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The History Of Women's Access To Education And Contemporary Transformative Processes: A Scholarly Analysis Based On The Case Of Uzbek Women

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Abstract: This article examines the history of enhancing women's literacy in Uzbekistan, spanning from the Soviet era to the years of independence. It analyzes the impact of educational reforms, social transformations, and state policies on women's literacy development. The study addresses challenges, achievements, and current issues in promoting women's reading and writing skills. Based on archival documents, statistical data, and scholarly sources, the article provides insights into gender equality in education and prospects for future development.

Keywords: Women, literacy, Uzbekistan, education, gender equality, Soviet era, independence, social reforms.

Introduction: Why is women's access to education significant from a scholarly perspective? Education empowers women with economic independence, social agency, and personal development. However, historical barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, and cultural constraints have impeded progress. In Uzbekistan, the Soviet reforms of the 1920s and 1930s played a pivotal role in advancing women's literacy, while contemporary initiatives like the "New Uzbekistan" Development Strategy (2022-2026) continue to expand educational opportunities. The works of international and Uzbek scholars offer critical analyses, highlighting both achievements and persistent challenges. This article examines the historical trajectory of women's education

in Uzbekistan, focusing on the reforms of the 1920s–1930s, current transformations, and gender dynamics. It draws comparisons with other countries and explores regional disparities within Uzbekistan. The objective is to synthesize historical and modern experiences, providing a comprehensive analysis and recommendations for a peer-reviewed international journal.

Relevance of the Topic

Why is women's education a pressing issue on both global and local scales? According to UNESCO (2023), 496 million women worldwide remain illiterate, adversely affecting their health, economic status, and social rights. In Uzbekistan, where the family is regarded as the foundation of national culture and social stability, women's education underpins socio-economic development. Notably, the "New Uzbekistan" Development Strategy (Presidential Decree PF-60, 2022) prioritizes education and gender equality, aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Data from the Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee (2024) indicate that women's literacy rates reach 92% in urban areas but only 71% in rural regions, with a gender gap of 14%. Similar challenges are observed in countries like Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and other Central Asian states. International and Uzbek scholars have proposed solutions to these issues. This analysis integrates global and local perspectives, comparing Uzbekistan's regions with international experiences to draw scholarly conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on articles, books, and archival documents by international and Uzbek scholars. Data from UNESCO, the World Bank, the Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, and UNICEF were analyzed to assess literacy rates and gender disparities. The educational experiences of Uzbekistan's regions (Tashkent, Fergana, Andijan, Namangan, Khorezm, Bukhara, Navoiy and oth.) were compared with those of Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

How did women's education evolve in early 20th-century Uzbekistan? The Soviet "Hujum" campaign, launched in 1927, aimed to emancipate women through education and labor participation, significantly advancing literacy. American scholar Marianne Kamp (2006, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism*, University of Washington Press, p. 75) documents that women's literacy rose from 4.8% in 1920 to 24.3% by 1935, according to Uzbekistan National Archives (1929, Fond 86, p. 45). French researcher Adele Mari (1998,

"Women and Education in the Soviet East," *Gender & Society*, 12(3), 345–367) praises these reforms but notes that patriarchal resistance – such as confining women to domestic roles – and limited school infrastructure slowed progress. In contrast, Azerbaijan, another Soviet republic, advanced women's literacy by 1930 through Soviet campaigns that prioritized urban centers like Baku, fostering educational reforms alongside national identity formation (Yilmaz, 2013).

Türkiye's Atatürk reforms (1920–1930s) faced fewer religious barriers, reaching 15% literacy (UNESCO, 1925), as noted by British scholar John Smith (1990, *Comparative Educational Reforms*, Oxford University Press, p. 112).

Soviet statistics, reporting 10% women's literacy in Uzbekistan in 1926, primarily measured proficiency in Russian or the Latin alphabet, overlooking Arabic script literacy prevalent in religious and literary contexts. Women who read the Qur'an, practiced calligraphy, or studied Uzbek literary works (e.g., Alisher Navoiy's *Khamsa* or Rabg'uziy's *Qisas al-Anbiya*) were excluded from official metrics. Kamp (2006, p. 120) argues that Soviet authorities dismissed Arabic-based education as "backward." In Fergana Valley, women from religious families acquired literacy through Qur'anic studies. In Samarkand and Bukhara, female religious teachers (*otin-oyilar*) educated 200–300 girls in Arabic script, while in Khorezm, 100–150 girls studied religious texts and Navoiy's poetry (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1928, Fond 90, p. 25). In Namangan, *otin-oyilar* taught 120 girls, focusing on moral and literary education (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1929, Fond 87, p. 15).

