy focused on political and public spheres, the economy, gender education, reproductive health, gender-based violence prevention, and the family, as well as public awareness, with defined goals, objectives, and monitoring indicators for each. Implementation plans were executed in phases (2006–2008, 2009–2011, and 2012–2016) to achieve these aims
4.	In 2009, the <i>Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women</i> was enacted, legally establishing equal rights and opportunities for men and women, defining gender discrimination, ensuring state guarantees in various areas, and assigning responsibility for implementing gender policies to all state agencies
5.	In 2009, the <i>Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence</i> was approved
6.	In 2016, the <i>Concept of Family and Gender Policies in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030</i> was approved. The policy aimed to address gender stereotypes in education and society, among other objectives
7.	In 2021, the <i>Concept was updated</i> to address modern challenges, including early marriage, reproductive health, domestic violence prevention, women’s economic empowerment, and inadequate representation of women in decision-making roles
8.	In 2021, <i>Election Laws were amended</i> , mandating a 30% quota for women and youth, guaranteeing the representation of women in both local and national political structures
9.	On 15 April 2024, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed <i>amendments to Domestic Violence laws</i> amid ongoing civic activism. The updated legislation intends to provide stronger deterrence for perpetrators compared to previous lenient measures

Sources #1, 5 (UNFPA, 2022); #2 (Shakirova, 2015); #3–4 (ADB, 2018a); #7 (Ministry of National Economy, Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022); #8 (Nurbayev et al., 2024); #9 (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Federal Republic of Germany, 2024)

of civil servants, the police, judges, healthcare workers, and statisticians (Shakirova, 2015). However, the extent to which these initiatives were enacted remains unclear, although an ongoing research project now explores the enactment of gender-focused courses (Kataeva et al., 2025). The Gender Equality Strategy 2006–2016 required schools to integrate gender education into the school curricula. Despite this, school textbooks

were not revised to address gender stereotypes throughout the strategy's 10-year duration, with recent studies revealing prevalent gender stereotypes in school textbooks (Bekzhanova, 2023; Durrani et al., 2022; see also Chapter 4).

Kyrgyzstan

Historically, Kyrgyzstan followed a nomadic lifestyle with comparatively fewer constraints on women's mobility but within a patriarchal social structure. Following independence, Kyrgyz society predominantly depicts women as domestic wives, perpetuating discriminatory practices that normalise male dominance and may justify violence against them (Childress et al., 2023). Similar to other post-Soviet Central Asian countries, the construction of Kyrgyz nationalism heavily relies on the retradition-alisation of national values, positioning women as symbols and defenders of national culture, tradition, and honour (Kim, 2020). Public opinion concerning women's rights and gender equality in Kyrgyzstan is polarised, with social media often framing gender equality movements as foreign impositions on traditional culture (Childress et al., 2023).

Kyrgyzstan, a lower-middle-income country, depends significantly on donor funding (Erisheva, 2023). The country has experienced political instability, characterised by presidential overthrows in 2005, 2010, and 2020 (Ozawa et al., 2024). After independence, the state's rapid downsizing led to widespread poverty and unemployment, particularly impacting women (Pares, 2021). While Kyrgyzstan is viewed as a pioneer in the region for policy- and law-making supporting human rights, recent international reports reveal a significant decline in gender equality and women's empowerment in the country (Erisheva, 2023). Table 2.2 charts significant developments regarding gender policies and programmes in the country.

Research exploring the relationship between gender and education in Kyrgyzstan highlights a predominant focus on male heroes in history textbooks, marginalising women or depicting a few women as "honorary males", reinforcing gender disparities (Blakkisrud & Abdykapar, 2017, p. 133). Furthermore, early literacy textbooks reinforce gender stereotypes by portraying females as caregivers and sparingly depicting boys in traditional feminine roles while emphasising a historical narrative dominated by male figures (Palandjian et al., 2018).

