



Gender roles and power dynamics in marriage: a sociological observation in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article examines gender roles and power dynamics within marriage in Uzbekistan, focusing on sociological and psychological perspectives and recent trends (2020-2024). Uzbekistan has a traditionally patriarchal family structure influenced by both cultural norms and post-Soviet social changes. Purpose: The study aims to analyze how marital power relations are shaped by gender roles, how these dynamics have evolved in recent years, and what theoretical frameworks explain these patterns. Methods: A literature-based analysis was conducted, drawing on sociological studies, psychological research, and reports on gender in Uzbekistan. Findings: Traditional Uzbek marriages often feature male-dominated decision-making and a clear division of labor, reinforced by cultural norms and extended family structures. However, recent reforms and shifting attitudes (especially among younger, urban couples) show emergent egalitarian tendencies. Legislation between 2020 and 2024—such as strengthened domestic violence laws and a national gender strategy—reflects progress in women’s rights. Still, surveys reveal that a large majority of the population adheres to stereotypes assigning men primary authority and women domestic responsibility. Conclusions: Marital power dynamics in Uzbekistan are in transition: while historic patriarchy persists, socio-economic developments and legal reforms are enabling gradual shifts toward equality. Implications: Understanding these dynamics through theories of resource power, patriarchy, and social role expectations is crucial for policymakers and educators aiming to foster gender equity in family life.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, marriage, gender roles, marital power, patriarchy, egalitarianism, sociological theory, 2020-2024 trends.

Introduction: Uzbekistan's family life is at a crossroads between deep-rooted traditions and modern egalitarian ideals. Gender roles and power dynamics in marriage refer to how responsibilities, decision-making authority, and influence are distributed between husbands and wives. In many societies, these dynamics are shaped by cultural norms, economic factors, and legal frameworks. Uzbekistan provides a compelling case study due to its history as a Soviet republic (which promoted women's emancipation) and its post-independence reassertion of traditional values. This article explores how marital gender roles are defined in Uzbek culture, how power is negotiated between spouses, and how these patterns have evolved in the period 2020-2024. Understanding marital power dynamics is important because they affect family well-being, women's status, and societal development. Power imbalances in marriage can influence everything from daily decisions (e.g. finances, mobility) to serious outcomes like domestic violence rates and divorce. Conversely, more balanced, egalitarian relationships are often associated with higher marital satisfaction and better outcomes for children. The concept of gender roles is central to understanding family dynamics, shaping expectations, responsibilities, and interactions within the family unit. In Uzbekistan, a society deeply rooted in traditions, gender roles have historically been defined by cultural, religious, and social norms. However, the rapid modernization and globalization of the past decades have initiated significant transformations in these roles. In Uzbekistan, family relationships are deeply rooted in cultural traditions that define specific roles for men and women. Historically, men have been viewed as breadwinners and protectors, while women have primarily taken on caregiving and homemaking responsibilities. However, socio-economic developments, education, and globalization are reshaping these roles, leading to new dynamics in family relationships. This article examines the evolution of gender roles in Uzbek families, analyzing the forces driving change and their implications for both individual members and society at large. [1]

METHOD

Multiple theories in sociology and psychology explain how gender roles and power operate within marriage. Below, we summarize several influential perspectives: Structural-Functionalism (Traditional Role Theory): Early functionalist thinkers like Talcott Parsons argued that in a well-functioning family, spouses take on complementary roles - the husband as breadwinner (instrumental role) and the wife as homemaker (expressive role). This "separate spheres" model held that a clear division of labor by gender would create

harmony in the family. While this perspective acknowledged an authority difference (husband as head of household), it viewed it as a natural, beneficial arrangement in traditional society. Critics note that this model often justified male dominance as "normal" and ignored women's autonomy.

