MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN

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1. Uzbekistan's current demographic problems

The results of demographic surveys conducted in Uzbekistan previously gave ample cause for anxiety: high child and maternal mortality, too many families with a runaway birth rate (especially in the countryside), low social and territorial mobility of the population.

Over the past few years of independence, however, the demographic situation in Uzbekistan has undergone substantial changes, both qualitative and quantitative. A steady decline in the birth rate is the most prominent new development on the demographic front. In today's Uzbekistan about 30 per cent less children are born compared to the early 1990s figure, this meaning a birth rate reduction from 35-37 to 19-20 per mille. This trend is particularly manifest within individual age brackets. Thus, among women aged 20-24 the birth rate decreased 33.4 per cent, and among those aged 25-29 years, 37.5 per cent. Today, the average number of children per woman approaching 30 is one less than was the case 10 years ago. That testifies to the steadiness of a downward trend in the childbirth rate among Uzbekistan's young women.

Notably, that goes for the rural rather than the urban population, for the most part: since the early 1990s, the birth rate has gone down 37.5 per cent in towns as against a 44.5 per cent decline in births in the countryside. The difference between age-specific rates in town and countryside remains big enough; nevertheless, changes in the rural population's reproductive behaviour and the resultant narrowing down of the gap between these indices are all too obvious.

As part of its policy of strengthening the family and promoting maternal and child health, the state campaigned for family planning on a large scale, and its efforts paid off. Returns of the socio-demographic surveys of the past few years go to show that the birth rate is steadily coming down to what most people recognize as the optimum and desirable indicators.

A lower birth rate promotes better maternal and child health because longer birth intervals allow the mother enough time to recover after the previous delivery and to give her newly-born baby all the care it needs. Besides, demographic pressure on the able-bodied population has been largely eased out. As compared with the 1980s, the load per 1000 working-age population has been relieved by forty persons, and as compared with the 1970s, by 98 persons.

Mortality is a major demographic characteristic because it actually shows not only the state of the nation's health but its socio-economic status.

In Uzbekistan, the mortality rate has always been relatively low owing chiefly to its specific age pattern – a large proportion of youth and a relatively small proportion of old-age retirees. Over the years of independence, mortality has dropped from 6.2 to 5.3 pro mille. This index changed by leaps and bounds over the years rising somewhat in 1992-1994; in the late 1990s, however, and at the turn of the 21st century the downward trend manifested itself plainly enough.

The rate of population reproduction in Uzbekistan is unmistakably positive. The mortality level there is among the world's lowest, and the annual deaths/births ratio is about one to four which is evidence of the country's substantial demographic potential. Nevertheless, the rising mortality rate in senior age brackets is noteworthy – it indicates a need for improved social security of the aged, single pensioners in particular.

A substantial reduction in infant mortality was a major achievement of Uzbekistan over the past decade. Towards the early 1990s, the infant mortality rate was 35-36 per 1000 as against 17-18, or half that number, today. This is Central Asia's lowest infant mortality rate, made possible by the
state's purposeful effort to push it down. What's more, the country has the potential for further progress in that direction.

The age-sex structure of the population has been influenced by a change in the birth rate and by migration processes. A decline in births has reduced the share of children and adolescents (aged 0-15) in the total population from 43.1 per cent as of 1 January 1991 to 37.8 per cent as of 1 January 2003.

The sex ratio in Uzbekistan is improving markedly. There were 1023 women per 1000 men as of early 1991, and only 1006 at the beginning of 2003. Amid overall population increase by 23.3 per cent, the proportion of women grew 22.3 per cent, and of men, 24.5 per cent, bringing their numbers to 12,743,400 and 12,684,500, respectively (permanent figures for the beginning of the period).

