

The impact of reforms and neoliberal policies on gender equity in Uzbekistan's higher education

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the impact of Uzbekistan's reforms and neoliberal policies since 2017, particularly on gender equity in higher education institutions (HEIs). Through semi-structured interviews with 32 key stakeholders, the research highlights increased female enrolment and participation, with notable growth in female doctoral students, mainly due to government interventions like quotas and financial support. However, persistent challenges such as gender biases, work-life balance issues, and underrepresentation in leadership continue to affect women's academic careers. Despite policy advancements, structural inequalities remain, limiting women's opportunities for professional growth. This research contributes to understanding the intersection of gender and neoliberal reforms in Uzbekistan's higher education landscape. It emphasizes the need for further policy and cultural shifts to address ongoing gender disparities.

KEYWORDS: Gender equity, higher education reforms, neoliberal policies, Uzbekistan, female leadership, academic careers, barriers to gender equality, performance-based evaluations

1. INTRODUCTION

The political transition in Uzbekistan following the death of President Islam Karimov in 2016 marked a historical moment, bringing in a wave of neoliberal reforms in several sectors, including higher education (Muratov & Wilkins, 2024). These changes, which incorporate market-driven principles, the establishment of private higher edu-

tion institutions (HEIs), and performance-based assessment systems, have drastically impacted Uzbekistan's higher education setting. In 2017, Uzbekistan's gross enrolment ratio was relatively low compared to other former Soviet Union countries, at 9%, ranking among the lowest in the Central Asian region (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018; Ubaydullaeva, 2021). By 2023, the gross enrolment ratio in higher education had jumped to 42%, with 1.2 million active students. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are seeing a similar pattern of development. In 2012, Uzbekistan had 64 HEIs, with 58 being state-owned, 6 being foreign university branches, and no private universities. Following the reforms introduced in 2017, the first private university was founded in 2018. By 2022, the number of HEIs in Uzbekistan had risen to 191, including 123 state-owned HEIs, 26 foreign university branches, and 42 private HEIs (Agency of Statistics, 2024). This shift is consistent with worldwide higher education trends prioritizing competitiveness, efficiency, and internationalization (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

However, these shifts bring serious concerns regarding their impact on gender equity, especially in a post-Soviet setting where centralized power and patriarchal norms continue to define social and academic institutions (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; Kataeva, 2022). Gender equity in higher education remains a global challenge, with women encountering systematic obstacles to enrollment, career advancement, and leadership representation (West et al., 2013; Duch et al., 2013). In Central Asia, these problems are further complicated by cultural expectations that stress traditional gender roles, restricting women's access to and success in academia.

This study examines the interplay between neoliberal reforms and gender equity in Uzbekistan's HEIs, addressing five research questions: (1) How have reforms since 2017 influenced gender equity? (2) What barriers to gender equity persist? (3) How have reforms impacted female enrolment and participation? (4) To what extent have policies addressed gender equity in leadership roles? (5) How do gender-specific outcomes compare pre- and post-reforms? Drawing on qualitative interviews with 32 stakeholders across diverse HEIs, this research illuminates the nuanced effects of policy changes, situating findings within global and regional literature on gender and education. It contributes to the discourse on gender equity in post-socialist contexts, advocating for a balanced approach that integrates policy innovation with cultural transformation. The study also explores the broader social implications of these reforms, such as their impact on reducing early marriages, highlighting the transformative potential of education for women in Uzbekistan (Rasmussen et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2024).

