

## WOMEN'S SOCIAL ACTIVITY AND PUBLIC ROLE DURING THE PERIOD OF THE BUKHARA KHANATE AND EMIRATE

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the social activity and public role of women during the period of the Bukhara Khanate (16th–18th centuries) and the Bukhara Emirate (1785–1920), a topic that remains insufficiently studied within the broader historiography of Central Asian social history. Although traditional historical accounts have often portrayed women of this era as confined exclusively to the domestic sphere, archival, ethnographic, and narrative sources reveal a considerably more nuanced picture, in which women participated in economic production, religious and charitable institutions, informal education, and, in select cases, court and administrative affairs. Using a comparative-historical method combined with critical analysis of waqf (charitable endowment) documents, travelers' accounts, and biographical sources, the study reconstructs the legal status, economic functions, educational opportunities, and religious activities of women within the Manghit-era social structure. The findings indicate that while Sharia-based family law and the institution of seclusion (purdah) structurally limited women's participation in public political life, women nonetheless exercised meaningful informal authority within household economies, craft production, the otin oyi tradition of religious instruction, and as founders or beneficiaries of waqf endowments. The article argues that women's agency in Bukharan society should be understood not as an absence of activity but as a distinct, gender-segregated sphere of social influence operating largely through religious, familial, and economic networks rather than formal political institutions. These findings contribute to a more balanced historiographical understanding of gender relations in pre-colonial and colonial-era Central Asian polities and provide a foundation for further archival research into women's history in the region.*

**Keywords:** *Bukhara Khanate; Bukhara Emirate; women's history; Central Asian social history; Manghit dynasty; waqf; otin oyi; gender and Islam; purdah; 19th-century Bukhara.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The social history of Central Asia under the Bukhara Khanate and, subsequently, the Bukhara Emirate of the Manghit dynasty (1785–1920) has traditionally been written through the lens of dynastic politics, military campaigns, and religious scholarship, with the lived experience of women receiving comparatively little systematic attention. This

historiographical gap is not accidental: women rarely appear as named actors in chronicles (*tarikh*), court annals, or diplomatic correspondence, the genres that have long formed the evidentiary backbone of Central Asian historical writing. Yet the relative silence of dynastic sources does not imply the social absence of women; rather, it reflects the gendered logic of pre-modern Islamic historiography, in which public chronicling privileged the affairs of rulers, the *ulama*, and the military elite.

This study addresses the question of how women's social activity manifested within the structural constraints of Bukharan society, and which institutional channels — economic, religious, educational, and familial — allowed women to exercise agency despite their formal exclusion from political office and most public assemblies. The relevance of this inquiry is twofold. First, a more complete reconstruction of Bukharan social history requires accounting for the roughly half of the population whose activity has been historiographically marginalized. Second, contemporary Uzbekistan's scholarly and educational discourse increasingly emphasizes the recovery of women's contributions to national history, making this an area of active academic and pedagogical relevance.

The chronological scope of this study spans from the consolidation of the Bukhara Khanate under the Shibanid and Ashtarkhanid dynasties through the Manghit Emirate's incorporation as a Russian protectorate in 1873 and its eventual dissolution in 1920. This period is treated as a relatively coherent social formation for the purposes of analysis, since the underlying Hanafi legal framework, the institution of *waqf*, and the broader patterns of urban and rural family organization persisted with notable continuity across the khanate-to-emirate transition, even as political authority shifted from the khans to the Manghit emirs.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the sources and comparative-historical method employed. Section 3 presents the findings across four thematic domains: legal and familial status, economic activity, religious and educational roles, and the limited cases of court-related influence. Section 4 discusses these findings in relation to existing historiography and situates them within broader debates on gender and agency in Islamic societies. Section 5 concludes with the study's principal contributions and avenues for further research.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative, comparative-historical method grounded in critical source analysis. Three categories of primary and secondary materials were consulted. The first category comprises *waqf-nama* (endowment deed) documents and related administrative records, which, where women appear as founders (*vaqif*), beneficiaries, or trustees (*mutavalli*), provide rare direct evidence of female economic and legal agency. The second category consists of European and Russian travelers' and diplomatic accounts from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, which, despite their

orientalist framing and need for critical contextualization, offer ethnographic observations of household structure, marriage customs, and women's dress and seclusion practices unavailable in indigenous court chronicles. The third category includes Persian- and Chagatai-language chronicles and biographical dictionaries (tazkira), supplemented by twentieth- and twenty-first-century historiographical and ethnographic scholarship on Bukharan social structure.