In Uzbekistan, the family is very high on the traditional scale of values and enjoys strong government support. All the respondents in the 1997 public opinion polls conducted by the Macroeconomic Statistics Ministry in town and countryside gave top priority to the family on the scale of values. Such an attitude to the family makes for its stability as illustrated by the marriage rate exceeding the divorce rate for years. In 1991, for example, marriage and divorce rates constituted 12.9 and 1.6, and in 2002, 6.5 and 0.7 per 1000 population, respectively. Most women divorcees are in the 20-30 age group, and an average marriage lasts for 3-5 years.

A typical family in Uzbekistan is traditionally large and has quite a number of dependents – children and old people – to support. According to a 2002 household budget survey, the average family is comprised of 5.1 members – 4.4 in town and 5.8 in countryside. Notably, this index is tending downward, on the whole. Demographers explain the shrinking of the average family by a reduction in the woman population (from 50.6 per cent in early 1991 to 50.1 in 2003) and by a decline in the birth rate (from 34.5 pro mille in 1991 to 21 in 2002).

2. **Female employment and unemployment**

In Uzbekistan, women constitute a substantial proportion of labour resources, which lends special importance to their gainful employment as a factor in promoting social progress and improving child welfare.

Uzbekistan of the early 1990s inherited an irrational and inefficient system of employment marked by a high level of latent joblessness, quantitative and qualitative disbalance between labour supply and demand. Confronted with new challenges, the country had, at the same time, to deal with old employment difficulties that had accumulated over the years.

The social reforms carried out in Uzbekistan seek to liven up economic activity of the population and realize their creative potential; hence new approaches to providing employment opportunities for all who need them – women in particular. Various factors that affect female employment can be divided into two categories.

Falling into the first category are the social and economic factors (like the sectoral structure of the economy, the industrial development level, labour conditions, etc.) that determine the overall level of women's economic activity and employment from the standpoint of labour demand.

The second category comprises specific factors affecting female labour supply. These include the birth rate, the availability of pre-school childcare institutions, the state of the social sphere in general, qualitative characteristics of female labour, and women's social and occupational motivations.
In Soviet times, female employment in Uzbekistan was high compared with that in other countries. At the same time, there existed a system of counterbalances – measures relieving workforce pressure on the labour market, especially on the part of youth, women and pensioners. These measures included compulsory secondary education; ready access to full-time secondary specialized and college education; a low pensionable age, especially for women; long part-paid maternity and post-natal leaves to young mothers; guaranteed job security for women who have children to support; inclusion of the post-natal leave in the length of service required for women to receive their old-age pension, etc.

The results of such policy are difficult to assess because socialist countries professed to have no unemployment. According to sample survey reports and expert estimates, however, the unemployed constituted 13.8 per cent of Uzbekistan's able-bodied population at the turn of the 1990s, with women accounting for about 90 per cent of those not gainfully employed (in the countryside, for the most part). Considering that a large family kept a woman's hands full, many non-working housewives might very well not look for jobs at all.

For most women, a job means not only a chance to attain self-fulfilment but also to earn a living. A survey of women's working and living conditions conducted by the State Statistics Department in 1997 revealed that 55 per cent of female respondents kept regular jobs in order to earn money for their families, and 14 per cent, for the sake of financial self-reliance.

On the whole, the proportion of employed working-age persons was rather high in Uzbekistan – 70.5 per cent of the total. In the meantime, women's share in the active able-bodied population (62.4 per cent) was far short of men's (78.4 per cent) in 2002. That was largely due to the fact that a reduction in the number of pre-school childcare institutions kept the women too busy about the house to seek employment.

For all the transformations Uzbekistan's economy has undergone over the past few years, the gender structure of employment remained practically unchanged. The share of women employed in the economy constituted 44 per cent in 1991 and 43.7 per cent in 2002. Specifically, the share of women engaged in material production dwindled from 53.1 to 50.9 per cent while increasing from 46.9 to 49.1 in the non-production sphere.

The female employment pattern is strongly affected by women's responsibilities involved in housekeeping and child upbringing. According to the results of the above-mentioned survey, 58 per cent of the respondents would like to work part-time or on a flexible schedule basis. Consequently, effective employment of women calls for providing equal opportunities for men and women in the family especially as regards the division of household duties and responsibilities for housekeeping and child upbringing.