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review focusing on gender in higher education. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 discusses the outcome. The final section concludes the study by summarizing the key findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. GENDER EQUITY IN GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Globally, women in academia face systemic barriers, including gender biases, limited access to mentorship, and challenges in achieving work-life balance (Metcalfe, 2006; Vongalis-Macrow, 2016; Smidt et al., 2021). Fotaki (2013) argues that academic institutions' "masculine symbolic order" marginalizes women, limiting their access to leadership roles and high-impact research opportunities. This is especially obvious in STEM fields, where women are underrepresented due to entrenched stereotypes and insufficient early-career support (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020). Neoliberal policies, which prioritize performance metrics such as publications and funding acquisition, often complicate these issues by demanding significant time and resources, which women, burdened by domestic responsibilities, may struggle to allocate (Górska, 2023; Lund & Tienari, 2019). Niyozov, Tahir, and Silova (2020) argue that educational reforms in Central Asia have shifted the region's systems toward global market standards—such as international accreditation, privatization, and performance metrics—often ignoring local social contexts and equity needs. Brue (2018) argues that work-life balance issues negatively affect female academics, restricting their career advancement. Similarly, Spoon et al. (2023) observed that gender gaps in faculty retention in the United States result from uneven workloads and institutional prejudices, emphasizing the need for structural changes. Morley (2013) emphasizes implicit bias against women in management positions. Bendraou and Sakale (2024) underline the need for critical pedagogy in examining gender stereotypes in Moroccan educational settings, which might help Uzbekistan develop more inclusive academic environments. Nascimento Rocha et al. (2024) highlight the relevance of intersectional approaches to diversity and inclusion, arguing that policies must examine different dimensions of identity in order to produce equal results.

2.2. GENDER EQUITY IN POST-SOVIET CONTEXTS OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

In post-Soviet countries, gender equity in higher education is affected by the conflict between socialist legacies and neoliberal reforms. Under socialism, gender equality was ideologically propagated, with state support encouraging women's education and workforce participation (Kataeva & DeYoung, 2017). However, cultural norms frequently undermined these initiatives by maintaining traditional gender roles. The transition to neoliberal models in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan has resulted in market-driven reforms that have increased institutional autonomy while at the same time intensifying gender inequities (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017). Kataeva (2022) reported that female faculty in Tajikistan face significant barriers in navigating STEM careers due to societal expectations and limited institutional support. This pattern is also seen in Kazakhstan (CohenMiller et al., 2021). Studies on gender equity in higher education and

STEM fields have been conducted in the case of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan by different scholars (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; Kataeva & DeYoung, 2017; Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020; CohenMiller et al., 2021; CohenMiller et al., 2022; Kataeva, 2022). In contrast, gender-focused research in Uzbekistan's higher education system remains limited.

2.3. GENDER EQUITY IN UZBEKISTAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION

In Uzbekistan, research on gender equity in higher education is limited, with most studies focusing on broader educational reforms, capacity building (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018; Ruziev & Mamasolieva, 2022), internationalization (Uralov, 2020; Ubaydullaeva, 2020; Muratov & Wilkins, 2024), and the securitization of higher education (Ubaydullaeva, 2021). HEI in Uzbekistan as a whole country was under an authoritarian regime, where strict centralized control limits academic freedom, and education is used as a tool for political and ideological conformity (Ubaydullaeva, 2021). After changing the government in 2016, a new neoliberal approach to HEI was introduced.

Allowing the establishment of private universities, promoting free-market principles, competition, and efficiency. This has facilitated alignment with international market standards (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2015) and aimed at enhancing recognition in prestigious global ranking systems, such as Times Higher Education, QS, and Shanghai Rankings (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Marginson & Wende, 2007). Students, teachers, researchers, and administration of HEI had to deal with new realities of academia, such as focusing on performance metrics, profitability, and competition for students and funding, prioritizing individualism and access based on personal accomplishment and employability (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Ball, 2012; Van der Lee & Ellemers, 2018; Parker et al., 2023).

Even though neoliberal policies were introduced, the top-down approach still exists due to past dependency (Mahoney & Schensul, 2006). Gender equality was ideologically pushed under socialism, with women actively encouraged to pursue education and professional careers, which were promoted by government-provided free education and social benefits. Yet, actual gender equality had not been achieved. In the post-socialist era, introducing neoliberal reforms has created new obstacles for women in academia. These changes, emphasizing market-driven targets and competitiveness, have often worsened existing gender inequities, creating structural barriers to women's development in academic fields (Górska, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research, with expert interviews being the primary data-collecting tool. Expert interviews, which are commonly employed in policy and management research (Littig, 2009), were chosen for their suitability in exploring nuanced in-

sights. The study followed the, Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' issued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), assuring complete confidentiality and anonymity for participants. Consequently, when presenting interview excerpts in the Findings section, only the participant's gender, job category, and regional affiliation are disclosed to maintain privacy.

