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GENDER DISPARITIES IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN: LEGAL GUARANTEES AND CHALLENGES OF THEIR PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract: The article examines the legal and institutional framework for ensuring gender equality and the realization of the right to work of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which gender stereotypes, social attitudes and the organization of work affect the employment opportunities of this population group. The provisions of international legal instruments, national legislation and the main directions of state employment policy are analyzed. The study considers barriers related to the accessibility of vocational education, workplace adaptation, employer practices and interaction among state institutions. Based on the analysis, the article identifies directions for improving inclusive employment mechanisms that take into account gender-specific factors and the individual needs of persons with disabilities.

Keywords: gender equality, persons with disabilities, employment, inclusive employment, social protection, discrimination, labor rights, public policy.

The right to work occupies an important place in the system of human social and economic rights. The ability to earn one's own living, apply professional skills and participate in public life affects not only a person's material well-being but also the degree of his or her social independence. However, formally enshrined rights do not in themselves mean that every citizen has equal opportunities to exercise them. This is particularly evident in the employment of persons with disabilities, where individual professional capabilities are often closely linked to the accessibility of the environment and to public attitudes.

In examining this issue, it is important to consider not only disability itself but also other circumstances that may affect a person's position in the labor market. One such circumstance is gender. Women and men with disabilities may face different expectations from society, employers and family members. As a result, disability-related barriers are in some cases compounded by constraints arising from traditional notions of occupational and family roles.

The aim of the study is to analyze the legal and institutional mechanisms for ensuring gender equality in the employment of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Uzbekistan, and to identify the main problems in their practical implementation as well as directions for improvement.

Research methodology. To achieve the stated objectives, the employment of persons with disabilities should be viewed as the outcome of the interaction of several factors. These include

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legislative guarantees, labor market conditions, access to education, workplace organization and the activities of state institutions. For this reason, the methodological basis of the study comprises systemic, comparative legal and gender approaches. In addition, an analysis of regulatory legal acts and institutional mechanisms is employed. When interpreting the results, it is essential to distinguish between legal analysis and empirical research. Regulatory documents make it possible to establish the content of legal guarantees, whereas assessing the actual situation of citizens requires statistical data, official reports and the findings of sociological surveys.

The empirical basis of the study comprises data from the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan [1]; the results of the household budget survey and administrative data of the National Agency for Social Protection, summarized by the Social Policy Laboratory (ISLAB) [2]; and the results of a survey of young people with disabilities conducted by ISLAB with the support of UNDP [3].

International and national legal frameworks for ensuring labor rights. In this context, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are of particular importance. The former aims to eliminate discrimination against women, including in employment and professional development. The latter enshrines the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others and provides for the creation of an accessible and non-discriminatory working environment. This system is complemented by the conventions of the International Labour Organization on equal remuneration and the prevention of discrimination in employment and occupation.

The Republic of Uzbekistan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by Law No. ZRU-695 of June 7, 2021 [4]; the instrument of ratification was deposited on June 28, 2021, and the Convention entered into force for Uzbekistan on July 28, 2021. Accession to this international instrument is significant not only in terms of recognizing the relevant rights but also in the context of further improving national social protection and employment mechanisms. The state's international obligations are reflected in national legislation. Of fundamental importance in this area is the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan in its new wording adopted in 2023. Article 58 enshrines the equal rights of women and men, while Article 57 provides for state guarantees of social protection and the creation of conditions for the full participation of persons with disabilities in public life [5]. These provisions form the constitutional basis for the further development of legislation on equal opportunities and inclusive employment. The constitutional guarantees have been elaborated in specialized regulatory legal acts. In particular, Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. ZRU-562 of September 2, 2019, "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men," establishes the legal foundations for ensuring gender equality [6]. Law No. ZRU-641 of October 15, 2020, "On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities," regulates the protection of the rights of this category of citizens, including the exercise of the right to work [7]. Of additional significance is Law No. ZRU-561 of September 2, 2019, "On the Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence," which is aimed at protecting women from the relevant forms of rights violations [8].

Another important element of state policy is the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030 [9]. It sets long-term benchmarks for the development of equal opportunity policy. Its relevance to the topic under consideration lies not only in the promotion of gender equality in general but also in the need to take into account the situation of women who face additional social and economic constraints.

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Gender-specific aspects of the employment of persons with disabilities. Statistical data confirm the significance of the gender factor. In 2025, there were 1,063.1 thousand persons with disabilities in Uzbekistan, of whom women accounted for 45.3% and men for 54.7% [1]. The employment rate of working-age persons with disabilities was 24.7%, compared with 59.2% among persons without disabilities. Among men with disabilities it stood at 30.4%, while among women it was only 16.4% (15.7% in rural areas) [2]. According to the ISLAB study, 40% of employed young people with disabilities work informally, and among young women this figure reaches 88% [2; 3].

For women with disabilities, gender stereotypes that may influence employers' decisions constitute one of the major obstacles. In some cases, a woman's professional qualities are assessed through assumptions about her presumed family responsibilities or disability-related limitations. Such attitudes can reduce her chances of employment even when she has the necessary education and qualifications. Men with disabilities also face specific social difficulties. In societies where traditional views of the man as the main breadwinner persist, unemployment may be perceived not only as an economic problem but also as the loss of a customary social role. Such expectations can intensify psychological pressure and hinder adaptation to new working conditions. A fuller understanding of the problem requires taking into account the intersection of gender and disability. This approach helps explain why universal support measures do not always produce the same results. For example, a vocational training program may be formally open to all citizens, yet actual participation in it will depend on the accessibility of premises, transportation and learning materials, as well as on the ability to combine training with other responsibilities.