Source material was triangulated to mitigate the biases inherent in each genre: the formulaic and elite-centered character of dynastic chronicles, the orientalist lens of European travel writing, and the legal-formalism of waqf documentation. Where sources conflicted, preference was given to corroborated claims appearing across at least two independent source types. The analysis further draws on the comparative method common in Central Asian gender historiography, situating Bukharan practices alongside documented patterns in the neighboring Khanate of Khiva and Khanate of Kokand to assess which features were specific to the Manghit emirate and which reflected broader regional norms of Hanafi Islamic social organization.

Limitations of this approach must be acknowledged. Indigenous sources authored by women themselves are exceedingly rare for this period, meaning that the reconstructed picture of women's agency is necessarily filtered through male-authored documentation. The study therefore makes interpretive claims with appropriate caution, emphasizing institutional and structural evidence (such as waqf endowment patterns) over inference about individual subjective experience.

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **3.1. Legal and Familial Status**

Family law within the Bukhara Khanate and Emirate operated under Hanafi Sharia jurisprudence, administered by qazi (religious judges) who adjudicated marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody matters. Women possessed defined, if asymmetric, legal personhood: a bride was entitled to mahr (a marriage payment from the groom, traditionally including a minimum specified quantity of silver coinage), and women retained independent rights to inherited and personally acquired property, which remained legally separate from a husband's estate. Marriage was typically arranged through female-led matchmaking networks, in which senior female relatives assessed prospective matches, with formal approval finalized by male heads of household; the marriage process itself involved a structured sequence of rituals, including the reading of the nikah contract and the ceremonial unveiling of the bride.

Polygyny was permitted under Hanafi law, with a legal maximum of four wives contingent upon the husband's demonstrated capacity for equitable material support; in practice, economic constraints meant that monogamy predominated among the majority of urban and rural households, with polygynous marriage concentrated among wealthier merchant, clerical, and court-affiliated families. Divorce (talaq) and, more rarely,

female-initiated dissolution (khul') were both legally recognized procedures, though social and economic pressures generally disadvantaged women seeking separation.

### **3.2. Economic Activity**

Despite the prevailing norm of female seclusion in urban public space, women constituted an integral, if largely undocumented, component of the Bukharan economy. Within the household economy, women managed textile production — including silk reeling, cotton spinning, weaving, and embroidery (suzani) — much of which entered local and regional trade through male intermediaries, given restrictions on women's direct participation in open bazaar commerce. In rural and semi-nomadic communities, women's labor extended to agricultural tasks, livestock care, and food processing, areas in which seclusion norms were applied less rigidly than in the urban centers of Bukhara and Samarkand.

The waqf institution constitutes the clearest documented evidence of independent female economic agency. Women of means — particularly those connected to court, merchant, or clerical families — are recorded as founders of charitable endowments supporting mosques, madrasas, and public infrastructure such as water reservoirs (hauz) and caravanserais. Several madrasas in Bukhara are historically associated with female patrons, indicating that wealthy women exercised not only property rights but also a recognized form of pious public benefaction that conferred social prestige despite operating outside formal political office.

### **3.3. Religious and Educational Roles**

Education in the Bukhara Khanate and Emirate was organized along strictly gender-segregated lines. Boys' elementary schooling (maktab) was typically conducted in mosques or madrasas, whereas girls' instruction took place informally in private homes, often under the direction of an otin oyi — a learned woman who taught girls religious recitation, basic literacy, and household devotional practice. The otin oyi tradition represents a historically significant, female-led institution of informal education and religious authority that operated parallel to, but largely independent of, the formal male-dominated madrasa system, and it persisted as a recognizable social institution well beyond the fall of the Emirate in 1920.

