

Addressing Harmful Gender Stereotypes

Application of Behavioural Insights

Background

The Government of Uzbekistan has made commendable progress towards ensuring gender equality and empowering women. The country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1995 and has submitted periodic reports. Uzbekistan enacted several laws and policies addressing the protection of women from harassment and violence, equal rights and opportunities. The National Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030 was adopted in May 2021, focusing on increasing female representation in leadership roles, addressing gender imbalances, and preventing harassment and violence against women. Additional regulations also have been adopted to support women's entrepreneurship and education.

However, despite significant legislative and policy initiatives, gender biases and widespread discriminatory attitudes remain deeply entrenched in society. These informal barriers have a negative impact on the necessary and effective implementation of the adopted legal reforms since the existing social structures, community-level perceptions, and status quo influence the position of women more than the formal legislation. This is demonstrated by the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index by UNDP, which found that in Uzbekistan, 98.03%

To maximise the effectiveness of gender policies, it is essential to address not only legal considerations and the provision of services by government entities but also the deeply rooted social norms and community-level beliefs. Gender norms are not learned through government legislation; they are typically learned in social settings, often from a very young age, and are particularly guided by parental attitudes.

Application of Behavioural Insights

To support this effort, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in cooperation with CVE Insights conducted an innovative behavioural insights experiment in Uzbekistan (Namangan region).

This experiment applied a behavioural change approach aimed at impacting the attitudes and behaviours within households, particularly among parents (both husbands and wives), engaging 20 households (40 participants) of the same community (Mahalla).

The experiment was unfolded in **several phases:**

Note. *Insights from the behavioural sciences, or what is commonly referred to as Behavioural Insights (BI), are the accumulation of knowledge gained from various disciplines – including psychology, economics, sociology, cognitive science and neuroscience – that challenges the notion of rationality and supports the use of more human-centered approaches to designing policies, programmes and projects. These behavioural insights have shown that we, as humans, predictably deviate from a rational model of action, and struggle to convert our own intentions into actions.*

Phase 1: Identification of Opinion Leaders – three representatives were selected to be trained as gender equality messengers: one religious leader, one community leader, and one-woman role model (business-woman). These individuals were chosen based on their potential impact as community influencers.

Phase 2: Training of Opinion Leaders – the three opinion leaders received an in-person training, focusing on key gender concepts and principles, building and redefining women's agency, and how to engage the participants on gender equality. They then developed their own speeches for the intervention, with support from a national trainer to ensure alignment with the intervention's core messages.

Phase 3: Participant Identification – participants were selected and allocated to the "experimental" that participated in the intervention or "a control" group that did not. This division was critical for ensuring comparability.

Phase 4: Baseline Phase – all participants, from the experimental and control groups, completed a baseline (pre-intervention) survey capturing their initial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to gender roles, stereotypes, and norms.

Phase 5: Treatment (Intervention) – the control group received no intervention, serving as a benchmark. The experimental group received the intervention, designed to enhance knowledge and challenge existing gender stereotypes and norms. In practice, the intervention was built on three key behavioural levers:

Autonomy: participants were encouraged to introspect and identify their own issues and solutions, promoting individual choice and motivation.

Information: participants developed the information themselves with subtle guidance, enhancing their sense of capacity and achievement.

Social Influences: this leveraged credible and trusted messengers to support and promote the desired behavioural change. Being overarching to the behavioural experiment, this stage involved the interventions (gender sensitive messages) from opinion leaders, which were specifically developed in accordance with the following structure:

1. Messages delivered by the Community Religious Leader.

- Equal rights of men and women in Islam: Chapters in which the verses of Islamic sources consider economic, social, and other rights, freedoms, and balance in marriage.
- Islamic educational and employment viewpoints: Emphasizing women's education, opportunities for work or additional activities, entrepreneurship, and business for generating income in a Muslim family.
- Harassment and violence against women: Condemning such actions as unacceptable in Islam.
- Interpretation of «polygamy» in Islam: Addressing common misconceptions and errors in religious understanding. Clarifying factors leading to polygamy and ways to overcome wrong interpretations leading to polygamy.
- Family and existential crises: Addressing crises in the personal lives of both women and men and emphasizing the importance of overcoming them. Supporting the notion of equal partnership between men and women in the family, as supported by our religion.

