
Comment 3 Transformations in Uzbekistan: Gender and Development

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Introductory Remarks. This paper is a kind of case study, based on the author’s personal experiences of meeting with prominent Uzbek women who played important roles in transformations of Uzbekistan from the viewpoint of gender and development within the last 100 years. The main focus here is on the personality of one of the organizers of the “*Hujum*” campaign in Tashkent, Khabibakhon Abdurakhmanova (1886–1966), and her impact.



From 1927 to 1932, Kh. Abdurakhmanova served as head of the Women’s Department of Starogorodskoi District Party Committee in Tashkent and head of the Council of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan’s (“Uzsovsprof”) Secretariat, responsible for work with women.

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Personality. Khabibakhon Abdurakhmanova was a true believer. In fact, from her early childhood to her death, she led the traditional way of life, but due to the circumstances, became involved in the transformation process in Uzbekistan and contributed to the country’s social and human development, especially women’s emancipation.

Khabibakhon lost her parents in early childhood and was adopted by her uncle, whom people called “Abdujabbor-emchi” (“emchi” meaning “vaccinator”). He was close to Jadids and became one of the first Uzbeks to vaccinate children and adults. An educated and well-to-do man, he used his cows to produce a vaccine against smallpox. Helping him, Khabibakhon learned how to read, write, and, in practice, became acquainted with the basics of medicine. Most importantly, she learned lessons of selfless service to others and became a true supporter of Jadids’ ideas of enlightenment.

Marriage and Family. Khabibakhon was always a tall girl. Nice, neat, and industrious, she always coped with entrusted tasks. At the age of 14, Khabibakhon Abdurakhmon-qizi married Islamhodja Yunushodja-ogly. Their first children died in their infancy. Of 12 children, only four survived¹ and three outlived her: daughter Karamatkhon (1908–2007), and sons Anvar (1911–1994) and Nishon (1914–1981).

¹ Tursinkhon, the first child to survive, was born five years after their marriage. They prayed to Allah that she would survive. The very name “Tursin” is an invocation that stands for “stay” (with the meaning “don’t die”). She grew up to be an intelligent and healthy girl. However, at the age of 16, she became the victim of epidemia.

When her husband died in 1916, Khabibakhon was forced to go to work. As a literate woman, she worked at printing shops in Eski-Juva almost a decade. Karamatkxon looked after her brothers and performed all the household chores. The children grew up in the Shaykhantokhur neighborhood. Soon, her elder son went to school where, along with secular sciences, the Qur'an was taught. Khabibakhon was proud of him; he was an excellent pupil and the best reciter of the Qur'an among district schoolchildren.



Khabibakhon with her children. Tashkent, 1926

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Work. In the printing shop, Khabibakhon worked diligently and responsibly, without avoiding overtime assignments although conditions there obviously affected employees' health. She developed asthma because of the vapors of lead and printing dust. Moreover the long hours of reading proofs deteriorated her vision. These illnesses sharpened especially in her old age.

However, Khabiba-khon never left her work incomplete. Most of all, she was happy that they produced manuals and textbooks for schoolchildren and adults attending "likbez" ("liquidation of illiteracy") courses. Using these textbooks herself, she organized a circle for girls who worked in the printing shop and taught them how to read and write. Her attitude toward work had a beneficial effect on other women. All who knew Khabibakhon treated her with respect.

Khabibakhon was promoted to **Chief of Women's Department of the Eski Shakhar District Party Committee** in early 1927. From the first day, she carried out systematic work among parents, persuading them to permit their boys and girls to go to school, actively advocating for equal opportunities for men and women in education and work. She was well accepted by ordinary people in the old city of Tashkent.

Khabibakhon was among the first Uzbek women who dropped the veil and replaced it first with a dark and then with a large white kerchief. This occurred even before the "*Hujum*" campaign. In her life and behavior, she demonstrated to other women that these actions were not against the essence of religion. Observing the norms of Islam, she tried her best to convince people that absence of the veil did not mean a rejection of religion and morality. During her entire life, she strongly condemned immorality, especially among women.

The “*Hujum*” Campaign began on March 8, 1927—Women’s Day. In the republics and regions with a large Muslim population, the campaign for women’s emancipation began with an attack against “*paranji*,” rather rigidly enforced from above. Even many years later, children in the street shouted “8 (sakkizinchi) Mart paranjini tort” (“8th of March—pull *paranji* out”).

Habibakhon disliked her children shouting such slogans with other pupils, explaining that “*Hujum*” stood against old prejudices connected with inequality of women in order to give them more opportunities to study and work. *Paranji* was just a symbol. However, the decision not to wear was to be taken voluntarily by each woman herself, not by force or by strangers in the street.

Such an approach was in contradiction to government and party bureaucrats, many of whom, as they say, if “ordered to bring ‘duppi’ (national scullcap) were ready to bring it together with a head.” She did not like the organization of demonstration fires to burn *parandji*, nor the demand to speed the process of unveiling at any cost. This attitude made her local supervisors think that Khabibakhon was not strong enough to implement party decisions. Soon, she was recommended to work in the “Uzsovsprof” and use softer measures by convincing, rather than ordering women. She accepted this position with pleasure although it meant moving from Tashkent because the capital city of Uzbekistan was moved to Samarkand.

