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WHEN SHARED NORMS DO NOT PRODUCE SHARED MEANINGS: THE CASE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: Gender equality has become one of the most widely accepted global norms through international agreements such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). Many studies examine how this norm spreads across countries. Far less attention has been paid to what the norm comes to mean after it enters a national context. This article addresses that gap through the case of Uzbekistan. It combines norm diffusion theory, Acharya's concept of norm localization, and post-structuralist discourse analysis, and it reads policy with Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach. The study compares how gender equality is constructed in the international framework with how it is constructed in Uzbekistan's official documents, including national laws, the national gender strategy, and presidential addresses. It follows a rule of symmetry: neither the international nor the national construction is treated as the true version of the norm, and the country is not tested for consistency between them. The analysis shows that Uzbekistan has adopted gender equality as an international commitment and written it into domestic law, so diffusion is clear. Yet the meaning of the norm is not identical across the two settings. The international framework builds gender equality around rights, non-discrimination, participation, and empowerment. Uzbekistan's official discourse builds the same term around the family, social protection, national development, and the role of the state. The article argues that diffusion produces a shared commitment but not a shared meaning, and it reads this difference as norm localization rather than as resistance.

Keywords: gender equality; norm diffusion; norm localization; discourse analysis; constructivism; SDG 5; Uzbekistan.

1. Introduction

Gender equality is often described as one of the clearest examples of a global norm. Almost every state has signed the main international agreements on it, from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). Uzbekistan is part of this pattern. It reports on SDG 5 to the United Nations, it has passed national laws on equal rights and on the protection of women, it has adopted a national gender strategy. By any usual measure, the global norm has arrived.

This article asks a question that comes after arrival. When a state accepts a global norm, does it also accept one fixed meaning for that norm? Or can a country share the international commitment while giving the norm a different content at home? The article studies this through Uzbekistan. It does not ask whether Uzbekistan adopted gender equality, because it clearly did. It asks how gender equality is understood once the norm is inside national policy.

The thesis is simple. Norm diffusion produces a shared commitment, but it does not automatically produce a shared meaning. The international framework and Uzbekistan's official discourse both speak of gender equality, and both connect their gender policy to the same global goal. Yet they build the meaning of the term in different ways. The international framework builds it around

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rights, non-discrimination, participation, and empowerment. Uzbekistan's official discourse builds it around the family, social protection, national development, and the role of the state. The same word is filled with different content.

The article follows one rule throughout, which it calls symmetry. Neither the international nor the national construction is treated as the real or correct version of the norm. The international framework is not the true gender equality that Uzbekistan fails to match. The national framework is not an authentic local culture that hides behind international language. The two are read as two constructions of the same norm. The article does not test the country for consistency between them, and it does not read a difference between them as a sign of hypocrisy. A difference is treated as evidence about how meaning is made, not as a fault to expose.

This design has a purpose. Most diffusion studies compare states, asking which adopted a norm and which did not. That approach assumes the norm has one meaning and measures distance from it. Comparing the international and the national construction within one country does something different. It holds the state constant and lets the meaning vary. If the same government gives the same norm a different content at home than abroad, then meaning is being made locally, in use, not simply received from outside.

Uzbekistan is a useful case for this question. Over the last several years it has reformed gender policy quickly, passing new laws, adopting a national strategy, and creating new state bodies. It has also reported actively on the SDGs, which leaves a clear trail of international texts. The result is a dense set of recent documents in both settings, produced close together in time, which makes a careful side-by-side reading possible without comparing texts from very different periods.

For the study of norm diffusion, the article shows that the gap between adopting a norm and sharing its meaning is real and can be read directly in official texts. It names this gap localization, in Acharya's (2004) sense, rather than resistance or failure. For the study of gender politics in Central Asia, it brings close reading to a set of recent Uzbek documents that are usually discussed in terms of reform and implementation rather than meaning. The article proceeds as follows. It reviews the relevant literature. It sets out a theoretical framework and a method. It reads the global construction of gender equality, then the Uzbek construction. It discusses what the comparison shows, and it concludes with the wider lesson for how we study international norms.

2. Literature Review

Research on norm diffusion has shown how international norms shape domestic policy. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) described a norm life cycle, in which norms emerge, spread as more states adopt them, and finally become taken for granted. In this account, states adopt norms not only under pressure but also because the norms come to seem legitimate and appropriate. This work was important because it showed that ideas and shared beliefs, not only material interests, shape what states do.

