



## Uzbekistan: Women's Perceptions of Religion, Faith and Traditions

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to study the changes that might have occurred during the years of independence and to examine the impact of these changes on the lives of women in Uzbekistan. This paper integrates the main changes in Uzbek women's attitudes and perceptions on such topics as religion, faith and traditions among others. It emphasizes the effects of the expansion of old traditions on the lives of Uzbek women the decade after Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991, and explains the impact of religion on women's behaviour in social and family life. Traditions and changes that relate not only to religious practices but also to ethnic customs are included in the analysis.

**Keywords:** *Women; Islamic Rules; Cultural Heritage; Traditions; Fundamentalism; Transition; Independence; Religious Observations*

### **Introduction**

In order to see how women's lives are affected by structural and ideological developments, it is necessary to provide some background to the Uzbek national religious heritage and traditional components. Interviews were conducted with 20 middle class women from Tashkent city, ranging in age between 38 and 54. The reason for choosing this particular age group was that women of these ages have experiences from the past and are mature enough to see the changes in their own lives and in Uzbek society and develop their own perspectives on the events that took place after independence. Out of 20 women interviewed fourteen have higher education; the other six have secondary special education. In terms of occupation: nine were housewives, one a ballet dancer, one a school teacher, four university lecturers, one a paediatrician, one a head of a human resources department, two NGO workers and one retired.

As has been mentioned previously, the economic status of respondents was blurred, therefore data on the financial situation was difficult to obtain. Most participants were reluctant to answer questions about their economic situation. Several of the respondents interviewed were unaware of their family's income, especially those who were solely supported by their husbands. That also could be due to the constantly changing financial situation depending on the availability of additional earnings from illegal activity, to unstable economic situation in the country, and the existence of a black market exchange rate.

Taking into consideration the delicacy of the subject the question on income was dropped from the study. None of the participants reported receiving any governmental support.

Only three out of nine housewives had never worked, three worked as medical professionals, one was a physical education teacher, one accountant, and one university lecturer. Marital status: fourteen women were married, two divorced, two separated, one was unmarried and one woman's husband went missing.

Women problems within the observed groups of population could be understood better through a thorough analysis of the cultural context in which respondents find themselves and how it defines their reactions to issues of health. The article aims to uncover women's attitude to ideological changes in Uzbekistan that took place after the independence, and the consequent impact on their lives. It is important to scrutinise the impact of the resurgence of Islamic tradition on the status of women. This is because the renewed interest in tradition together with economic hardships could have a profound effect on patterns of equality. The data reflects how religion is integrated with all aspects of Uzbek women's lives.

From ancient times ethnic Uzbek traditions and customs were uniquely interwoven with Islamic practices. Religion, despite the seventy years of atheistic ideology in the country, is fundamental to the lives of many Uzbek women. Most of the indigenous population in Uzbekistan are Muslim. "Some 90 per cent of the total population of Uzbekistan consists of Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school" and even the "openly hostile Soviet attitude towards the Islamic creed and way of life failed to eradicate the Islamic influence" [1, 16]. During the Soviet period atheistic Marxist ideology was "incorporated with indigenous customs" while "religion was discouraged and at times actively persecuted" [2, 138].

Respondents felt a great deal of ambiguity towards Islam. There is a general agreement that Islam is an essential component of the national identity and cultural legacy, and therefore it is impossible to separate Islam and Uzbek cultural traditions. On the other hand, there is a clear manifestation of absolute enmity and hostility towards the manifestation of Islamic fundamentalist trends, although socio-economic conditions favour the growth of fundamentalist revival of Islam [3]. There are some concerns that traditional Islamic influences may have a negative impact on economic development in the country. According to Lubin [4] even during the Soviet period, the indigenous population was encouraged by the Soviet state to pursue better education and training, but because of their preferences for traditional life-styles they continued to occupy lower paid non-prestigious jobs.

