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# Contents

**Turkmenistan's Quest for Energy Market Stability:  
Navigating Export Route Diversification**

*Ms. Akanksha Meena*

1-14

**Russia in Transition:  
A Study of Economic Reforms**

*Dr. Raj Yadav*

15-31

**Interactions of Deported Meskhetian Turks with  
Jews and Koryo-Saram in Uzbekistan**

*Fahri Türk*

*Prof. Dolunay Yusuf Balturk*

32-50

**India – Turkish World Cultural Relations:  
History, Heritage and Possibilities<sup>1</sup>**

*Prof. Dr. Akhlaque A. 'Ahan'*

51-57

**Studying Nagas of Kashmir:  
An inquiry into place names**

*Dr. Afaq Aziz*

58-78

**New Dynamics of India-Uzbekistan's Economic Relations**

*Dr. Govind Kumar Inakhiya*

79-88

**Media in Kazakhstan:**

**Between Democratic Emancipation and In-built Authoritarianism**

*Dr. Shazia Majid*

89-100

**China-Kazakhstan Relations:**

**An Analysis of Kazakhstani People's Perception of  
Belt and Road Initiative**

*Arfat Ahmad Bhat*

*Dr. Abdul Maajid Dar*

101-113

**Barriers and Bias:**

**An Overview of the Status of Women in Central Asia**

*Dr. Bilal Ahmad Dada*

114-121

**Social Adaptation and Resilience in Social Orphans of Kyrgyzstan:**

**A Systematic Review of Effective Strategies and Practices.**

*Irfan Ahmad Hajam*

122-135

**China-Pakistan Economic Corridor:**

**A New Great Game in South Asia**

*Abdul Hamid Sheikh*

136-149

# **Barriers and Bias: An Overview of the Status of Women in Central Asia**

*Bilal Ahmad Dada*

## **Abstract**

*Women's daily experiences in Central Asia are not frequently reflected in laws about equal rights and opportunities for men and women. In the region, many countries lack efficient systems to keep an eye on the application of national legislation promoting gender equality and human rights treaties. Certain governments overlook the established connections between gender disparity and public policy and economic and social development issues. On average, women make up almost 80% of what males do worldwide. However, in Central Asia, the disparity is more pronounced. In Tajikistan, it is 61%; in Uzbekistan, it is 75%; in the Kyrgyz Republic, it is 78%; and in Kazakhstan, working women make up around 60% of what males do. Throughout Central Asia, there is a trend of low pay and low employment rates among women, which immediately shrinks the economies of the region and raises the poverty rate. It has been surveyed in Central Asia that national income would vary from 27% in Kazakhstan to 63% in Tajikistan if women participated in the same proportion as men. Raising the average salary of working-age women and men in Uzbekistan would lift almost 700,000 people out of poverty. Nations with more gender equality also tend to expand quickly and have substantially higher per capita national incomes. This paper examines how these potential economic benefits are massive in Central Asia and what measures are needed in the region to achieve them. It attempts to address the question as why achieving true gender equality remains a major challenge in Central Asia, even though legal protections in the region are generally strong and women are relatively well-represented in secondary education and the workforce.*

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, Women, Political Participation, Gender Disparity, Education, Development, Soviet Union, Religion*

## **Introduction**

Gender equality has long been a goal of nations in regions like Central Asia and Europe. However, there have been significant gender-related effects caused by three decades of unparalleled political, economic, and social transformations, which differ

nation by nation. Gender gaps continue in earnings and labor force participation (“Gender equality in Europe and Central Asia”, 2022). In Central Asia, for men, the labor force participation rate is 66%, while for women it is 50.6%. Women face many obstacles, such as the lack of quality and affordable childcare and access to safe transport, social pressure to adhere to gender-related norms and roles, and the dual burden of professional and household work. The gender salary gap is around 30% (“Gender equality in Europe and Central Asia”, 2022). In addition, there are other constraints, such as women’s limited access to markets, information, financial services, and assets, that prevent women from holding top business management positions and contribute to low female entrepreneurship. For the World Bank, the main developmental priority is to assist the Central Asian countries in achieving their full economic potential by empowering women through support to female entrepreneurs and business leaders (“Gender equality in Europe and Central Asia”, 2022).

One of the various forms of living that existed and continues to exist along the Silk Roads is Nomadism. An important role in the cultural exchanges that took place along these historic routes was played by the nomads of Central Asia. The nomadic communities that inhabited the regions of modern Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan had highly specific social systems centered on pasturing herds across vast stretches of desert and grassland and traveling very large distances on horseback (“Did you know?”, 2018). Throughout Central Asia, they coexisted with sedentary inhabitants dispersed across areas of cultivated land in oases and river valleys.