Table 2.2 Key policies, initiatives, and milestones addressing gender—Kyrgyzstan

1.	In 1996, the <i>National Council on Gender Policy</i> was established and located within the President’s Office and the State Commission on Family, Women, and Youth Affairs In 2001, the Council was replaced by the <i>National Council on Women, Family and Gender Affairs</i> (NCWFGA) by Presidential Decree under the direct supervision of the President’s Office
2.	In the early 1990s, the <i>Program Ayalzat</i> (1996 to 2000) was adopted for the advancement of women’s rights
3.	In 2002, the <i>National Plan of Action for Achieving Gender Equality for 2002–2006</i> was adopted, replacing Ayalzat
4.	In 2002, the <i>National Poverty Reduction Strategy for 2003–2005</i> was adopted, which outlined key priorities for advancing gender equality
5.	In 2003, Kyrgyzstan adopted the first Law, “ <i>On Basic State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women</i> ”
6.	In 2003, the country also adopted the first <i>Law on Social and Legal Protection against Domestic Violence</i>
7.	In 2007, a 30% <i>Gender Quota</i> in government posts was introduced
8.	In 2008, Kyrgyzstan adopted the new law “ <i>On State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women</i> ”
9.	In 2012, the <i>National Gender Strategy (NGS) on Achieving Gender Equality by 2020</i> was adopted
10.	The NGS is elucidated through the 3-year <i>National Action Plan on Gender Equality (NAPGE)</i> for the periods 2012–2014, 2015–2017, and 2018–2020
11.	In 2017, the <i>new Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence</i> was adopted (replacing the Law adopted in 2003)
12.	In 2022, the <i>National Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic to achieve gender equality by 2030</i> was adopted
13.	In 2022, the <i>National Action Plan for 2022–2024</i> was adopted

Sources #1–3 (ADB, 2005); #4–11 (ADB, 2019); #12–13 (UN, 2024)

Tajikistan

Historically, Tajikistan had an urban culture (Falkingham, 2000; Ubaiduloev, 2015). After the arrival of Islam in Central Asia, the mosque played a central role in social and religious activities, blending traditional practices with Islamic customs (Akiner, 1997). As part of its “liberation of Eastern women”, the Soviet policy aimed to alter the traditional social structures within the Tajik society through policies that often appeared superficial and coercive (Kasymova, 2008). Resistance to *hujum* was strong in Tajikistan, with *Zhenotdel* activities mostly concentrated in major cities (Tadjbakhsh, 1998). In the aftermath of independence, economic struggles compounded by the civil war (1992–1997) led to heightened

poverty, unemployment, and educational disruptions, reshaping gender dynamics and profoundly influencing the status of Tajik women and the educational opportunities of girls (Waljee, 2008; Yakubova, 2020).

Tajikistan has made strides in gender equality through legislative measures and strategies overseen by the Committee for Women's and Family Affairs (Table 2.3), with the Agency for Statistics monitoring progress and data reporting. While progress has been made, significant gender equality challenges persist in Tajikistan (World Bank, 2021; see also Chapter 7).

To transform gender norms through education, the Parliament approved the inclusion of a sex education subject in the school curriculum in 2015, sparking varied reactions within Tajik society due to concerns from some that the subject goes against Tajik culture and may encourage early sexual activity among students (Asia-Plus, 2015). Despite being part of the curriculum for seven years, there remains a lack of adequate training for teachers conducting these lessons (Ketting et al., 2021). Higher education institutions regulate women's bodies through the prescription of dress codes according to government instructions (Kataeva, 2024; Ozawa et al., 2024).

Turkmenistan

Academic and grey literature on the role of education and gender in Turkmenistan is exceptionally scarce (Kataeva et al., 2023). Nomadic customs prescribed gender roles in Turkmenistan and later by Islamic practices prior to Russian and Soviet influences (Liczek, 2005). In the post-Soviet transition, the retraditionalisation of society involved replacing the "emancipated" Soviet woman with Turkmen heritage, symbolised by a powerful maternal figure representing the national home (Kepderi, 2022). Due to the limitation of civil liberties, there is limited information available on the implementation of gender policies in Turkmenistan. However, similar to other Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan has developed various gender policies and laws safeguarding women while also submitting reports to international bodies regarding gender indicators (OECD, 2010). However, in practice, unwritten laws based on imagined traditions and community laws are prioritised over the laws of the state (Liczek, 2005).

