



INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE EXPANSION OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN UZBEKISTAN'S LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT SYSTEM (2016-2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the institutional and legislative transformations that have significantly expanded women's leadership and participation in Uzbekistan's local self-government system from 2016 to 2025. Grounded in the principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, national laws on youth policy, gender equality, and protection of women from harassment and violence, as well as the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality by 2030, this study examines how comprehensive reforms strengthened women's socio-political influence. The establishment of the Committee on Family and Women's Affairs, the introduction of deputy positions for governors, and the creation of women's activity coordinators in mahallas reflect the state's commitment to gender-responsive governance. Statistical data show that women's representation in local leadership positions increased from 18% in 2016 to 30% in 2025. The findings highlight that consistent policy implementation and institutional restructuring have become key drivers of gender equality and democratic development in Uzbekistan.

KEYWORDS: Gender equality, women's leadership, mahalla system, institutional reforms, local governance, Uzbekistan

INTRODUCTION

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On State Youth Policy," "On Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence," and "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men," the Resolution of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Approval of the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030," as well as universally recognized principles and norms of international law and international treaties of the Republic of Uzbekistan, a National Program for Increasing Women's Activity in All Spheres of the Country's Economic, Political, and Social Life for 2022-2026 was developed. This program created broader political opportunities for women.

During this period, the State Committee for Family and Women Affairs was established, along with its branches in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the regions, the city of Tashkent, and all districts (cities). A new post of Deputy Prime Minister was introduced, who simultaneously serves as the Chairperson of this Committee.

A Republican Commission on Enhancing the Role of Women in Society, Gender Equality, and Family Affairs, as well as regional commissions under local Councils of People's Deputies, were established. To promote women's entrepreneurship, a Deputy Chairman for Women's Support position was introduced in the People's Bank system.

In regional, city, and district administrations, the posts of Deputy Hokims (Governors) for Family and Women Affairs were created, and in each mahalla (neighborhood community), a Women's Activist position was established.

As a result, by 2025, statistical indicators of women's leadership in local self-government bodies demonstrated positive dynamics. During this period, the number of women promoted to leadership positions and their participation in local governance increased. The activity of women in local bodies and their representation in leadership positions showed steady growth each year.

Between 2016 and 2025, the proportion of women leaders in local self-government bodies increased from 18% in 2016 to 30% in 2025. A five-year analysis shows a significant rise in the number of women serving as mahalla chairpersons from 2017 to 2025. In this sector, the number of women exceeded 55%, demonstrating their expanding role in local leadership.

A crucial document contributing to this development was the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Increasing the Socio-Economic Activity of Women and Their Involvement in Political and Local Governance" (2016), which established key tasks such as promoting women's advancement to leadership roles and creating favorable conditions for their political and social participation.

Additionally, the Law "On the Organization and Activity of Citizens' Self-Government Bodies", adopted the same year, defined the organizational and legal foundations of local governance and established norms aimed at increasing women's participation in these bodies, thereby creating opportunities for women's leadership.

Another example is the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated February 18, 2020, "On Measures to Improve the System of Work with Families and Women, Strengthen the Institution of Mahalla, and Create New Mechanisms of Support." As a result of this decree, structural changes occurred in the system of local self-government bodies, which in turn contributed to the growth of women's political activity.

According to this decree, several advisory positions (on social, moral, youth, entrepreneurship, and elderly affairs) were reorganized. New positions were established, including Deputy Chairpersons of Citizens' Assemblies for Law Enforcement, Family, Women, and Socio-Moral Affairs, as well as specialists on family and women's issues, and deputies on youth and elderly affairs. These reforms expanded women's involvement in governance and public administration at the local level.

As evidenced above, the growing need for specialists dealing with women's issues within the mahalla system has led to a significant increase in the number of women employed in this sector. For example, due to the introduction of positions of deputy chairpersons for family, women, and socio-spiritual affairs under all citizens' assemblies, the number of women working within the mahalla institution rose considerably by 2021. During this period, the average number of women across the republic exceeded 9,900. Among mahalla chairpersons, 742 were women, while 3,342 women served as executive secretaries, and 8,402 women were active in women's committees.

In 2004, there were 734 female mahalla chairpersons, 19,080 female advisors to the citizens' assembly chairpersons (aksakals), 3,323 women working as executive secretaries (about 30% of the total), and 8,360 women heading local women's committees. During the 2017 elections,

no sharp changes were observed in overall figures; however, the number of women with higher education increased by 5%.

It is well known that the local public administration system cooperates with mahallas, citizens' assemblies, women's committees, non-governmental organizations, self-governing voluntary associations, political parties, trade unions, and various associations. In this sense, local governance bears responsibility for the socio-economic development of the region, and women hold leading positions within these institutions, playing a crucial role in ensuring social progress and community well-being.

In addition, citizens' assembly chairpersons have recently been granted several new rights, including:

- Submitting a mandatory proposal to internal affairs bodies (MIA) regarding the evaluation of a preventive inspector's performance, including recommendations for incentives or disciplinary actions up to dismissal;
- Proposing the termination of a management contract between the homeowners' general assembly and the managing organization or association chairperson;
- Acting, with the consent of property owners, on their behalf in dealings with management organizations or homeowners' associations concerning issues related to multi-apartment building management.

The "Prosperous and Safe Mahalla" Concept is being implemented in stages. From July 1, 2020, a new financing system for self-government bodies was introduced. In particular, employees now receive a special 30% salary supplement in addition to their base pay, along with increased material incentives. Moreover, expenditures related to strengthening material and technical resources, improving neighborhood infrastructure, and covering other current costs are financed from local district (city) budgets through revenues from the property tax paid by individuals.

In conclusion, the growing demand for specialists addressing women's issues in local communities has significantly increased the number of women working within the mahalla (neighborhood) system. Over the past decades, women have taken on more active roles as advisors, secretaries, and leaders of women's committees. By 2021, the number of women employed in mahallas had risen considerably, with thousands serving in leadership and administrative positions.

Although the 2017 elections did not show drastic numerical changes, the share of women with higher education increased by 5%, indicating progress in women's professional development and qualifications. This demonstrates that women are not only expanding their presence but also enhancing their competence and influence in local governance.

The mahalla institution plays a vital role in ensuring social development and cooperation between local self-governing bodies, NGOs, and public organizations. Women have become key figures in these institutions, contributing actively to social stability, community development, and effective public administration.

Furthermore, reforms such as the "Prosperous and Safe Mahalla" concept and new financial mechanisms introduced in 2020 have strengthened the mahalla system by improving financial independence, staff incentives, and working conditions. These measures create a more sustainable framework for women's leadership and community participation, highlighting their growing role as essential agents of social progress in modern Uzbekistan.

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