In Central Asian nomadic societies, women were actively engaged in a wide variety of tasks like nurturing and rearing children, housework, crafting, riding, and setting up and taking down tents. Furthermore, they were well-known for handling household matters like purchasing or selling the family’s livestock. Moreover, at community meetings, women’s opinions and views were often considered, particularly when it came to matters of common interest. In the steppes, women used to participate in a variety of sporting and cultural events and rode freely in the steppes (“Did you know?”, 2018). However, there were many restrictions imposed by men upon the roles women held within Central Asian nomadic societies. These restrictions were justified by associating them with religion. Thus, from the 18th century, the gender stereotypes rooted in both religious and cultural beliefs and practices led to the worst form of female subordination in the Central Asian region.

## **Women in Post-Soviet Central Asia**

The women in the Central Asian region experienced unprecedented changes when the region was made a part of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Women were viewed as an

oppressed class throughout the Soviet era, and the state's primary objective was to free them and bring them up to parity with males in all aspects of society, including the legal, economic, social, and political ones (Ulugova, 2020). Against the backdrop of the Soviet state's introduction of equality before the law, equal gender rights, and quotas in public institutions, Central Asian women stopped to wear 'paranja', an Islamic dress covering a woman from head to toe, female education got momentum, and many inegalitarian socio-religious customs and practices responsible for women subordination were challenged ("Women and power", 2006). However, the rights acquired by women and the positive social, economic, and political changes that occurred during the Soviet era began losing ground after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the structures of post-Central Asian republics, the traditional gender stereotypes came back again. As a result, gender stereotypes rooted in both religious traditions and lifestyles continue to prevent Central Asian women from participating in and pursuing careers in business, politics, sports, and many other fields ("Women and power", 2006). In Central Asia, many families have deeply prescribed gender norms and roles. Women are subservient, and abuse and violence from in-laws and husbands are regular occurrences in their lives. In addition to the burden of stereotypes, Central Asian women are also burdened with economic hardships, including poverty and unemployment. Many women have become the sole breadwinner for their families. In some cases, this has encouraged women to do jobs in business, a domain in which, so far, women have progressed more than politics ("Women and power", 2006). Historically, in Central Asian States, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, women have been active in politics. However, following the 2005 parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan and the subsequent revolution that overthrew President Askar Akaev, no single woman assumed a key government position and took up a parliamentary seat. Human rights activist Kerez Japakbaeva from Kyrgyzstan points out that three out of sixteen cabinet ministers were women under the government of Akaev. But she claims that the newly elected all-male parliament 'voted them all out' after 2005 ("Women and power", 2006). Before the country's legislative elections in December 2004, Uzbekistan introduced a 30 % gender quota. However, some impartial observers see this step as a 'formality' devised to mollify the global community without giving women a proportional voice in decision-making and public policy formulation. As Uzbek women's rights activist Marfua Tokhtahojeva states:

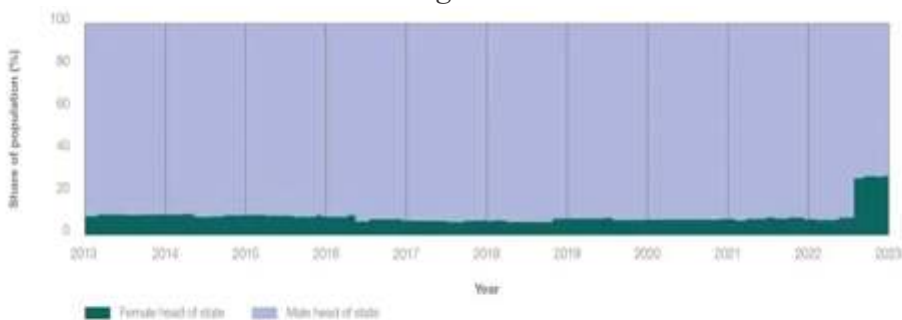
A quota was introduced because the Uzbek government signed an international convention on eliminating all forms of discrimination against women. This document requires the political participation of women. But in the case of Uzbekistan, I am afraid it is just a formality. The government wants to say to the international community, 'Yes, we respect women and their rights. Look how many women we have in the parliament'. But most voters do not trust women or the parliament itself (as cited in "Women and power",



2006). The present-day gender inequality in Central Asia is largely the product of the historical interaction between the Soviet Union’s project of modernization, the vital component of which was female emancipation, and customary practices of the Central Asian region (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016). The Soviet state, for instance, initiated a colossal unveiling campaign in Uzbekistan following the failure of other initiatives in the region that caused considerable opposition and resistance, including a wave of killings of women who did not veil. The resistance made gender conservatism a national virtue when it was organized along religious lines, which created a wave in defense of religion and socio-religious customs and practices. Furthermore, the Soviet state, for political purposes, expediently did not touch the local patriarchal networks that it wanted to abolish. As a result, this further strengthened the roots of gender conservatism in the region (Kane & Gorbenko, 2016).