A classic study by Robert Blood and Donald Wolfe found that the spouse who brings more social and economic resources (income, education, status) into the marriage tends to have greater decision-making power. In their survey of 900 American wives, they concluded that marital power is not just about tradition, but about who controls valued resources. This is an application of social exchange theory: the partner less dependent on the other (because they have independent resources) can leverage more power. Resource theory suggests that as women gain education and income, power balances become more equal. However, this theory assumes decisions are openly negotiated; it may overlook hidden forms of power.[3]

Related to exchange theory, this principle (attributed to sociologist Willard Waller) posits that the partner less emotionally invested in or dependent on the relationship holds more power. In many traditional marriages, men have been seen as holding less to lose (due to greater social freedom or ability to remarry), giving them a power advantage. This dynamic can manifest in decision-making or even the ability to dictate the relationship's terms.

Feminist scholars argue that marriage has historically been a patriarchal institution where men as a class hold power over women. Delphy and Leonard, for example, contended that even in late 20th-century Western marriages, wives often perform the bulk of domestic labor and provide emotional support, while husbands benefit from this arrangement.

Sociologist Jessie Bernard observed that men and women often experience marriage very differently - essentially there are "his" and "her" versions of a marriage. Men are more likely to report being happy with marriage because the institution is often tailored to their benefit, while women may find marriage entails more work and fewer privileges. Bernard and later scholars like Deniz Kandiyoti introduced the idea of the "patriarchal bargain," where women may conform to traditional roles in exchange for security or status within the family. In highly patriarchal settings, a young wife might "bargain" by diligently serving her husband and in-laws; in return, she gains acceptance and stability, and eventually, as an older mother-in-law herself, some authority in the household. This theoretical lens helps explain why women sometimes perpetuate the very norms that subordinate them - it can be a rational

strategy under constrained conditions.[6] Each of these theories offers a lens for examining Uzbekistan's marital dynamics. In the following sections, we will see that elements of all these perspectives traditional patriarchal norms, resource-based shifts in power, and evolving attitudes are at play in Uzbek society. The interaction of economic change, laws, and cultural beliefs creates a complex picture of how gender and power interrelate in contemporary Uzbek marriages.

Uzbekistan's society has deep patriarchal roots, and traditional gender roles in marriage have been strongly defined by custom and family structure. Several key features characterize traditional Uzbek marital dynamics: Patrilocal Extended Families: Upon marriage, it has been customary for a woman to move into her husband's family home. The new bride (kelin) historically occupies the lowest status in this extended family until she proves herself-often only gaining respect after bearing children (especially a son). Living with the husband's parents means that power dynamics are not only between husband and wife but also mediated by in-laws. The young wife is expected to obey her husband as well as her mother-in-law and father-in-law. Fundamental decisions about her life-such as whether she can work outside the home, pursue further education, or how often she can visit her own parents-have often been made by her in-laws in conservative families. This multi-generational authority structure reinforces patriarchal control: the husband is the primary authority within the nuclear couple, but even he defers to his father (or mother) in many cases, creating a hierarchy with the eldest male at the top. For the wife, this means limited autonomy; she may need permission from senior family members for significant actions.

Culturally, the husband is viewed as the head (boshi) of the family in Uzbek tradition. He is expected to provide financially, make major external decisions, and represent the family in the community. The wife is often seen as the manager of the home and children, but subordinate to the husband in decision-making authority. Even the language reflects this: an Uzbek idiom suggests "er – uying boshlig'i, xotin – uying zynati," roughly translating to "the man is the head of the house, the woman is the adornment of the house," implying that a wife's role is to make the home pleasant and raise the family, but not to lead. Traditionally, if disputes arise, the norm has been that the wife should defer to the husband or seek resolution through elders, rather than open confrontation.