In order to mark the transition to independent nationhood, the government utilised Uzbek ethnic and Islamic traditions as cultural national symbols. In fact there are some differences between Islam in theory and in practice in Uzbekistan. Strict adherence to Islamic rules (*Adats*) and observation of Islamic obligations and proscriptions (*Shariat*) were not practised on a large scale after the Socialist revolution. However, Islamic rules have been preserved and observed generally during marriage customs, funerals and circumcision ceremonies. Islamic rules in certain circumstances were very significant in daily Uzbek life. The Soviet regime successfully aimed to annihilate the influence of Islam in society. However, despite its endeavours the regime was unable to reach the core of the national constructed unit, where the system of religious standards and patterns was preserved, "with its educational institutions" and "communication structures" transmitted from generation to generation [1, 99]. "What has returned today in public life – argues Yalcin – is, however, the mobilized version of what survived underground" (Ibid).

After the Silk Route ended its run in the 16 century, Central Asian countries became the most remote of the major Islamic countries. For centuries, they were cut off not only from Arab Islamic influence, but also from economic and cultural contacts with other countries, due to their isolated geographical position. In 1868, Uzbekistan fell under Russian rule and in 1917 accepted Bolshevik Socialist rule. After that, for seventy years Islam was kept tightly under the control of Communist State. As a result, Central Asian Muslims became the most secularised in the world. The Muslim Spiritual Board of Central Asia was established in 1943. All Muslim clerics had to be registered with the board. Despite the fact that Islam gained, to certain extent, increasing influence during Soviet period, "as a result

of greater tolerance to religion throughout the Soviet period” [5, 284], Islamic Muslim’s schools were abolished, many mosques and institutions were closed, Muslim women were given civil rights, and religious dress was discouraged. As Tabyshalieva [6, 52] states “the traditional cultural values of Central Asia survived throughout the Soviet era, despite the many advances that were otherwise made in science, culture, healthcare, and politics”. Many Muslims began a dual life. They gained atheistic secular education, many becoming Communist Party members; however, they continued to follow some Islamic traditions. The dominant Muslim sect in Uzbekistan is Sunni. In comparison with the Sufi and Shia sects Sunni trends were more fatalistic and therefore appeared to be more broad-minded in accepting the rule of any power. Islam has been preserved in the country during secularism but declined to the status of a religion of private conscience. “Islam remained the constant element of the region’s cultural and historical identity that each generation owed to the foregoing” [1, 99].

During the civil war in 1920, following the Russian revolution, the country was devastated. Many children lost their parents in this war. These children were brought up in the Soviet institutions and effectively absorbed a new communistic way of life and later were actively involved in the communist party movement. They were the first local activists to join the emancipation process.

Rano, 38, commented on this change as follows:

“I had two grandmothers. Both were from the Fergana valley. My father’s mother was very religious; she wore a *paranja* (overcoat with a horse-hair veil) all her life. She was illiterate, married young, and the revolution had made little impact on her life, she continued to perform prayers five times a day, observed fasting during Ramadan and she never watched TV. My mother’s mother was sent to the Soviet institution, because her mother was unable to sustain her three daughters and a son by herself. Thus my granny was brought up under a strict influence of modernized communistic ideology. She abandoned *paranja*, cut her hair and wore stylish western clothes. She studied Uzbek literature in the institute. She was very emancipated. We were exposed to two different influences from our emancipated grandmother and the other grandmother who strictly adhered to Islamic traditions”.

The process of emancipation was hastened by the fact that due to poor living conditions young children had been separated from their families and come under the influence of communistic ideas, in the social institutions where they were offered a protected environment.

Today, after independence from a communist ideology that created a highly educated, liberated female population over seventy years, women, have been subjected to a confusing mixture of competing ideologies: nationalism, Muslim revivalism and westernisation. A resurgence of Muslim traditional practices such as wearing the veil, polygamy, submission to husband or father, goes against women’s expectations cherished under socialism. Social transformations during transition such as the religious revival, and clerical fundamentalism in particular, could have unpleasant and restrictive consequences for women. This is because they bring a resurgence of traditional patriarchal attitudes towards women’s position in society.

Thus, during the Soviet period the authorities tried to establish ideological dominance with the help of communistic slogans and dogmas, but there is an attempt to alter life according to the Law of early Islam. Taking advantage of political discrepancies the first step in this alteration has been taken towards changing women’s status. “Women and Islam” is the most popular subject in the official press today. Social problems and an increase in crime have been linked to the process of developments in women’s emancipation and their equal rights with men, implying that emancipated women pay less attention to the upbringing of their children. The debate among Uzbek politicians and writers takes place on the radio, television, and in the press is about the idea of returning woman to her family responsibilities established by the ancient traditions. The process of national revival went along with the revival of Islamic traditions, but lack of experience and religious knowledge have led to peculiar interpretations of Islamic rules, disproportionately emphasising the definitions of Islamic norms with regards to women’s secondary position.