A second wave of research looked at what happens after a norm reaches a country. Acharya (2004) introduced the idea of norm localization. He argued that local actors do not simply accept or reject a global norm. They actively rework it so that it fits local beliefs, institutions, and political traditions, while keeping the norm in place. In this view, variation between countries is not a sign that diffusion failed. It is a normal part of how global norms take hold in different societies.

Studies of gender norms have used these ideas widely. Krook and True (2012) showed that gender equality spread through the United Nations in part because it was stated in broad and open language, which let many actors read it in their own way. Zwingel (2012) argued that women's rights norms gain their meaning not in one place but across many sites, as they move between the international level and national and local settings. Merry (2006) described this movement as

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vernacularization, the work of translating a global norm into local terms so that it can be understood and used at home. Together, these studies suggest that the meaning of a gender norm is not fixed once and for all. It is made and remade as the norm travels.

There is also a body of work that treats norms as contested rather than settled. Wiener (2009) argues that the meaning of a norm is not given once it is agreed but is worked out as actors use and interpret it. From this angle, a state that signs an agreement has not thereby accepted a single, finished meaning. It has entered a shared commitment whose content is still open to interpretation in use. This is the starting intuition the present article develops for the Uzbek case.

Most of this work, however, still treats the international norm as a relatively stable starting point and studies how national actors change it afterwards. Less attention has been given to a simpler observation: a state can adopt the same norm as everyone else and still understand it differently, and this difference can be read directly in its official texts. The point is not whether the norm diffused, which is easy to confirm, but what it came to mean once it did.

This is also where the article differs from one common way of reading gaps between international and domestic policy. In some studies a difference between what a state promises internationally and what it does at home is treated as decoupling, and decoupling is often read as a sign that the commitment is only on paper. That reading assumes the international version is the real norm and the domestic version a shortfall. The present article does not take that path. It treats the national construction as a real use of the norm, not as a failure to live up to it, and it asks what that construction means rather than how far it falls short.

The literature on gender in Central Asia provides important background for reading the Uzbek case. Kamp (2006) studied the Soviet campaign to change women's lives in Uzbekistan, including the public unveiling of the late 1920s, and showed that gender change there was led by the state and tied to a larger project of building a modern society. Kandiyoti (1988) argued that women often pursue security and respect by working within family-based rules, a strategy she called the patriarchal bargain. In later work, Kandiyoti (2007) described a Soviet paradox: state policy modernised women's lives through education and work while leaving family and community roles partly in place, so that the outcome was neither fully "colonized" nor fully "modern". Peshkova (2014) showed that women in Uzbekistan also shape identity and authority in private and religious spaces that official policy does not fully capture.

Closer to the present, a growing literature examines Uzbekistan's recent gender reforms: the new laws, the national strategy, the institutions, and the rise in women's representation. Much of this work asks how far the reforms are implemented and what results they produce. That focus is valuable, but it tends to take the meaning of gender equality as given and to measure progress towards it. The present article steps back from implementation and asks a prior question: what does gender equality mean in these documents in the first place?

This body of work is rich on history, society, and reform. It pays less attention to one thing: how recent official documents construct the meaning of gender equality, and how that construction compares with the international one. Most studies ask whether reforms are implemented or whether women participate. Fewer read the laws, the strategy, the Constitution, and the speeches as texts and ask what picture of gender equality they build. This article works in that gap.

The article's contribution here is mainly one of design. By comparing the international and the national construction of the same norm within a single country, it separates two things that cross-country studies often blur: whether a norm has been adopted, and what it has come to mean. Holding the state constant makes the second question answerable, because any difference in meaning cannot be

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put down to different national cultures. It must come from how the same state builds the norm in different settings.

3. Theoretical Framework

The article draws on three connected ideas. The first is norm diffusion. It explains how gender equality became an international norm and how it entered Uzbekistan through agreements, development cooperation, and the SDGs (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Diffusion accounts for the shared commitment. It does not, by itself, account for shared meaning.

The second idea is norm localization (Acharya, 2004). Localization explains why a global norm can acquire a different content when it enters a national context. Local actors keep the norm but connect it to ideas that already matter to them. Merry's (2006) vernacularization describes the same process from the side of translation: the global norm is put into local terms so that it can be used at home. Zwingel (2012) adds that this happens in many places at once, so that a norm's meaning is best seen as made across sites rather than fixed at the top.