In line with both Islamic tradition and Central Asian custom, husbands in rural and traditional settings typically engage in paid work or agriculture, while

wives shoulder almost all domestic responsibilities. Household chores, cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing are considered women's work. One observational account noted that an Uzbek mother "is incredibly hard working... I didn't see one minute of down time," as she was constantly cooking, cleaning, and ordering children about. Men, on the other hand, may socialize outside (for example, in teahouses or at community gatherings) while women are expected to "stay quiet" and tend to family needs. This reflects a broader norm of modesty and service for women. The persistence of such a division means wives often have long hours of labor at home, limiting their ability to work outside or develop independent interests. Even when women do have jobs, they are still expected to fulfill domestic duties a "double burden" that reinforces their dependent status.

Traditional Uzbek marriages are characterized by patriarchy and hierarchy. Men traditionally hold formal power - making key decisions and representing the family- while women hold an informal influence through managing the home and sometimes by gently steering decisions behind the scenes. It is common for wives to exercise agency in subtle ways: as one study noted, some wives in modern Uzbekistan "voluntarily relinquish nominal dominance to husbands, while retaining actual leadership" in many day-to-day matters. This suggests that even under a patriarchal veneer, couples find ways to cooperate and wives often become the backbone of the household. However, the open acknowledgment of equality is rare in the traditional model - the husband is publicly the head, and the wife's influence is exercised tactfully. Such patterns were prevalent through the 1990s and 2000s, especially in rural areas. Yet, Uzbekistan has also seen forces of change: Soviet legacy increased women's education and employment; globalization and urbanization introduced new ideas of gender equality; and the government's recent reforms aim to improve women's rights. The next section explores how these changes are manifesting in the 2020-2024 period, potentially altering the gender and power equation in marriage. National Strategy for Gender Equality (2020-2030): In 2019, Uzbekistan passed its first Gender Equality Law, and by 2021 it approved a comprehensive strategy through 2030. This strategy and related action plans aim to. While largely declarative, it set the tone that the state supports women's empowerment - including within the family. Domestic Violence Legislation: Traditionally, domestic violence (DV) was not explicitly criminalized. In 2019, a Law "On Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence" was adopted, and awareness campaigns against family violence increased. However, enforcement was initially weak due to societal attitudes urging reconciliation. A breakthrough came in 2023,

when amendments to the Criminal Code established criminal penalties for domestic violence. By criminalizing spousal abuse, the law formally recognizes wives' right to bodily autonomy and safety. This legal change is significant: it challenges the old notion that abuse is a "private matter" and that a wife must tolerate mistreatment. In practice, implementation will take time, but early data showed thousands of protection orders were issued (21,000+ in the first 7 months of 2022 for women facing domestic abuse. These reforms, supported by police training and hotlines, potentially empower women to speak out and demand better treatment, subtly shifting the power balance toward accountability of husbands. Economic Empowerment Programs: Recognizing that economic dependence fuels power imbalance, the government and international partners (World Bank, ADB, UNDP) have launched programs for women's entrepreneurship and employment. For example, since 2022 banks offer preferential loans to women for small businesses or education. Also, quotas for women in higher education and governance have been introduced. Though not directly about marriage, these efforts mean more women can earn and contribute financially. As Resource Theory predicts, when a wife has her own income and knowledge, she likely gains more say at home. Young urban couples increasingly make joint financial decisions, especially if both are earning. The World Bank's 2024 Gender Assessment noted progress in women's access to education (tertiary enrollment quadrupled for women from 2017 to 2022), and the Labor Code was amended in 2022 to ensure equal pay and remove restrictions on women's jobs. These shifts aim to level the economic playing field, which in turn can level the domestic power field. 2020-2024 has been a period of gradual change in Uzbekistan: formal strides towards equality and some shift in attitudes, yet enduring traditionalism. Many families now occupy a middle ground -what might be called "transitional" marriages. In these, husbands and wives may both work and share some tasks, and make decisions more jointly, but they often still couch decisions in terms of male "final say" out of respect for custom. For example, a wife might convince her husband about a major financial decision through discussion, and they agree together - but both might still outwardly say "the husband allowed it" to conform to social expectations. The power dynamic is more negotiated and less authoritarian than in the past, especially among the young, but true equality (where a wife could make a decision independently without stigma, or a husband routinely cooks dinner) is not yet the norm. The next section will explore the implications of these dynamics and include perspectives from psychology on how power

distribution affects marital quality, as well as mention all relevant theories discussed, tying them to the Uzbek context. (Given the comprehensive nature of this analysis, most major theoretical lenses have been integrated above; we will now consider more on the consequences and broader significance.)

