THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S LABOR IN THE INFORMAL (SHADOW) ECONOMY OF THE UZBEK SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (1930–1980S)

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the hidden forms of women's work in the informal economy in the Soviet Union, and in particular in the Uzbek SSR, from a historical and economic perspective in the 1930s–1980s. The hidden activities of women who fell under the official planned economy include domestic work, handicrafts, black market trade, work on additional agricultural plots, and family businesses.*

Key words*: informal economy, hidden work, women's work, Soviet Union, Uzbek SSR, second economy, household production, black market, gender and labor, 1930s–1980s.*

INTRODUCTION

Today, in the process of profound reforms taking place in our country, the role of every member of society—especially women—is increasing to an unprecedented degree. As the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has stated: "Increasing the economic, social, and political activity of women has become one of the key directions of the New Uzbekistan Development Strategy" [1.245]. This strategic objective is based on the idea of perceiving women not only as homemakers but also as active participants in public administration, entrepreneurship, and social life.

Although this policy is interpreted as a program defining the role of women in society, it is highly interesting to explore its historical roots. In the 1930s–1980s, the official economic system of the Soviet Union was based on centralized planning, state ownership, and the ideology of "socialist competition." However, numerous hidden economic layers existed within its internal mechanisms. Women's labor, in particular, constituted one of the most active, essential, yet least recognized components of this informal economic sphere.

While Soviet official statistics measured economic life primarily through factories, collective farms (kolkhozes), state farms (sovkhozes), state trade, and production plans, the practical economy of everyday life—such as household maintenance, overcoming shortages, meeting domestic needs, and the production and reproduction of clothing and food—was largely ensured through informal labor performed by women.

This situation was especially evident in the Uzbek SSR, particularly in rural areas and among the peoples of Central Asia. Although women constituted a relatively smaller share of the official workforce, they bore the main burden of informal labor.

In the 1970s–1980s, the official employment rate of Uzbek women was often below 50 percent; however, they were actively engaged in household economy, private garden plots (tomorqa), and informal market activities. Although Soviet authorities aimed to involve women in the workforce under the slogan of "economic emancipation," traditional family roles, agricultural labor, and domestic responsibilities remained preserved. As a result, women experienced a "double burden"—formal employment and informal labor [2.148].

During this period, cotton monoculture dominated agriculture in Uzbekistan, and rural women were heavily engaged in manual labor in cotton fields. Nevertheless, the primary source of income and food supply for households remained private garden plots.

Literature Review. Scholarly literature on women's hidden labor in the Soviet Union and the Uzbek SSR mainly focuses on three areas: informal economy theory, household production, and gender inequality in labor.

G. I. Shmelev emphasizes the importance of private subsidiary plots (tomorqa) in Soviet agriculture, showing that small household farms played a major role in food production and family income despite being officially underestimated [3]. This is especially relevant for Uzbekistan, where rural households depended heavily on these plots.

Gregory Grossman introduced the concept of the "second economy," which explains informal and unplanned economic activities such as private trade, home production, and black-market exchange. This framework helps to understand how Soviet citizens, including women, compensated for shortages in the planned economy [6].

D. A. Alimova highlights the gender dimension of Soviet modernization in Uzbekistan, showing that women experienced a "double burden"—formal employment and unpaid domestic work. She also notes that traditional social roles remained strong despite official policies of emancipation [2].

Analysis and Results. The collectivization process of the 1930s brought significant changes to rural life in Uzbekistan. Although peasants' private lands were confiscated and merged into collective farms, each household was allocated a small subsidiary plot—tomorqa (usually 0.25–0.35 hectares). These plots functioned as an extension of the official economy and accounted for 30–40 percent of household income.

According to Soviet statistics, although private plots occupied only about 3 percent of total cultivated land in the USSR, they produced 30–40 percent of vegetables and a significant share of milk and meat. In Uzbekistan, these figures were even higher due to the dominance of cotton production and the prevalence of forced labor in cotton fields.

During World War II (1941–1945), women were massively mobilized into the labor force. In 1940, women accounted for 34 percent of industrial employment, and by 1943 this figure had reached 63 percent [3.28].