Shirin Akiner [5, 193] argues that “the great majority of women have not shown any inclination to exceed the limits sanctioned by society” and that could be regarded as a sign of backwardness. However, despite the notion about the relatively backward position of Uzbek women, the data I collected gives little evidence that women in Uzbekistan wish to give up all they gained during the Soviet period. However, it should be taken into consideration that modernisation of life, education and assimilation of multi-cultural norms of relations has been spread and adopted mostly among the urban educated part of the population. New modernized ideas introduced by the Russians have been combined with traditional patterns of life on a very superficial level. In rural areas, on the contrary, Russification has been seen as an inadmissible infringement of national identity and traditions and as a betrayal of religion.

The sequence of the events in Uzbekistan shows that it seems that Uzbek middle-class urban women could easily adapt to any situation they have been put in. After the revolution, women abandoned *paranja*, (although, the process was not as smooth as it was presented by the Soviet ideology), and accepted emancipation, European styles in fashion and at home, acquired atheism and took advantage of all legal rights the Soviet system had offered. Today in the changing society, despite the fact that they accepted Islam to some extent, they are not eager to give up their positions. Thus, they accept a revival of Islam only up to a certain level, if it does not eliminate their achievements and attainments.

However, women need to make constant adjustments in the face of changing socio-economic and cultural-traditional conditions of everyday life. Switching from one ideological form to another could bring disorganization into women’s lives and confusion about identity. Thus the meaning of women’s lives cannot be properly described and understood without taking into consideration changing circumstance, particularly in areas such as religion. Thus the objective of this paper is to discuss a significant issue of women’s beliefs; to understand women’s behaviour during a critical period in relation to Islam; to learn women’s own perceptions of and attitudes to religion. It is very important to ascertain if there has been a reversal in women’s lives, and if so, then why it was a reversal for some women and for others an opportunity to progress.

### **Influence of Soviet Heritage on Women’s Religious Choices**

Most of the women interviewed identified themselves as Muslim. Although the majority of respondents adhere strictly to all Muslim traditions. That could be due to the fact that Islam, was repressed during the Soviet rule, and many people were not acquainted with true Islamic norms. On the other hand in many Islamic countries the observations of such traditions as funeral rites, dress code, marriage, divorce, dietary rules, and others are mostly cultural choices rather than Quranic and there are no precise norms, except the common ones like “Five pillars” of Islam. Islamic law *shariat* was legally prohibited in the Soviet period and after independence.

Some women confessed that they believed in God, in a Supreme Power and in a Supreme Spirit, but rejected contrived unwritten practices. One woman acknowledged that she was an atheist, although she admitted that she believed in some kind of a Spirit that has protected her. She became an atheist because she was a scientist in the first place, but also because she was disappointed in a state Church and priests. This is her story:

Oliya, 54, scientist:

“I studied different religions. I studied religion in Kiev, and I got a degree. However, the teachers there were very dishonourable. That deterred me from official religion for ever. I believe in some kind of spirit that protects me, but I do not attend the Church. Sometimes I have the urge to go there, so I go, and listen to the service, examine the icons, and watch the process. But I do not like people whose duty is to bring faith in God to ordinary people. They are not sincere in their duties; they are so artificial and false. The priest must help people, but I don’t see it. All priests ride about in Mercedes. In my family there were two religions – Islam and Orthodoxy. But my parents never pulled me to their sides”.

Soviet propaganda in literature and films contributed to the creation of the image of clergymen as hypocritical, cunning and deceitful. Consequently, children learned from a young age that clergymen did not accept science and knew only how to learn verses from holy books.

Religious people were less likely to access higher education, because in order to enter an institute or university, one must have been enrolled in the Komsomol (youth organization). The older generation realised that it would be better for their children to put religion aside, if they wanted them to prosper in their future lives.

