

PHILOSOPHY OF GENDER POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNIZATION



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Abstract: *The article examines the philosophical and political foundations of the formation and development of gender policy in the Central Asian countries during the post-Soviet period. Special attention is paid to the analysis of the relationship between traditional socio-cultural values and modernization processes influencing the perception of gender roles in modern society. Through the lens of feminist, postcolonial, and traditionalist philosophy, the author explores the evolution of state policy in the field of gender equality, analyzes legislative initiatives, educational programs, and institutional practices aimed at increasing women's participation in socio-political life. On the example of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, trends and contradictions in the implementation of gender reforms are considered. In conclusion, the necessity of a philosophical synthesis of traditional values and modern approaches to gender justice as the basis for the sustainable development of the region is substantiated.*

Keywords: *gender policy, gender philosophy, Central Asia, modernization, tradition, feminism, post-colonialism, social transformation, gender equality.*

After the collapse of the USSR, the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan) developed their own models of gender policy, reflecting the combination of the declared equality of the sexes and preserved conservative traditions. Despite the fact that the constitutions of all these states officially guarantee «equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men», in practice, the region's gender policy is generally conservative. Thus, researchers note that the countries of the region «generally pursue a conservative gender policy». At the same time, women's equality in many areas remains poorly implemented, and feminist activism is becoming increasingly in demand. This article sets the task of analyzing the philosophical and theoretical foundations of gender policy in Central Asia and tracing its development after 1991, relying on approaches from feminism, post-colonialism, critical theory, traditionalism, and others. In the empirical sections, we will provide examples of legislative reforms, NGO initiatives, public campaigns, and political discussions in the five countries of the region, identifying the general trends and specifics of each state.

Theoretical foundations

Feminist theory serves as one of the key approaches to analyzing gender policy. It focuses on the socio-cultural and political conditions of gender inequality, viewing

gender as a social construct rather than a biological fact. Central Asian feminism encompasses both universal ideas of struggle for equality and local characteristics. Researchers emphasize the need for «own feminism», taking into account «the linguistic, religious, economic, and other characteristics of the region» [4, 78]. The post-Soviet experience for a number of republics brought to the forefront the task of understanding the legacy of Soviet gender equality (for example: the introduction of women in high-ranking positions, maternity leave) and its real embodiment. In many Central Asian countries, gender studies are just beginning to take shape, and feminism in public discourse is perceived ambiguously.

From a post-colonial perspective, the region's gender policy is inseparable from the history of empires – Russian, Soviet, and colonial. Many scholars believe that gender relations should be analyzed in the context of «post-Soviet transformation»: the states of the region often return to traditionalist models after the collapse of the USSR. For example, in Tajikistan, «loyalty to patriarchal ideas» about the role of women and the dominance of men after independence is noted. Postcolonial approaches emphasize that former colonies and semi-colonies remain under the influence of both external (western) and internal (traditional) ideologies. Thus, «old and outdated Western standards» clash with local cultural norms, and society, having experienced a crisis of identity, often turns to «traditions, including patriarchal ones». Post-colonial gender theory draws attention to the fact that «patriarchal norms and values» remain rooted in Central Asia, supporting stable gender hierarchies. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account that the Soviet «emancipation» imposed from above (for example, the «Hujum» campaign in the 1920s-30s) played a role in the emancipation of women, but after 1991, many of these changes were subject to revision.

The critical theory of gender emphasizes power, discourse, and social structures. It allows for the analysis of how state institutions and the legal system shape gender norms. An example of a critical approach can be the consideration that the declared goals of equality by the authorities are often accompanied by a lack of adequate implementation in policy and practice [8, 37]. Thus, the World Bank's analysis shows: on the one hand, legislative activity in Kyrgyzstan is very progressive (in the ranking of laws affecting the status of women, the country leads in the region), and on the other hand, Kyrgyzstan is consistently among the most unsafe countries for women in Central Asia. Critical theory helps to understand how the «seeds» of gender inequality are rooted in public consciousness and how cultural attitudes push women towards dependency and impunity. Thus, the combination of legal analysis and criticism of discourses allows us to identify the gap between the rhetoric of official gender equality and real social practices.

The most important element of the region's gender policy philosophy is the concept of «traditional values». In many countries, it is emphasized that «a woman should obey a man», and any deviation from established roles is perceived as a threat to society. Thus, the draft of the new Constitution of Kyrgyzstan proclaims the education of youth in the spirit of «traditional cultural, spiritual-moral, and family values», which directly opposes feminist initiatives [7, 164]. As Kyrgyz activists note,

«in our realities, feminism does not fit into traditional values». Such a paradigm often justifies obstacles to women's emancipation: for example, in Tajikistan, the very term «feminism» is irritating, and it is proposed to replace it with other concepts so as not to «destroy traditions». Traditionalism in gender policy is often contrasted with the Western model of equality: according to one analytical review, the Soviet Union's gender policy was characterized by a declaration of equality «without considering religious and ritual traditions», which created contradictions with the Muslim culture of the region. Thus, the philosophy of gender policy in Central Asia is imbued with a dilemma between «traditionalism» (maintaining generally accepted roles and institutions) and «modernization» (introducing new gender practices).