The third idea comes from post-structuralist discourse theory. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue that key political terms do not have one fixed meaning. A term holds a field of ideas together while staying open to more than one filling, depending on which other ideas it is connected to. Gender equality works in this way. It can be tied to rights and participation, or to family and social protection, while remaining the same word. Wiener (2009) makes a related point with the idea of meaning-in-use: the meaning of a norm is enacted as actors use it, and it can be enacted differently in different uses.

It is worth drawing out one term from this view, because it does work later. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call the points that hold a discourse together nodal points. A nodal point is a privileged term that other ideas are arranged around. Gender equality can serve as a nodal point in both settings while gathering a different set of ideas around it in each. This is why two constructions can share the word and still differ in meaning: they arrange different ideas around the same point.

It also helps to be clear that diffusion and localization are not two separate stages, one finishing before the other starts. A norm can arrive and be given local content at the same time. The act of writing a global goal into a national law is already an act of interpretation. So localization is not only something that happens long after diffusion. It can happen in the very moment the norm is adopted, as the state chooses words, frames, and institutions for it.

Put together, these ideas give the article its expectation. If a norm's meaning is not fixed, then two settings can share the norm and still build it differently. The task is then empirical: to read how each setting builds the meaning of gender equality, and to compare the two without ranking them. That is what the method is designed to do.

4. Research Design and Method

The study uses qualitative discourse analysis. It reads policy with the approach developed by Bacchi (2009), known as "What's the Problem Represented to Be?", or WPR. The starting idea is that a policy does not only respond to a problem that already exists. It also helps to create the problem, by deciding what the problem is. A law that punishes violence against women represents the problem as one of violence and protection. A target that counts women in parliament represents it as one of participation. The chosen solution reveals the assumed problem. Reading the solution backwards reveals the picture of the problem inside it.

For each body of documents, the article asks a small set of questions drawn from Bacchi (2009). How is gender inequality represented as a problem? How are women constructed within the discourse? What role is assigned to the state? And which meanings become central while others receive less attention? The answers are then compared across the two settings. The aim is not to score either setting against a standard. It is to describe two pictures of the problem and see how they relate.

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The fourth question, about what is left unsaid, deserves emphasis. Every construction is loud about some things and quiet about others, and the pattern of loud and quiet is part of how it fixes the meaning of the norm. Reading for silences is not reading in hidden motives. It is noticing which ideas a text does not reach for, which is itself evidence about the picture of the problem it builds.

The international corpus includes the foundational human rights texts (United Nations, 1945, 1948), CEDAW (United Nations, 1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995), and the 2030 Agenda with SDG 5 (United Nations, 2015). The national corpus includes Uzbekistan's national Sustainable Development Goals and targets (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018); the Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019a); the Law on the Protection of Women from Oppression and Violence (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019b); the Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality until 2030 (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021); the Senate resolution that established a national commission on women, gender equality, and the family (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022); and presidential addresses on International Women's Day (Mirziyoyev, 2024, 2025).

A note on language is needed. Most national documents exist in Uzbek and Russian, and the article works mainly from the Uzbek and official English texts. Translation is not neutral, and one example matters for the argument. The protection law's subject, in Russian and Uzbek, is best rendered as oppression and violence. Some English versions narrow it to harassment and violence. Oppression points to a broad condition, while harassment points to specific acts. The article keeps the broader term and treats the difference as part of how meaning moves between languages, not as a simple error.

A final note on the position of the analyst. Reading documents is itself interpretation, and another reader might weigh a phrase differently. The aim is not a single final reading but a careful and open one, in which each claim about a setting points to a specific text, so that the reader can check it.

5. Findings

5.1 The Global Construction of Gender Equality

The international understanding of gender equality did not begin with SDG 5. It developed gradually through the United Nations human rights and development framework. The Charter of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) stated the equal rights of men and women as a basic principle. CEDAW (United Nations, 1979) made this principle concrete for women, defining discrimination against women and committing states to remove it in law and in practice. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995) widened the agenda to participation, empowerment, and action across many areas of life.

CEDAW is worth a closer look, because it shows the international construction in detail. It does not only ask for equal treatment in law. It also asks states to change practices and customs that keep women unequal, which makes equality a matter of real conditions and not only of formal rules (United Nations, 1979). At the same time, the international system leaves states room to adjust their commitment, for example through the reservations that many states entered to CEDAW. The openness of the framework is therefore not only in vague wording. It is part of how the international system was built.