Saida, 51, a housewife, said that she lost her belief when several misfortunes befell her family. Her husband went missing in May 1994 and her 19 year old son died a year later in suspicious circumstances, after that her daughter divorced and had to undergo hysterectomy, and now at twenty eight her daughter had become an invalid without the opportunity to have children. In this case the woman had her personal grievance, she could not be reconciled with her multiple loss. She admitted that she had lost her belief, because she prayed and prayed, but that did not help, on the contrary, matters worsened. She explains her husband's disappearance and her son's death by the fact that at that time the Wahhabi movement was wide spread in the country, religious leaflets were disseminated, many young men were abducted, and there was general unease.

After the bombing in 1999 the government initiated the persecution of Islamic fundamentalist leaders, the purge of Wahhabis and fundamentalists had begun. Islamic influence that revived after independence has been put under the strict control of the ruling government once again. Uzbek authorities expressed concern about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and gradually introduced measures to control forms of Islam not authorised by the state [7 and 8].

### **Islam in everyday life**

In reality Islam, unlike some other religions for example Buddhism and even Christianity, is not only a religion of private consciousness. Islam is a way of life rather than just a religion. It regulates family and domestic life (marriage, inheritance and sexual relations), determines social behaviour, ethics, dress, conduct justice and punishment and so on. Therefore, despite the fact that there was no legal validity for Islamic Law during the Soviet period, Islam was a potent conservative force powerful enough to resist the enormous changes imposed by the secular regime. Religion that was persecuted during the Soviet period has been preserved in social consciousness as a national characteristic, and in this form it was strong enough among the majority of the population. Traditions were deeply rooted and maintained in everyday life and this could explain the survival of Islam for all these years. That could be explained by scrutinising Soviet policy towards Central Asian nationalism. On the one hand they sought to discourage and even eliminate any religious ideas "which they saw as a potential rival to its power". On the other hand in order to avoid arousal of negative public awareness the authorities had to loosen the interference in "matters of local custom" to some extent [9, 234]. Moreover, as [2, 138] argues, Islam for the Soviet power was "a useful way to control the population".

The restrictions on religion were manifested by the fact that almost nobody celebrated Islamic holidays like *Hait*, (Id al-Fitr, a celebration of the break of fasting) *Uraza* (fasting during the Ramadan). People, rarely knew how to pray properly, almost nobody wore religiously prescribed clothes, (it is obligatory for Muslims to cover their heads). However, the funerals and weddings were carried out with all religious observations among all indigenous population, despite official prohibition. Thus, for instance, during funerals the corpse had to be washed in accordance with the Islamic ritual, then wrapped in a white fabric, three times for men and five times for women, versus from the Quran have had to be cited: "*La Illahi ila Allahi, va Muhammad Rasuluhu*" (There is no God except Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet). No coffin was permitted – the corpse had to be put in the specially dug pit, in the sitting position with its legs pointing towards the East. Even where senior Party leaders had to be buried, and the body was put in the coffin for the official ceremony, it had then to be taken from the coffin. All rituals were observed in privacy within their families. There was no way, that an individual of Uzbek nationality, whoever he was, atheist or not, could have been buried without traditional Islamic observations.

There are examples here of what Foucault [10] calls “counter–memories” – subterranean practices sustained as forms of resistance to dominant forms of power. During the weddings, which must have been registered in the registry office first, the newlyweds usually requested that the mullah observe the Islamic ritual (*nikoh*). The mullah carried out the *nikoh* only if the man and woman had the marriage certificate issued by the Soviet authorities. People usually tried not to publicise that they had undergone the *nikoh*. During the *nikoh*, the bride and groom must have been seated in different rooms or on different sides of a partition. The mullah cited a special verse from the Quran, and then asked the groom what he had to provide for the bride. After specifying the obligations and duties of both sides the mullah would ask the bride three times if she agrees to accept what the groom offers and be his wife. Only on the third time should the bride give her answer. After she said “yes”, they were considered to be husband and wife. The *Shariat* gives the bride the right to accept or decline or specify the details of the contract<sup>1</sup>. During the Soviet period that ceremony was not publicised, and did not have a legal status. However, parents persuaded young couples to undertake the *nikoh* ceremony, explaining that it was just Uzbek custom. Today the official status has been given to *nikoh*. After independence, idealization and reincarnation of Islamic traditions have been manifested in everyday life.