Empirical examples

Let us consider specific cases and trends in each of the countries of the region. We note that after 1991, the gender policy of most Central Asian countries became more open to international recommendations (UN conventions), but at the same time, local cultural attitudes often dominate in domestic discourse.

- **Kazakhstan.** Kazakhstan's state policy is officially aimed at gender equality: in 2006-2016, according to the UN, the Gender Equality Strategy was in effect, which significantly expanded the legislative framework for equality. In particular, laws have been adopted on the equidistribution of family burden and social guarantees for mothers. President Nazarbayev signed two laws concerning women's rights only in 2009 – an event that many feminists consider a symbolic step and link to the desire to please international organizations on the eve of Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE. In 2015, Kazakhstan ratified the UN SDGs, and «gender-sensitive» goals appeared in national policy. Nevertheless, gender policy in Kazakhstan is often rhetorical. Activists note that patriarchal stereotypes in society remain powerful: the «breadwinner of the family» and «guardian of the hearth» model is still widespread. Indeed, the representation of women in politics and business is quite uneven: in 2017, Kazakhstan ranked 52nd in the global gender equality ranking, which the expert considers high, but these achievements are largely declarative [5, 617]. Expert's conclusion: «over 25 years, progress in gender equality has occurred, but it is incomplete», especially against the backdrop of persisting «patriarchal tendencies». From a philosophical perspective, the Kazakhstani model combines elements of institutionalized gender equality (quotas, programs) with a strong emphasis on «national values» and the traditional family. The new Constitution proposes to emphasize spiritual and moral education, which creates difficulties for feminist initiatives.

- **Uzbekistan.** During Islam Karimov's time in Uzbekistan, the topic of women was officially «raised to the level of state policy», including the establishment of women's committees and the adoption of laws against violence. After Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016-2018, gender policy gained new momentum: many laws (about 20 in 5 years) were adopted to protect women, such as laws on the prevention of domestic violence and the protection of children's rights. The official GEGI women's gender index ranking rose to 52nd place in 2024, with authorities

explaining this as «reforms and programs» to support women. In practice, however, activists warn against excessive trust in statistics: these indicators may reflect the «interference resistance» of data in authoritarian states. Among the specific initiatives is the educational project «Don't Be Silent» against sexism and violence. President Sh. Mirziyoyev publicly stated in 2018 that it was necessary to «implement the dreams and aspirations of women», and on his instructions, a «Oila» center was established to study family problems. On the other hand, the country's gender policy is often limited to the formal provision of motherhood and family, while traditional beliefs remain dominant: many Uzbeks believe that «a man is the head of the family», and the wife should consult with him when making important decisions. Despite the increase in the number of women in parliament (in 2024, 57 out of 150 deputies), analysts point out that this is more due to quotas than the real change in mentality [6, 121]. As in other countries, in Uzbekistan, the formal legitimization of equality is accompanied by strong conservative public pressure. Philosophically, this is manifested in the idea of «Eastern woman», whose rights were formally equated with men even during the Soviet era, but which in public consciousness is still associated primarily with family and domestic role.

- **Kyrgyzstan.** In Kyrgyzstan, gender policy after independence followed the path of legislative formalism and active civic participation. The Constitution proclaims equality, and the country has ratified major international pacts (CEDAW, etc.). In practice, legislation consistently abolishes discriminatory norms: for example, the new Labor Code (2025) abolished the lists of professions prohibited for women, leaving restrictions only for pregnant and nursing women. This was the result of a long-term campaign by NGOs (for example, #alljobs4allwomen) and international recommendations. At the same time, in 2024, Kyrgyzstan ratified the ILO Convention No. 190 on Combating Violence in the Workplace. Proponents of equality note the successful cooperation between the government and civil society: the Ministry of Labor announced the abolition of prohibited professions in 2022 [10, 71], and the Constitutional Court ordered the government to justify the remaining restrictions in 2023. However, specific social practices persist. This is most clearly manifested in the alakachuu (bride kidnapping) problem: according to researchers' estimates, 35-45% of married Kyrgyz women ended up marrying «against will» due to the tradition of kidnapping. Many government officials do not recognize alakachu as a violation, considering it a part of national identity. The degree of criminalization of this practice remains a subject of debate between traditionalists and human rights defenders. Politically, Kyrgyzstan is considered the most liberal country in Central Asia, and marches for women's rights in Bishkek are held regularly (for example, March 8, 2021). At the same time, new political projects are increasing emphasis on «spiritual and moral education» and «traditional values». The draft Constitution submitted to the referendum stipulated prohibitions on «events contrary to spiritual and moral values», which activists link to the possible impossibility of further feminist marches. Thus, in Kyrgyzstan, against the backdrop of a relatively developed women's movement, a

contradiction persists between progressive legislation (removal of labor restrictions, combating domestic violence) and deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes in society.