2. Messages delivered by the Businesswoman.

- Biographical journey: From an ordinary village girl to a highly educated businessperson and politician.
- Business achievements: Highlighting the results and successes of starting a business, progressing from the district to city, regional, and international levels.
- Challenges faced: Obstacles encountered on the path to success in both business and politics. Addressing the influence of gender stereotypes and preconceptions about women, along with efforts made to overcome them.
- Life lessons: Reflecting on the lessons learned from her experiences in business and politics, emphasizing the personal and intellectual-psychological resources invested in balancing being a successful businesswoman, a wife, and a mother.

3. Messages delivered by the Community leader - Chair of the Mahalla.

- Current socio-economic and gender situation in the community: Analysis of demographic trends and the community's perception of the state policy regarding gender equality.
- Challenges and opportunities among youth: The impact of local, national, and gender stereotypes on the mental health and political perspectives of young people, tracing their socio-historical roots.

- Consequences of harmful gender stereotypes: Addressing community issues such as the erosion of family institutions, divorce, and social issues resulting from detrimental gender stereotypes.
- Gender roles in pre-marital and post-marital relationships: Gender norms and expectations
- in relationships before and after marriage.
- Cultivating gender-Sensitivity in the community: Guidance for couples to foster relationships that are attuned to gender dynamics and cultural norms.

Phase 6: Immediate Post-Treatment Assessment - after the intervention, all participants (both experimental and control groups) completed the same survey as the baseline phase to identify immediate shifts in attitudes or perceptions related to gender stereotypes.

Phase 7: Post-Intervention Survey Phase - a follow-up survey was conducted among the experimental group participants one week after the intervention to capture any lasting impacts and changes in gender-related perceptions, women’s agency, and behaviours.

Phase 8: Data Analysis and Report Write-up - the final phase involved comprehensive analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the intervention’s effectiveness.

Key Findings

Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI)

| Column1 | Experimental Group (20 Participants) | | Control Group (20 Participants) | |
|---|---|-------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| | Pre-intervention | Post-intervention | Pre-intervention | Post-intervention |
| Average No. of Biases Per Respondent (Mean) | 4.05 | 3.55 | 4.85 | 4.85 |
| Std. Deviation | 1.61 | 1.7 | 1.27 | 1.27 |
| Min | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Max | 6 | 6 | 7 | 7 |

The results of the GSNI show that the intervention had a meaningful and positive impact on gender bias reduction. The average number of biases presented by the participants in the experimental group decreased from 4.05 to 3.55 (out of seven) after the intervention, reflecting an overall reduction of 12.3%.

Women’s Agency and Decision-Making: the intervention significantly enhanced women’s intrinsic agency, with 80% of women reporting increased comfort visiting places alone, expressing opinions, and making independent decisions.

Equal Opportunities to Work: the intervention halved the number of people believing that «men should have more right to a job than women», reducing it from 60% to 30%. Post-intervention, 100% of male participants supported «more opportunities for women in business», and 80% of women started to consider earning their own money, with 50% contemplating starting their own business.

Intimate-Partner Violence: the intervention significantly reduced the acceptance of intimate-partner violence, with the number of participants believing that «it is justifiable

for a man to beat his wife» decreasing by 67%. Moreover, the proportion of individuals who fully disagreed with the statement “a women should tolerate violence to keep her family together” increased from 35% to 70%, while those who agreed or fully agreed fell from 30% to 5%. Similarly, full disagreement with the statement “it is alright for a man to beat his wife to discipline her” rose from 55% to 90%, and agreement reduced from 10% to 0%.

Politics and Education: the belief that «women having the same rights as men is essential for democracy» rose from 20% to 50%, and support for «more opportunities for women in politics» increased from 65% to 85%. Additionally, support for «more access to higher education for women» reached 100% post-intervention, up from 85%.

Behavior Beyond Perspectives: following the intervention, 85% of participants reported that husbands took on more household work and chores, indicating a significant behavioural change and shift in gender perspectives within the households.

Impact of Opinion Leaders: The role of the opinion leaders, including a religious leader, a community leader, and a female role model (a businesswoman), was crucial to the intervention’s success. Engaging these leaders in the intervention effectively leveraged their influence to promote positive changes in gender attitudes. The female role model appeared to play a particularly important role. Her engagement was noted by participants as being a particularly important component of the intervention.

