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GENDER, PATRIARCHY, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN UZBEKISTAN

The position of women in Uzbekistan must be understood within the broader historical and social development of Central Asia. During the Soviet period, the Soviet government formally proclaimed gender equality and promoted women's education, employment, and participation in public life. These policies produced significant changes in women's access to education and professional employment. Nevertheless, formal equality did not eliminate deeply rooted patriarchal structures within the family and community. Women continued to experience substantial pressure to conform to traditional expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and their responsibilities within the household. Notwithstanding increased education and social mobility, women continued to occupy a secondary position in significant areas of Soviet social life.

These tensions were particularly pronounced in Central Asia, where traditional family structures and customary practices remained influential. Arranged marriages, bride-price practices (*kalym*), unequal access to education and professional opportunities, and strong expectations concerning female behavior formed part of the social environment in which many women lived.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan developed its own national political and social institutions. The transition, however, did not eliminate these longstanding patriarchal attitudes. To the contrary, the post-Soviet period was characterized by the continued influence of nationalism and traditional social expectations that contributed to restrictions on

women's autonomy. Women were expected to conform to highly restrictive notions of appropriate behavior, sexuality, marriage, and family life.

The persistence of these expectations is important because domestic violence does not occur in a social vacuum. Violence within the family is more difficult to prevent when women are expected to remain obedient to husbands and relatives, when divorce is stigmatized, and when preserving the family is treated as a greater social priority than protecting an individual woman from abuse.

Traditional expectations continue to influence women's ability to make independent decisions about their lives. Strong social restrictions surround sexuality, premarital relationships, pregnancy outside marriage, and women's perceived obligations to their families. Surveys have demonstrated the strength of these attitudes, including widespread opposition to premarital sex and strong disapproval of children born outside marriage.

Such attitudes have consequences beyond questions of morality. When a woman's social standing is closely connected to her reputation, marital status, and perceived sexual behavior, leaving an abusive relationship can carry substantial social costs. A woman who separates from her husband, seeks a divorce, reports sexual or domestic abuse, or otherwise challenges established family expectations may face condemnation from relatives and members of the broader community.

Women are frequently subject to expectations of obedience, silence, sexual restraint, and dependence. The family can consequently function as a principal site of social control, with women expected to subordinate their individual interests to the preservation of the household. These conditions are especially significant in extended-family settings, where a married woman may not be dealing solely with an abusive husband. Parents-in-law and other relatives can

exercise substantial influence over the woman's living arrangements, economic circumstances, childcare responsibilities, and ability to leave the household. The resulting power imbalance can make domestic violence difficult to escape even when the immediate perpetrator is an individual family member.

Domestic violence has historically been one of the most serious manifestations of gender inequality. Physical assault, psychological abuse, intimidation, sexual violence, economic dependence, and social isolation frequently operate as interconnected aspects of women's vulnerability.

One documented example concerns a prominent female lawyer who worked on women's rights issues but nevertheless feared returning home late or traveling for work because her husband was jealous and physically abusive. The example is significant because it demonstrates that education, professional status, and awareness of women's rights do not necessarily protect a woman from domestic violence.

The experience of Maqsuda Alimardonova provides an even more serious illustration. Alimardonova, a mother of two and a nurse, was hospitalized with severe injuries allegedly inflicted by her husband and died without regaining consciousness. Her family criticized the authorities' decision to charge her husband with intentional grievous bodily harm rather than murder.

Cases such as this illustrate why domestic violence must be understood not merely as isolated interpersonal misconduct, but as a broader question of access to protection and justice. Where women cannot safely report abuse, where complaints are not adequately investigated, or where perpetrators receive relatively lenient treatment, the formal existence of legal rights does not necessarily translate into meaningful protection.