Literate and accurate in doing everything, she worked efficiently at the republican level too. At the beginning of the 1930s, Khabibakhon Abdurakhmanova was awarded a trip to Moscow for a conference on Oriental women’s emancipation. The participants of the conference were received in the Granovitovaia Chamber of the Kremlin by N.K. Krupskaja (Lenin’s wife), who appreciated their contribution not only in the unveiling of Muslim women, but for giving them equal opportunities to study and work.

She was inspired by the conference, but soon in Moscow and Tashkent, hardliners began to prevail. As an honest person, she could not accept repressive measures with “*peregiby*,” especially in rural areas. When Tashkent was again made the capital, all Republic-level institutions, including Uzsovsprof, returned there. New cadres with university diplomas, better command of the Russian language, and Stalinist ideology started to replace colleagues her age. In Tashkent, Khabibakhon decided to retire too and concentrate on her family. Still, she was active in the formation of the new *mahalla* in “Rabochii Gorodok.”

By that time, **her son Anvar** had graduated from the Pedagogical Academy (now Samarkand State University), majoring in higher mathematics. He also returned to Tashkent and began to teach at the Transportation Institute. Because his students did not have sufficient knowledge [Islamov 2011: 17], he, on the advice of Habibakhon-aya, organized extra classes and helped students obtain firm knowledge and character, among them Yodgor Nasretdinova.²

Habibakhon was very proud that her elder son was working as a professor of mathematics, rector of Tashkent State Pedagogical Institute (1946–1951), vice-rector of Tashkent Institute of Electrotechnical Communications (1959–1972), and continuing her tradition, served to enlighten people and participated in preparation of thousands of young male and female engineers and teachers. He taught for almost 60 years, and after the country’s independence, published five manuals on higher mathematics in the Uzbek language to help a new generation of students study this subject.

² In the 1960–70s, she served as a Chairwoman of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Uzbekistan in Tashkent and then as the Chairwoman of the Chamber of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow. She was the first and only woman of the Soviet period who worked in these positions.



Khabibakhon-aya with her son Anvar and his family. Tashkent. 1948

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In Independent Uzbekistan, where the secular state supports gender equality,³ the deeds of Habibakhon Abdurakhmanova continue to bear fruitful results. It is symbolic that Farida Akbarova, a granddaughter of Kosima-aya Gadoiboyeva from *mahalla* Rabochii Gorodok was Head of the Women’s Committee and served among five other women as the Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan. D. Tashmukhamedova was the Chairwoman of the Legislative Chamber of the Uzbek Parliament from 2008 to 2014. In Tashkent and all regions of Uzbekistan, there are women Deputy Khokims—heads of regional Women’s Committees. In Uzbekistan, the level of female economic activity is rather high, especially in healthcare, sports, social protection (78%), education, culture, science (68%), trade, forestry, and agriculture (51–53%). Overall, women compose 48% of the employed population and about half of all university students [Abdurakhmanov and Zakirova 2014: 227-228].

Globalization and growth of aggressive, politically motivated Islam in the region and the world has led to an increase of “hijob” (new veil) wearers and sellers in Uzbekistan. The government banned wearing religious clothing in public (1998) and selling it in shops and bazaars (2012). The Muslim Board welcomed unveiling.⁴ Why are both the government and Muslim Board of Uzbekistan against hijob?

For most women, especially young girls, hijob is like a new fashion symbolizing faith and purity. For a few, it is a challenge against ugly forms of marketization. However, for conservatives who promote the “hijobization” campaign, it is a method of spreading their ideas in order to split societies and achieve political changes in expansion of the Islamic State (*khalifat*).

The anti-hijob campaign in Uzbekistan is not against religion, but against any sign of solidarity with extreme forms of Islam. The absolute majority of the Uzbek people, the State, and the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan are not in favor of radical political Islam. Modern Uzbek society is for such forms that are adequate to our traditions, mentality, and historical and cultural heritage. They do not want to return to the Middle Ages.

³ The Constitution of Uzbekistan states, “Women and men have equal rights.”

⁴ See C. Obiya’s article in this discussion paper..

Progressive Muslim women, for instance, Asra Nomani, of Indian background, authored *Standing Alone: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam* and journalist Hala Arafa, born in Egypt, also argues that hijab is not compulsory from the viewpoint of the Qur'an, that it is a creation of contemporary conservatives to maintain discrimination against Muslim women. They stress that hijab is not a symbol of Muslim women's faith and dignity and call on women not to wear it [*Washington Post* 2015].

Concluding Remarks. Muslim women in Uzbekistan are much like Khabiba Abdurakhmanova who unveiled herself and actively participated in the *Hujum* campaign, but not at the expense of her faith and principles. The majority of people support unveiling not only because they have been forced to but also because they want better educated and healthy children—boys and girls—to have equal opportunities in jobs and careers.

According to Yoji Yamamoto, “Changes in style of clothing lead to changes in style of life.”⁵ The transformation in Uzbekistan in the 20th century illustrates this. Now, in the 21st century, the problem is not in the veil itself, but in proper expression of religious and social feelings. It is important *not* to import political Islam via hijab and *not* to reverse achievements with a new systemic transformation.

Uzbek people managed to maintain their religion as their spiritual, moral, and cultural values even in a rigid atheistic society. After independence, the secular state provides freedom of faith, but it does not mean freedom for political and extreme forms of Islam or any other religion. It does mean freedom for an individual to exercise religion without harming society, its stability, progress, and happiness.

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⁵ Quoted from [Bagdasaryan 2016]