A total of 32 expert interviews were conducted over one month, encompassing 27 HEIs across nine regions of Uzbekistan. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity across roles (faculty members and administrators), regions (9 regions out of 12), and institution type (state-run, private, and foreign university branches), capturing a broad range of perspectives. To ensure a balanced representation, 50% of interviewees were from state-run HEIs, 28% from private HEIs, and 22% from foreign university branches. Among the participants, 8 were Rectors or Vice-Rectors, 6 were Deans, 11 were department heads, and 7 were assistant professors. The gender distribution among responders was 31% female and 69% male. Interviews took place via Zoom technology and lasted an average of 65 minutes. Participants were questioned in Uzbek, Russian, or English depending on their language preference. The interview questions were designed to explore higher education reforms, including gender equity, with minor variations based on participants' roles and gender. Additional questions were asked of female respondents to get more gender-specific information. The semi-structured style allowed experts to provide extra information where they felt it was necessary (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Data saturation was achieved after 32 interviews, as no new themes emerged, indicating theoretical sufficiency.

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and labeling themes, and (6) producing the report. Transcripts were manually coded to identify patterns relating to the study topics, using multiple coding cycles to ensure accuracy. Secondary data, including policy papers, ministry statistics, and academic publications, were used to contextualize findings and improve the validity of the research through triangulation.

4. FINDINGS

The findings respond to the five study objectives by keeping respondents' essential messages while improving interpretative concepts to meet academic standards.

4.1. INFLUENCE OF NEOLIBERAL REFORMS ON GENDER EQUITY

Neoliberal reforms, including annual employment contracts and performance-based evaluations, have reshaped academic work in Uzbekistan. Before the implementation of educational reforms, academic staff in Uzbekistan were required to undergo accredi-

tation every five years. This system allowed faculty members to focus primarily on preparing for this periodic assessment, with minimal concern regarding job security in the interim. However, annual employment contracts were introduced following the reforms, contingent upon performance evaluation through a “110-point evaluation system” in state HEIs or Key Performance Indicators (KPI) in private HEIs. This system assesses teachers’ performance across four key areas: 1) Educational and methodological activities (40 points), 2) Scientific and research work (30 points), 3) Spiritual and social contributions (20 points), and 4) Innovation and investment, which refer to contributions to the development of higher education institutions (20 points). This shift changed the nature of academic employment, emphasizing publications and the commercialization of outcomes. This increases pressure on academics, especially women, who struggle to balance teaching, research, and family responsibilities.

The system demands international publications, but teachers, especially women, struggle with time. We balance teaching, administrative tasks, and family responsibilities, leaving little room for research. (Female, Head of department, Tashkent)

This reflects the disproportionate burden on women.

The KPI system pushes academics to publish more, but women often lack the support to meet these demands, especially with family obligations. (Female, Dean, Namangan)

Government initiatives have driven progress in addressing gender gaps.

The KPI system encourages educators to increase their publications and prioritize career development. Previously, the number of female students pursuing advanced degrees such as PhDs or DScs was relatively low, but this trend is now shifting upward. The government has introduced additional quotas and privileges to support female applicants. For many female teachers, whose “glass ceiling” limited them to positions without advanced degrees, the realization has set in that pursuing higher qualifications is essential to remain competitive. In the face of growing competition, those who do not take advantage of these opportunities risk losing even their current roles. (Female, Dean, Namangan)

Over the past decade, the number of doctoral students in Uzbekistan has increased by 460%, from 1,249 students in 2012 to 5,747 in 2022. Notably, the proportion of female postgraduate students has also grown, reflecting a shift toward gender parity. While the male-to-female ratio of doctoral students averaged 63% to 37% in the previous decade, by 2022, this had improved to 59% male and 41% female. This increase is partly attributed to government initiatives, including Presidential Decree No. PF-87 allocates an additional targeted quota of at least 300 spots for women to pursue doctoral studies at state scientific organizations or higher education institutions. Additionally, the decree

mandates the coverage of tuition fees for all women pursuing master's degrees at state universities, with an annual budget of 200 billion sums (equivalent to 17.7 million USD at the 2022 exchange rate). Furthermore, the "El-Yurt Umid" fund provides an additional 50 scholarships for women to pursue bachelor's degrees and 10 for master's degrees at foreign HEIs, enhancing opportunities for female academics to study abroad and further their careers.

