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GENDER EQUALITY: THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

Background: Women’s equal participation in decision-making is both a requirement of human rights law and a condition of good governance and sustainable development. Worldwide, women remain under-represented in parliaments, governments and corporate leadership. Since 2019 Uzbekistan has adopted a set of legal and institutional measures aimed at increasing the number of women in leadership.

Aim: The article analyses the legal framework and practical measures for promoting women’s leadership in Uzbekistan, assesses their results and identifies remaining barriers.

Methods: The study combines doctrinal analysis of the Law “On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men”, the Electoral Code and strategic documents; comparative analysis against CEDAW, General Recommendations No. 23 and No. 25 and Target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals; descriptive analysis of electoral and international index data; and content analysis of public statements by state leaders on women’s leadership, including those of Saida Mirziyoyeva.

Results: The candidate quota for women was raised from 30 to 40 per cent, and in the 2024 elections the share of women in the Legislative Chamber rose from 32 to 38 per cent, the highest in the country’s history. Women hold 27 per cent of Senate seats and 32.5 per cent of seats in local councils, and the Senate is chaired by a woman. Leadership training programmes, the Women’s Leadership School

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and the Asian Women's Forum have become platforms for building a pipeline of women leaders. In 2026 Uzbekistan improved its position in the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law index by 43 places, to 48th of 190. Barriers remain in executive and local government, the private sector and regions, and in social norms and the unequal distribution of care work.

Conclusion: The article proposes extending quota-like targets to executive appointments and the personnel reserve, transparent gender-disaggregated data on leadership, support for work–life balance and mentoring programmes in the regions.

Keywords: gender equality; women's leadership; political participation; gender quota; temporary special measures; public administration; Saida Mirziyoyeva; Uzbekistan.

Introduction

The participation of women in leadership is a test of whether equality is real or only formal. Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women requires states to ensure women, on equal terms with men, the right to participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy and to hold public office at all levels.[1] Target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.[2] Yet women hold only about a quarter of parliamentary seats worldwide, and their share in executive positions and corporate boards is lower still.[3]

[1] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. New York, 18 December 1979, art. 7.
[2] United Nations General Assembly. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UN Doc. A/RES/70/1, 25 September 2015, Target 5.5.
[3] Inter-Parliamentary Union. Women in Parliament: Open Data. URL: https://data.ipu.org.

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Research shows that women's leadership matters not only for fairness but also for the quality of decisions. In a well-known natural experiment in India, Chattopadhyay and Duflo found that village councils reserved for women leaders invested more in public goods that women had identified as priorities, such as drinking water.[4] Eagly and Carli have shown that women face a "labyrinth" of barriers on the way to leadership, including stereotypes, unequal family responsibilities and a lack of networks.[5] Removing these barriers requires purposeful state policy.

In Uzbekistan, the importance of women's leadership has been repeatedly emphasised at the highest level. In December 2019 President Shavkat Mirziyoyev noted that more and more women were being appointed to senior positions in public administration, the economy, finance, education, healthcare and culture, and declared that the policy of increasing the role of women in society would continue.[6] The adoption in 2019 of the Laws "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" and "On Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence" created the legislative basis for this policy.[7,8]

A visible role in promoting women's leadership has been played by Saida Mirziyoyeva, formerly a member of the Republican Commission on Gender Equality and currently Head of the Presidential Administration.[9] Her public

[4] Chattopadhyay R., Duflo E. Women as policy makers: evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India // Econometrica. 2004. Vol. 72, No. 5. P. 1409–1443.
[5] Eagly A.H., Carli L.L. Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007.
[6] Mirziyoyev: We will continue to actively pursue a policy of increasing the role of women in society // Kun.uz. 9 December 2019. URL: https://live.kun.uz/en/news/2019/12/09/mirziyoyev-we-will-continue-to-actively-pursue-a-policy-of-increasing-the-role-of-women-in-society.
[7] Mirziyoyev: We will continue to actively pursue a policy of increasing the role of women in society // Kun.uz. 9 December 2019. URL: https://live.kun.uz/en/news/2019/12/09/mirziyoyev-we-will-continue-to-actively-pursue-a-policy-of-increasing-the-role-of-women-in-society.
[8] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" of 2 September 2019, No. ZRU-562. URL: https://lex.uz/docs/5167654.
[9] Saida Mirziyoyeva: Human rights cannot be fully achieved without ensuring women's rights // Kun.uz. 18 February 2020. URL: https://beta.kun.uz/en/news/2020/02/18/saida-mirziyoyeva-human-rights-cannot-be-fully-achieved-without-ensuring-womens-rights.

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statements and initiatives provide material for analysing how the state articulates the goals of gender policy.

