GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET OF UZBEKISTAN: BARRIERS, LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Khanifakhon Solikhova
British Management University in Tashkent &
Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh
MSc Graduate, International Management
ORCID: 0009-0008-9453-0294
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Abstract. Gender inequality in the labour market remains one of the most persistent structural challenges facing Uzbekistan's economic growth strategy. According to the International Labour Organization's most recent assessment (2025), women in wage employment in Uzbekistan earn between 25 and 35% less than men, with the gap measured at 31.7% at the mean and 35.7% at the median in 2022 — figures that have remained essentially unchanged since 2018 despite a comprehensive legislative reform programme. Drawing on the ILO's 2025 Gender Pay Gap report, the 2025 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, recent comparative academic research on occupational segregation in Central Asia, and national legislative sources, this paper examines the main aspects of gender inequality in Uzbekistan's labour market. The analysis reveals that although Uzbekistan's legal framework has been significantly strengthened since 2019, including the removal of restrictions on women's employment in numerous occupations and the introduction of anti-discrimination laws, the employment rate for women remains roughly half the male rate, occupational segregation continues, and there is no clear downward trend in the pay gap. Policy recommendations focus on enforcement methods, pay transparency, childcare infrastructure, and tackling the structural drivers of occupational segregation.

Keywords: gender inequality, labour market, Uzbekistan, gender pay gap, women in leadership, workplace discrimination, labour legislation, Central Asia, occupational segregation, human capital

Introduction

Gender equality in the workplace is an economic concern as well as a social justice one. Long-term growth and national economic output are negatively impacted by a labour market that routinely underutilises the productive potential of half of its workforce. It is from this perspective that Uzbekistan's gender gap warrants serious analytical attention, especially as the country pursues an ambitious economic modernisation plan that heavily relies on expanding labour productivity and workforce participation.

The scope of the challenge is significant. According to the International Labour Organization's most recent assessment, published in February 2025, the gender pay gap in Uzbekistan was 31.7% at the mean and 35.7% at the median in 2022. This means that women make between 64 and 68 tiyin for every Uzbek som earned by men. This figure is high by international standards, exceeding both the global average of roughly 20% and the norm for lower-middle-income countries [1]. Uzbekistan is ranked 110th out of 148 countries in the 2025 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, a decline from its prior ranking [2].

Uzbekistan's legal system formally prohibits gender discrimination in the workplace. The Constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women, the Labour Code explicitly forbids both direct and indirect sex-based discrimination, and two landmark laws adopted in 2019 — the Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men, and the Law on Protection of Women Against Harassment and Violence — introduced formal definitions of gender discrimination and mandatory gender impact assessment of new regulations [1]. However, there is still a significant gap between formal legal protection and labour market outcomes.

This paper explores the major aspects of gender inequality in Uzbekistan's labour market across three interrelated areas: the current scale of the pay and employment gaps, the legislative and policy framework that has evolved since 2019, and the structural and cultural factors that maintain inequality in spite of formal prohibitions. It is based mostly on the ILO's 2025 report, supplemented by recent comparative academic research and national legislative sources, and concludes with policy recommendations meant to bridge the gap between Uzbekistan's formal commitments and its labour market outcomes.

The Scale of the Gender Gap: Pay, Employment, and Occupational Segregation

The gender pay gap is the most quantifiable aspect of labour market inequality in Uzbekistan. Based on aggregate wage data from the National Statistics Agency and the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction, the ILO's 2025 analysis reveals that the gap is largest among prime-age workers (30–44 years old), reaching 35–40%, and narrows significantly among workers over 55. This is partially due to the fact that women who remain employed at older ages tend to be a positively selected, higher-earning group [1]. Additionally, there is a substantial correlation between the difference and industry. Traditionally female-dominated industries like health care and social services have the biggest gap, whereas male-dominated industries like construction and transportation have lower but still positive gaps. This pattern illustrates what the research refers to as a 'sector penalty' compounding a 'gender penalty': women are disproportionately employed in lower-paying industries, and they earn less than men.

The employment gap is, if anything, more noticeable than the pay gap. In 2022, men were over twice as likely to be employed as women, with a female employment rate of 37.2% compared to 69.3% for men. Crucially, this gap has not narrowed over the past decade; it increased from 28.9 percentage points in 2010 to 32.1 percentage points in 2022 [1]. According to a recent comparative study of occupational segregation across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, published in 2025, while Uzbekistan's Gini index of wage inequality decreased significantly between 2015 and 2024 (from 24.41 to 19.12), its Glass Ceiling Index — a measure of obstacles to women's advancement into senior roles — remained below the threshold associated with genuine parity, and that women's representation in leadership was the single strongest predictor of a reduced gender pay gap across all three countries studied [3].

Occupational segregation compounds both gaps. Women make up a small minority in construction, mining, and transportation, but they represent 76.6% of workers in health care and social services and 72.7% in education, two industries with very low wages. This pattern of horizontal segregation is a result of both cultural norms linking particular occupations with women, and, up until 2019, a clear legal prohibition on women's employment in 44 occupations deemed hazardous [1].

Legislative and Policy Reform Since 2019

Uzbekistan's policy reaction to gender inequality has been significant in scope, especially since 2019. The Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men introduced official definitions of direct and indirect gender discrimination and required mandatory gender impact assessment of new legislation. A major formal obstacle to women's access to higher-paying industrial roles was removed when the ban on women working in 44 hazardous occupations was replaced with a non-binding recommended list [1].