The reforms have opened doors for women, but the evaluation systems don't account for the extra challenges they face at home. (Female, Head of Department, Termiz)

These insights underscore the dual impact of reforms: while policies promote access, structural demands exacerbate existing inequalities.

4.2. PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO GENDER EQUITY

Cultural and institutional barriers continue to impede gender equity.

As a university rector, I occasionally encounter challenges working with male colleagues. It appears that some of them are uncomfortable with female leadership. Although the hierarchical structure prevents them from expressing their views openly, their discomfort becomes evident through subtle reactions and behavior. (Female, Rector, Tashkent)

This is an implicit bias against women in leadership roles. Work-life balance remains a significant challenge, particularly for senior positions.

It is evident that balancing work and family life becomes particularly challenging for women in senior leadership positions, especially for those holding roles such as dean or higher. Senior administrators often work late into the evening and may be required to work on weekends when necessary. Additionally, they are sometimes tasked with unusual duties, such as conducting night inspections of buildings or dormitories during the winter months to ensure there are no issues, such as water leaks or problems with the heating system. (Male, Vice Rector, Urganch)

Another example can be the experience of a female vice-rector in Tashkent.

I often work late, which conflicts with family expectations. It's exhausting, and I worry about burnout. (Female, Vice-rector, Tashkent)

Traditional attitudes also hinder female enrolment, especially in rural areas.

Traditional parental attitudes pose a significant challenge to women's higher education. Since most universities are located in the capital or regional centers, some parents are reluctant to send their daughters to study in another city. In-

stead, they prefer to marry them off and have them assume the role of housewives. These parents fail to recognize that an educated mother is essential for raising a well-educated child, underscoring the broader societal benefits of supporting women's education. (Male, Head of department, Nukus)

UNICEF (2020) corroborates this, with 20.8% of female respondents citing parental opposition as a barrier, compared to 12.1% of males.

Rural families often consider education less important for girls because of their financial situation. If they have enough money, they will prioritize their sons' education, thinking that he will be the future breadwinner of the family, while girls will leave the family after getting married. (Male, Vice Rector, Urganch)

These examples illustrate that a top-down approach alone cannot address the existing challenges. In addition to policy reforms, there must be a broader transformation in social norms and societal perspectives to fully support the education and empowerment of girls and women. A cultural shift is needed to encourage greater acceptance and encouragement of women's educational and professional aspirations.

4.3. IMPACT ON FEMALE ENROLMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Several measures have been introduced to enhance support for girls and women. These initiatives include targeted privileges such as dedicated quotas for women with professional experience, financial assistance for women from disadvantaged backgrounds, tax exemptions on tuition fees, and access to interest-free loans for educational expenses.

Government reforms support the advancement of girls and women, providing them with various benefits and opportunities. For instance, A quota of 500 positions has been established for women with at least five years of professional experience. Additionally, 2,000 state grants have been allocated specifically for women from low-income families. Regardless of the source of tuition payment, female university students have contract fees exempt from income tax. Furthermore, 1.8 trillion (approximately 160 million USD at the 2022 exchange rate) is allocated annually from the national budget to banks to provide seven-year, interest-free loans to cover tuition fees for female students. (Male, Vice Rector, Angren)

In 2012, the gender distribution of students in higher education institutions showed a male-to-female ratio of 63.3% to 36.7% at the undergraduate level and 68.7% to 31.3% at the master's level. By 2022, these figures shifted significantly, with the undergraduate ratio changing to 52.7% male and 47.3% female and the master's degree ratio reaching 47.2% male and 52.8% female (Agency of Statistics, 2024). This marked the first instance in the past decade where the proportion of women surpassed that of men at the master's level. The increase in female enrollment, particularly at the master's level, can be

attributed to government initiatives, including covering tuition fees for female students pursuing master's degrees.