The WID Bureau and Women's Union were instrumental in establishing the national mechanism for women's advancement, working alongside the UNDP to shape a national agenda and policy framework for

Table 2.3 Key policies, initiatives, and milestones addressing gender—Tajikistan

1.	In 1991, the <i>Committee for Women’s and Family Affairs</i> was established, and its authority was significantly expanded in 2006, making it the primary body for implementing state policies to protect women’s interests and rights
2.	In 1997, the Ministry of Education adopted the policy on the admission of girls from remote areas to universities without entrance examinations
3.	In 1999, a Presidential Decree was adopted on the <i>Enhancement of Role of Women</i> to ensure the broad participation of women in public life and government management and to enhance the social status of women
4.	In 2000, the State Program “ <i>Main Directions of State Policy to Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Men And Women in The Republic of Tajikistan for 2001–2010</i> ” was adopted
5.	In 2005, the Law on “ <i>State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women</i> ” was adopted to define the concepts of gender. The law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex while distinguishing special measures to protect pregnancy and the health of women and men, and it guarantees equal rights in public authorities, civil service, education, labour, and the family
6.	In 2006, <i>the State Program for Education, Selection and Placement of Capable Women and Girls in Leadership Position</i> (2007–2016) was adopted and renewed in 2017 (2017–2022)
7.	<i>In 2011, the National Strategy for Enhancing the Role of Women in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2011–2020</i> was adopted
8.	The state programme “ <i>On training women specialists and promoting their employment for 2012–2015</i> ” was developed
9.	In 2013, the <i>Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence</i> was approved
10.	In 2013, the <i>National Program on the Prevention of Domestic Violence for 2014–2023</i> was adopted
11.	In 2013, the <i>Program on the Development of Gender Statistics in Tajikistan for 2014–2015</i> started
12.	In 2021, <i>the National Strategy for the Activation of the Role of Women in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2021–2030</i> was initiated

Sources #1, 4–12 (World Bank, 2021); #2 (Yakubova, 2020); 3# (EU BOMCA, 2023)

gender equality (Liczek, 2005). However, with three chairperson changes in the Women’s Union since 2001, the closure of the WID Bureau, and constrained financial support from international entities, Turkmenistan’s gender agenda came to a standstill. Table 2.4 outlines key advancements in gender policies and programs within the country.

Tensions and contradictions exist between the drive to modernise the state and bolster its national identity through education policy and practice. The Government of Turkmenistan (2023) asserts that schools have

Table 2.4 Key policies, initiatives, and milestones addressing gender—Turkmenistan

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1. In 1999, the *National Action Plan (NAP) (1998–2001)* was endorsed, which outlined key priorities, including coordinating advocacy efforts nationally and internationally, enhancing women’s involvement in governance and decision-making, improving women’s education and training, and addressing women’s health, economic roles, human rights, and media participation
 2. In November 1999, the *Women’s Sector*, created under the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan to address women’s development and gender equality, was shut down shortly after its inception, with its duties transferred to the *Women’s Union*
 3. In 2015, *Article 29 of Turkmenistan’s Constitution and Law No.264-V* was passed, granting equal civil rights and opportunities for men and women
 4. On 22 January 2015, the *2015–2020 National Action Plan on Gender Equality* was approved, which focuses on developing gender-oriented programmes and policies to promote equal opportunities and access for women
 5. In December 2020, the *2021–2025 National Action Plan for Gender Equality* was adopted, which set out national goals, objectives, and priorities to enhance and advocate for gender equality across all aspects of life, both at the national and local levels
 6. On April 20, 2021, Turkmenistan was elected as a *member of the Executive Board of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)* for the term 2020–2024
 7. In November 2022, Turkmenistan created a “*Roadmap*” for *enhancing the Health and Status of Women in the Family for 2022–2025*. The plan includes reinforcing laws against domestic violence, establishing a comprehensive support system for women affected by violence, implementing measures to prevent violence and gender discrimination, and collecting and analysing data on gender-based violence both within and outside the family
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Sources #1–2 (Liczek, 2005); #3,5,6 (Kepderi, 2022); #4 (Government of Turkmenistan, 2019), #7 (Government of Turkmenistan, 2023)