Although Central Asian states share some similarities, they differ in many aspects owing to their different cultural and geopolitical contexts. This region in the field of post-secondary education might be the only world’s region where female participation rates both significantly surpass and significantly fall short of the global average of 50% (Sabzalieva, 2016). Compared to males, women are more likely than men in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to pursue post-secondary education, while less than 40% of their neighbors in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are doing so. However, things are not static in this scenario. While Uzbekistan is seeing a slowdown in female enrollment, Tajikistan has seen a nearly 10% rise in the percentage of women obtaining post-secondary education (Sabzalieva, 2016). Due to this gender gap in higher education, gender disparities in political leadership continue to persist. While the proportion of women holding positions of political authority has increased globally, regional differences are still substantial, and gender parity is still a long way off (“Global gender gap report”, 2023). Figure 1 below examines the global population under a female head of state from 2013 to 2022.

Figure 1

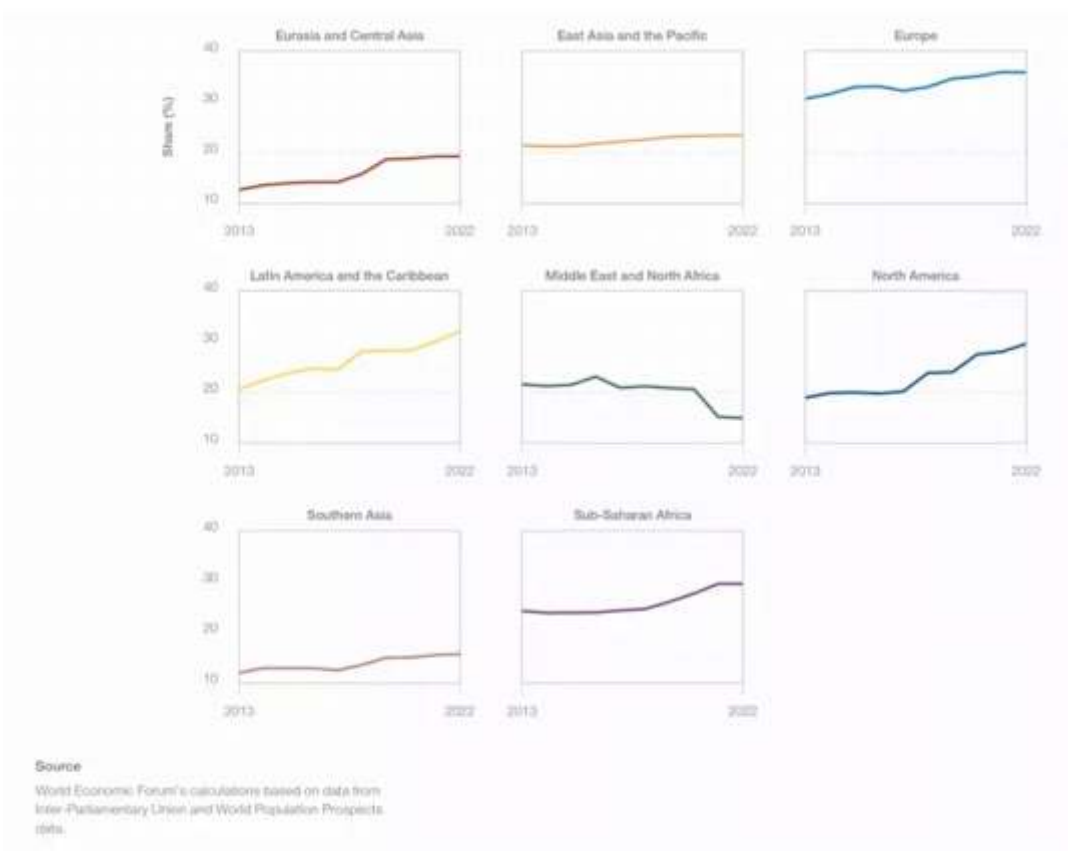


Source

Calculation based on World Economic Forum data and United Nations' World Population Prospects data.

By December 31, 2022, 2.12 billion people, or around 27.9% of the world’s population, live in nations with a female head of state. While this number witnessed stagnation between 2013 and 2021, 2022 experienced a substantial increase. This increase is mostly due to India, the most populous nation on earth, where a female president took office after the 2022 presidential election. Eight of the nine women who have gained power since January 2022 are still in their positions as of March 2023 (“Global gender gap report”, 2023). In terms of representation of the state and national agenda setting, these heads of state hold varied degrees of authority depending on the nation’s political system. Figure 2 below shows Women’s representation in parliament (weighted by population) by region from 2013 to 2022.

