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Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Women's Representation and Participation in Politics in Uzbekistan from 1991 to 2023*

Meral Balcı**

Abstract

Uzbekistan enacted a new constitution and a series of laws after the proclamation of independence in 1991. The functioning of the new state in a democratic way was organized according to these laws. In this study, it was investigated whether the laws enacted had influence on women's participation and representation in politics along with democracy, and if so, in what ways they were applied. As the method of the study, a descriptive design with semi-structured interviews and document analyses was applied to obtain data for the triangulation of a mixed-method approach. The current situation and dynamics regarding women's participation and representation in politics were explored by analysing original governmental documents related to Uzbek Constitution and by conducting semi-structured interviews with nine Uzbek citizens. As the results exhibited, it was seen that women in Uzbekistan were represented in the politics as mentioned in the laws. However, as the data analysis indicated the so-called representation and participation of women in Uzbekistan remained on the surface level. Depending on the reported results, it could be stated that the representation and participation were limited and not efficient and actively implemented in the real-life context.

Keywords

Uzbekistan, constitution, law, women, representation, participation, politics.

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1991'den 2023'e Özbekistan'da Kadınların Siyasette Temsili ve Siyasete Katılımı*

Meral Balcı**

Öz

Özbekistan'ın 1991 yılında bağımsızlığını ilan etmesinin ardından yeni bir anayasa yapıldı ve bir dizi yasa çıkarıldı. Yeni devletin demokratik bir şekilde işleyişi bu yasalara göre örgütlendi. Bu çalışmada, çıkarılan yasaların kadınların demokrasiyle birlikte siyasete katılımı ve temsili üzerinde etkili olup olmadığı ve eğer öyleyse hangi yollarla uygulandığı araştırılmıştır. Çalışmanın yöntemi olarak, karma yöntem yaklaşımının üçgenleştirilmesi için veri elde etmek amacıyla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ve belge analizleri içeren tanımlayıcı bir tasarım uygulanmıştır. Kadınların siyasete katılımı ve temsil edilmesine ilişkin mevcut durum ve dinamikler, Özbek Anayasasına ilişkin orijinal hükûmet belgeleri analiz edilerek ve 9 Özbek vatandaşıyla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılarak incelenmiştir. Sonuçlar ortaya çıktıkça, Özbekistan'daki kadınların yasalarda belirtildiği gibi siyasette temsil edildiği görülmüştür. Bununla birlikte, veri analizinde belirtildiği gibi, Özbekistan'da kadınların sözde temsili ve katılımı yüzey seviyesinde kalmıştır. Rapor edilen sonuçlara bağlı olarak sunum ve katılımın sınırlı olduğu, etkin olmadığı ve gerçek hayat bağlamında aktif olarak uygulandığı ifade edilebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Özbekistan, anayasa, hukuk, kadın, temsiliyet, katılım, politika.

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Introduction

The representation of women in politics began to be emphasized all over the world. Uzbekistan is one of the countries that attach importance to women's representation and participation in politics. A series of reforms were enacted for the representation of women in politics democratically with the new Uzbek Constitution after being independent. The purpose of the study is to explore how the laws are implemented to establish the democratic ascendancy of women's representation in Uzbekistan and focuses on researching the role of women in politics. Therefore, the questions of the study are: 1) What are the constitutional laws related to women's representation and participation in politics? 2) How much are these laws implemented and practiced according to the reported answers? 3) Were the women reported that they were effective in politics?

This study is significant in many ways; after the collapse of the USSR, newly established liberated states adopted their own constitutions. In a democratic state, the laws written in constitutions are implemented in daily life in practice. Therefore, what is written in theory, here in the laws, must overlap practice. This study aims to investigate how much the laws are enforced in practice in Uzbekistan in particular since there are a few studies on this topic and this study is one of them.

Background to the Study

Women's participation, representation, and reaching opportunities and overall gender equality in every field have been measured and analyzed in the Global Gender Gap Report which was first published by the World Economic Forum in 2006. With a ratio of 25, political empowerment is the area where women are severely underrepresented around the world ("Global Gender"). Although there is no direct data about political empowerment in Uzbekistan in the mentioned report, Tursunova and Azizova (113), stated that Uzbek women had aimed to acquire equal rights for men and women.

Improving the political system is connected to processes of democratic innovation within society and necessitates a compact modernization and integration into a globalized world (Rakhimov 6). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the socio-political condition in all former-Soviet countries in Central Asia and specifically in Uzbekistan was characterized by a gradual transformation in the path to establish democratic regimes.