Women in Uzbekistan are entitled to 126 days of maternity leave, which is more than the 98-day minimum under ILO Convention No. 183. A major reform in 2022 introduced state-funded support equal to four times the minimum consumption budget, with employers covering only the remainder, partially addressing a long-standing source of indirect discrimination: the requirement that private employers fully fund maternity benefits, which had discouraged hiring of women [1].

Early childcare provision has expanded substantially: the number of preschool education institutions rose from 5,138 in 2016 to 29,420 in 2022, increasing coverage from around 15% to 68.3% of children aged three to six. Education and entrepreneurship support programmes that specifically target women — such as subsidised loans, university enrolment quotas, and IT sector training initiatives — have also significantly increased under the National Programme for increasing women's involvement in economic, political, and social life (2022–2026) [1]. Since the introduction of a 30% candidate quota in 2003, the percentage of women in parliament has increased to 32% in the lower chamber [1].

These improvements represent genuine institutional progress. However, formal legislative change has not yet resulted in a proportionate improvement in labour market outcomes, as evidenced by the persistence of a 31.7% pay gap and a nearly static employment gap throughout this reform period. This gap between policy and practice is similar to the pattern found in Uzbekistan's customs and trade facilitation reforms more broadly.

Structural and Cultural Barriers

Legislative change is insufficient to address the structural and cultural factors that underlie the statistical dimensions of gender inequality. The most significant of them is the disproportionate distribution of unpaid domestic and caregiving labour. According to estimates, 22% of Uzbek women's time is spent on household duties, compared to 9% for men[4]. The resulting 'motherhood pay gap' — the wage penalty related to childbirth and caregiving responsibilities — is a well-documented phenomenon internationally, and the ILO's analysis identifies it as a primary driver of the exceptionally substantial pay gap observed among prime-age Uzbek women [1].

The minimum wage, which is now equal to about 80 USD per month, is still too low in Uzbekistan to meaningfully compress the gender pay gap, despite being a potential equalising tool given the over-representation of women in lower-paid professions [1]. Collective bargaining has shown more promise: trade union-negotiated 'gender tables' in collective agreements, which require equal pay adjustments across occupations predominantly held by women and men respectively, were introduced from 2018 and have received positive reviews from the ILO Committee of Experts, though their coverage is still restricted to formally unionised enterprises [1].

Cultural attitudes regarding women in leadership present a further barrier that is more resistant to policy intervention than official legislative constraints. The persistence of traditional gender role expectations continues to influence hiring and promotion decisions despite improvements in legal protections, especially in the private sector, where formal gender reporting requirements are less strict than in state institutions [3][5]. Educational attainment does not explain the gap — women in Uzbekistan are well-represented at the tertiary level — indicating that the barrier is more likely to exist at the point of labour market entry and career progression rather than educational preparation.

Policy Recommendations

Interventions at the legislative, organisational, and cultural levels must be implemented concurrently in order to address gender inequality in Uzbekistan's labour market. These interventions must be maintained over a longer period of time than the reform programme has so far covered.

First, measures for pay transparency should be given top priority. In order to directly address the "unexplained" component of the pay gap that cannot be attributed to differences in education or experience, the ILO's own assessment suggests encouraging pay transparency at the enterprise level and supporting the adoption of gender-neutral job evaluation tools [1]. Second, the minimum wage and collective bargaining coverage should be expanded, drawing on the trade union 'gender table' concept that has already shown some effectiveness. Third, since caregiving responsibilities are the most direct structural constraint to women's participation in the labour force, continued investment in accessible, affordable childcare—building on the significant expansion already accomplished since 2017—remains crucial to closing the employment gap [1].

Fourth, the employment gap itself merits more direct policy attention than it has received thus far: while the pay gap has been the focus of recent analysis, the fact that the female employment rate is barely half the male rate, and has remained unchanged over the past ten years, indicates that interventions need to address barriers to labour force entry as well as conditions once women are employed. Finally, ongoing attention to women's representation in leadership and decision-making roles is necessary given the cross-country evidence that this factor is the strongest single predictor of a reduced gender pay gap [3].

Conclusion

In Uzbekistan's labour market, gender inequality is a structural issue with measurable economic consequences. The most recent data available, the ILO's 2025 assessment, indicates a pay gap of 31.7% and an employment gap that has increased rather than narrowed over the past ten years, despite the significant legislative reform program that has been in place since 2019 and represents genuine institutional commitment. This combination suggests that the gap between formal policy and the realities of the labour market remains the major obstacle.

According to the evidence reviewed in this paper, a consistent set of priorities include pay transparency, expanded collective bargaining coverage, ongoing childcare infrastructure investment, and direct attention to the employment participation gap rather than concentrating solely on pay differentials among those already employed. Progress on these fronts would improve both equity and measurable economic returns, given that closing gender gaps in labour force participation has been estimated by the World Bank to be capable of raising national income substantially while moving hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty [4].

Future research should expand on the ILO's 2025 report by securing access to individual-level survey data. This would enable the breakdown of the pay gap into its explained and unexplained components which is currently not feasible with the aggregate data available. This would provide future policy interventions with a more solid evidence base to focus on the precise reasons behind Uzbekistan's persistently high gender pay gap.

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