The aim of this article is to analyse the legal framework and practical measures for promoting women's leadership in Uzbekistan, to assess their results and to identify remaining barriers. The research question is whether the measures taken since 2019 have produced not only greater representation of women but also the conditions for sustainable women's leadership.

Methods

Doctrinal analysis: The study examined the Law of 2 September 2019 No. ZRU-562 "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men", the Electoral Code as amended in 2023 and the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality until 2030.

Comparative analysis: The national framework was assessed against CEDAW, CEDAW General Recommendation No. 23 on women in political and public life and No. 25 on temporary special measures,[10] and SDG Target 5.5.[11]

Descriptive statistical analysis: Data of the Central Election Commission, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law index were analysed.

Content analysis: Public statements of state leaders on women's leadership reported by official and media sources between 2019 and 2026, including statements by Saida Mirziyoyeva, were analysed to identify the stated goals and priorities of gender policy.

Limitations: Comprehensive gender-disaggregated data on leadership positions in executive bodies and the private sector are not publicly available. Public

[10] Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. General Recommendation No. 23: Political and public life (1997); General Recommendation No. 25 on temporary special measures (2004).

[11] United Nations General Assembly. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UN Doc. A/RES/70/1, 25 September 2015, Target 5.5.

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statements reflect declared policy and are not in themselves evidence of results; they are therefore analysed together with quantitative indicators.

Results

Legal framework: The Law No. ZRU-562 guarantees equal rights and opportunities for women and men, provides for temporary special measures, introduces gender-legal expertise of legislation and requires the collection of gender-disaggregated statistics.[12] In 2021 the Senate approved the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality until 2030. The goal of increasing the share of women in the civil service and in the National Personnel Reserve to 40 per cent has been set.[13]

The most significant temporary special measure concerns elections. Following the 2023 constitutional and electoral reforms, the quota for women candidates was raised from 30 to 40 per cent: at least 40 per cent of each party's candidates in both single-member constituencies and party lists must be women, and within the party lists at least two of every five candidates must be women.[14]

Representation in elected bodies: In the parliamentary elections of 27 October 2024, the first held under the new mixed electoral system, women made up about 45 per cent of candidates.[15] The number of women elected to the Legislative Chamber rose from 48 (32 per cent) to 57 (38 per cent), the highest proportion in the country's history.[16,17] After the elections women held 27 per cent of seats in

[12] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" of 2 September 2019, No. ZRU-562. URL: https://lex.uz/docs/5167654.
[13] Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the United Kingdom. Gender policy of Uzbekistan. URL: https://uzembassy.uk/news/1634.
[14] Inter-Parliamentary Union. Uzbekistan, Legislative Chamber: Elections. URL: https://data.ipu.org/node/187/elections.
[15] OSCE/ODIHR International Election Observation Mission. Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections, 27 October 2024: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. URL: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/8/579304.pdf; OSCE PA. Voters lacked a genuine choice in Uzbekistan's technically well-prepared parliamentary elections. 28 October 2024.
[16] Inter-Parliamentary Union. Uzbekistan, Legislative Chamber: Elections. URL: https://data.ipu.org/node/187/elections.
[17] Central Election Commission of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Preliminary results of the elections. URL: https://saylov.uz/en/elections-and-referendums/page/14.

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the Senate and 32.5 per cent in local councils.[18] The Senate is chaired by a woman, Tanzila Narbayeva, who presided over the adoption of the Bukhara Declaration at the Second Asian Women's Forum in 2026.[19]

Table 1. Women's representation in elected bodies of Uzbekistan

Indicator	Before 2024	After the 2024 elections
Candidate quota for women	30%	40% (at least 2 of every 5 on party lists)
Women in the Legislative Chamber	48 (32%)	57 (38%)
Women in the Senate	24%	27%
Women in local councils	about 25%	32.5%

Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union, Central Election Commission, media reports.[20,21,22,23]

Building a pipeline of women leaders: Representation in parliament is only one dimension of leadership. Uzbekistan has introduced programmes aimed at preparing women for leadership. The share of women in the National Personnel Reserve, formed to fill leadership positions, doubled in a year compared with 2023.[24] The Women's Leadership School, whose fourth season was opened by Saida Mirziyoyeva in January 2025, trains women for self-realisation and active

[18] The Central Asian country rewriting the rules on women's rights // Yahoo News. 2025. URL: https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/central-asian-country-rewriting-rules-125019648.html.
[19] UN Women Europe and Central Asia. Investing in women, building the region: What you need to know from the Asian Women's Forum 2026. URL: https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2026/05/investing-in-women-building-the-region-what-you-need-to-know-from-the-asian-womens-forum-2026.
[20] Inter-Parliamentary Union. Uzbekistan, Legislative Chamber: Elections. URL: https://data.ipu.org/node/187/elections.
[21] Central Election Commission of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Preliminary results of the elections. URL: https://saylov.uz/en/elections-and-referendums/page/14.
[22] The Central Asian country rewriting the rules on women's rights // Yahoo News. 2025. URL: https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/central-asian-country-rewriting-rules-125019648.html.
[23] Uzbekistan: Parliament and women's participation // International Diplomat. URL: https://internationaldiplomat.com/archives/7230.
[24] Developing women's leadership in public administration // International Journal of Civil Service Reform and Practice. 2025. Vol. 13, No. 1. URL: https://astanahubjournal.org/index.php/ijcsrp/article/download/175/201/508.