To reach this goal, it was necessary to promulgate a new constitution. Therefore, the constitution of Uzbekistan was adopted on 8 December 1992, superseding the constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan of 1978. The new constitution separated powers among a strong presidency, the legislature, Oliy Majlis, and a judiciary (Salimov 2). Since then, the President has become the head of state, granted supreme executive power by the constitution, and empowered to appoint a full cabinet of ministers. The President also has had the power to form and dissolve the parliament.

During the transition period, women's participation and representation in politics in Uzbekistan had fallen sharply from 36% to 6%. With the new constitution, women's rights pertaining to being represented and then participating in politics that had previously been implemented during the Soviet regime were enhanced. Although women's representation in politics dropped after the proclamation of Independence, it was rectified by presidential decrees following the enactment and promulgation of the new constitution. Women's participation in society is limited by gender perspectives, although in Uzbekistan, as in traditional societies that consider men as the main economic providers (Taşkın, "Political Representation" 165), there are official decrees favouring women's participation in politics ("Women's political"); Tursunova and Azizova 132).

This study aims to analyze how the representation and participation of women in politics in Uzbekistan within the constitution, and whether the law corresponds with practice. It also analyzes whether there is any gap between the theory and the practice.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the laws related to the topic were examined to investigate how they were implemented. *Representation* is the key factor in this study as women were required to take part in the Parliament to enable their voices to be heard. The active involvement of women in politics can be realized and defined by *Participation*. As for the concept of *women's participation*, it is accepted as the process related to women's engagement in economic and political institutions by participating in policy-making bodies, bureaucracies, and representative organization. Based on this research,

Conway's (232) conceptual framework was taken into consideration. His definition of *political participation* of women as "… activities of citizens that attempt to influence the structure or government, the selection of government authorities, or the policies of government" was used as a base in the study.

Theoretical Framework

There have been a broad body of studies conducted in this field as in Taşkın ("Political Representation" 168), Mee (10), Prillaman (68), Kadirkhanova. A great deal of that is examined in this research. One of these in the literature which was briefly mentioned is Soledad Artiz Prillaman, who shows in her theoretical analysis that there is a relationship between women's representation in the domestic sphere and their representation in the political arena (Prillaman 70). Taşkın ("Political Representation" 165-67) argues that not only domestic institutional factors such as electoral and party system, women's grassroot movements and cultural norms have significant impact on female representation, but that country's adoption of international norms determines its gender policy (Taşkın, "Cherry-Picking" 134). In addition, as Kadirkhanova, noted the increasing influence of women in the political, economic and social spheres will be reflected in all fundamental aspects of society.

This study is far from being primarily theoretical. On the contrary, it firstly collects data and attempts to evaluate these data through empirical questions it poses. The most important criterion in this paper is essentially the fundamental constitutional framework drawn for women's participation in political life in Uzbekistan. In other words, rather than conducting an analysis based on normative aspirations based on existing theoretical frameworks such as feminism, this study questions to what extent laws and regulations regarding women's participation in the country are actually implemented in real life.

Review of the Related Literature

Women's representation and participation in politics have been studied by many academicians and politicians. Not only books or articles but country briefing papers, such as Women and Men of Uzbekistan 2007-2010, Women's political participation and leadership, and reports of NGO's have

been valuable source of the literature. Official documents released by Uzbek Government are other sources that contributed to this study. Therefore, primary sources used in this paper are official documents revealed from the government's websites, the national legislative database, secondary data from the State Statistics Committee, and data obtained from publications on this subject. One of the reports was written by Mee (15) on the status of Women in Uzbekistan. She analysed the percentage and effectiveness of women in Uzbek Parliament. Other articles dealing with the topic have investigated the role and effects of women in politics. In a similar context, Tursunova and Azizova (115) studied women's progress and their political participation in Uzbekistan. As the issue of *Women's representation and participation* had been discussed a lot, a number of books and articles were written on this topic. They were mostly written by academicians and authors in democratic countries. For instance, in Curtis's book country profile can be found; whereas Conway (232), wrote about "Women and Political Participation". In their article Bridging the gap between de jure and de facto parliamentary representation of women in Africa, Thabane and Buthelezi (178) pointed out the gap between the theory and reality. Equal representation and participation of men and women in policymaking are important for strengthening the democracy (Thabane and Buthelezi 178). Tursunova and Azizova (115) mentioned empowerment of women in their article named "Women's progress in Uzbekistan: Political Participation".