A major obstacle to assessing the full scale of domestic violence in Uzbekistan has been the absence of reliable and comprehensive data. Many incidents remain unreported because victims do not believe that approaching the authorities will produce meaningful protection. This problem remains relevant. UN Women currently notes that official national statistics for the prevalence of physical and sexual intimate-partner violence in Uzbekistan remain unavailable, creating an important gap in the measurement of violence against women. Underreporting is itself an important indicator of the social environment surrounding domestic violence. Women may refrain from reporting because of fear of retaliation, economic dependence, concern about children, social stigma, pressure from relatives, or distrust of law-enforcement institutions. Consequently, official statistics should not automatically be understood as representing the actual prevalence of abuse.

The COVID-19 period further demonstrated the difficulty of measuring the problem. A substantial increase in calls to at least one women's hotline was recorded during the lockdown period, while humanitarian organizations reported that Uzbek women remained vulnerable to domestic violence and faced economic disadvantage and exclusion from decision-making. The legal environment has changed significantly since the earlier period in which domestic violence received comparatively limited formal legal recognition. In April 2023, Uzbekistan introduced criminal and administrative liability for domestic violence and strengthened legal protections for women. These reforms represented an important formal acknowledgment that domestic violence is not simply a private family matter. The existence of this legislation, however, should not be confused with the disappearance of domestic violence or the elimination of the structural conditions that allow it to persist.

Recent evidence indicates that implementation remains a major problem. Human Rights Watch reported in March 2026 that, although Uzbekistan had criminalized domestic violence three years earlier, progress remained too slow and serious gaps continued in enforcement, access to shelters and services, legal assistance, and the treatment of reconciliation in domestic-violence cases. Human Rights Watch cited research indicating that more than 55 percent of domestic-violence cases were dismissed through reconciliation procedures and that more than 90 percent of victims lacked legal representation.

This is particularly significant because reconciliation can place the victim back into contact with the person accused of abusing her. In circumstances where a woman is economically dependent upon her husband or socially dependent upon the extended family, a formally voluntary reconciliation may occur in an environment in which the woman has limited practical alternatives. The persistence of this problem is also reflected in Human Rights Watch's 2026 assessment of Uzbekistan, which states that impunity for domestic violence remained the norm in 2025. Thus, the principal issue is no longer simply whether Uzbekistan has laws addressing domestic violence. It is whether those laws are consistently enforced and whether women can realistically invoke them without facing retaliation, stigma, economic hardship, or pressure to preserve the marriage.

The gap between law and practice is particularly important in evaluating women's access to state protection. Police and local authorities have historically treated domestic abuse as a family matter and encouraged women to reconcile with abusive husbands rather than pursue legal remedies. Recent evidence indicates that this institutional pattern has not entirely disappeared. Human Rights Watch has reported continuing reliance on reconciliation, inadequate access to shelters and legal services, geographic disparities, and insufficient training among

officials dealing with domestic violence. UN Women likewise identifies the need for Uzbekistan to strengthen the effective issuance and enforcement of protection orders, ensure that domestic-violence cases are properly investigated and prosecuted, improve access to legal assistance, and strengthen victim-support services, including shelters, hotlines, medical assistance, psychosocial counseling, and economic support. These conditions demonstrate that the problem extends beyond the wording of criminal statutes. Effective protection requires functioning institutions capable of responding promptly and independently when a woman reports abuse.

Economic dependence is another important dimension of women's vulnerability. A woman who lacks independent income, property, housing, or access to employment may have few practical options for leaving an abusive household. Women continue to experience economic and social dependence as well as limitations affecting education, employment, and social opportunities.

The consequences are particularly serious when domestic violence intersects with divorce, child custody, property, and inheritance. A woman who leaves her husband may risk losing financial support, housing, family assistance, and social status. In extended-family households, she may also face pressure to return to the marriage in order to preserve family unity. Consequently, the ability to leave an abusive relationship cannot be assessed solely in legal terms. A protection order or criminal statute may exist, but the woman must also have somewhere to go, financial resources, access to legal assistance, and protection from retaliation.