integrated the subject “Basics of Life” since the 2007–2008 academic year, covering topics like healthy lifestyles, reproductive health, gender issues, and family life preparation and the Ministry of Education has established educational standards for reproductive health protection, incorporated in textbooks for grades 7 to 10. Conversely, disciplinary meetings across the country enforce strict dress codes and grooming standards for women and girls in public institutions, including schools and universities, with repercussions for non-compliance, including disciplinary measures and public shaming (Kepderi, 2022).

Uzbekistan

The cosmopolitan cities of Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand were traditional centres of Islamic learning during the pre-Soviet times. The Bolshevik's campaigns against religion and for women's emancipation faced fierce opposition in Uzbekistan, converting gender into a symbolic core of Uzbek national identity, as explained earlier. This historical context continues to impact gender relations in independent Uzbekistan.

Following Karimov's (1991–2016) tenure, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has prioritised legal, economic, and social reforms, ushering in positive transformations across various sectors of the economy and social sphere (ADB, 2018b). The government's initiatives have specifically aimed at enhancing women's social and political participation while strengthening their roles in governance, society, and the family. As a result, Uzbekistan has recently emerged as one of the five countries making significant strides in advancing gender equality (World Bank, 2024). Nevertheless, traditional views on women's roles in society continue to influence gender dynamics, creating barriers for women to access leadership positions and equal opportunities in various sectors (ADB, 2018b). The *mahalla*, a residential community with self-governing administrative functions that held substantial influence in Uzbekistan before, during, and after the Soviet era, is cited as a significant channel for perpetuating gender conservatism (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016). Despite legal protections and policy measures, violence against women remains a significant concern (Alieva, 2023). There is a lack of a consistent public message promoting zero tolerance for domestic violence, and state media persist in reinforcing gender inequality and stereotypes that imply women and girls need to be "controlled". This atmosphere supports a culture of violence and establishes a prevailing sense of impunity for offenders. Table 2.5 outlines key gender equality developments in the country.

GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS HINDERING GENDER POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

While Central Asia demonstrates relatively positive gender equality indicators (see Chapter 3), deeply entrenched social norms surrounding gender roles and status pose a significant challenge, leading to discrimination against women in society and education, ultimately hindering the implementation of gender equality policy (Erisheva, 2023; UNFPA,

Table 2.5 Key policies, initiatives and milestones addressing gender—Uzbekistan

1.	Founded in 1991 and designated as a government entity through a presidential decree in 1992, the Women’s Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan , with branches across the country, is responsible for steering and upholding the government’s focus on women’s status
2.	In March 1995, Uzbekistan passed the <i>decree Enhancing Women’s Role in State and Social Development</i> , creating a formal political structure including the Deputy Prime Minister for Women’s Affairs to promote and monitor women’s participation in society
3.	In 1997, the Women’s Committee developed and adopted the National Action Plan for the Improvement of the Status of Women of Uzbekistan
4.	The presidential decree declared 1999 the “Year of Women” to spotlight gender-related challenges hindering women’s societal participation
5.	In September 2019, the <i>Law On Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence</i> was passed to provide legal protection to women against all forms of discrimination
6.	Passed in 2019, <i>Law On Guarantees With Respect to Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men</i> was adopted to promote gender equality and address disparities between men and women in all walks of life
7.	In 2021, the presidential decree “ <i>On Additional Measures for the Rehabilitation of Women Victims of Violence</i> ” introduced a system of support and assistance for women surviving physical and psychological abuse
8.	In 2021, the <i>Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030</i> was passed to promote gender equality across social, economic, and political domains

Sources #1–4 (Mee, 2001); #5–6, 8 (Government of Uzbekistan, 2023); #7 (Makhmudova et al., 2023)

2022). Gender stereotypes regarding women’s political, educational, and economic equality and bodily integrity persist in Central Asia, surpassing global averages, as shown in Table 2.6. Cultural biases deeply ingrained in society fuel both structural and direct violence against women by implicitly condoning violence, shaping abusive behaviours, and making it challenging for women to seek help due to limited support systems and societal stigma (Childress et al., 2023).