Background of the Status of Women

The basic principles and laws of a nation determine the duties of the government and guarantee certain rights to the people in constitutions. Following the independence, 1991 constitution was adopted in 1992 on the 11th session of the Supreme Council of Uzbekistan by replacing 1978 constitution. When Uzbekistan was a member of the Soviet Union, the name of the parliament was the Uzbek Supreme Soviet. Before gaining its independence in 1980, there were 510 members of the Uzbek Supreme Soviet and 35% of them were women; in 1985, there were again 510 members and 36% of them were women (Nohlen et al.). The last election in the Uzbek Supreme Soviet was held in 1990. There were 500 members and 9% of them were women, and the Communist Party of Uzbekistan

won the elections (Curtis). During the Soviet term, women's representation in the parliament was higher as it was a transformation period.

Following the independence in 1991, this proportion dropped drastically to 9%, and then 6% due to the change of the system of the government and the establishment of institutions of the new system. A year later, in independent Uzbekistan, İslam Karimov was elected as the first President of Uzbekistan in the same year. Then, series of changes in government institutions and administrations launched. Firstly, Uzbekistan declared 1991 as the "Year of Women". Emphasizing the importance of women's participation in politics and encouraging them to apply for leading positions are indicators of the construction of a democratic state. In 1994 the Supreme Soviet was replaced by the parliament and, in the elections held in the same year the number of members dropped to 250, which meant the percentage of women in parliament was only 6% (Nohlen et al.; "The Beijing"; "25 Years").

After Uzbekistan had chosen a democratic path of development, it confirmed its commitment to the ideals of democracy and recognized the priority of the universally accepted rules of international law ("Initial reports"). In 2002 referendum, a bicameral parliament consisting of a lower house (the Oliy Majlis), and an upper house (Senate) was set up. Two years later, in 2004 elections, the percentage of women in parliament increased to 17,50%, and 15% in the senate ("Elections to … 2009").

Five years later, in the 2009 Parliamentary elections, the percentage of women in parliament increased to 19,80%, and 15% in the senate as it was in previous elections. As in the 2011 Report of the ADB, Uzbekistan had a higher proportion of women in politics than over 80% of the countries that have no quotas, considering that it has the lowest proportion of women in parliament with a legislated candidate quota in 2011. In addition, some presidential decrees were revealed in the following years. As a result of this, in the Statistical Bulletin of 2012, it was clearly stated that the percentage of women's representation in the Oliy Majlis from 2007 to 2010 had risen from 17.50% to 19.80% ("Women and men"). In the 2014 elections, while the percentage of women in parliament dropped to 16%, it increased by 17% in the Senate. The reason why this change happened was that the President's wish to give more chances to women in the parliament as it was in the Soviet term ("Elections to … 2014"). In 2016, the first Uzbek president Karimov

died. Three months later, Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected as the country's second president. One year later, Mirziyoyev changed most of Karimov's officials and employed *new, young people who love their country*, as he said, in the government and altered many of his predecessor's policies ("Message from").

Uzbekistan also adopted many international agreements and conventions that confirm women's rights, such as the Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men in 2019 ("Women's political") and, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2000 ("Convention on"). One of the important step taken by the Uzbekistan government was the 30% quota of women in political parties, which provided equal conditions for candidates to participate in election campaigns (Article 20(2) of the Election..). Implementing a one-third quota helped more women be elected in Uzbekistan than it was before. Moreover, on the official site of the National Center for Human Rights of the Republic of Uzbekistan, women's rights are defined as *the Rights that strengthen the socio-economic, ivil and political status of women*. (Women's rights.). Moreover, the institution called "Deputy Prime Minister of Women's Affairs" was established to improve the position of women. Moreover, a parliamentary commission was set up to speed up the implementation of gender-related policies in 2019 ("A committee on women".). In the last report of OCSE on Uzbekistan ("ODIHR Election Observation"), it was pointed out that women were underrepresented in public and political life. Only 16% of the outgoing legislative chamber and 17% of the Senate members were women. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, parties raised the proportion of women candidates from 32% in the 2014 parliamentary elections to 41% (310 women candidates), which showed a significant percentage increase (Figure 2) ("OSCE Project").

In 2020, the government launched a program to improve women's socio-economic lives which would provide grants for women to have vocational training and entrepreneurial skills ("On the state"). In this way, representations of a new *Uzbek woman* in the mass media, popular culture and art overcame existing stereotypes (Mee 25). Therefore, with President Mirziyoyev's desire to modernize the country, Uzbekistan has had improvements in not only the economic but political areas as well since

2017 (Salimov 3). Uzbekistan also took 45th place among the countries in the international ranking of the Inter-Parliamentary Union of the World in 2021 ("The role of women"). What's more, in 2022, to improve the status of women, a national forum in Tashkent on the topic of the role of women parliamentarians in the development of Uzbekistan was held which released women's representation and participation was equal to the UN recommendations by 32%.