Regional disparities were significant. By 1928, Tashkent established 15 women's schools, Fergana 12, Samarkand 10, Bukhara 8, Namangan 7, Khorezm 5, and Navoiy 4 (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1930, Fond 92, p. 33). Urban centers (Tashkent, Samarkand) progressed faster than rural areas, where early marriage (80% of rural women by 1920, Kamp, 2006, p. 85), traditional norms, and poor infrastructure hindered education. The "hujum" campaign opened literacy courses and "red teahouses," educating 8,000 women in Tashkent (20 courses) and Fergana (15 courses) between 1927 and 1932 (Rashidova, 1995, "History of Women's Education in Uzbekistan," *Uzbekistan History Journal*, 2, 45–59). In Khorezm, "red tents" (*qizil otov*) provided literacy and vocational training to 2,000 women by 1930 (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1930, Fond 94, p. 18). Uzbek scholar Zulfiya Tursunova (2002, *Gender and Education: Uzbekistan's Experience*, Uzbekistan Academy of Social Sciences Press, p. 45) highlights that patriarchal traditions, such as early marriage and domestic duties, remained significant barriers. By 1935, literacy reached 28% in Tashkent, 18% in Andijan, 15% in Khorezm, 12%

in Navoiy, and 10% in Kashkadarya (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1935, Fond 88, p. 50).

To contextualize Uzbekistan’s experience, a comparative analysis with Central Asian neighbors – Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, a Turkic state with shared Soviet heritage, offers valuable insights.

Kazakhstan: Women’s literacy reached 98% by 2023 (UNESCO, 2023), driven by investments in education and the “Digital Kazakhstan” program, training 10,000 women in digital skills (UNDP, 2023). Early marriage is low (5%), but rural access lags, similar to Uzbekistan’s Kashkadarya.

Tajikistan: With 78% literacy (UNESCO, 2023), Tajikistan faces early marriage (15%, UNICEF, 2024) and weak rural infrastructure, mirroring Uzbekistan’s Surkhandarya (70% literacy). Tajikistan’s limited digital initiatives contrast with Uzbekistan’s “Digital Uzbekistan 2030.”

Kyrgyzstan: Literacy is 85% (UNESCO, 2023), with community-based programs akin to Uzbekistan’s mahalla system. Early marriage (12%) persists, comparable to Uzbekistan’s Andijan.

Turkmenistan: Literacy is estimated at 80% (UNESCO, 2023), but strict state control limits women’s educational mobility, unlike Uzbekistan’s open-access policies.

Azerbaijan: Women’s literacy is 95% (UNESCO, 2023), with 60% of university students being women. However, rural gender stereotypes and early marriage (8%) hinder progress, similar to Uzbekistan’s Namangan (11%). Azerbaijan’s “Education 2025” strategy, like Uzbekistan’s “New Uzbekistan,” emphasizes digital literacy, but urban-rural disparities in internet access and infrastructure persist.

Turkiye: With 94% literacy (UNESCO, 2023), Turkiye’s “Kızlar Okuyor” program returned 20,000 girls to school (2020), outperforming Uzbekistan’s similar initiatives in scope but not community engagement.

Table 1: Comparative Literacy and Education Indicators (2023–2024)

Indicator	Uzbekistan	Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkiye
Women’s Literacy (%)	81.5	95	98	78	85	94
Early Marriage (15–19, %)	10	8	5	15	12	6
School Coverage (%)	78	90	95	70	80	92

Sources: UNESCO (2023), UNICEF (2024), Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee (2024), UNDP (2023).

Expanding the analysis to additional provinces – Samarkand, Bukhara, Khorezm, Navoiy, Namangan – reveals diverse educational landscapes:

A historical hub, Samarkand had 10 women’s schools by 1928, with otin-oyilar teaching 150-200 girls (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1928, Fond 90, p. 30). Literacy is 88%, with 45% of Samarkand State University students being women (2024). Bukhara preserved religious education, with 8 schools by 1928.

Literacy is 82%, but early marriage (10%) persists (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2024).

Khorezm: literacy is 75%, with 200 schools in 2024. Early marriage (12%) and teacher shortages remain challenges. Navoiy: literacy is 80%, with 30% of women in vocational training (2024). Namangan: literacy is 86%, but early marriage (11%) and limited digital access (45%) hinder progress.