Recent policies have made higher education a viable option for women from disadvantaged backgrounds, transforming their prospects. (Male, Rector, Jizzakh)

These insights reflect the transformative impact of targeted financial and policy support on female participation. Adopting recent laws and presidential decrees in Uzbekistan marks a significant step toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality. Notable examples include the resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-5020 "On measures for further enhancement of the system of support and ensuring active participation of women in the life of society," issued on March 5, 2021; Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PF-87 "On measures to further accelerate the work on systemic support for families and women," issued on March 7, 2022; resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 145 "On measures to further improve the system of studying and solving women's problems" issued on March 31, 2022.

4.4. GENDER EQUITY IN LEADERSHIP ROLES

In Uzbekistan, only 10 higher education institutions (HEIs), or 4.7% of the total, are led by female rectors. This represents a relatively low proportion. In contrast, nearly a quarter (48 out of 200) of the top universities globally, as ranked by Times Higher Education, are headed by women (KUN.UZ, 2023).

It will take time to significantly increase the number of women in leadership roles within higher education institutions. Currently, there are relatively few female rectors, vice-rectors, or deans, and those who hold these positions tend to be concentrated in traditionally female-dominated fields such as medicine, linguistics, or pedagogy. (Female, Dean, Tashkent)

Cultural attitudes exacerbate this disparity, as a female department head in Termiz stated:

While several government decrees and resolutions aim to address gender equity in leadership positions, I have a doubt that without changes in societal stereotypes and conservative cultural attitudes, top-down policies alone may not achieve the desired outcomes. (Female, Head of Department, Termiz)

Family support is critical for women in leadership, as a female rector in Tashkent emphasized:

My mother-in-law's support allows me to succeed. Family backing is everything. (Female, Rector, Tashkent)

A female vice-rector in Tashkent made a similar statement.

Occasionally, my husband expresses reproach with remarks such as, “Thank goodness you made it home; I was concerned you might remain at the university.” Nevertheless, I am grateful to my husband for his support and patience. (Female, Vice-rector, Tashkent)

It is common in Uzbekistan for people to live in a big family where grandparents live with their children and grandchildren. In a traditional Eastern culture, the bride’s relationship with her mother-in-law is significant. These responses highlight the interplay of institutional and cultural factors limiting women’s leadership opportunities.

4.5. GENDER-SPECIFIC OUTCOMES PRE- AND POST-REFORMS

Reforms have improved access to education, with significant social impacts, including reduced early marriages. A male rector in Jizzakh observed:

Scholarships enable girls from low-income families to study, reducing pressure for early marriage. (Male, Rector, Jizzakh)

An increasing number of girls and women are pursuing higher education, facilitated by targeted scholarships and financial support from the government. This broader access to higher education has also contributed to a reduction in early marriages in Uzbekistan. UNICEF defines early marriage as a formal or informal union involving individuals under 18. According to the organization’s most recent data, approximately 650 million women worldwide are married before age 18 (UNICEF, 2023). In Uzbekistan, the legal minimum age for marriage has been 18 years for both men and women since 2019; previously, it was 17 for women and 18 for men. To provide a comparative perspective, it is noteworthy that in 2012 there were 7,839 recorded instances of early marriage throughout the Republic. By 2022, this number had significantly decreased to 74 (Agency of Statistics, 2024).

Support for student mothers is also emerging, with a female rector in Tashkent proposing:

We have many graduate or doctoral students with small children. Despite their family responsibilities, these students remain highly motivated to pursue their studies and research. To better support them, we propose establishing a dedicated mother-and-child room within the institute, acknowledging that a significant portion of our student population comprises married individuals with young children. (Female, Rector, Tashkent)

A female assistant professor in Tashkent noted:

Access to education has empowered women to delay marriage and pursue ca-

reers, giving us more choices.