On a positive note, UNFPA’s (2022) research indicates that except for Tajikistan, national policy documents in all countries outline strategies to challenge harmful gender norms. Although these plans often lack a specific focus on engaging men and boys, except in areas like fatherhood, campaigns on healthy boyhood have been launched in the region with

Table 2.6 Gender social norms index values

Country	<i>Percentage of people biased by dimension</i>							
	<i>Political</i>		<i>Educational</i>		<i>Economic</i>		<i>Physical Integrity</i>	
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
#Kazakhstan	62.82	75.29	25.41	32.56	60.84	72.61	67.90	78.48
#Kyrgyzstan	77.54	80.91	48.04	58.94	81.40	86.64	88.53	92.96
#Tajikistan	74.59	82.15	47.36	56.06	71.29	85.02	98.35	96.63
@Uzbekistan	76.23	86.06	44.35	56.42	77.55	86.82	80.85	89.45
*World average	57.34	65.07	24.93	31.23	54.50	64.74	73.36	76.23

Source Prepared from UNDP (2023) Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality

* Based on 80 countries with data from wave 6 (2010–2014) or wave 7 (2017–2022) of the World Values Survey

#Period: 2017–2022

@Period: 2010–2014

Data for Turkmenistan is not available

Physical integrity is a proxy indicator for intimate partner violence

the collaborations of community leaders such as male religious figures. While integrating subjects like sex or relationship education into the school curriculum can help foster positive gender norms in the region, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are yet to provide comprehensive sexuality education programmes in schools (Ketting et al., 2021), and teachers are unprepared to teach the subject effectively (Zhuravleva & Helmer, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has comparatively analysed historical and contemporary gender policies in Central Asia and has illuminated how historical legacies, nation-building agendas, ethnic cultures, national economies, political stability and democratic structure, and global influences shape the current gender policy landscapes in the region. Overall, the chapter highlights a favourable policy climate in these emerging nations, which strive for modernisation, legitimacy, and national distinctiveness by imagining idealised femininities and masculinities. Despite a strong performance in gender equality indicators compared to global standards, persistent gendered norms present obstacles to translating policies into desired

outcomes. Central Asia, like other post-colonial countries (Dunne et al., 2020), illustrates the symbolic role of women in national distinction, reinforcing the dominance of masculinity in public and private spheres.

Educational institutions can drive a shift in gender norms by emphasising gender equality in their content, processes, and structures. While change may be gradual, it requires supportive policies across various sectors of the state (Durrani & Halai, 2018). Gender-transformative initiatives are pivotal in Central Asia to challenge entrenched norms and envision more egalitarian societies (UNFPA, 2022). Shifting from the Soviet emphasis on “women’s” issues and, involving men as key stakeholders in gender equality efforts appears crucial. Additionally, gender equality approaches based on universalised interventions for women’s empowerment, especially those solely targeting women, might not be suitable for post-colonial contexts where women remain crucial to national identity (Dunne et al., 2020). While progress has been made in engaging men in gender initiatives, further research is needed to develop context-specific approaches. Sharing experiences and insights among countries in the region can enhance efforts to advance gender equality.

The lack of academic literature on gender equality policies and initiatives in education underscores the need for further research across the region, specifically in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Future studies should offer fine-grained analyses of the drivers, initiatives, and enactment of gender equality policies within the education sector. This nuanced exploration is essential for illuminating the processes of transformation and reproduction, emphasising the significance of education as a tool for advancing gender equality.

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