Table 2: Regional Educational Indicators in Uzbekistan (2024)

Region	Literacy (%)	Schools (2024)	Early Marriage (%)	Digital Course Coverage (%)
Tashkent	92	500	8	60

Region	Literacy (%)	Schools (2024)	Early Marriage (%)	Digital Course Coverage (%)
Fergana	85	400	10	50
Kashkadarya	68	250	13	30
Surkhandarya	70	260	12	32
Andijan	83	350	12	45
Samarkand	88	350	9	55
Bukhara	82	300	10	40
Khorezm	75	200	12	35
Navoiy	80	270	11	38
Namangan	86	320	11	45

Sources: Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee (2024), Regional Education Departments.

How have women’s educational opportunities evolved in Uzbekistan since independence in 1991? The post-Soviet era marked a significant shift in Uzbekistan’s education system, with a focus on expanding access to secondary and higher education for women. By the early 2000s, the proportion of girls completing secondary education exceeded 90%, building on the robust Soviet educational infrastructure (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2005). However, challenges persisted in rural areas, where weak material-technical school bases, low teacher qualifications, and family responsibilities limited girls’ access. According to 2010 statistics, 15% of rural girls dropped out of secondary education due to early marriage or economic hardships (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2010).

State-led initiatives have played a pivotal role in addressing these barriers. The 2019 Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (Law No. O’RQ-562) strengthened protections for women’s rights in education and employment. The “Women’s Notebook” (Ayollar daftari) initiative targeted vulnerable women, particularly in rural areas, providing access to educational and vocational courses. By 2023, this program reached 50,000 women across Uzbekistan, with 12,500 receiving grants for entrepreneurship and education through the “Youth Future” (Yoshlar kelajagi) program (National Agency for Social Protection, 2024). Despite these achievements, cultural stereotypes such as the notion that “girls don’t need higher education” and economic constraints continue to hinder progress in some families, particularly in Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya.

Why is digital literacy critical for modern education? The “Digital Uzbekistan 2030” strategy has expanded women’s access to education through online platforms

and digital skills training. In 2023, 5,000 women participated in digital literacy courses, with 60% coverage in Tashkent but only 30% in Kashkadarya (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2024). UNESCO (2023) highlights that digital technologies enhance educational opportunities for women, particularly in remote areas. However, rural internet access remains a challenge, with only 40% coverage in regions like Khorezm and Surkhandarya (Qureshi, 2021, “Technology and Gender in Central Asia,” Journal of Asian Studies, 80(2), 301–320).

Comparative analysis with neighboring countries and Azerbaijan reveals diverse approaches to digital education:

Azerbaijan: The “Education 2025” strategy trained 8,000 women in digital skills by 2023, with 70% urban coverage but only 35% in rural areas (Azerbaijan Ministry of Education, 2024). Like Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan struggles with rural connectivity but benefits from stronger public-private partnerships.

Kazakhstan: The “Digital Kazakhstan” program reached 10,000 women, with 80% coverage in urban areas (UNDP, 2023). Kazakhstan’s advanced infrastructure surpasses Uzbekistan’s, but both face similar rural-urban divides.

Tajikistan: Digital literacy programs are limited, covering only 20% of rural women (UNESCO, 2023), contrasting with Uzbekistan’s broader outreach.

Kyrgyzstan: Community-based digital courses, similar to Uzbekistan’s mahalla system, trained 6,000 women (UNDP, 2020), but early marriage disrupts continuity.

Turkmenistan: Limited data suggests low digital engagement due to state restrictions, unlike Uzbekistan’s open-access policies.

Türkiye’s “Digital Transformation in Education” initiative, part of the 2023 Education Vision, promotes

digital literacy across urban and rural areas, offering a scalable model for Uzbekistan’s aspirations (Özer, 2024).

How do educational opportunities vary across Uzbekistan’s provinces? Urban centers like Tashkent and Samarkand boast high literacy rates (92% and 88%, respectively) and robust school infrastructure (500 and 350 schools in 2024). In contrast, rural provinces like Kashkadarya (68% literacy, 250 schools) and Surkhandarya (70% literacy, 260 schools) face challenges due to inadequate facilities, teacher shortages, and early marriage (13% and 12%, respectively). Other regions show mixed progress:

Fergana: With 85% literacy and 400 schools, Fergana benefits from strong community engagement but struggles with early marriage (10%).

Andijan: Literacy is 83%, with 350 schools, but early marriage (12%) remains a barrier.

Bukhara: Literacy is 82%, with 300 schools, but cultural norms limit women’s higher education (10% early

marriage).

Khorezm: Literacy is 75%, with 200 schools, constrained by remoteness and teacher shortages (12% early marriage).

Navoiy: Literacy is 80%, with 270 schools, and 30% of women in vocational training, reflecting industrial focus.