Circumcision, another Islamic tradition, has been observed by the majority of the indigenous Uzbek population, because it was considered the major attribute of adherence to Islam. Uzbek boys, aged three–to–five, must be circumcised, due to Islamic law. This procedure takes place both in private homes, where the mullah specialises in this procedure performing it on the children with rushes sticks and in clinics, by doctors administering local anaesthesia. Although, almost everywhere in the country the medical establishments perform the operation free (or for a trivial fee, usually people gave small presents to the doctors, like flowers and chocolates) and after one or two hours the child is free to go home, some people persistently preferred to do it in their homes with the help of mullahs.

Adalat, 38, housewife:

“We did it at home. My husband wanted to take my son to the hospital, but I refused, my parents insisted on doing it at home, they said that the boy must remember this event. But if we took him to the hospital, he would just have thought that something was wrong with him, that he was sick or whatever. Everything passed pretty well, although when he started to cry, I regretted that I didn’t take him to the hospital, but it was too late”.

During the circumcision, the woman should not be present in the room; she should stay in the other most remote room, and must put her hands in flour presumably in order not to be able to rush to her son, when he starts to cry. Yoqut, 39, school teacher:

“I put my hands into the flour, and I was crying, and my mascara melted and leaked, and my sister also had put her hand in the flour and she also was crying, and then I looked at her, she was like a clown, with all her make–up and flour smeared around her face. And she looked at me and probably I was also like a clown, so we started laughing at each other, through the tears”.

Iroda, 42:

“Oh, no. I regretted it so much that I let my relatives persuade me to do it at home. They took him to their house in the village, Oh, I remember, all those strangers in the house, I didn’t know who they were, and then suddenly, I realised that I lost my son from my sight, but it was too late to reverse anything. My aunts took me to another room, I started to weep, but all the women in the room seemed so happy. They brought the basin full of flour, and told me that I must put my hands in it, or otherwise bad spirits would come, and everything could have gone wrong. And then I heard him crying, and he cried so pitifully “Mama! Mama! Let me go to my mama!” And then he screamed so badly, I thought I would lose consciousness. But I was helpless”.

<sup>1</sup> Although in Uzbekistan it is only nominally, all the negotiations concerning duties and obligations of the groom are usually solved in advance.

After the procedure has been performed, the boy would lie in the bed for several days, and everybody, neighbours, relatives, friends should come to visit the boy and bring him gifts and presents, to help the boy to overcome the pain and cheer him up so he could quicker forget the unpleasant feeling from the procedure.

However, most of the women I interviewed had the circumcision performed on their sons in the clinics or hospitals, with local anaesthesia. Most women did not want to make their sons suffer, whatever the tradition had taught.

Circumcision is usually recommended by the doctors themselves when there are medical reasons for this operation, but, many people do it only for to religious reasons.

*Uraza*, fasting during Ramadan, became popular during the years after independence. However, few respondents or their children indicated that they strictly adhered to this tradition, whereas their husbands seemed more enthusiastic on fasting during Ramadan breaking it with the sumptuous feast (*iftar*).

Such matters as polygamy, virginity and circumcision have never been discussed openly in the scientific literature or in the press. In Uzbekistan such traditions and customs are usually the themes for ethnographic studies. However, these facts are a significant part of everyday life and exist in the forms of unwritten law, steadily implemented among each stratum of society. Very often these customs contradict constitutional law, which secures the main human rights.

Concerning polygamy all the respondents in my study opposed it. There are cases in Uzbekistan where men take a second wife, illegally, because the Soviet law and the Uzbek law prohibited polygamy. There is no official evidence on that issue though although it has been discussed in the press and on Uzbek Radio. After independence there was a discussion in the press about the possibility of the legalisation of polygamy with the approval of new Islamic tendencies, for instance to improve the situation of single mothers or widows. However, the tradition of polygamy seriously undermines women's social status and legal rights. Women who married as second wives have found themselves in a very unpleasant situation. Their social and legal status in the society becomes very low. For instance, they cannot lay claim to the inheritance, in the case of their husband's death, because of the illegality of their situation, not for themselves and not for their children. Husbands can easily abandon them without support. She would have to register as a single mother in order to receive financial support from the government. Some women cannot even appear in the husband's family, because of the secrecy of their status.