Across these documents, gender equality is built around a recognisable set of ideas. Women appear mainly as rights-holders. The problem is represented as unequal rights, discrimination, and the exclusion of women from political, economic, and social life. The solution is to guarantee equal rights, remove discrimination, and expand women's participation and opportunities (United Nations, 1979,

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1995). Equality here is closely tied to the individual woman and to her standing before the law and in public life.

The Beijing Platform added a further idea that became central to the international construction: empowerment. Beyond equal rights and non-discrimination, it stressed women's ability to take part, to lead, and to make choices across political and economic life (United Nations, 1995). Empowerment keeps the focus on the individual woman and on expanding what she can do. It is one of the ideas that the international setting places at the centre and that the national setting, as the next section shows, treats more as a means to other ends.

SDG 5 gathers these earlier ideas into one global framework (United Nations, 2015). Its targets address discrimination, violence against women, unpaid care and domestic work, participation and leadership, reproductive health, and equal access to economic resources. Taken together, the targets define gender equality as a set of measurable gaps between women and men that states are expected to close. The picture of the problem is a development gap, and the implied solution is to track it and reduce it over time.

The qualifying language in SDG 5 is easy to miss but important. Beyond the phrase "as nationally appropriate" in Target 5.4, other targets are tied to existing agreements and to national law: the target on reproductive health is framed in line with earlier international conferences, and the target on economic resources refers to national laws (United Nations, 2015). Each qualifier is a place where the global target hands part of the decision back to the state. The framework sets a common direction and, in the same breath, leaves the route to each country.

Measurement works in the same double way. The Sustainable Development Goals are presented as a single system of common indicators, which makes states comparable and progress visible. Yet the indicators rest on national data, definitions, and institutions, and they simplify complex realities that still have to be interpreted in use (Merry, 2011). The 2030 Agenda is also explicit that states set their own national targets and choose their own paths within the common frame (United Nations, 2015). So even the most standardising part of the international construction, its numbers, leaves space for national reading. The common direction is firm; the content is not fully fixed.

Yet the international framework does not fix one detailed model that every state must copy. Its language carries openings. Target 5.4, on unpaid care, asks states to act "as nationally appropriate" (United Nations, 2015). Other parts of the 2030 Agenda expect states to set national targets and to choose how to reach common goals within their own institutions. The framework also relies on indicators to compare progress, but indicators simplify complex realities and still require interpretation as they are put to use (Merry, 2011). So the international construction has a stable core, built around rights, non-discrimination, participation, and empowerment, and at the same time it leaves room for states to fill in the details. The possibility of a different national reading is present before the norm reaches any single country.

5.2 The Uzbek Official Construction of Gender Equality

Uzbekistan has clearly adopted the international principle of gender equality. It set national targets under SDG 5 (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018) and, from 2019, introduced a series of reforms. The Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men defines equal rights and equal opportunities, bans discrimination based on sex, and introduces a gender-legal review of draft laws (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019a). The Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality until 2030 sets goals and indicators across education, health, the economy, and decision-making (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). In its core legal form, the Uzbek construction matches the international one: gender equality as equal rights and opportunities guaranteed by law.

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Two tools in this part of the national construction deserve attention, because they sit very close to the international one. The first is gender-legal expertise: a review of draft laws for their effect on women and men, which builds the equality test into the law-making process itself (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019a). The second is a quota for women among election candidates, which represents the participation problem in the same countable terms the international framework uses. These tools are the part of the national construction where the two settings are nearest to each other, which makes the differences elsewhere easier to see by contrast.

Reading the documents more closely, however, shows that the meaning attached to gender equality is built around several further ideas that are less central in the international framework. The clearest is the family. Where international documents mainly address the individual woman, Uzbek documents regularly connect women's well-being to the well-being of the family. The Strategy ties its gender goals to national development and social stability, and its place in the wider policy system links gender work to the family as a unit the state supports (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). The family framing is also visible in institutions: a national commission was established on enhancing the role of women in society, gender equality, and the family (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022). When a state places the family in the title of its gender machinery, it represents the problem of gender as bound up with the health of the family, not only with the standing of the individual woman.

The way state bodies are named can be read as a small but telling sign. A body once centred on women came to carry family and women together in its remit, and the national commission joins women, gender equality, and the family in a single title (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022). Read carefully, and without reading in motives, this places gender questions inside the wider question of the family. It does not remove women from the picture. It sets the woman within the family as the unit the state addresses. For a study of how meaning is built, the wording of a mandate is data, because it is part of how the state represents the problem to itself and to the public.