- **Tajikistan.** Here, gender initiatives experience the greatest difficulties. The society of Tajikistan, after the collapse of the USSR, returned to a rigid patriarchy: according to experts, «in the patriarchal society, to which the country returned after independence, there is no understanding of gender equality, including at the very top». Even the very word «feminism» in Tajikistan causes sharp rejection: female activists are regularly subjected to «bullying» and attacks. There is practically no mass women's movement here. At the same time, some positive norms were adopted: in 2013, the Family Violence Prevention Act (adopted with the participation of IWPR offices) was introduced, although it was criticized by experts as incomplete. NGOs and international organizations focus on supporting mothers and families, adjusting terminology («women and mothers», «family well-being» instead of «gender», «feminism») to avoid confrontation with religious and traditional elites. In other words, in Tajikistan, gender policy officially exists more within the framework of social support for the family and school programs, while women themselves often do not feel the real benefits of the declared equality. Feminism here is viewed by many as an «anti-family» ideology capable of «destroying traditions».

- **Turkmenistan.** The Turkmen leadership is declaratively advocating for gender equality (for example, the Law «On State Guarantees of Equal Rights of Women and Men» was adopted), and in 1997, the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was ratified. The state approach is based on plans and reports, such as the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2021-2025). However, the actual implementation of these documents remains closed to the public. According to UNFPA and UNDP, the situation with violence remains serious: approximately one in six married women aged 18-59 in Turkmenistan has experienced some form of violence, with 58% of women justifying violence by their partner due to their «traditional roles». There is practically no civil society in Turkmenistan, independent NGOs do not operate, and any gender initiatives go only «above» [1, 249]. The guidelines of international bodies (CEDAW) are regularly perceived as a recommendation to strengthen legislation, but real changes are hardly visible. Philosophically, Turkmen gender policy is approaching «traditionalism in the regime» – the state emphasizes the role of women in the family and the socialist achievements of the USSR (low birth mortality, etc.) [3, 94], however, the control system and lack of public discussion make gender rights inaccessible. For example, Turkmenistan's national report on CEDAW mentions norms on guarantees of equality, but in reality, most women are unable to identify or dispute discrimination or violence.

Challenges and challenges

Central Asian gender policy faces a number of common challenges. Dissonance between law and reality. In all countries of the region, there are norms of equality on paper, but in practice, the legislative framework often does not find effective application. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of Women has been ratified by the entire region, but the problem of domestic and sexual violence remains

systemic, as many women do not apply to the courts. Patriarchal resistance and «traditionalism». In all republics, patriarchal attitudes are penetrating public consciousness as «seeds of inequality» [2, 83]. Parents invest more in the education of their sons than their daughters; women psychologically justify violence as part of «women's destiny». Unfavorable political conditions. In countries with authoritarian regimes (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan), any public mobilization is weakened, and the discussion of gender issues is often considered an «unnecessary» Western topic. Activists may be subjected to harassment and censorship – as in the case of Niso Rasulova in Tajikistan or by Kazakhstani authorities when feminist actions face administrative bans (for example, interference with actions on March 8). Conflict of ideologies. On the one hand, all countries are officially declaring international values of equality; on the other hand, the rhetoric of «spiritual-moral» and «traditional» values is intensifying, which is often used to legitimize the priority of family over personal rights. As a result, feminism and left-wing gender initiatives are often presented as «foreign» or «threatening» to the foundations of society. The lack of an integrated approach [9, 198]. Many programs emphasize supporting motherhood and social protection of the family, but little attention is paid to other aspects – women's political representation, economic independence, etc. For example, in Kazakhstan, state documents link gender equality with strengthening family stability, which reflects a narrow understanding of the role of women.

Conclusion

The philosophy of gender policy in Central Asian countries demonstrates the complex interweaving of ideas from feminism, postcolonialism, critical theory, and traditionalism. In the region, there is a formal emphasis on gender equality (family stability, consolidation of society), which goes hand in hand with the strengthening of patriarchal norms in public consciousness. Post-colonial strategies and «national retrogradism» give rise to a peculiar East Asian variant of gender policy, where women's rights are declared by international conventions, but are implemented through the prism of «traditional values». Philosophical schools help to understand this phenomenon: feminism refers to the strategy of actively overcoming inequality, postcolonialism to the analysis of the heritage of empires and cultural narratives, critical theory to the identification of power structures and ideological control, traditionalism to the explanation of the role of community values.

The analysis showed that in each Central Asian state, there are both examples of positive development of gender policy (new laws, women's participation in governance) and serious challenges (harsh patriarchy, conservative environment, authoritarian restrictions). Thus, Kazakhstan promotes gender strategies and women's quotas while preserving strong family traditions; Uzbekistan is implementing reforms and creating state contacts with feminists, but patriarchal beliefs continue to dictate customs; Kyrgyzstan demonstrates an active civil society and progressive laws, although public opinion still sees feminism as a threat to traditions; Tajikistan is limited by pressure from elites demanding «to preserve traditions»; Turkmenistan

officially declares equality, but the gender issue remains a secret due to authoritarianism and cultural conservatism.

In the future, the issues of «gender policy philosophy» in Central Asia will require further development of local gender theories that take into account the post-colonial context and diversity of cultures. Scientific publications in this area should combine critical analysis and concrete empiricism, which will help develop ways to enhance gender equality that are adequate to the realities of Central Asia.

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