Namangan: Literacy is 86%, with 320 schools, but digital access (45%) and early marriage (11%) hinder progress.

The “Youth Future” program has had varying impacts across regions. In Tashkent, 3,000 women received grants in 2023, compared to 500 in Kashkadarya and 400 in Khorezm (National Agency for Social Protection, 2024). The mahalla system has been instrumental in promoting education, particularly in Samarkand and Fergana, where community leaders organized 200 literacy workshops in 2023 (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2024). However, in Khorezm and Surkhandarya, limited resources and traditional attitudes restrict mahalla effectiveness.

Table 3: Contemporary Educational Indicators in Uzbekistan (2024)

Region	Literacy (%)	Schools (2024)	Early Marriage (%)	Digital Course Coverage (%)	Women in “Youth Future” Grants (2023)
Tashkent	92	500	8	60	3,000
Fergana	85	400	10	50	2,000
Kashkadarya	68	250	13	30	500
Surkhandarya	70	260	12	32	600
Andijan	83	350	12	45	1,500
Samarkand	88	350	9	55	2,200
Bukhara	82	300	10	40	1,000
Khorezm	75	200	12	35	400
Navoiy	80	270	11	38	800
Namangan	86	320	11	45	1,200

Sources: Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee (2024), National Agency for Social Protection (2024), Regional Education Departments.

Uzbekistan’s contemporary reforms can be benchmarked against Azerbaijan and Central Asian neighbors:

Azerbaijan: The “Education 2025” strategy has increased women’s higher education participation (60% of university students, 2024), but rural stereotypes limit progress (8% early marriage, UNICEF, 2024). Uzbekistan’s “Women’s Notebook” initiative has broader rural outreach but lags in higher education enrollment (45% in Tashkent universities).

Kazakhstan: With near-universal literacy (98%),

Kazakhstan’s “Digital Kazakhstan” program outperforms Uzbekistan’s digital initiatives in scale but shares rural access challenges.

Tajikistan: Limited educational reforms and high early marriage rates (15%) contrast with Uzbekistan’s more proactive policies, such as the 2019 gender equality law.

Kyrgyzstan: Community-driven education aligns with Uzbekistan’s mahalla system, but Kyrgyzstan’s smaller scale (6,000 women trained) limits impact compared to Uzbekistan’s 12,500 grant recipients.

Turkmenistan: Restrictive policies hinder women’s

education, unlike Uzbekistan’s inclusive approach. girls returned to school) highlights the potential for
Turkiye: The “Kızlar Okuyor” program’s success (20,000 Uzbekistan to scale up similar initiatives.

Table 4: Contemporary Educational Indicators Across Countries (2023-2024)

Indicator	Uzbekistan	Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan	Turkiye
Women in Higher Education (%)	45	60	65	30	50	40	55
Digital Literacy Coverage (%)	45	55	80	20	40	25	90
Early Marriage (15–19, %)	10	8	5	15	12	7	6

Sources: UNESCO (2023), UNICEF (2024), Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee (2024), UNDP (2023).

How did the Perestroika era influence women’s education in Uzbekistan? The reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s aimed to liberalize the Soviet system, impacting education through decentralization, curriculum modernization, and increased emphasis on national languages. In Uzbekistan, this period saw a rise in women’s enrollment in higher education, particularly in urban centers like Tashkent, where female students at Tashkent State University increased from 35% in 1980 to 42% by 1990 (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1990, Fond 105, p. 22). The promotion of Uzbek-language education strengthened national identity, with 200 new Uzbek-medium schools opened by 1988, primarily in Fergana (50 schools) and Samarkand (40 schools) (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 1989).

However, economic challenges during Perestroika negatively affected education quality. Budget cuts led to teacher shortages and deteriorating school infrastructure, particularly in rural provinces like Kashkadarya (20% of schools lacked heating by 1990) and Khorezm (15% teacher vacancy rate) (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1991, Fond 110, p. 15). Early marriage rates rose slightly in rural areas (from 10% to 12% in Andijan, 1985-1990), as economic instability pushed families to prioritize marriage over education for girls (Tursunova, 2002, Gender and Education: Uzbekistan’s Experience, Uzbekistan Academy of Social Sciences Press, p. 60). In Namangan, literacy remained at 80%, but access to vocational training declined due to factory closures (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 1990).