Within the religious sphere more broadly, women participated in domestic and community devotional life, including the organization of life-cycle rituals (births, weddings, and funerary observances) that carried significant social and religious weight. While women were generally excluded from congregational Friday prayer in major mosques and from formal positions within the ulama hierarchy, the otin oyi network functioned as a parallel structure of female religious authority, transmitting both literacy and devotional knowledge across generations of women.

### **3.4. Court and Administrative Influence**

Formal political office in the Bukhara Khanate and Emirate was exclusively male, and women are correspondingly absent from administrative posts such as qazi, hakim (governor), or military command. Nonetheless, sources indicate that women connected to the ruling household — mothers, wives, and senior female relatives of khans and emirs — at times exercised informal political influence through court networks, intercession on behalf of petitioners, and involvement in dynastic marriage alliances that served diplomatic functions between the Bukharan state and neighboring polities such as the Khanate of Khiva and Khanate of Kokand. Such influence, however, remained informal, contingent on personal relationships within the court, and is documented far less systematically than the formal exercise of political authority by male officials.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that women's social activity in the Bukhara Khanate and Emirate cannot be adequately characterized through a simple binary of confinement versus freedom. Rather, Bukharan society operated according to a gender-segregated structural logic in which women's agency was channeled into specific institutional domains — household economic production, charitable endowment, informal religious education, and family-network diplomacy — that operated largely apart from, rather than in direct competition with, the male-dominated domains of formal governance, judiciary, and congregational religious leadership.

This pattern aligns with broader scholarship on gender and agency in pre-modern Islamic societies, which has increasingly moved away from interpretive frameworks centered solely on legal subordination toward frameworks that recognize parallel, gender-specific institutions of authority and influence. The waqf evidence is particularly significant in this regard: a woman's capacity to found and control a charitable endowment in her own name demonstrates a degree of independent legal and economic personhood that complicates any straightforward narrative of total female economic dependency. Similarly, the otin oyi tradition demonstrates that informal female educational authority was not merely tolerated but institutionally recognized and intergenerationally transmitted, constituting a durable parallel structure to the male madrasa system.

At the same time, the structural limits on women's public political and judicial participation were real and consequential. The qazi courts, the formal ulama hierarchy, and all positions of state administration remained closed to women throughout the period under study, and even the documented instances of court-related female influence operated informally rather than through recognized office. The comparative evidence from the neighboring Khanate of Khiva suggests that these patterns were not unique to Bukhara but reflected a broader regional configuration of Hanafi Islamic social and legal organization across the Uzbek khanates of Transoxiana, with local

variation in the degree of urban seclusion enforcement between Bukhara, Samarkand, and the more rural districts of the emirate.

The arrival of Jadid reformist currents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the subsequent Russian protectorate period after 1873, introduced new, if still limited, debates concerning women's education and social position, foreshadowing the more substantial transformations that would follow the establishment of Soviet rule after 1920. While a full treatment of this transitional period exceeds the scope of the present study, it is noted here as an important direction for future research connecting late-emirate gender norms to the subsequent Soviet-era reforms affecting women's legal and social status in Uzbekistan.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the social activity of women during the period of the Bukhara Khanate and Emirate through a comparative-historical analysis of waqf documentation, travelers' accounts, and chronicle sources. The evidence demonstrates that, contrary to historiographical narratives emphasizing total female confinement to the domestic sphere, women exercised meaningful agency within clearly defined institutional domains: as participants in household and craft-based economic production, as founders and beneficiaries of charitable waqf endowments, as transmitters of religious literacy through the *otin oyi* tradition, and, in select elite cases, as informal participants in court-based diplomatic and intercessory networks.

These findings support a revised historiographical framework in which women's social position in Bukharan society is understood not as an absence of activity but as a gender-segregated and institutionally distinct sphere of influence, structured by Hanafi Sharia law yet allowing for substantial informal authority within the household, the religious-educational system, and the charitable economy. Future research employing newly digitized waqf archives and biographical dictionaries may further refine this picture, particularly regarding regional variation between Bukhara's urban center and its rural districts, and regarding the transitional decades bridging the late Emirate and early Soviet periods.

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