The role of the state is the second idea. International documents generally describe governments as guarantors of equal rights and as bodies that must remove discrimination. In Uzbekistan's official discourse, the state takes a broader role. Within this frame, the state appears not only as a regulator but also as a provider of protection, social support, services, and opportunities for women. Equality is therefore tied to the state's duty of care, and supporting women, mothers, and families is presented as a public good.

Protection is the third idea, and it sits close to the role of the state. The Law on the Protection of Women from Oppression and Violence creates protection orders and assigns duties to state bodies (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019b). Here the woman appears as someone to be protected, and the state as protector. As noted above, the law's subject is oppression and violence in the Russian and Uzbek text, a broad term that some English versions narrow to harassment and violence. The protection frame is not the same as the equal-rights frame. It pictures the problem less as equal standing and more as safety and care. Both frames appear in the national documents, side by side.

Closely linked to protection is a frame of motherhood and childhood. The state presents support for mothers, for mother-and-child health, and for families with children as part of its gender policy. In this frame the woman is addressed partly as a mother and partly as the centre of a family the state wishes to keep strong. This is a different representation of the problem from the equal-rights frame, yet the documents do not treat the two as being in tension. They place them together, so that protecting and supporting women and advancing their rights are presented as one task.

National development is the fourth idea. Women's participation in education, work, business, and public life is strongly encouraged throughout official policy (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). But it is often presented not only as an individual right. It is also presented as a contribution to economic

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growth, to stronger families, and to the country's development. Presidential addresses on International Women's Day show this clearly: they praise women's achievements in work and public life and, in the same breath, honour women as mothers and as the centre of the family, and they link support for women to the strength of families and to social stability (Mirziyoyev, 2024, 2025). In this register, women's participation becomes part of a national development agenda.

Women's economic role is a clear example of this development framing. Support for women's employment and entrepreneurship is presented as good for families and for society, as well as for the women themselves (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021; Mirziyoyev, 2024). The same topic appears in the international setting too, but there it tends to be framed as participation and untapped potential, a gap between current and possible activity that should be closed. In the national setting it is framed as contribution to a strong family and a developing nation. The topic is shared; the frame around it differs.

A final point is that equality and protection are not treated as opposed. International literature often discusses a rights approach and a protection approach as different paths. In Uzbekistan's official discourse they appear together. Equal rights, protection from violence, social support, and family welfare are presented as parts of one policy framework rather than as competing approaches (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019a, 2019b, 2021). The Uzbek construction does not reject the international ideas. It keeps them and joins them to family, social protection, national development, and the social state, which then occupy a much more central place than they do internationally.

It is also worth noting what the national construction leaves unsaid, since silence is part of the picture. It says less about gender inequality as a structural gap measured across sectors and compared between countries, which is the heart of the international construction. This is not a rejection of that idea; the national strategy still counts. It is a matter of emphasis. Each setting is loud about some things and quiet about others, and the contrast in what they stress is exactly what the comparison is meant to bring out.

6. Discussion

The two constructions share a real foundation. Both treat gender equality as a stated aim. Both connect their gender work to the SDG framework: Uzbekistan set national SDG targets and anchored its national strategy to them (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018, 2021). Both use the language of rights and law, especially in the equal-rights law. So diffusion is not in doubt. The global norm has entered Uzbek policy, and the link is stated in the texts themselves.

The two constructions part on the picture of the problem. The international framework represents gender inequality mainly as a development gap, measured and to be closed, with the individual woman as a rights-holder (United Nations, 1979, 1995, 2015). The Uzbek construction represents it mainly as the well-being of women within strong families and a caring state, with equality, protection, and support folded together (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021, 2023; Mirziyoyev, 2024, 2025). The same goal stands behind both, but it is filled with different content. The difference is not that one setting measures and the other does not; the national strategy also uses indicators. The difference is in what the rights talk and the counting are organised around.

The protection system is a good place to see the two constructions meet and part. The same reform appears in both. In the international setting it appears as an output to be counted, for example in the protection orders recorded in the evaluation of the United Nations cooperation framework for Uzbekistan (United Nations, 2025). In the national setting it appears as care: a duty of the state to shield women from oppression and violence, set inside a wider concern for the family (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019b). One reform, two representations. The settings agree that the reform matters and differ, quietly, on what it is mainly for.