Figure 2



Gender disparities in school enrollment have steadily decreased in every region over the previous three decades. While gender disparities in primary school enrollment have mostly closed between 1990 and 2015, three regions—Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, and the Western Hemisphere—remain without parity (“Pursuing women’s”, 2018). In addition, progress has been achieved in reducing enrollment discrepancies in secondary schools. Gender parity in secondary education has been achieved across Asia

and the Pacific, which is remarkable considering that in the early 1980s, there were only 65 female registered students for every 100 male students in the region. Compared to the early 1980s, in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, there are currently 35 more girls enrolled in secondary education for every 100 boys (“Pursuing women’s”, 2018).

Zere Asylbek, who has become a central figure in relation to the emergence of Central Asian feminism, released many titles in 2021, one of which condemns domestic violence and the other of which opposes the practice of giving orders to females (Mattei, 2022). More generally, in recent years, in Central Asian states like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, women have been organizing to make their views known by going to the streets and spreading their actions on social media. An increasing number of them observe the feminist agenda’s key anniversaries, condemn violence against women, or start initiatives to promote gender equality (Mattei, 2022).

Within the largely Muslim-dominated patriarchal communities of Central Asia, the roles of men and women, as discussed above, were specifically defined prior to the Soviet era, with women being prohibited from several domains and only males occupying positions of authority. Notwithstanding their primary occupation in agriculture, they contributed significantly to the economy. Women’s liberation programs and a discourse on the ‘modernization’ of women’s position were instituted throughout the Soviet period. The laws of the republics even included provisions promoting gender equality. Despite this optimistic outlook and few exceptions, particularly in the artistic and scientific spheres, male dominance persisted in Central Asian Soviet culture. While males possessed political and economic power positions, the great majority of women continued to be restricted to the home and mother-wives (Mattei, 2022).

This historical practice of male domination and female subordination continues to exist in the present socio-economic and political structures of Central Asia. In Central Asian societies, the perception of feminism is inadequate (Ulugova, 2020). Some see it as a threat to the patriarchal institution, arguing that the practice of a woman, who in the family is responsible for too many things, going beyond control negatively impacts the country’s demographic development and, therefore, damages the nation. Some people hold that women in Central Asia have already achieved a high level of freedom, so their excessive demands for liberation contribute to the region’s instability (Ulugova, 2020). Thus, in light of this context, the Central Asian states have a long way to go to liberate women from male domination and exploitation. There is a need for what Anna Bjerde (who is a vice-president of Europe and Central Asia, World Bank) states: ‘we must accelerate action towards gender equality and engage women as agents of change for peaceful, green, resilient, and inclusive development’ (as cited in “Gender equality in Europe and Central Asia”, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

In the Central Asian states, the prospects for inclusive, healthy, and sustainable growth are limited by the phenomenon of gender disparities. This article found that over the last 20 years, men's and women's employment and labor force participation rates have either decreased or remained stable. However, These rates for women are still lower than those for men. Women are disproportionately underrepresented in the workforce as employers and wage earners. In Central Asia, self-employment is highly prevalent, and women are overrepresented in the category of contributing family workers. The gender wage inequality, which is present in the region, is associated with factors like the practice of women to work fewer hours than males and occupational and industrial segregation. Although female-owned enterprises have more significant scale economies and employ proportionately more women, they often have smaller operations than their male counterparts. Therefore, promoting the growth of female-owned businesses can have a bigger positive impact on overall development, especially on employment for women. Regarding educational achievement, there is a gender gap at the elementary and secondary levels. The share of female students in higher education is over 50%. However, the share of women varies significantly by subject, underscoring the high level of specialization that perpetuates the gender-based division in the corporate and occupational spheres. Although, in recent years, Central Asian states have taken measures to promote female political participation, women are still underrepresented in the political sphere.

The process of equitable development and advancement in the Central Asian region and the accomplishment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of poverty and inequality reduction can be achieved by reducing these gender disparities in the region. A thorough, evidence-based strategy is required to realize such reductions. According to Tamar Khitarishvili (2016), It should include the following components.

- a. Check blind-traditionalism and remove laws and rules that prevent women from exercising their powers and achieving political, economic, and educational empowerment.
- b. Formulate and implement policies like childcare subsidies, affordable and reliable childcare, and public childcare provisions that would improve women's earnings and their labor market outcomes as well as encourage respectable employment opportunities for them.
- c. Improve the rural economy and agricultural output.
- d. Leverage the green economy's capacity to create jobs to lessen industrial segregation by gender.

- e. Encourage substantial investments in education and focus on a gender-balanced system of educational attainment.
- f. Incorporate impact evaluation elements into the suggested policies designed for female empowerment.

## **Acknowledgment**

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