Female Deputies in the Parliament

The underlying rationality of the reasons why particular parties were chosen was related to their continuity in taking part in elections and being able to enter the parliament. The political parties analyzed in this context were listed below (Table 1). Political parties in Uzbekistan have reserved a 30% national quota for female election candidates since 2004 ("Election Code"). Likewise, women's proportion in parliament rose from 16% to 32% during 2016- 2020. The women's percentage reached only 3.03% in ministerial positions in 2020. Contrary to the number of women in the parliament, there is still only one woman minister in the parliament, the Minister of Education in 2023 ("Election Code").

Table 1
Rate of Female Deputies in the Parliament According to the Political Parties in Uzbekistan

Name of the Parties	2003	2005	2007	2010	2014	2019
Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan	28,3	33,1	35,0	36,6	19,3	26,4
Democratic Party of Uzbekistan	40,0	45,6	36,8	47,5	16,7	14
Justice Social Democratic Party of Uzbekistan "Adolat"	30,0	38,0	43,6	48,6	10	54
People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan	32,2	34,2	40,0	40,7	18,6	50
Ecological Party of Uzbekistan	-	-	-	-	6,7	26,6

Source: The table is compiled by the author from the official site of the parliament ("Women and men of Uzbekistan"); ("Female Deputies").

As is seen from the table above, the Justice Social Democratic Party of Uzbekistan has the highest rate of women deputies with a rate of 54% in 2019. The party with the lowest percentage is the National Revival Party with a rate of 14%. When it was asked to the woman deputy from the Justice Social Democratic Party, she said that their party, that they gave much more importance to the human, especially women's rights. We can conclude from these numbers in three elections that the percentage of women is increasing, especially in the parties on the left-wing, which give more chances to women than the right-wing parties. To sum up, not only the numbers in representation in policy but also women's participation in politics have been improving.

Content of the Laws Related to Women's Rights

It was vital to determine the relevant laws since the aim of this research was to analyze if the Laws related to women's representation and participation in politics coincided with the constitution. Thus, Laws in the constitution related to women, are listed in the table below.

Table 2
The Articles Related to Women and Equal Rights in the Uzbek Constitution

Number of the Law	Chapter	Article	Content of the Law
1	15	91	The number of **women** shall **not be less than thirty percent** of the total number of candidates for deputies of local Kengashes from political parties.
2	13	70	The number of **women** should **be at least thirty percent** of the total number of candidates nominated by a political party.
3	10	46	**Women** and men shall have **equal rights**.
4	8	41	All registered candidates shall have **equal rights**.
5	5	18	All citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall have **equal rights** and freedoms, and shall be equal before law without discrimination by sex, race, nationality, language, religion, social origin, convictions, individual and social status.

6	3	22	Provide **equal conditions** for candidates to participate in election campaign
7	3	14	Provide **equal conditions** of participation at the elections for candidates to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and candidates to deputy of the Legislative Chamber
8	3	11	Election commissions take the necessary measures to ensure **equal conditions** for candidates and political parties to conduct the election campaign

Source: The table is compiled by the author from the official site of the parliament, ("Election Code"); ("Constitution of the Republic")

The table above revealed the chapters, articles, and content of the laws connected to the topic. Nearly all articles emphasized that the legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan aims to ensure the principles of equal rights and equal opportunities for women as well as men. Firstly, as it is clearly seen in the table above, it was declared in Article *18(5)* of the constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan that "All citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall have equal rights and freedoms and shall be equal before the law, without discrimination by sex, race, and …..," and in Article *46(10)* of the constitution ("Constitution of the Republic"). Articles *14(3)* and *41(8)* of the Election Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan state that "all registered candidates shall have equal rights*"*. It was also written in Articles *91(15)* and *70(13)* that "the number of women shall not be less than 30% of the total number of candidates for deputies of local kengashes" political parties to increase and improve women's role in society and politics ("Election Code"). To sum up, the words "women and equal rights*"* are seen in 8 articles, however, only articles *91* and *70* are about women's representation in politics. Therefore, only these 2 articles were related to our topic. Thus, this paper mostly focused on these articles and their implementations.