Amid a transition to market relations accompanied by the restructuring of the economy and a decline in employment, part of the able-bodied population, women included, are compelled either to seek temporary employment or pluralize, work on a part-time basis, to engage in out-work, to do jobs under contract and subcontract, to go self-employed and to the informal sector.

Such forms of employment do not guarantee a worker a steady income, as a rule, and may land him/her in an informal labour market offering no legal instruments of protection. Besides, they involve low wages, scanty fringe benefits (if any), no social security, limited opportunities for professional training and advancement.

Parental leaves take quite a few working-age women off their regular jobs for rather long. Such a temporary suspension of their professional activity leaves young mothers with much less
advancement and educational opportunities than those enjoyed by men. That creates problems for women in the labour market where the supply of female labour always surpasses demand for it.

In the "Women in Uzbekistan's Labour Market" survey conducted by C. Marni in 1994, 84 per cent of the respondents said that women stood more chances of being dismissed from their jobs than men did.

According to the Labour and Social Security Ministry of the Republic of Uzbekistan, women accounted for about 62 per cent of the registered unemployment total in 2002 – a slight increase on the 1993 figure (60.9 per cent). Jobs are sought by women who have quit their former places of employment of their own free will and also by college graduates, general and specialized secondary school leavers. Most women registered as jobless have low professional skills, are manual workers or have no profession at all. Over 45 per cent of jobless women are in the 18-30 age bracket. Most of them (52.4 per cent in 2002) have general secondary education, and 33.4 per cent of them hold university diplomas and vocational school certificates.

Among those who found employment, women outnumber men. The former account for 62 per cent of the total number of the registered unemployed and for 64.5 per cent of those who found job.

The sectoral pattern of female employment is changing. Whereas previously (1996) many women found employment in industry, today most of them gravitate towards agriculture – its manpower redundancy and low pay notwithstanding. In the meantime, the share of women employed in such sectors as transport, telecommunications, trade, etc. has diminished. This is partly due to low mobility of young mothers residing in the countryside away from the centres of industry and strategic sectors of the national economy.

3. **The sectoral aspect of female employment**

Working women's distribution over the sectors of the economy is marked by striking unevenness. Public health and education, where women account for 71 and 62 per cent of all those employed, respectively, are by right referred to as "women's sectors".

Male labour predominates in transport (85.8 per cent), construction (87.6 per cent) and in the municipal economy (65.5 per cent). In other sectors – industry, agriculture, commerce, public catering, science, and finance – women account for 30.1 to 51 per cent of all those employed.

Within the sectors where men and women approximately balance each other out there are industries distinguished by higher concentration of female labour. These are, above all, the textile, clothing, confectionary, dairy and other factories.

Apart from inter-sectoral differences in levels of female labour concentration there are occupational dissimilarities. In the mechanical engineering, metalworking and instrument-making industries, for example, men are engaged mostly in top-skilled work involving machines and mechanisms (lathe operators, tool-setters, mechanics, repairmen, etc.) while most women workers specialize in computer assembly or do unskilled jobs such as cleaning, marking, packaging, etc.

In agriculture, men also do practically all skilled work such as farm machinery operation while women are engaged in simpler manual jobs. In public services, such as health, women perform intellectual types of job as well as those requiring no special skills.

In Uzbekistan, gender discrimination in wages is prohibited by law. Nevertheless, female labour concentration in budget-subsidized organizations where they do low-skilled or unskilled – and, consequently, low-paid – work mostly makes such discrimination very much a reality.
In town, most women make a living with odd jobs like small-lot and retail trading, offering various services (house cleaning, washing, child minding), making confectionery. In the countryside, they engage in farm produce and livestock trading, goods reselling, arts and crafts, and dress-making. Traditionally, women are engaged in light and food industries on an informal basis. Such jobs account for a no small (and now steadily growing) part of a family income and provide a solid groundwork for the growth of women's private enterprise and self-employment.