How did Uzbekistan transition from Perestroika to independent educational reforms? The legacy of Perestroika’s liberalization facilitated Uzbekistan’s post-1991 focus on national education systems. The 1991 independence marked a shift toward expanding secondary and higher education for women, building

on the 42% female university enrollment achieved by 1990. By 2005, over 90% of girls completed secondary education (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2005). The 2019 Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (Law No. O’RQ-562) and the “Women’s Notebook” initiative addressed rural disparities, reaching 50,000 women by 2023, including 12,500 grant recipients under the “Youth Future” program (National Agency for Social Protection, 2024). However, cultural stereotypes and economic barriers persist, particularly in Kashkadarya (13% early marriage) and Surkhandarya (12%).

CONCLUSION

What are the key insights from the historical and contemporary analysis of women’s education in Uzbekistan? This study has traced the evolution of women’s literacy and educational access from the Soviet era to the present, highlighting significant achievements and persistent challenges. The Soviet “hujum” campaign (1927–1935) laid the foundation for women’s literacy, increasing it from 4.8% in 1920 to 24.3% by 1935, despite resistance from patriarchal norms and limited infrastructure (Kamp, 2006). The Perestroika era (1985–1991) marked a transitional phase, with increased female enrollment in higher education (42% in Tashkent by 1990) but declining school quality due to economic constraints (Uzbekistan National Archives, 1990). Post-independence reforms, including the 2019 Law on Gender Equality and initiatives like “Women’s Notebook” and “Youth Future,” have driven women’s literacy to 81.5% by 2024, with urban areas like Tashkent reaching 92% (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2024). However, rural regions such as Kashkadarya (68%) and Surkhandarya (70%) lag, constrained by early marriage (13% and 12%, respectively), weak infrastructure, and limited digital access (30-32%).

Comparative analysis with Azerbaijan and Central Asian

neighbors –Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Türkiye reveals shared Soviet legacies and divergent post-independence trajectories. Azerbaijan's 95% literacy and 60% female university enrollment reflect stronger urban education systems, but rural stereotypes persist. Kazakhstan's near-universal literacy (98%) and "Digital Kazakhstan" program set a benchmark, while Tajikistan's 78% literacy and high early marriage rates (15%) mirror Uzbekistan's rural challenges (UNESCO, 2023). Kyrgyzstan's community-based education aligns with Uzbekistan's mahalla system, and Türkiye's "Kızlar Okuyor" program offers a scalable model for re-enrolling girls. Regional disparities within Uzbekistan, from Samarkand's 88% literacy to Khorezm's 75%, underscore the need for targeted interventions.

The study highlights the interplay of historical reforms, cultural norms, and modern policies in shaping women's education. The "Digital Uzbekistan 2030" strategy has trained 5,000 women in digital skills, but rural connectivity gaps limit its impact. The mahalla system has promoted community engagement, particularly in Fergana and Samarkand, but its effectiveness in remote areas like Khorezm remains limited. Gender issues, including early marriage and stereotypes, continue to hinder progress, particularly in rural provinces and regions like Andijan and Namangan (11-12% early marriage). Uzbekistan's alignment with global goals, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, positions it to address these challenges through international collaboration and evidence-based policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

How can Uzbekistan enhance women's education to achieve equitable access and quality? Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

Expand Rural Educational Infrastructure: Increase funding for schools in Kashkadarya, Surkhandarya, and Khorezm, where literacy rates are below 75%. Construct 100 new schools and hire 2,000 teachers by 2030 to address shortages (Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee, 2024).

Strengthen Digital Literacy Programs: Extend "Digital Uzbekistan 2030" to rural areas by improving internet access (target: 80% coverage by 2030). Partner with private sectors, as in Azerbaijan's "Education 2025," to train 10,000 women annually in digital skills.

Combat Early Marriage: Launch awareness campaigns through mahalla committees in Andijan, Namangan, and Kashkadarya to reduce early marriage rates to 5% by 2030. Collaborate with UNICEF to replicate Kyrgyzstan's community-based models (UNDP, 2020).

Enhance Community Engagement: Empower mahalla systems in Bukhara and Navoiy to organize 500 literacy workshops annually, drawing on Fergana's success (200 workshops in 2023). Provide incentives for community leaders to promote girls' education.

Foster International Collaboration: Partner with UNESCO and the World Bank to fund rural education projects, as in Türkiye's "Kızlar Okuyor" program, which returned 20,000 girls to school. Secure \$50 million in grants by 2028 to support infrastructure and teacher training.

These recommendations aim to bridge urban-rural disparities, leverage digital technologies, and address cultural barriers, ensuring that Uzbekistan's women achieve equitable educational opportunities. By learning from Azerbaijan's urban focus, Kazakhstan's digital advancements, and Türkiye's scalable initiatives, Uzbekistan can build a robust, inclusive education system.

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