Method

The method of this study is descriptive at the first place, and employs qualitative techniques dominantly however, to compare the results for the reliability of the research, quantitative techniques were also employed. Therefore the method of the study can be described as a mixed-method approach which simply refers to answering research questions using qualitative and

quantitative data. Both qualitative and quantitave type of data has its shortcomings, and by using a mixed methods approach a researcher is able to generate a clearer overall picture. The reason why the study needed a mixed method is to find out how the laws related to the topic, and how they were implemented in practice and to what extent they were used. Furthermore, for researchers in the field, the process of gathering evidence to support the required data, whether quantitative or qualitative can differ in how they were designed and implemented (Leech et al. 30).

Data Collection Process

This research was conducted in Tashkent between March and August 2023. The obtained data were recorded by taking notes during the interviews. The research was built on in-depth semi-structured interviews, and data interpretation and analysis (Appendix A). Therefore, the study benefited from the data obtained from the interviews with some women politicians working for the Oliy Majlis in Uzbekistan and somehow involved in politics. At this point, establishing a trust-based conversation with the interviewees was crucial since they didn't want to be misunderstood and judged in their society later, which was the most important limitation of the study. Therefore, to give them a safe zone, it was promised that their names would be anonymized if they demanded. In this way, participants would give accurate answers and information to the questions. Although the questions were prepared before the interview, the pre-determined questions were not strictly followed, which changed the way the interview since it would mostly focus on *why and how* questions.

Participants

The participants in this study are 9 Uzbek politicians and academicians including 7 females and 2 males who were chosen through convenient sampling. They are approximately at the age of 45 and have at least masters degree. One of the most important indicators that shows most of the Uzbek female politicians' characteristic feature is that the level of their education. One interviewee pointed out and I have also found out that all female members of the parliament, have at least a bachelor's degree. Most of them also have master's degrees and doctorates and specialized in certain subjects. The interviewees were chosen among people who had the opportunity

to observe and monitor the policy in the country. The interviewees were representatives of different regions and parties in Uzbekistan. Therefore, they knew and experienced the difficulties that women faced both in politics and social life. The politicians were from Oliy Majlis and the Senate; academicians were studying Law and International Law; and an influential civil servant and a member of an NGO.

Table 3
Information of Participants

Participant	Gender	Education	Expert	Occupation
P1	F	PhD	Oriental Studies	Institute of Oriental Studies
P2	F	PhD	Lawyer	Member of the Faculty of Law
P3	F	PhD	Lawyer	Member of the Faculty of Law
P4	F	BA	Gender	Permanent member of the Committee on Women and Gender Equality at Oliy Majlis
P5	F	BA	Gender	Head of the Committee on Women and Gender Equality at Oliy Majlis
P6	F	MA	Gender	Advisor on Gender Issues, Chairperson of the Mass Media Foundation
P7	F	PhD	Gender	Member of the Legislative Chamber of Oliy Majlis
P8	M	PhD	Lawyer	Member of the Faculty of Law
P9	M	PhD	Lawyer	Member of the Faculty of Law

Source: The table is compiled by the author

Data Analysis

The manual data analysis was employed in this research. I first read the documents, then related words and key words were grouped. All of the words were categorized.

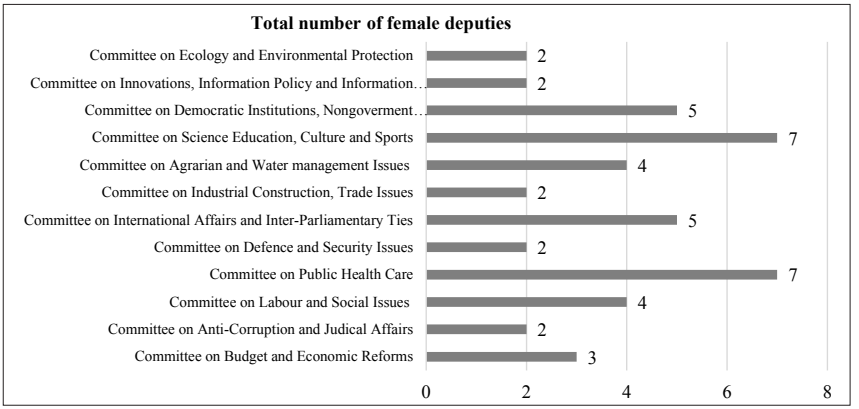
Findings

Findings from Documents

When analyzing the role of female in politics, it was seen that 100% of female senators have been working in the committees in the parliament as is seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Total Number of Female Senators Working on Different Committees in 2020



Source: The table is compiled by the author from the official site of the parliament ("Members of the Legislative").