4. Supporting women in the labour market

The law of the Republic of Uzbekistan prohibits any gender discrimination and provides for a system of measures to protect women's rights in the labour market. The most important elements of the system are as follows: the protection of mother and child, which provides for a guaranteed maternity leave; guaranteed employment, earnings, and sickness benefits; provision of special working conditions for expectant and nursing mothers (in particular, the employer may not cancel a work contract with an expectant mother and with a mother of children under 3 years of age); protection of the woman's reproductive functions by banning or restricting female employment in hard and health-hazardous jobs; a ban on compelling women who have children to work nights, overtime, sending them on missions away from home, etc.; granting women extra leaves. The employer has to keep women busy in the daytime, for the most part, and to allow women with little children on their hands to work shorter hours.

In a market environment, one may wonder how far such measures go towards guaranteeing women's equality and what effect they have on the existing structure of employment. Considering that the measures taken to protect women's rights add to the cost of their labour, won't they detract from women's job and promotion opportunities?

Today, most women who have lost their jobs are registered as unemployed, and over 58 per cent of them are on the dole. The amount of unemployment benefit depends on the previous wage level, and as their jobs earn them less money than men's do, women get smaller benefits accordingly.

Job centres have been instructed to arrange for the training and re-training of those registered as unemployed. Almost all the jobless, women included, who have received a course of training organized by the job centres are offered work in their lines.

The new version of the Law on Employment adopted in May 1998, provides for further employment guarantees for the socially vulnerable groups incapable of surviving in a highly competitive labour market on their own. The guarantees consist in creating new jobs, drawing up special training programmes and allocating jobs at enterprises to those falling into such categories.

Uzbekistan's public works programmes provide a vast potential for an increase in employment – specifically among women.

At present, such works are being financed from Uzbekistan's Employment Fund. The resources allocated for the purpose are meagre, however, and fall far short of the amounts required for the development of such works. The emphasis is on the implementation of targeted social support programmes based on income checking – a measure more complicated and expensive than government employment programmes.

5. New employment opportunities for women

The reforms underway in the country on its way to a market economy both create certain difficulties for women in the labour market and offer them new opportunities for exercising their economic rights and realizing their potentialities. Women do not make the most of these opportunities, however, owing largely to traditional notions of men's and women's roles in society and to Uzbek
women's having no previous experience of dealing with situations like this. Society must help women realize their potential earning powers in full. Such support must be provided all along the line, from the stage of training women in doing business right through to the stage of them actually striking out on their own.

As part of this effort, the Uzbekistan Chamber of Commodity Producers and Entrepreneurs, the Business Fund, the Employment Promotion Fund, the TACIS Programme, the Businesswomen's Association of Uzbekistan and other non-governmental organizations are now implementing a number of programmes meant to enlighten people on various market practices and to support small businesses – technologically and otherwise.

Women-oriented programmes include market skills training, legal education, explanations of women's rights and duties in business and other spheres of activity. Also under way now are programmes of direct support for women entrepreneurs venturing into private business.

At the same time, in order to speed up the growth of women-run small businesses expected to increase women's incomes and to go a long way towards their equality with men, it is necessary to carry on the efforts:

- to streamline borrowing procedures, commodities and services marketing, purchasing highly liquid raw stuff and materials;
- to propagate entrepreneurial knowledge especially among rural women having no experience and knack of running small businesses.

Considering that the female workforce is concentrated in the countryside, it is important for Uzbekistan to make rational use of female labour in rural areas through the establishment of non-farming companies, farm produce processing facilities in particular.

It is precisely this problem that a rural production and social infrastructure development programme now being implemented in Uzbekistan, with female workforce supply and demand in the labour market taken into account, is intended to solve. The programme has been drawn up on the initiative of Islam Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In accordance with it, most new jobs are being created in the countryside, and this trend will stay high on the list of employment priorities for years to come.