Marriage remains a particularly important institution through which gender expectations are expressed. The continuing influence of *kalym*, pressure surrounding marriage, and the emergence of unregistered religious marriages involving so-called “second wives” can create additional vulnerabilities. Such relationships may leave women without the full legal protections associated with registered marriage, including rights concerning property, inheritance, and financial

support. These practices demonstrate how social and legal vulnerability can reinforce one another. A woman who occupies a socially subordinate position within an informal or unregistered relationship may have greater difficulty asserting her rights when the relationship becomes abusive. At the same time, women who challenge conventional expectations can themselves become targets of harassment and condemnation. Women perceived as sexually improper or insufficiently conforming to traditional expectations may face particularly severe social pressure. The underlying issue is therefore broader than physical violence. It concerns the extent to which women are able to exercise individual autonomy without facing punishment or stigmatization from family members, community members, or state institutions.

Violence and discrimination against women also extend beyond the immediate family environment. Women perceived as sexually or socially nonconforming may experience harassment, condemnation, and other forms of social pressure. Official and social hostility toward women whose conduct is viewed as damaging to the perceived reputation of Uzbek womanhood can reinforce broader restrictions on women's autonomy.

Contemporary evidence also shows that violence against women has acquired additional forms. In 2026, UN Women highlighted the case of an Uzbek television journalist who successfully challenged online harassment in court. The case illustrates that abuse can occur in digital environments as well as within the household and that women who challenge abusive behavior may themselves become targets of further harassment.

This development is significant because it shows that the problem of violence against women cannot be reduced to physical assault by intimate partners. Psychological, verbal, sexual, economic, and digital forms of abuse can all function as mechanisms for controlling women and limiting their participation in public life.

Historical allegations also concern involuntary sterilization and the non-consensual use of intrauterine devices. These practices have been reported as particularly affecting economically disadvantaged women and members of ethnic minorities. These allegations should be distinguished analytically from domestic violence because they concern reproductive autonomy and state or medical practices rather than necessarily violence perpetrated by intimate partners. Nevertheless, they form part of the broader question of women's ability to exercise control over their bodies and reproductive decisions. The common theme is the limited ability of vulnerable women to make autonomous choices when family, social, medical, or governmental institutions exercise disproportionate control over their lives.

Uzbekistan has adopted important legal reforms, and domestic violence is now formally recognized as a criminal and administrative matter. At the same time, longstanding patriarchal attitudes, social stigma, economic dependence, underreporting, inadequate services, and inconsistent enforcement continue to limit the practical effectiveness of those reforms. The persistence of the problem is particularly apparent in the continuing reliance on reconciliation and the difficulties survivors face in obtaining legal representation and support. Human Rights Watch reported that more than 10,000 individuals were prosecuted for domestic violence during the first ten months of 2025, demonstrating that authorities are now bringing substantial numbers of cases. Yet the same reporting emphasizes that impunity remains a serious concern and that prosecution statistics alone do not establish that women are receiving effective protection. Domestic violence continues to play an enormous and damaging role in the lives of many women in Uzbekistan. Its persistence reflects the interaction of several factors: deeply rooted patriarchal expectations, pressure to preserve marriage and family unity, economic dependence,

social stigma, fear of retaliation, inadequate support services, underreporting, and inconsistent institutional responses.

The evolution of Uzbek law since 2023 represents a significant change from the earlier legal environment. However, legislation alone cannot transform entrenched social relationships. The continued use of reconciliation, limited access to legal representation and shelters, deficiencies in official data, and continuing concerns about enforcement demonstrate that a substantial gap remains between formal legal protections and women's lived experience. For this reason, domestic violence in Uzbekistan should be understood as a structural gender-equality and rule-of-law problem, rather than merely a collection of isolated incidents occurring within individual families. The central question is not simply whether a woman possesses a theoretical legal right to protection, but whether she can realistically exercise that right when confronting an abusive husband or family member without losing her economic security, social support, housing, children, or personal safety.

The evidence available today indicates that this transformation remains incomplete. Women continue to encounter significant barriers when attempting to escape abusive relationships and obtain effective protection. The persistence of these barriers, despite substantial legal reforms, demonstrates that domestic violence remains a serious and continuing feature of women's lives in Uzbekistan and that meaningful improvement requires not only legislation but also effective enforcement, accessible services, institutional accountability, economic empowerment, and a broader transformation of social attitudes concerning women's autonomy and equality.

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