Though cultural challenges persist, these outcomes underscore the broader societal benefits of educational access for women.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. ENROLLMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The significant increase in female enrollment (increased from 36.7% in 2012 to 47.3% in 2022 undergraduate, from 31.3% in 2012 to 47.2% in 2022 at the master's degree) aligns with trends in post-Soviet states such as Kazakhstan, where targeted policies have enhanced women's access to higher education (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017). Government quotas, scholarships, and tuition exemptions were among the policy actions that significantly increased female enrollment. The unprecedented surpassing of male enrollment at the master's level is a distinctive outcome in Uzbekistan, likely driven by tuition coverage for female students, a policy less standard in other post-Soviet contexts (Kataeva, 2022). The drastic increase in female enrollment at the master's level is a distinctive outcome in Uzbekistan, most likely driven by tuition coverage for female students. This policy is less common in other post-Soviet contexts (Kataeva, 2022). However, the persistence of parental opposition, particularly in countryside areas, is consistent with Bendraou and Sakale's (2024) and Offiong's (2019) observations in Morocco and Nigeria, where cultural norms limit girls' educational opportunities. This suggests that policy interventions must be complemented by initiatives to shift societal attitudes, as emphasized by UNICEF (2023). The efficacy of financial incentives, such as interest-free loans, is consistent with Rasmussen et al.'s (2019) results on the economic advantages of educational access, which emphasize their importance in lowering financial barriers for women.

5.2. DOCTORAL PARTICIPATION

The rise in female doctoral students from 37% in 2012 to 41% in 2022 (Agency of Statistics, 2024) reflects the effectiveness of targeted quotas, in line with Kataeva's (2022) findings in Tajikistan, where the government supports increased women's participation in advanced degrees. However, the persistent gender gap (59% male) underscores existing challenges, aligning with Górska's (2023) analysis of time constraints faced by women in Central and Eastern Europe. As noted by interviewees, the "110-point evaluation system" and KPIs worsen these challenges by prioritizing research output, which is consistent with Lund and Tienari's (2019) finding. In contrast to Kazakhstan, which has mentorship programs for female academics (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020), Uzbekistan lacks similar initiatives, revealing a crucial policy gap.

5.3. LEADERSHIP REPRESENTATION

Neoliberal reforms in Uzbekistan, while increasing female access in HEI, have still failed to achieve structural inequalities, as seen in the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Comparisons with other post-Soviet states, such as Kyrgyzstan, reveal similar patterns where neoliberal agendas have prioritized marketization over equity (Shadyanova & Amsler, 2018). The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (4.7% of rectors) is consistent with global trends (Smidt et al., 2021; Giglia & Smith, 2024; Vongalis-Macrow, 2016) and regional findings in Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017). Implicit bias, as reported by female rectors, is in line with Morley's (2013) analysis of resistance to female leadership in higher education. The majority of female leaders in "feminized" professions, such as education, is consistent with findings in Tajikistan (Kataeva & DeYoung, 2017). This fact illustrates that cultural norms continue to impact leadership's future possibilities. In contrast to Morocco, where institutional reforms have been proposed to support women leaders (Bendraou & Sakale, 2024), Uzbekistan's HEIs lack such measures, limiting growth. Smidt et al.'s (2021) demand for disrupting gendered discourses in academia is also relevant in the case of Uzbekistan. Policymakers must also implement reforms that include targeted mentoring to help women in leadership positions. Nascimento Rocha et al.'s (2024) intersectional approach further emphasizes the need to consider cultural and familial dynamics in leadership development programs.

5.4. WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance challenges, particularly for women in leadership, resonate with Brue's (2018) findings on the disproportionate impact of academic demands on women. The expectation for senior administrators to handle irregular tasks, such as dormitory inspections, which the vice-rector in Urganch mentioned, may exacerbate these challenges. Uzbekistan's HEIs lack flexible work policies for women, hindering women's career progression (Metcalfe, 2006; Fotaki, 2013; Vongalis-Macrow, 2016; Spoon, 2023). CohenMiller et al.'s (2022) focus on supporting mother scholars offers a potential model, suggesting that facilities like mother-and-child rooms could alleviate pressures on female students and faculty.

5.5. SOCIAL IMPACTS

The dramatic reduction in early marriages (from 7,839 to 74 between 2012 and 2022) reflects the broader social benefits of educational access, consistent with Rasmussen et al. (2019) and Khan et al. (2024), who link education to delayed marriage and improved economic outcomes. Uzbekistan's progress highlights the efficacy of financial support mechanisms, such as scholarships and loans, in mitigating economic barriers.