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participation in the country's development.[25] UNDP and the Senate have held roundtables and public speaking workshops for regional women leaders and women in the personnel reserve.[26]

At the international level, the Asian Women's Forum, held since 2024 at the initiative of President Mirziyoyev announced at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly, has become a regular platform.[27] The Second Forum in Bukhara on 14–15 May 2026, organised with UN Women and UNFPA, brought together more than 80 parliamentarians, scientists and women leaders from 18 countries and adopted the Bukhara Declaration, which commits participating states to advancing women's full, equal and meaningful participation in public institutions, parliaments and local self-government.[28] In the President's address read at the opening by Saida Mirziyoyeva, it was noted that Uzbekistan had improved its position in the Women, Business and the Law index by 43 places in 2026 and ranked 48th among 190 states.[29]

Public discourse on women's leadership: the statements of Saida Mirziyoyeva: The content analysis shows that the public statements of Saida Mirziyoyeva articulate three consistent themes.

The first theme is women's rights as an integral part of human rights. Speaking at the Global Women's Forum in Dubai in February 2020, she stated that "human rights cannot be fully achieved without ensuring women's rights", and explained that the task of the Commission on Gender Equality was to introduce gender policy in all spheres of life, to monitor its implementation in government

[25] Developing women's leadership in public administration // International Journal of Civil Service Reform and Practice. 2025. Vol. 13, No. 1. URL: https://astanahubjournal.org/index.php/ijcsrp/article/download/175/201/508.

[26] UNDP Uzbekistan. Empowering Women Leaders in Uzbekistan. 2 August 2024. URL: https://www.undp.org/uzbekistan/press-releases/empowering-women-leaders-uzbekistan.

[27] SCO Secretariat participates in the Second Asian Women's Forum // Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. 15 May 2026. URL: https://eng.sectsco.org/20260515/2309969.html.

[28] UN Women Europe and Central Asia. Investing in women, building the region: What you need to know from the Asian Women's Forum 2026. URL: https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2026/05/investing-in-women-building-the-region-what-you-need-to-know-from-the-asian-womens-forum-2026.

[29] Address to the participants of the Second Asian Women's Forum // Official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. 14 May 2026. URL: https://president.uz/en/lists/view/9200; see also: https://gov.uz/ru/digital/news/view/165664.

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organisations and to raise public awareness.[30] She concluded the speech with the words, in translation from Uzbek, "By empowering our women, we empower our nation".[31]

The second theme is the gap between declarations and reality. At a forum on the role of women leaders in Bishkek, she noted that discussion of basic women's rights remains a subject of bargaining and dispute in all parts of the world.[32] She has also called on the international community to move from slogans to real laws in protecting rights.[33]

The third theme is state responsibility for vulnerable women. Commenting, as a member of the Gender Equality Commission, on the tragic death of a woman in Namangan who had been a victim of fraud, she argued that the state should help victims of fraud and called on deputies to strengthen social protection for those who are helpless and deceived.[34]

These statements correspond to the CEDAW approach, which views temporary special measures not as privileges but as means of achieving substantive equality,[35] and to the emphasis of the Bukhara Declaration on moving from commitment to representation.[36]

[30] Saida Mirziyoyeva: Human rights cannot be fully achieved without ensuring women's rights // Kun.uz. 18 February 2020. URL: https://beta.kun.uz/en/news/2020/02/18/saida-mirziyoyeva-human-rights-cannot-be-fully-achieved-without-ensuring-womens-rights.

[31] Saida Mirziyoyeva Butunjahon ayollar forumida nutq so'zladi // Kun.uz. 16 February 2020. URL: https://kun.uz/news/2020/02/16/saida-mirziyoyeva-butunjahon-ayollar-forumida-nutq-sozladi.

[32] Saida Mirziyoyeva participates in forum on role of women leaders in Bishkek // 24.kg. URL: https://24.kg/english/340394_Saida_Mirziyoyeva_participates_in_forum_on_role_of_women_leaders_in_Bishkek/.

[33] Saida Mirziyoyeva prizvala mirovoye soobshchestvo pereyti ot lozungov k realnym zakonam // Podrobno.uz. URL: https://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/saida-mirziyeeva-prizvala-mirovoe-soobshchestvo-pereyti-ot-lozungov-k-realnym-zakonam-v-zashchite-pr/.