The interviewees stated that women politicians are mostly effective in the Committee on Women and Gender Equality in Oliy Majlis. Two interviewees were from these committees and told about their work to improve women's position in society and that their suggestions had value in the government. However, these are not enough and convincing testimonials for an analysis to explain the effectiveness of women politicians. As Mee (10) stated, women's level of representation and participation in political parties, in the Parliament, in the Cabinet of Ministers, in local authorities, and also in diplomatic institutions should be closely monitored to ensure that the staff in any institution is not less than 30%. Mee (10) also suggested that leadership programs and legal literacy programs were important in terms of women's political participation.

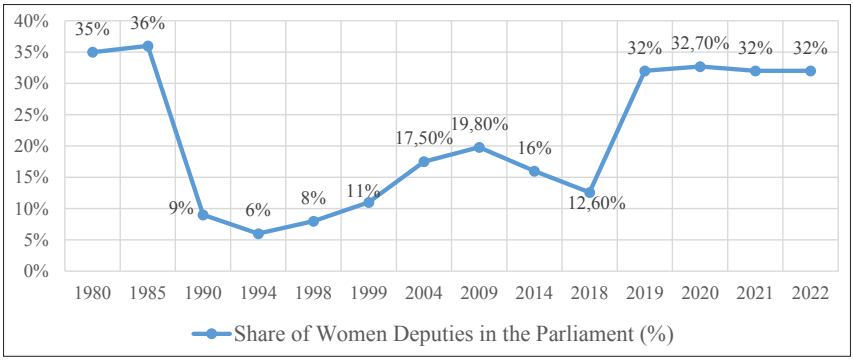
Findings from Interviews

After completing the interviews, the data collected from the interviewees were grouped. As a result of these it was seen that women face unseen barriers to playing a role in politics whereas Uzbekistan has taken some very important strategic steps to develop women's role and position in politics. As most of the interviewees said, even though women took part in parliament, the most important tasks were appointed to men since the idea of women's first duty was at home. The answers given by the interviewees showed some similarities and differences on this subject (for the interview questions see Appendix A), such as; The question about the political participation of women *(Q1)* was answered as it was not easy to take part in politics as a woman; on the other hand, two interviewees who are senators' answered as opposite. The question about women politicians' role in politics in Uzbekistan *(Q2)* was again answered as in *Q1*. Nearly all answers given by the civil servant or members of the parliament were like official discourse. When they were asked about their duties in their parties *(Q3)* and if the number of women deputies of their political party in the Oliy Majlis increased/ decreased after 2000 *(Q4),* it was seen that their answers coincided with *Figure 1* (Total Number …) and *Table 2 (*Rate of Women Deputies ..). It should be noted that interviewees other than civil servants and members of the parliament explained exactly the opposite ideas. The answers given to other questions were the same. Another key factor that helped women's position to improve is the president's daughter, Saida Mirziyoyeva, who is called as "the voice of women" in gender issues, she had a huge influence on Uzbek policy for the adoption of some laws in favour of women (interviewee P3).

As in *Table 1*, women interviewees were chosen according to their status in the parliament, senate, and other governmental institutions since their thoughts and points of view were crucial. Therefore, as a woman and a politician if they face any difficulties because of their gender, how they are treated in the Majlis, and if their rights are granted under the law are important points which require further attention. At this point, the data could only be obtained from woman politicians. Therefore, when these questions were asked to high-educated, woman politicians experienced in gender issues, they replied using nearly the same words, which they had no limitations and barriers in participation and representation in politics.

Here it should be noted that as in other Turkic countries in Uzbekistan, women are appreciated as long as they are expected to cope with the overall house chores which were considered women's primary duty. However, when these questions were directed to highly educated, academics knowlegable in Uzbek Law, said that even the government supported women to participate in politics and made law for this, a 30% quota, there was an unwritten rule which was about women's first responsibility was towards to their families as a wife and a mother, then politics, which refrain women from participating actively in politics. They added that most women did not become aware of the importance of their participation in the decision-making process. Most of them were used to accepting men as the representatives of their families and even did not attend any decision-making processes in their neighbourhoods. Mee (10), speaks of the need to give such women a higher profile to counter conservative tendencies that promote patriarchal gender structures that define women primarily as wives and mothers. She also pointed out that women with a career need to be made aware of the need to encourage young women to seek recognition and positions in public, political, and economic spheres. It was explained in Social Development Policy Briefs of ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) that "..the traditional patriarchal context that prescribes rigid gender roles" is one of the reasons why women are rarely elected to parliament ("Women's political") When talking about the rates of women in the parliament, as is seen in the graph below, except for the term of being an independent country following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the percentage of women in the parliament declined sharply by 16% in 2014 and, 12,6% in 2018 from 19,8% in 2009 elections. However, it started increasing after 2019.