There could be a number of reasons why women do this. The first reason could be love a woman in love could believe in all the promises of her beloved, for example, that he would eventually leave his first wife, or that he would protect and support and provide for her and their children. Another reason could be that for divorced women or elderly spinster it is a better option than living alone. The institution of cohabitation is not in practice in Uzbek society. Therefore, even if polygamy is not legitimate in relation to State law, at least it could be legitimate in relation to God. However, the respondents of the study showed their negative reaction to this issue.

Mukaddas, 39, gives her opinion on this topic:

“I think that the problem was in the way the marriages were arranged in Uzbek society. It is usually the parents who decided whom their children are to marry. Thus the son obeys his parents' decision and marries the girl whom he doesn't like at all. The two are very young, they live at his parents' house, they do not have their own family, just a communal house, and they do not have any privacy. But they have their own needs. Take my friend, for example, his parents didn't allowed him to marry the girl he loved so much. So he married the girl his parents found him. After two or three years, or may be straight away, who knows, he started seeing his other girl again, and then she gave birth to his child, and now they did *nikoh* (religious marriage). People do

not understand that they make their kids unhappy, on the contrary they prove that they did it with the purpose of making their kids happy”.

Arranged marriages are still common in the country. When I asked women would they arrange their children’s marriages, some of them said that they would do so. Ruhsora, Mariam, Oydin, Sultanat, said that their marriages were arranged by their parents, although all of them had their right to choose, and were not married by force.

Sultanat, 54, gives her opinion on this topic:

“With our upbringing and our traditions, it is very difficult to get into relations which could lead to marriage. And the parents usually want the best for their children, and would pick the best. But it is not like in the old days, when they traded the children for the dowry. If you don’t like the person you can wait for another opportunity”.

Usually, the mother of the groom asks her son if he is ready to get married. If he says yes, then she starts to ask among acquaintances and relatives if they have their eye on somebody. Usually, the offer comes from different sides, so the mother has several girls to choose from. She goes to the girl’s house, supposedly, incognito, talks to the girl’s mother, and asks the neighbours about the family history. If she likes the family, she will ask the girl’s parents if her son and their daughter can meet. The meeting usually takes place in the open air, somewhere in the park or in the square under the supervision of the mothers from both sides. There are some common places in Tashkent where one can observe these events. The boy and the girl talk for several minutes and then go away. If they liked each other they would tell their parents to go ahead. If they do not like each other nobody would bear a grudge against the other party. Several respondents in my study admitted that they saw their future spouses only once or twice before the marriage.

This tradition is still valid, although young people meet each other at schools and institutes and at work and eventually fall in love. In this case parents are happy to marry them, but they follow the tradition of going to the girl’s house, asking agreement from her parents, even though everything has been decided between them beforehand. In this case the groom’s parents are released from the humiliation of refusal.

Traditionally a girl must be a virgin before marriage, although this is not mentioned anywhere in Islamic law. There is no way to find out the roots of this law, because there are no sources of information where this problem is scrutinized. These themes are taboo for Uzbek society. However, the law on virginity has been deeply rooted into the social psychology and could be the cause of serious problems for women, although nobody expects the man to be a virgin. These views are strongly and widely held and so have a profound influence on shaping the lives of women. This unwritten law became a cultural stronghold of paternalistic a patriarchal society and is still valid among all strata of the indigenous population. Even the high level of emancipation of Uzbek women, was not able to solve this problem. It could be argued that as long as this situation exists in the country the discourse about women’s emancipation is still significant. While there are debates about women’s equal rights in the productive sphere, there is no discourse about women’s sexual rights. That could prove the fact that women were not fighting for their equal rights, they just accepted what they were granted by the state. They passively supported official policies without an attempt to express their own views and demands. If we assume that during the Soviet period women did not have any choice but to comply with the state policy, than it could be expected that after the independence women would take the advantage in order to acquire further achievements in the sphere of gender equality. However, the data from the interviews suggests that although women are unwilling to give up the Soviet achievements, they did not express any aspiration to improve their position. There are still no independent feminist movements, which could organise women into parties, to fight for their rights, influence the decision making, and introduce amendments and adjustments into the legislation in order to enhance their status. The respondents were very reluctant to talk on the issue of virginity, although women who did talk expressed their negative attitude towards this tradition.