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This is what it means to say that gender equality is a floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The word stays the same across the two settings, but the web of ideas around it does not. Internationally it is connected to rights, participation, and empowerment. In Uzbek discourse it is connected to family, protection, the social state, and national development. The norm is not transferred whole from one setting to the other. It is reassembled in each, out of the materials each setting already has. Wiener's (2009) idea of meaning-in-use describes the same point: the meaning of the norm is enacted as it is used, and it is enacted differently in different uses.

This reassembly is localization in Acharya's (2004) sense, and vernacularization in Merry's (2006). Local actors keep the norm and the language of equality, and they build it together with ideas that already carry weight in Uzbek policy and society. The history helps explain why these particular ideas. Gender change in Uzbekistan has long been led by the state and tied to building a modern society (Kamp, 2006), and family and community roles have remained central through the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (Kandiyoti, 1988, 2007). The family framing and the strong role of the state are therefore not a misreading of the global norm. They are the familiar forms through which the norm is made usable at home. Zwingel (2012) would describe the result as meaning made across sites rather than fixed at the top.

This is also why the difference should not be read as decoupling. In some accounts, a state's international commitments and its domestic practice are said to come apart, and the gap is taken as a sign that the commitment is hollow. The difference found here is not of that kind. It is not a gap between word and deed. It is a difference between two sets of words, two constructions of the problem, both of them real policy. Reading it as decoupling would quietly restore the assumption the article set aside, that the international construction is the true norm.

The family framing also has roots in everyday life, which helps explain why it holds together so well. Kandiyoti (1988) argued that women often seek security and respect by working within family-based rules rather than only against them. A gender policy built around the family is therefore not only handed down from above. It connects to strategies that many people already use. This does not place the policy beyond question, but it shows that the national construction draws on familiar social material, which is part of what makes it a stable local meaning rather than a thin official slogan.

For diffusion theory, this points to a unit of analysis that is often skipped: the setting, or register, in which a state speaks. Studies usually compare countries, or compare a global norm with a national outcome. Comparing the settings inside one state adds a level in between. It shows that a single government can hold more than one meaning of a norm at once, and that which meaning appears depends on the audience and the genre. A norm's life inside a state is not one story but several, told in different rooms of the same house.

These findings have a broader lesson for the study of international norms. Research on diffusion often focuses on whether states adopt commitments or comply with standards (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Acharya, 2004). Much less attention has gone to whether states understand a norm in the same way. The Uzbek case suggests that formal acceptance of a norm should not be read as shared meaning. International organisations and national governments may use the same language of gender equality while building it around different priorities. If this is not recognised, it can create misunderstanding in policy dialogue, even when both sides support the same goals. Reading how meaning is built therefore becomes as important as tracing whether the norm diffused.

7. Conclusion

This article asked what gender equality comes to mean after it becomes part of national policy. Using the case of Uzbekistan, it showed that the diffusion of an international norm does not by itself produce a shared understanding of that norm. Uzbekistan has accepted gender equality as an

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international commitment and written it into national law and policy, so the commitment is shared. Yet its official discourse builds the meaning of gender equality around the family, social protection, national development, and the role of the state, while the international framework builds it around rights, non-discrimination, participation, and empowerment. The same word is filled in two ways.

The study makes two contributions to the literature on norm diffusion. First, it shows that adopting a norm and sharing its meaning are not the same, and that the difference can be read directly in official texts. Second, it shows that this difference is best understood as localization rather than resistance. The Uzbek construction does not reject the global norm. It keeps it and reassembles it through national priorities and a long history of state-led, family-centred gender policy. Diffusion explains how the norm arrived; localization explains why it does not mean exactly the same thing at home as abroad.

The lesson reaches beyond this case. Many global norms, including human rights, democracy, sustainability, and good governance, are stated in broad language that different actors can fill in different ways. Wherever that is true, sharing a norm and sharing its meaning are not the same thing, and the difference can be studied by reading how the norm is constructed in each setting. The gap between commitment and meaning is not a flaw in diffusion. It is part of how global norms live in the world.

There are limits. The article reads texts, not their effects in people's lives, and it works mainly from Uzbek and English versions, where, as the protection-law example showed, word choices can shift meaning. It studies one country and one norm. Future research could compare the international and national constructions of other norms, or follow how the Uzbek construction changes as new laws, strategies, and speeches appear. The method travels well. Wherever a state uses a global norm in more than one setting, the constructions can be read side by side, and the reassembly of meaning can be traced. For gender equality in Uzbekistan, that reassembly is the main finding: a shared norm, given two meanings by the same hand.

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