[34] "The State should help victims of fraud" – Saida Mirziyoyeva comments on the suicide case in Namangan // Kun.uz. URL: https://kun.uz/en/87070659.

[35] Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. General Recommendation No. 23: Political and public life (1997); General Recommendation No. 25 on temporary special measures (2004).

[36] UN Women Europe and Central Asia. Investing in women, building the region: What you need to know from the Asian Women's Forum 2026. URL: https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2026/05/investing-in-women-building-the-region-what-you-need-to-know-from-the-asian-womens-forum-2026.

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Discussion

What the quota achieved: The results confirm the international evidence that well-designed candidate quotas with placement rules are among the most effective tools for increasing women's representation.[37] The "two of every five" rule prevents parties from placing women at the bottom of lists, and the share of women in the Legislative Chamber reached 38 per cent, well above the world average of about a quarter.[38] The election of women to leadership positions in Parliament, including the chair of the Senate, creates visible role models.

Remaining barriers: (1) Executive and local leadership: Quotas apply to elected bodies but not to appointments of ministers, khokims and heads of state enterprises. The 40 per cent goal for the civil service and personnel reserve is a policy target rather than a binding rule, and public data on women in senior executive positions are limited.

(2) The private sector: Women's economic leadership, including in company management and boards, is not covered by temporary special measures. The improvement in the Women, Business and the Law index shows progress in legal equality, but implementation in practice requires monitoring.[39]

(3) Care work and social norms: The "labyrinth" described by Eagly and Carli is visible in Uzbekistan in the unequal distribution of household and care responsibilities and in traditional expectations about women's roles.[40] Without childcare services, flexible work and shared parental responsibility, many qualified women cannot accept leadership positions.

(4) Regional disparities: Leadership programmes are concentrated in Tashkent and regional centres. Women in rural districts have fewer opportunities for training, networking and mentoring.

[37] Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. General Recommendation No. 23: Political and public life (1997); General Recommendation No. 25 on temporary special measures (2004).
[38] Inter-Parliamentary Union. Women in Parliament: Open Data. URL: https://data.ipu.org.
[39] Address to the participants of the Second Asian Women's Forum // Official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. 14 May 2026. URL: https://president.uz/en/lists/view/9200; see also: https://gov.uz/ru/digital/news/view/165664.
[40] Eagly A.H., Carli L.L. Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007.

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(5) The quality of participation: International observers of the 2024 elections welcomed the increased gender quota while noting limits on political competition and pluralism.[41] Women's leadership is most meaningful in an environment of genuine political competition and accountability, where women leaders can represent diverse interests.

Interpretation: The case of Uzbekistan shows how strong political commitment, articulated at the highest level and reflected in legal quotas and leadership programmes, can quickly increase women's representation. The statements of Saida Mirziyoyeva and other leaders frame women's leadership as a matter of human rights and national development. The next stage is to translate representation into sustainable influence: from parliament to executive power, from the capital to the regions and from public institutions to the economy.

Conclusion and recommendations

Uzbekistan has achieved notable progress in women's leadership: a 40 per cent candidate quota with placement rules, a record 38 per cent of women in the Legislative Chamber, leadership training programmes and an international platform in the form of the Asian Women's Forum. The public statements of state leaders, including Saida Mirziyoyeva, consistently frame women's rights as inseparable from human rights and national development. The answer to the research question is that representation has increased substantially, while the conditions for sustainable women's leadership beyond elected bodies are still being formed. The following measures are proposed:

1. Introduce binding targets of at least 40 per cent women in the National Personnel Reserve and in appointments to senior civil service positions, with annual public reporting.

[41] OSCE/ODIHR International Election Observation Mission. Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections, 27 October 2024: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. URL: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/8/579304.pdf; OSCE PA. Voters lacked a genuine choice in Uzbekistan's technically well-prepared parliamentary elections. 28 October 2024.

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2.Publish gender-disaggregated statistics on leadership in ministries, khokimiyats, state enterprises and the boards of large companies.
3.Expand childcare services, flexible work arrangements and paternity leave to support the reconciliation of leadership and family responsibilities.
4.Extend the Women's Leadership School and mentoring programmes to all districts, with a focus on rural women and young women.
5.Introduce gender-responsive corporate governance rules for state-owned and listed companies, including targets for women on boards.
6.Use the Bukhara Declaration as a framework for a national action plan on women's leadership with measurable indicators.

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18. 24.kg. Saida Mirziyoyeva participates in forum on role of women leaders in Bishkek.
19. Podrobno.uz. Saida Mirziyoyeva prizvala mirovoye soobshchestvo pereyti ot lozungov k realnym zakonam.
20. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. SCO Secretariat participates in the Second Asian Women's Forum. 15 May 2026.