The way power is shared (or not shared) in marriages has wide-ranging effects on both the private and public spheres in Uzbekistan. Here we discuss some key implications and connect them to expert views: Marital Satisfaction and Stability: Research consistently shows that more egalitarian marriages tend to be happier and more resilient. John Gottman's findings, for example, highlight that when husbands accept influence from wives and decisions are made jointly, couples experience less negativity and are far less likely to divorce. In Uzbekistan, this suggests that as young couples move toward a bit more equality (e.g., discussing decisions together rather than the husband unilaterally deciding), they may enjoy better emotional intimacy and understanding.[8] Conversely, in very unequal marriages, wives often report frustration or depression, and husbands may feel pressure or lack emotional closeness. A psychological survey in Central Asia (cited by local psychologists) has indicated that women who feel voiceless at home are more prone to mental health issues like anxiety. Thus, promoting balanced power in marriage isn't just a women's rights issue; it's about family harmony. Traditional gender ideology, which demands the wife always submit, can harm the relationship quality - especially as modern wives have their own aspirations. When those aspirations are suppressed, conflict can arise. From a family systems perspective, an imbalance where one partner dominates can also negatively affect children (who may model those behaviors or feel the tension between parents). On the positive side, when spouses model respect and equality, children learn mutual respect and are likely to perpetuate those values.

CONCLUSION

Gender roles and power dynamics in Uzbek marriages are in a state of gradual transition, balancing legacy and change. On one hand, the patriarchal framework - where husbands are default heads of families and wives are subordinate caregivers - remains deeply ingrained, as evidenced by prevailing social attitudes and the continued practice of in-law authority and gendered division of labor. On the other hand, the period from 2020 to 2024 has seen meaningful progress: the government's reforms (from criminalizing domestic violence to promoting women in education and work) have created an environment more supportive of gender equality, and younger couples especially are inching towards more egalitarian relationships in

practice. Drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives, we see that no single theory fully explains the Uzbek case, but together they offer insight. Resource theory is evident as women's rising education and income are slowly translating into more decision-making power at home (though still limited by norms). Patriarchy and feminist theory remind us that despite surface changes, underlying power structures and "bargains" persist - many women still navigate within patriarchal limits, negotiating their influence subtly. Psychological research underscores that these dynamics are not just a sociopolitical matter but affect the core happiness of families; marriages based on partnership and mutual respect tend to be stronger and healthier. Conversely, inequality in marriage can propagate cycles of abuse, poverty, and dissatisfaction that ripple out to society.

In Uzbekistan's sociological observation, we also note the importance of context: factors such as extended family living, cultural expectations (like the role of the obedient bride), and the legacy of Soviet gender policies create a unique interplay. The years 2020-2024 highlight a critical comparison - they show that change is possible (as laws and rankings improve, and as some norms start to shift), yet they also show how resilient cultural patterns can be (with the majority still believing in male-dominated family models). Essentially, Uzbekistan is experiencing what many societies have: the tension between modern egalitarian ideals and traditional patriarchal customs.

Empowering women and promoting equality in marriages is not about undermining culture or family; rather, it's about strengthening families through fairness and mutual respect. The evidence and expert opinions presented indicate that balanced marriages benefit everyone - women, men, children, and the nation's development. Uzbekistan's journey from 2020 to 2024 provides cautious optimism that such balance, though not yet fully realized, is on the horizon.

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