



CONFERENCE ARTICLE

Women's Leadership in the Mahalla System of Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the growing role of women in Uzbekistan's Mahalla (community self-governance) system from 2000 to 2016, emphasizing the impact of state reforms and gender policies initiated by the 2004 Presidential Decree "On Additional Measures to Support the Activities of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan." The study reveals how structural changes—such as the introduction of advisors on religious enlightenment and moral education—created new opportunities for women's engagement in community leadership. Statistical data demonstrate a steady increase in women's representation: from 12% in 2000 to 40% by 2016. The article highlights the contributions of exemplary female leaders who transformed Mahallas into active centers of civic participation and moral development. The analysis concludes that gender equality policies, social education, and institutional reforms have significantly strengthened women's leadership within local self-governing structures and advanced Uzbekistan's democratic governance.

KEYWORDS

Mahalla, women's leadership, gender equality, Uzbekistan, local self-government, social reforms, moral education

INTRODUCTION

Since Uzbekistan's independence, the Mahalla has evolved from a traditional community-based institution into a modern mechanism of local self-governance and civic participation. Among the most notable policy measures contributing to this transformation was the Presidential Decree of May 25, 2004, "On Additional Measures to Support the Activities of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan." Based on this decree, from July 1, 2004, the positions of "advisors on religious enlightenment and moral-ethical education" were introduced into the staff structure of citizens' assembly councils, replacing the previous roles of educators and pedagogues.

This reform aimed to empower experienced and respected women who could positively influence the spiritual and moral upbringing of youth, promote healthy lifestyles, and preserve national and religious traditions. Consequently, the introduction of these positions significantly increased women's participation in local self-government.

Between 2000 and 2016, women's representation in leadership roles within local governance steadily rose. In 2000, women accounted for only 12% of leadership positions, increasing to 35% by 2010 and reaching 40% by 2016. Moreover, the proportion of Mahalla leaders with higher education grew by 7% after the 2008 elections, while the number of female candidates rose from 12% in 2006 to 38% in 2008. Although only 8.7% of all Mahalla chairs were women at that time, 85% of advisory positions were held by women.

This progress reflects the broader social and political changes driven by the implementation of Uzbekistan's National Action Plan for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which followed the UN CEDAW recommendations. Training programs were organized for key target groups—

including government officials, law enforcement officers, Mahalla leaders, youth activists, and media representatives—to enhance awareness and gender sensitivity in community management.

Particularly since 2016, with the government's renewed focus on gender equality, the representation of women in decision-making and administrative roles has reached new levels, marking a significant step toward inclusive governance. The Mahalla institution thus continues to serve as a vital link between the state and civil society, embodying both the preservation of national traditions and the promotion of modern democratic values.

The early 2000s marked a turning point in Uzbekistan's policy toward gender equality and women's empowerment in public administration. According to the Presidential Decree of May 25, 2004, "On Additional Measures to Support the Activities of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan," significant reforms were initiated to enhance the role of women in social and spiritual spheres. Beginning on July 1, 2004, within the structure of citizens' assembly councils, the position of educator-pedagogue was replaced by a new role — Advisor on Religious Enlightenment and Moral-Ethical Education.

These advisors were to be selected from among the most respected, experienced, and socially active women who could positively influence the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and the preservation and development of national and religious traditions. The introduction of this position also contributed to the increasing number of women working in local self-government bodies.

Between 2000 and 2016, Uzbekistan underwent significant social, political, and economic reforms that led to a noticeable

rise in women's representation in leadership roles at the local level. In 2000, women accounted for only 12% of leadership positions in local self-government, while by 2010, the figure had risen to 35%, and by 2016, it reached 40%.

After the 2008 local elections, the proportion of mahalla chairpersons with higher education increased by 7%, and deputy chairs with secondary specialized education grew by 15%, reaching 53%. While only 12% of candidates in the 2006 elections were women, by 2008, their share had risen to 38%. However, women still constituted only 8.7% of the heads of citizens' assemblies, while 85% of advisors were women.

These data indicate that between 2010 and 2016, a range of socio-political factors contributed to the rise of women to leadership positions within the mahalla system. Following the 2004 Presidential Decree, reforms were implemented to increase women's political participation, and local administrations were encouraged to appoint more women as mahalla leaders.

In line with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Uzbekistan adopted a National Action Plan to promote gender equality. Under this plan, in 2006, training programs were launched for six key target groups: government officials, law enforcement officers, mahalla leaders, youth organization (Kamalot) activists, representatives of religious institutions, and media professionals.

These measures strengthened women's leadership skills and improved the effectiveness of local administration. Between 2000 and 2016, the proportion of women serving as mahalla chairs increased from 15% to 18%, with the highest representation recorded in the Khorezm, Andijan, Surkhandarya, and Bukhara regions.

Among the distinguished mahalla leaders was Anabibi Matkarimova, chair of the Al-Khwarizmi citizens' assembly in Urgench city. Known for her initiative and organizational skills, she earned the "El-Yurt Hurmati" (Respect of the Nation) order for her outstanding work in improving community life and promoting social welfare.

Another exemplary figure was Dilbar Muhammadova from Termez, who served as chair of the Paxtaobod rural citizens' assembly for several years. Working closely with local elders and activists, she played a key role in enhancing living conditions and social cohesion within her community.

Provincial Women's Committees, Mahalla Foundations, and the Department of Internal Affairs jointly organized a regional contest titled "The Best Advisor on Religious and Moral-Ethical Education" to encourage and promote the exemplary work of female mahalla advisors.

The period between 2016 and 2025 has witnessed a new stage in gender equality reforms, ensuring broader rights and opportunities for all women in Uzbekistan. Women's active participation in local self-governance and state administration has significantly strengthened their leadership role in decision-making processes. These developments have also contributed to the democratic evolution of society and to the consolidation of social justice and equality.

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