Recommendations

Incorporate Behavioral Insights into the 2030 Strategy. The 2030 Strategy (the Strategy of Achieving Gender Equality in the Republic of Uzbekistan Until 2030) currently provides a commendable set of measures, focusing on improving the legal framework, implementing socio-economic measures, and enhancing coordination and research. The socio-economic measures primarily include discussions, greater involvement of women in processes and activities, organising trainings, and providing support to women and girls across diverse sectors. All of these measures are admirable and appropriate; however, their effectiveness will likely continue to be hindered by the prevalent gender norms and stereotypes.

Using a behavioural insights approach involves understanding how people actually behave and make decisions, rather than how they are expected to behave. For gender-related policies, this means creating frameworks that consider the deeply ingrained social norms and stereotypes that influence gender dynamics. Within this context, to fully achieve the indicators set in the 2030 Strategy, the government should consider updating and expanding the current measures and indicators to incorporate a behavioural insights approach.

Scaling up the BI Intervention in other the mahallas of Uzbekistan: Mahallas are of pivotal importance in safeguarding human values, culture, and social cohesion in Uzbekistan. The intervention significantly enhanced women’s intrinsic agency, promoted gender equality, and reduced acceptance of intimate-partner violence in the community. Replicating this intervention in other mahallas could similarly advance gender equality and improve women’s livelihoods, thereby providing broad support and complementarity to the government’s policy approaches on gender equality.

It is fit for purpose to train and build capacities of the staff of “Mahalla Association of Uzbekistan” and community leaders such as mahalla chairmen, women leaders and youth leaders on different aspects of gender equality, women empowerment and gender sensitive decision making. To facilitate this, it is also recommended to conduct a training-of-trainers programme.

Invest in the Promotion of Women Role Models: Promoting a diverse range of female role models, particularly in underrepresented sectors can shift societal attitudes and encourage more equitable gender norms. Public campaigns and media representation of successful women, using the intervention’s effective messaging structure, can amplify positive effects and encourage women’s engagement with government services.

The 2030 Strategy of Uzbekistan includes measures aimed at ensuring opportunities for women in socio-economic, political-legal, cultural and humanitarian spheres. Indeed, prominent female figures can challenge traditional norms and inspire others to pursue education and careers.

Particularly, increased representation of women in the prestigious spheres, such as diplomatic service (including ambassadors, international organizations and international missions) could provide an essential platform for cultivating female role models with considerable positive impact. It is recommended, to further national efforts to create more opportunities for women in the foreign policy and foster female ambassadors/high level government representatives by reviewing the current action plans, implication of the additional interventions, learning and emulating of the foreign best practices.

It is also recommended to promote and intensify the work of the National Women Leaders Caucus under the Senate of the Oliy Majlis to nurture and ensure wider representation of women leaders in the country. Forming, within the framework of this platform, the pool of the women leaders in the regions of Uzbekistan and active campaigns to raise their visibility would tremendously contribute in fostering women role models and their positive public impact.

Expand Support for Religious Leaders in Promoting Gender Equality: Building upon religious leaders’ influence on social norms can support the effectiveness of established measures. Expanding support for these leaders, including training and resources, can significantly enhance their ability to promote gender equality.

By leveraging their influence, these leaders can play a pivotal role in challenging and transforming entrenched gender norms within the mahallas.

In particular, sermons by the religious leaders during the Friday Prayers in mahallas have tremendous impact on the residents’ behaviours and the social attitudes. It is highly recommended to harness this influence by making a practice of introducing the messages on promoting gender equality to the religious sermons, also to organize capacity building trainings for imams and religious leaders in mahallas to increase their “the gender sensitivity”.

Furthermore, it is fit for purpose to leverage opportunities and capacities of the institutions like the International Academy of Islam of Uzbekistan, the Al-Bukhari International Research Centre, the Haddith Academic School, and the

Centre of Islamic Civilization for gender mainstreaming in the religious realm.

Piloting Behavioral Insights Entity in the Government System: Systematic application of behavioural insights was pioneered in 2010 when the UK established the Behavioural Insights Team. Since then, many countries have been integrating behavioral insights in public policy designing and implication. According to OECD, policymakers are increasingly asking behavioural scientists to help them unpack policy problems, design solutions that go with the grain of human behaviour and evaluate them rigorously. As of 2023, there are at least 300 public entities all over the world applying behavioural insights to their policies.

Success of the BI application to address harmful gender stereotypes in Uzbekistan heralds the prospects and important possibilities of BI in tackling policy issues in the country. Establishment of the BI unit/entity within the government system could provide the consistent and systematic designing and implicating of BI interventions. This unit would generate and apply Behavioural insights to form, improve the relevant government policy.