While quotas and grants have clearly increased female enrollment, a more critical perspective highlights possible conflicts in neoliberal approaches to gender equity. For example, adopting performance measures (KPIs) in a neoliberal framework, although fostering meritocracy, can disproportionately burden women, particularly those handling care obligations or dealing with pre-existing systemic inequalities. This raises concerns regarding the long-term viability and actual empowering potential of measures that may unintentionally maintain gendered divisions of work or result in a 'symbolic' rather than a substantial shift toward fairness. As Baranowski (2020) criticizes, neoliberal commodification of higher education should not increase social gaps between groups. Therefore, these issues should be considered when implementing neoliberal reforms and social initiatives.

The findings emphasize the need for a multifaceted strategy combining policy innovation and cultural transformation. While quotas and financial assistance have been beneficial in increasing enrollment and doctoral involvement, institutional reforms such as mentoring programs and flexible work arrangements are essential for addressing leadership inequities and work-life balance issues.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the situation of gender equality in Uzbekistan's higher education system, focusing on enrollment rates, doctorate participation, leadership representation, work-life balance, and the broader societal implications of educational access. The findings demonstrate significant success in expanding female enrollment at both the undergraduate and master's levels, primarily due to specific government initiatives such as quotas, scholarships, and tuition exemptions. Notably, female enrollment has overtaken male enrollment at the master's level, a distinctive outcome in the post-Soviet context, primarily attributed to tuition coverage for female students. These achievements are consistent with patterns seen in other post-Soviet republics, where government interventions have significantly increased women's access to higher education.

Despite such successes, significant challenges remain, notably regarding doctoral participation and leadership representation. The number of female PhD students has increased from 37% in 2012 to 41% in 2022, although a gender disparity persists, with males accounting for 59% of doctoral applicants. This disparity is consistent with regional analyses highlighting time constraints and systemic barriers for women. Furthermore, women hold just 4.7% of rector positions, emphasizing their underrepresentation in leadership roles. This finding is consistent with global and regional research that has identified cultural norms, unconscious bias, and a lack of institutional support, such as mentorship programs, as major obstacles. Interviewee reports and prior research show that a lack of flexible work regulations exacerbates work-life balance issues for women in academia, particularly those in leadership positions. Implementing concepts like CohenMiller et

al. (2022) “mother-and-child rooms” could reduce pressures while following global best practices. Meanwhile, the significant decrease in early marriages (from 7,839 to 74 cases, 2012-2022) demonstrates education’s societal ripple effects, supporting Rasmussen et al. (2019)’s claim that financial assistance mechanisms directly increase women’s autonomy and postpone familial obligations.

The findings highlight the need for a diversified strategy to achieve full gender equity in higher education. While financial incentives and quotas have helped increase enrollment, resolving leadership gaps and work-life balance difficulties will require extensive institutional shifts. These include mentorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and focused leadership development initiatives. Furthermore, cultural change actions, such as education and awareness campaigns, are essential for overcoming social obstacles. Future studies could investigate the long-term effects of these policies on women’s career advancement and leadership opportunities in Uzbekistan’s higher education sector. Comparative studies with other Central Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan, may give helpful information about the efficacy of various policy measures.

To promote long-term gender parity, governments should not only target quantitative objectives (such as enrollment quotas) but also qualitative structural and cultural adjustments. Recommendations include:

- (i) Reforming Performance Metrics: Re-evaluate Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to ensure they do not inadvertently penalize women or encourage gender stereotypes. This might include measures that recognize many types of academic contribution (e.g., mentorship, community engagement) and enable flexible working arrangements to facilitate work-life balance for all academics, particularly women.
- (ii) Targeted Leadership Development: Implement organized mentoring programs and leadership training for women, clear promotion tracks, and transparent leadership selection processes. This necessitates allocating specialized financial resources for program creation and execution, such as grants or re-assigned institutional funds.
- (iii) Ensuring Financial Sustainability of Support Programs: Evaluate the long-term viability of present financial support mechanisms (for example, scholarships and stipends for female master’s and PhD students). Furthermore, assessing the initiative’s results in terms of resource allocation efficiency.

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