Key barriers to exercising the right to work. Social barriers include prejudice regarding the professional abilities of persons with disabilities. If an employer assumes in advance that such a candidate will be less productive, the hiring decision may be based on stereotypes rather than on an objective assessment of qualifications. In such situations, a legal prohibition of discrimination is insufficient without effective oversight mechanisms and the development of non-discriminatory hiring practices.

Educational barriers are no less significant. Opportunities for professional development are limited if training programs do not take into account the needs of persons with disabilities or fail to provide access to the necessary technologies and materials. Moreover, the qualifications obtained do not always lead to employment if educational programs do not meet labor market requirements. Insufficient coordination of support measures is also highlighted in analytical materials on the development of the social protection and employment promotion system in Uzbekistan. The 2024 UNDP report, prepared jointly with the National Agency for Social Protection under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, addresses the coordination of social services and employment support mechanisms for persons with disabilities [10]. The areas for improvement identified in the report include comprehensive individual support, coordinated action by government agencies and better targeting of assistance. The ISLAB study also found that only 18.7% of young people with disabilities are aware of employment quotas, while 49.6% have no information about existing employment support services [2].

To systematize the identified problems, the main barriers and possible ways of overcoming them are presented in the table below.

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Group of barriers	Main manifestation	Direction of solution
Social	Employers' stereotypes and prejudices	Awareness-raising and development of non-discriminatory hiring practices
Educational	Limited access to vocational training	Accessible training and retraining programs
Infrastructural	Inaccessibility of transportation, buildings and workplaces	Universal design and reasonable accommodation
Economic	Shortage of suitable vacancies and employment instability	Incentives for employers and vocational support
Institutional	Insufficient coordination of social and labor services	Interagency cooperation
Gender-related	Stereotypes about occupational roles and unequal distribution of family responsibilities	Taking gender-specific factors into account in the design of employment programs

Institutional mechanisms of state policy

An important step in improving the institutional system was Presidential Decree No. UP-85 of May 8, 2025, "On Additional Measures to Improve the System for Ensuring the Employment of Persons with Disabilities" [11]. The document provides for additional measures to improve this system, covering job creation, the promotion of sustainable employment and interaction among the responsible government bodies.

According to the National Agency for Social Protection, the number of officially employed persons with disabilities increased from 72 thousand in 2023 to 234 thousand in 2025 [2]. From the perspective of gender analysis, the assessment of state policy outcomes should be complemented by a comparison of the situation of women and men with disabilities. Although aggregate statistics show an increase in the number of employed citizens, they do not make it possible to determine whether the new opportunities are distributed equally among different population groups. This requires data disaggregated by sex and other relevant characteristics, which are not yet provided in the available employment materials.

Discussion and directions for policy improvement. An examination of legal norms, gender-specific factors and institutional mechanisms reveals a common problem: guaranteeing equal rights and creating equal opportunities are interrelated but not identical tasks. Legislation enshrines the necessary guarantees; however, the actual situation of citizens depends on the extent to which these guarantees are supported by accessible infrastructure, effective services and appropriate labor market conditions.

An important issue concerns the consideration of gender-specific factors in the design of support programs. Identical conditions for participation in a program do not always mean equal accessibility for all citizens. For example, the opportunity to undergo training may depend on transport accessibility, class schedules, family responsibilities and the accessibility of learning materials. Therefore, program design should take into account the real-life circumstances of participants without reinforcing traditional notions of which responsibilities women and men should perform. In this regard, it is

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advisable to use a system of indicators that includes the share of employed persons with disabilities, the ratio of female to male employment rates, the share of workers who retain their jobs 6 and 12 months after being hired, as well as data on access to vocational training and workplace accommodation. Where the relevant statistics are available, differences by age, region, level of education and other characteristics should be analyzed.

Conclusion. The analysis shows that the existence of legal guarantees should not be automatically equated with the achievement of de facto equality. Employment opportunities still need to be considered in connection with access to education and infrastructure, employer practices, the quality of social services and the coherence of state institutions' activities. This is also confirmed by statistics: the employment rate of women with disabilities (16.4%) is almost half that of men with disabilities (30.4%). The gender dimension of employment requires particular attention. Women and men with disabilities may face different social expectations and constraints that affect their professional opportunities. Therefore, general support measures should be complemented by an analysis of citizens' specific needs, without relying on preconceived notions of their family roles or professional abilities.

The main directions for policy improvement include the development of individualized employment support, improved workplace accessibility, expanded opportunities for professional retraining, stronger interagency cooperation and the introduction of a monitoring system with data disaggregated by sex and other relevant characteristics.

Thus, the assessment of state policy on the employment of persons with disabilities should take into account not only the number of regulatory acts adopted and measures implemented but also real changes in the situation of citizens. The key outcome should be the expansion of opportunities for sustainable employment, professional development and economic independence, regardless of sex or disability.

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