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WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN UZBEKISTAN: HISTORICAL ROOTS AND PHILOSOPHICAL MEANING

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Abstract: The article analyses the formation of women's entrepreneurship in Uzbekistan from historical and philosophical perspectives. The author traces the long path from family-based crafts in the era of the Great Silk Road, through the state economy of the Soviet period, to the market reforms of the independence years.
The study shows that in 2020–2024 the number of women entrepreneurs increased sevenfold, reaching 2.1 million, yet most of them remain at the micro and informal level. The article interprets this situation through the dialectic of "quantity and quality", and through the relationships between freedom and responsibility, and between work and family. Based on a comparative analysis of the experience of Central Asian countries, practical proposals are put forward.
Keywords: women's entrepreneurship, historical development, social philosophy, freedom, family, informal economy, Central Asia, gender equality.

Introduction. Women's entrepreneurship is not merely an economic indicator; it is a mirror reflecting the social maturity and moral character of a society. Through the loom, shop or enterprise in a woman's hands, we see the encounter between traditions formed over centuries, social norms and today's reforms.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has become the fastest-growing country in the region in terms of the number of women entrepreneurs. However, this growth raises a pressing question: does the increase in the number of women entrepreneurs also mean an increase in their real economic independence and social status?

The **aim** of the article is to reveal women's entrepreneurship in the unity of historical process and philosophical meaning. **Objectives:**

1. to examine the history of women's economic activity across its main periods;
2. to identify the quantitative growth and qualitative problems of the independence years;
3. to compare with the experience of Central Asian countries;
4. to interpret the phenomenon philosophically through the concepts of freedom, labour and justice.

The study used historical, comparative and dialectical methods. Official statistics, reports of United Nations system organisations and data from international publications for 2024–2026 were used as sources.

Historical Roots: From the Loom to the Market

The economic activity of Uzbek women began long before independence. Only its form changed in each period in line with the prevailing social order.

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The Silk Road and Family Crafts

During the era of the Great Silk Road, a large share of the goods sold in the bazaars of Samarkand, Bukhara, Margilan and Khiva was made by women. Silkworm breeding, spinning, atlas weaving, suzani embroidery and carpet making were work carried out mainly within the home.

However, this labour was "invisible". The product made by a woman was usually taken to market by a male member of the family, and the income and social recognition also went to him. Thus, although a woman was a producer, she was not recognised as an entrepreneur. The roots of today's problem of "informality" lie precisely here.

Jadidism: Liberation through Enlightenment

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Jadid enlighteners — Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Abdulla Avloni and others — emphasised that the education of women was a condition for the progress of the nation. In Avloni's work "Turkiy Guliston yoxud Axloq" (The Turkic Rose Garden, or Ethics), upbringing and labour are regarded as the foundation of human perfection.

For the Jadids, a woman's being educated was linked to the stability of the family and society. This idea is still relevant today: financial, legal and digital literacy remains the main precondition for women's entrepreneurship.

The Soviet Period: Employment Without Entrepreneurship

The Hujum policy, launched in 1927, forcibly drew women into public life. During the Soviet period, women's literacy and employment increased significantly. However, because private entrepreneurship was prohibited, a woman could be an employee of a state enterprise, but not the owner of her own business.

During this period, the phenomenon of the "double burden" also took shape: women worked at their workplaces, while housework and care remained their responsibility as before. This legacy still limits the time and energy resources of today's women entrepreneurs.

Independence: The Return to the Market

After 1991, the transition to a market economy was both an opportunity and a trial for women. Many women took up trade and services to support their families. In this way, the entrepreneurial spirit that had remained within the home for centuries came back to the market.

The Present Stage: A Quantitative Leap and the Problem of Quality

UNDP data show that in 2024, 2.1 million of Uzbekistan's 5.2 million entrepreneurs were women. This is seven times more than in 2020 and the highest rate in the region.

In Hegel's terms, this is a stage of the accumulation of quantitative changes. However, the transition to quality has not yet occurred, as the following figures show:

Indicator	Value	Source
Share of women among all entrepreneurs	~40%	UNDP
Share among corporate entrepreneurs	17%	UNDP
Share among small enterprises and micro-firms	12.2% (43,860)	Statistics Agency, 01.01.2025
Women working in the informal sector	~60%	international estimates
Women's enterprises in Tashkent city	12,814 (~30%)	stat.uz

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The figures lead to one conclusion: growth is mainly due to self-employment. In other words, a woman entrepreneur today still often supports her family but cannot become the head of an enterprise that creates jobs.