Raising the level of female labour competitiveness is a pressing need. Uzbekistan's female population is distinguished by a high standard of education – women account for 51 per cent of university graduates and vocational school leavers.

Nevertheless, the current transition to a market economy, a growing need for skilled labour capable of keeping abreast with ongoing technological progress and pursuing new lines of activity call for special emphasis on organizing women's vocational training and re-training. This will be largely facilitated by the National Personnel Training Programme to be completed by the year 2010.

Labour market regulation priorities and measures should rest on all-round reforms in the spheres of management, social protection, labour organization and material incentive. The reforms are to be carried out with due regard for the specifics of various groups and sections of the female population, for national traditions and mentality, and for market demands.

Thus, one can state that:
• the female labour force has an important part to play in building a new independent Uzbekistan because women constitute over 50 per cent of its population and account for almost 44 per cent of those employed;

• a new legal framework aimed at protecting women against discrimination and economic exploitation has been created over a historically short period;

• the egalitarian aspect of female labour issues calls for a systematic and steady effort to overcome a stereotyped attitude to that on the part of women as well as men;

• in order to cushion the impact of market reforms on female labour it is necessary to promote self-employment and entrepreneurial initiative among women, to render women economic support through special funds and banks, to draw up special training and re-training programmes for women, especially those who have been on long maternity and post-natal leaves and those residing in the countryside.

6. Poverty

There is no official poverty line in Uzbekistan. The authors of the Human Development Report: Uzbekistan 1998 made an attempt to ascertain the pattern of poverty in the country. Their findings matched against the household distribution data have revealed that:

- by the beginning of 1997, 22 per cent of the population, or 16 per cent of the households, earned per capita incomes placing them below the weighted average poverty line;

- every fourth household made up of five and more members (24.7 per cent) falls into the poor category;

- large families with four and more children are most likely to fall into the category of the poor (38.3 per cent); poor families with three children account for 19.6 per cent of the total;

By the degree of poverty, households fall into four categories: those extremely poor; needy; poor; moderately poor. According to the same report, in the fourth quarter of 1996 the pattern of poverty was as follows: the extremely poor families, 12.1 per cent; the needy families, 3.4 per cent; the poor families, 0.5 per cent; the moderately poor families, 21.2 per cent.

7. Uzbekistan's system of support for the moderately poor brackets

The country's social security system:

- is targeted at families with many children, in particular;

- provides material aid for all the extremely poor and needy families.

In the course of reforms and as free market relations gained ground in Uzbekistan, social policy priorities, and forms and methods of containing poverty changed. The new social safety net system takes a strictly differentiated approach to various strata of the population, strengthens targeted forms of social support, and engages the cooperation of business companies, public organizations, charitable and non-governmental funds.

Through the current social protection system the government regulates various groups' income levels in order to prevent sharp income gap widening.

Basic elements of the income level control mechanism include:
• regular raises of minimum pensions, student stipends and budget-funded wages;

• targeted support for low-income families and families with children in the form of regular payments of allowances;

• financial support for those temporarily out of work in the form of unemployment benefits, subsidized vocational training, and a 10 per cent benefit increment per each dependent in the family of an unemployed;

• a system of allowances, guarantees and benefits established for individual categories of citizens and families;

• a uniform wage scale with amounts paid to workers in various wage brackets dovetailed with the minimal wage;

• progressive incomes taxation of natural persons.

The way low-income families and families with children are supported in the countryside is specific to Uzbekistan. Allowances are distributed among the poor by the citizens' local self-government body – the mahalla – which decides who needs it most.

In 1997, social security agencies handed over their functions to the citizens' self-government bodies that now decide which of the low-income families qualify for an allowance, and assign and pay out benefits to families with children.

The record of the past few years shows that all the social protection measures taken are focused on encouraging maternal employment, increasing family incomes, and improving child welfare.