Figure 2
The Proportion of Women in the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis



Source: The table is compiled by the author from the official site of the parliament ("Elections to … 2014"). The Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) – Uzbekistan ("Elections to … 2009"); ("Social life"); Mee (10).

When the causes of this decrease were asked the interviewees, they listed the reasons as follows: First, quota system for women abolished in the 1980s, which caused a sharp decline in the number of women in Parliament and other decision-making positions. Then, the death of former President Karimov in 2016 affected the mechanism of the government. Three interviewees pointed out, the new government, new system, elections, and new candidates were the challenges that Uzbekistan came across. They also added that there must have been a lack of organization while altering new institutions in this transition period. More men were nominated during the elections. Another comment coming from interviewees was that Russian-educated women deputies gradually left the post, and nominating new candidates took time in this case. When the interviewees were asked about the dynamics of the increase in the percentage of women to 32% in the 2019 elections, they enumerated the reasons as follows: Woman politicians working for gender equality in Oliy Majlis and the Senate, and academicians studying Law at Uzbek Universities pointed to President Mirziyoyev's policy of empowering women. Other interviewees shared the same ideas adding that women's increased self-confidence also led to this increase.

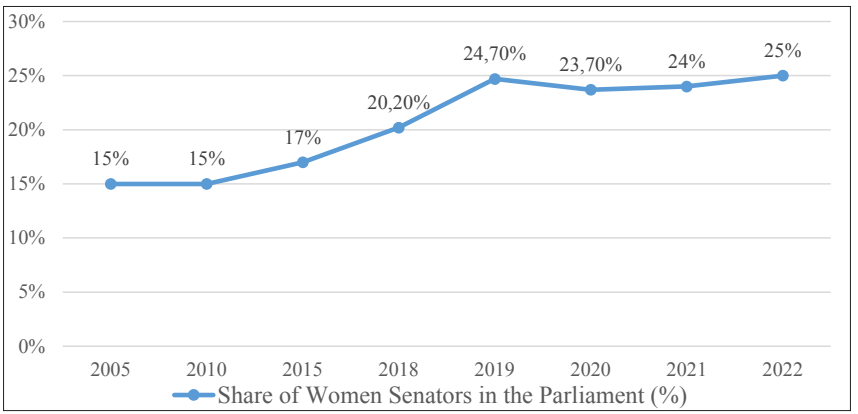
Women interviewees aged between 45 and 60 responded to the questions as if they were making the government's official statement; *Women in*

Uzbekistan have been given more chance to be represented and encouraged to participate in politics than before (P4, P5). On the other hand, the younger one disagreed with them; *it is just on paper, women in the Majlis just hold their hands to say yes to the proposals, that's all. She also added, what women politicians said are not taken seriously (P1).* This limitation in practice shows while descriptive representation is increasing, the substantive side of women representative remained weak.

At the beginning, the new administration might have wanted to have a positive image and recognition among the other democratic countries in order to engage in the international arena since gender equality is one of the vital prerequisite factors to be accepted as a democratic country. Moreover, they might have wished for improving access to the international community and, wanted to change the image of Uzbekistan that there was no transparency. Another factor that the interviewees pointed out was that the more equal rights, the more democratic a country was. Therefore, becoming a member of international organizations might have been easier for Uzbekistan. The last reason mentioned in the interviews was that President Mirziyoyev's wife and daughter's effect. They are well-educated and active women in countless activities, especially on gender issues. They might have had a positive influence on the government to take some democratic steps including gender equality. In such an atmosphere, before the 2019 elections, President Mirziyoyev criticized all political parties for not nominating more women in the 2014 elections during the president's speech at the 20th plenary session of the Senate. Therefore, after the 2019 parliamentary elections, the proportion of women candidates increased to 41% from 32%.

Figure 3

The Proportion of Women in the Senate of the Oliy Majlis from 2005 to 2020



Source: The table is compiled by the author from the official site of the parliament ("Members of the Legislative").

The number and proportion of women senators were the same between 2005-2010 (15%) whereas it started to rise to 17% in 2015 and 23,70% in 2020. The rate is 25% at the moment. The number of senators in the Senate was 100 and, 84 of them were elected, 16 of them were appointed by the President. However, with the new referendum on April 30, 2023, number of members was reduced to 65 from 100 to increase the effectiveness of the Senate by administrative reforms.