At the same time, there are also signs of quality. In 2025, more than 380,000 women received business loans totalling EUR 1.52 billion. In 2024, 20,632 enterprises managed by women made a net profit of UZS 4.2 trillion. Through the "Hamroh" organisation, more than 18,000 women were reached and more than 6,000 projects were financed.

Thus, today's issue is not drawing women into entrepreneurship, but scaling up and formalising their businesses.

Regional Comparison: A Common Legacy, Different Paths

The five countries of Central Asia started from the same historical point — the Soviet legacy and family traditions. However, over thirty years they have chosen different models of women's entrepreneurship.

Country	Share of women	Path model	Main weakness
Kazakhstan	48.1% (Small and medium-sized business managers, 2025)	Systematic programmes, 17 development centres	Only 28% have access to credit
Uzbekistan	40% (2024)	Mass concessional lending, mahalla system	Informality; 17% in the corporate sector
Tajikistan	27.8% (2026)	National strategy, presidential grants	20% of borrowers are women
Kyrgyzstan	27%	Legal definition (2025), Guarantee Fund	Property ownership only 29%
Turkmenistan	No open data	Women's Union, crafts	No statistical transparency

From a historical point of view, the most interesting aspect is that the barriers are almost the same in all five countries. The small amount of property in women's names, the burden of housework, informality and stereotypes — all of these reflect a common legacy formed over centuries. In a survey by the International Trade Centre (ITC), 90 percent of women traders said that they do housework as well as running their business.

The example of Tajikistan is particularly instructive: men's labour migration has forced many women, as heads of household, to start businesses. Here entrepreneurship appears not as a free choice but as the result of necessity.

Philosophical Analysis: Freedom, Labour, Family and Justice

From a philosophical point of view, women's entrepreneurship is linked to a person's right to determine her own destiny. Therefore, it can be examined through four concepts.

Freedom and Necessity

The economist and philosopher Amartya Sen defines development as the expansion of human freedom. In his view, income is not an end in itself but a means of expanding a person's opportunity to choose the life she values.

From this point of view, two types of entrepreneurship should be distinguished. The first is necessity entrepreneurship, that is, a path chosen because there was no other option. The second is opportunity entrepreneurship, that is, a conscious choice to realise ideas and talent.

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A large part of the informal micro-business in Uzbekistan is still closer to the first type. The true aim of the reforms is to ensure the transition from necessity to opportunity.

The Dialectic of Quantity and Quality

According to the law of dialectics, quantitative changes lead to qualitative change at a certain threshold. However, this transition does not happen by itself: it requires changes in institutions, laws and public consciousness.

More than two million women entrepreneurs represent the accumulated "quantity". Its transformation into "quality", that is, the transition to formal, growing and job-creating businesses, is the next historical task.

Labour and Human Dignity

In his work "The Virtuous City" (Fozil odamlar shahri), Abu Nasr al-Farabi emphasises that a person attains happiness only through cooperation. If an equal half of the members of society remains on the margins, the whole city cannot achieve true prosperity.

The official recognition of women's labour, which has remained "invisible" for centuries, is not only an economic issue but a matter of moral justice. Formalisation gives a woman social protection, a credit history and professional reputation.

The Family: A Support, Not an Obstacle

In Uzbek society, the family is regarded as a sacred value. Setting women's entrepreneurship against the family is a mistaken and ineffective approach.

The issue lies in the fair distribution of the burden of housework and care. Kindergartens, care for the elderly and solidarity within the family free up a woman's time. Then the family becomes the strongest support for women's entrepreneurship.

Social Justice

Justice is not limited to legal equality. If a woman has no property in her name, she may be formally equal in obtaining credit, but she is not equal in practice.

The fact that only 28 percent of women's SMEs in Kazakhstan can use credit, and that in Tajikistan women make up only 20 percent of borrowers even though they repay loans better, illustrates this gap. True justice is equality of opportunity in practice.

Conclusions and Proposals

The entrepreneurship of Uzbek women has travelled a long road from the loom to the market. Today it stands at the stage of a quantitative leap, and the next task is the transition to quality. Historical analysis shows that most of today's barriers — "invisible labour", the "double burden" and property inequality — have been formed over centuries. Philosophical analysis, in turn, shows that the goal is not numbers but a woman's genuine freedom of choice. In general, the development of women's entrepreneurship is not only economic growth but a measure of a society's moral maturity. When a woman's talent is realised, both the family and society benefit equally.

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