In this paper I tried to reveal perceptions of Islamic and cultural traditions from urban women's perspectives. In fact the picture in the rural areas or in the regions like the Fergana valley could vary from the facts presented in this paper. This information was collected from women who are highly educated, in most cases they were brought up under the tight atheistic control of secular society. The fact that many are reluctantly perhaps adopting some religious practices attests to the extent of this revival in the country. Indeed, most of the respondents admitted that they do believe in God, in a Supreme Power, in some kind of Supreme Spirit, even the woman who declared herself an atheist. Perhaps after independence Islam has filled the vacuum left by the collapse of communist ideology. During the first years of independence the alternation from communist ideology to Islamic heritage in Uzbekistan has been spreading successfully. New mosques have been built, seminaries and religious schools have been reopened. Many women reported that they started being more Muslim after independence when they became more exposed to religious information through literature, radio and television. Thus women, interviewed indicated the importance of adhering to certain patterns of religious behaviour like doing good deeds, having good intentions, in other words following the commandments. However, they signify that a good believer must not try to impose one's own perceptions on others. For most of them choosing Islam, was not a free choice but following their national heritage and family traditions. On the other hand the fact that people are more prone to turn to religion when they become more mature, could also contribute to the fact that the respondents gradually rediscover the faith for themselves. Many women mentioned that their parents became very religious later in their life. Being religious for most respondents had a lot to do with sound intentions, doing good deeds to others and having a pure soul.

The idea of independence, substituted the former communist ideological foundation of power, and even revealed itself in the same forms of coercion. There is still a danger of radicalisation of the process of revival of Islam in the forms of fundamentalism. A spiritual vacuum, as a consequence of the collapse of communist ideology, a decrease in living standards, ethnic and social unrest, a rapid growth of religious devotion, proliferation of religious organisations together with the low level of religious knowledge, all these could be a precondition for fundamentalism. There are also other factors that could impede the growth of fundamentalism, and that could be adherence to a secular way of live among the educated urban middle – class. As the data reveals many women do not consider giving up their achievements they gained. However, many women expressed their concerns about the increase of demands and restrictions from the clerical authorities, and will possibly spread to the other spheres of life such as education.

Some women admitted that they started observing Muslim traditions only because of social pressure, which is stronger in some neighbourhoods than in others. Some respondents on the contrary confessed that they were disappointed in religion, due to their personal misfortunes, or due to the disillusionment in the clergymen. In the country where Islam was preserved not as a theological trend but more as a way of life, cultural, traditional and religious aspects have been mixed, and today people have been left to decide on their own what to choose. Especially when the revival of Islam comes from different countries with different Islamic trends. For instance, Turkish influence is more modernised, Saudi-Arabian enforces the strict Hanbali Sunni rule, whereas Iran follows Shia trends.

Most of the respondents expressed their concern about women's clothes. Although all women interviewed spoke out against the Muslim tradition to cover women from the head to the ankles, there is a trend in the Uzbek society for women to cover themselves. Thus, even if women are ready to accept some Islamic norms and rules, they are not prepared to give up all they gained during the years of emancipation.

Another sphere where women are totally against Islamic traditions is polygamy. None of the respondents experienced it in her life, but all of them expressed very negative feelings on this question.

The majority of respondents expressed the wish that the country would keep the balance between tradition and modernity, and would be able to take the rational from both directions. Almost all of them

were of the opinion that Islam should not be politicised, and that the state must be separate from religion, and that religion should develop only in the private sphere.

The data collected on the topic of “religion and tradition” have shown the diversity of opinions among women. It could be argued that most women adopted a passive strategy towards newly revived religious traditions. However, women indicated that they have not followed these traditions blindly; on the contrary, they adhered to the challenge selectively and choose what was most acceptable for them. Their so – called passivity is rather a deliberate strategy in coping with the new order, which was imposed on them involuntary. An increased religiosity among these women does not prevent them from asking critical questions and behaving in a way that seems more appropriate than that of conservative trends.

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