Conclusions

As the documents showed, women's political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for genuine democracy. It facilitates women's direct engagement in public decision-making. Uzbekistan has made progress in women's representation and participation in political fields. Women's representation in the parliament has been guaranteed with a quota by law and the constitution. Although the Uzbek government has implemented a number of policies that encouraged gender equality in all aspects of life, these policies have not always been effectively implemented or enforced. Before the quota was implemented, women were represented in parliament, but the percentage was not as high as it is now. Even in Soviet terms, women were represented in high ratios. Women are still underrepresented, and they

haven't reached the critical plurality of 30% representation yet, which is necessary for women to have an effective role in decision-making and in politics. Even with President Mirziyoyev's promising action to address the lack of women's rights in Uzbekistan, men have still dominated government positions for years.

It can be said that gender inequality in Uzbekistan is persistent, and changing attitude towards women in every aspect of life is quite difficult since it is not easy to change the cultural background of a country where women have not been given more or at least equal rights and freedom than men. Nevertheless, it should be noted that some steps on this issue have been taken in both the present and the new constitution.

It is confirmed in this study that the opportunities and processes of representation and participation in politics in Uzbekistan vary for women and men. That's why even though the percentage of female parlamentarians' representation has compiled with what is written in the constitution, in reality, they are not as powerful as male politicians. To illustrate, in the Uzbek Parliament, there is only one female minister, while the number of male ministers is 20. Therefore, it can be concluded that even the ratio of representation is high, the quality of the weight of representation is not. Although the right to political participation for women is provided by the national legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, there is no considerable growth in women's participation in formal political structures. Contrary to accomplished and experienced women who could be role models for younger women, the conservative and patriarchal structure of society and culture defines women primarily as wives and mothers, which keeps women from being recognized and accepted as powerful as men in politics.

In conclusion, Uzbekistan might have made progress toward women's political rights in percentage since 2016. However, an increase in percentage does not mean that women's representation and participation in politics, public life, and decision-making improved. As a result of this, women's representation at all levels of government, as stated in the constitution, was prompted to end gender-based discrimination in politics. However, there is still a gap between de jure and de facto in women's representation and participation in politics in practice.

Implications

This study was a limited-scale research and therefore it needs to be improved and generalized to a greater number of observations of women politicians and exploration of practices of law related to women participation to reach more accurate data and how much the theory was practised and, reveal more findings to compare the ones presented in this study. As a small-scale research, the study suggests some implications for researchers as follows: 1. Questioning is a highly prestigious research skill which requires a well planned inquiry. Therefore, a very careful planning is required if a great scale research is conducted this is quite significant. In planning stages, researchers can prepare questions that completely analyze the content of Laws and implementation in practice. 2. There should be a variety of questions to be used during the interviews. Researchers should integrate all types of questions as much as possible. 3. Interviewers should try to lead interviewees to higher-level answering processes and ask them as many demanding questions as possible to obtain accurate answers.

As indicated from this research, political participation has been achieved in terms of women's visibility. Therefore, the next steps could be more democratic and effective participation. If women take more roles in real terms, their competence and effectiveness will be higher.

Ethical approval and consent

An ethics approval letter was obtained from Westminster International University in Tashkent on April 5, 2023 (RO/06-01-0056) for the implementation of the interviews in accordance with the principles of qualitative research, and the study was carried out in accordance with the principles of social sciences. The written informed consent of the people we interviewed was obtained to record the information given in writing and to publish the information in the article, and they took part in the study by stating their names without specifying their surnames.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

APPENDIX A: The interview questions

Q1. Do you think it is easy to take part in politics as a woman in your country?

Q2. Do you think women politicians play an important role in Uzbekistan?

Q3. What kind of duties do you have in your party?

Q4. Did the number of women deputies of your political party in the Oliy Majlis increase or decrease after the 2000s? Can you explain why?

Q5. What's your opinion about the women's branch in your political party? Do women parliamentarians explain their thoughts freely?

Q6. Are there any written/unwritten rules/ norms for women in the majlis?

Q7. What do you consider the biggest gap in the law (in theory) and the practice in participation and representation in politics?

Q8. The Uzbek Constitution has a mandatory (rule) of a 30% quota for women deputies. Do you think this mandatory quota meeting contributes positively to women's participation in politics in Uzbekistan?

Q9. What do you think about the government's attitude towards women's existence in politics?

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