



UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan's population is more than 60 per cent rural, and the rural way of life influences family relations and relations in society. Despite 70 years of Soviet modernisation, the society and family life remain traditional and patriarchal. Marriage is regarded as a means of procreation and a person's religious duty. Many families have hierarchical structures, with specific roles for each member of the family. The head of the family is the husband or father; the wife manages the household and cares for her husband, children and for elder members of the family. The nature of interpersonal family relations is defined by *adat* (custom). Though modernisation occurred during the Soviet time, leading to increases in women working outside the home and freer relations within families, there has been increasing backlash against modernisation and a fallback to traditional relationships in the family since the end of the Soviet era.

Equality in the Family is Necessary

- ▶ Boys and girls are taught different family roles, values, behaviours and goals. Girls are limited in their choices and life goals, and are punished for protesting against these restrictions. Since they are afraid of being alienated by their families, women agree to their situations and accept obligations that limit their freedom and their rights.
- ▶ Younger children are under the control of elders, and girls are under the control of their brothers. Uzbek marriages are mostly arranged with families of similar economic and social status. Boys may have sexual relations before marriage, but even meeting boys in a public place without permission from parents is shameful for girls. Once the marriage has been arranged, it is difficult for a woman to postpone the wedding, so many girls drop out of secondary or higher education for marriage.
- ▶ Young married couples generally live with the husband's parents for a time, though the girl's family provides a dowry of all of the goods required for their room or house. A bride follows the orders of her mother-in-law, looking after the younger members of family, cooking, cleaning, meeting guests, washing, and caring for the animals or agricultural plot, etc. Young wives have no time for their education, healthcare, or nurturing their own development.
- ▶ Families try to keep domestic violence cases secret; society does not recognise violence as a violation of women's rights. Men believe that their wives should be absolutely submissive to their orders, and that wives and children are their property. Women do not leave relationships because they are afraid to lose their status as married women and worry about the future of their children. Despite the existence of legislation on domestic violence, there are only a few cases in which the perpetrator has been punished.
- ▶ Divorce is difficult because women who seek divorces are stigmatised by their families and neighbourhoods and do not receive any support.
- ▶ The practice of polygamy has increased since 1991. It has been proclaimed as a national tradition and a means to support single women. Civil legislation forbids polygamy, but it exists as *adat* (custom). Polygamy is especially widespread in the new upper classes and the clergy. Girls younger than 18 years are married as subsequent wives, but because polygamy is illegal they have no legal status. If their husbands divorce them, they have no legal protection, and often limited education and professional opportunities. Many become victims of trafficking.

Equality in the Family is Possible

- ▶ During the Soviet era, Uzbek society was modernised and secularised, at least superficially. Women were able to pursue education and work outside of the home.
- ▶ Many women were actively involved with civil society organisations until 2005, at which time many NGOs were closed. Although the NGOs that continue their activities now work under the strict control of the government and in limited public space, they are still courageously struggling for change. If the restrictions lift, these NGOs will be prepared to continue their work.
- ▶ Previously, neighbourhood councils encouraged women suffering from domestic violence to return to their husbands for the sake of their children and to accept a subordinate and submissive role. After NGO advocacy on domestic violence, women can appeal to a court for a divorce without first getting permission from their neighbourhood councils.
- ▶ Uzbekistan has ratified many of the major human rights instruments, and has reported before several of the human rights treaty bodies (Committee Against Torture in 2007, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2006, Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2006, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2006, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 2006, and the Human Rights Committee in 2005).

Sources: Report submitted to Musawah in English by Dr. Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva; Uzbekistan website of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/ENACARRegion/Pages/UZIndex.aspx>.