At the Tashkent Textile Combine, as well as factories in Andijan and Margilan, women constituted the main workforce. After the war, the number of women in industry increased sharply; for example, at the Andijan Volodarsky factory it increased by 3.5 times, and at the Stroymashina plant by 3 times.

In the 1950s, women's share in light industry—especially textiles—reached 60 percent; however, in heavy industry they often worked in manual and hazardous conditions. By 1975, only 210 out of every 1,000 women in the Uzbek SSR were officially employed in the national economy.

In rural areas, women worked approximately 50 days per year in collective farms, while the rest of their time was devoted to household and private farming. Soviet household budget studies (1969–1990) indicate that on average 23 percent of household expenditures were derived from informal economic activities, contributing approximately 6.8 percent to the total USSR GDP. In the Uzbek SSR—especially in the Fergana Valley and rural areas—this figure reached 70–85 percent [4.98].

Women's hidden labor was primarily expressed in domestic production and handicrafts. During the Soviet period, Uzbek women produced traditional items at home such as suzani embroidery, doppi hats, silk dresses, men's robes, and other textile goods. This craft significantly supplemented household income.

In the 1970s–1980s, some workers of the Margilan and Kosonsoy textile enterprises also engaged in home-based production, selling finished goods in markets. For women with many children, home-based tailoring and handicrafts became the main source of income, as formal employment and family responsibilities were combined.

Family-based production was often organized around crafts such as shoemaking, leather processing, and knife-making, carried out within households through master–apprentice systems. Although these activities were formally associated with collective farms, a significant portion of income remained hidden.

Women's participation in agriculture was also significant. By the 1980s, women constituted up to 77 percent of agricultural workers, although most were informally or partially employed. Women were responsible for cultivating vegetables, fruits, and livestock on private plots.

They also participated in cotton harvesting and weeding, dedicating their remaining time to household plots. Products from these plots not only fed families but were also sold in markets, generating additional income. According to Soviet studies, income from household plots often equaled or exceeded official wages, accounting for 35–40 percent of household budgets [5].

Shadow market trade and speculation (i.e., selling goods at artificially inflated prices due to shortages) was another important form of the informal economy. Women sold home-produced goods—clothing, vegetables, fruits, milk, and other products—in markets in Tashkent, Fergana, and other regions.

During wartime and the economic stagnation of the 1970s, some women engaged in “chelnok” trade, transporting goods from other republics and reselling them locally [6.29]. Although officially prohibited, such activities formed an essential part of household income.

Informal labor played a crucial role in sustaining the Soviet economy by compensating for shortages in official production. From a gender perspective, although Soviet emancipation policies sought to integrate women into the workforce, traditional roles persisted in Central Asia. Women predominantly worked in manual labor under difficult conditions.

By the 1980s, the informal economy exposed the structural weaknesses of the Soviet system [7.165]. Women’s hidden labor not only sustained households but also contributed to the economic stability of the entire republic.

Conclusion / Recommendations. In the 1930s–1980s, women’s hidden labor in the informal economy of the Uzbek SSR served as one of the most important yet invisible pillars of the Soviet planned economy. Through household crafts, private garden plots, shadow market trade, and family-based production, women’s labor sustained millions of families and partially compensated for systemic shortages.

Women lived under a “double burden,” simultaneously engaged in formal employment and informal economic activities, thereby compensating for the weaknesses of the Soviet system.

From a gender perspective, this period revealed the true nature of Soviet emancipation policy. Although women were formally employed, traditional roles and additional hidden labor placed them under severe physical and psychological strain. Health consequences included chronic fatigue, anemia, musculoskeletal disorders, reproductive health problems, and psychological stress.

These issues were often ideologically masked by terms such as “labor heroism,” “devotion,” and “socialist consciousness,” thereby rendering women’s excessive labor invisible both economically and ideologically.

This historical experience laid the foundation for the strong informal sector in the economy of independent Uzbekistan, and its influence continues today. Studying women’s hidden labor is therefore important not only for historical understanding but also for contemporary gender policy and economic development.

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