

# COVID - Induced Inequalities:

The case of Uzbekistan

Education, Health Services, Digital Access,  
and Female Labor Force Participation

The case of Uzbekistan

- In March 2020, the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic began to affect every industry system, including national healthcare, education, employment, and information technology sectors in most countries.
- In Uzbekistan, the first ten days of April 2020 marked the most significant decline in economic activity during the quarantine period.
- The trading volume on the commodity exchange fell by an average of 30%, while unemployment rose to 11% percent, and sales of some goods decreased by almost 80% (World bank, 2020).
- The adaption to the new situation and the preparation for future pandemics is ongoing. This study attempts to identify and recommend, promising and specific, new policies and implementation practices.

- The case study analyzed primary qualitative data collected by a multisector team (health, education, digitization, and employment).
- Semi-structured interviews were designed to answer the research questions and to draw out the empirical experiences of the participants.
- The purposeful stratified samples included persons from government and non-government organizations, and persons more directly affected by the pandemic.
- Basic coding, comparative analysis, and category systems led to themes that composed the study's findings.
- We reviewed a limited amount of secondary data to inform the study. Locating Post-COVID 19 data was challenging.

**Context:** Before, During, and Post\* COVID-19 pandemic

**Cross-cutting:** Health Services, Education, Digital XYZ,  
Women in the labor force

**Demographics:** Age (students – seniors); Location (urban – rural);  
Gender

**RQ1**—Access / availability / achievement gaps?

**RQ2**—Quality differences?

**RQ3**—New Challenges, government's response, and its effectiveness?

**RQ4**—Recommendations for 'creative' policy and implementation?

- The education system of Uzbekistan had little to no experience in online teaching and learning before the COVID-19 pandemic. At all education levels, classes were always organized in traditional, i.e. face-to-face mode.
- For some students, access was limited, particularly due to the availability and affordability of technology.
- Uzbekistan strengthened its capacity to apply blended learning (creative on- and off-line teaching and learning approaches). But the system was limited by teachers' experience and access to technology.
- Educational institutions were unready primarily to adjust to the newly applied systems and platforms.

- Invest and accelerate *technology-driven teaching and learning* across the country, focusing on rural and low-income areas. Enhance *teachers' and students' technological skills*.
- The Ministry of Higher Education increases the autonomy of universities to develop their *internal quality assurance mechanisms*.
- Use international experiences to *inform and strengthen effective online teaching techniques*.
- Improve the *capabilities of teaching staff for online teaching* by organizing regular teacher training programs.
- Only *accept applicants* to pedagogical universities with *intrinsic motivation* to become teachers.
- Increase the *reputation and salary* of the teaching profession.

- Uzbekistan has invested heavily in its technology ecosystem, driving the creation and delivery of IT products and services, including Internet access, mobile communications, and other related areas.
- COVID-19 pushed technology adoption to the next level.
- Over 10 million people, 30% of the population, lacked access to the Internet.
- Despite this, the number of people using social media in Uzbekistan rose by 1.7 million between 2021 and 2022.

- Offer *tax incentives* for communication operators who prioritize *Internet connections* and install fiber-optic lines to improve broadband connection in rural areas. Especially, those in mountainous or 'shadow' locations.
- Offer *financial incentives* for local businesses and entrepreneurs to install *free WiFi access in public places*, especially in rural areas.
- Offer *affordable loans / credit* through state-owned banks for consumers in regions to *buy digital devices*.
- Provide *tax incentives* to firms that subsidize employees' *gadget purchases*.



- Uzbekistan was the only country in Central Asia to report positive growth during the pandemic.
- By early 2020, COVID – 1) brought serious and new challenges to the employment sector across the country, disproportionately affecting women.
- Although women comprise 49.6% of Uzbekistan's population, their share of informal employment (45.7%) is lower than men (54.3%).
- The limited number of local formal sector jobs and the lack of necessary education, qualifications, and skills make women in rural areas much less competitive in the labor market.
- The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on Uzbekistan's female labor force participation are poorly understood.

- Enforce the government *Labor Code* regarding *support for maternity and paternity leave* and compensation packages in private companies.
- Improve the *living conditions and security in dormitories* used by female employees. Prepare for periods when the inflow of residents is faster, straining the capacity / sustainability of facilities.
- Consider stronger social safety nets for women who cannot work during pandemics or similar crises.

- Uzbekistan's health care sector before the Covid-19 pandemic, could be characterized by continuously developing and enhancing infrastructure and management, with the burden of non-communicable disease, with cardiovascular diseases, stroke, diabetes, and cancer accounting for over 60% of all causes of death (Healthdata.org, 2022)
- In general, the country was one of the leading countries to introduce strict social distance policies, lockdowns, and border control, and more than 10,000 added beds. Moreover, the number of Covid-19 laboratories increased from 3 to more than 110, proceeding with more than 35 thousand tests daily.
- Ambulance care services were seriously disrupted due to the significant burden of COVID-19 patients who had to utilize the same services as those suffering from emergencies.
- The amount of laboratory diagnostics tests was limited, especially cardio markers in rural areas.

- Implement a *unified digital medical record system*, including telemedicine (or e-medicine.)
- Increase *public health sector finance investment* by attracting private and foreign addressed investment.
- Prioritize *training and support of healthcare workers*, including emergency preparedness.
- Develop a *national strategy and action plan* during worldwide pandemics and epidemics.
- Establish *effective integrated response systems* to increase confidence in health services.
- Enable *equality of healthcare services* in rural and remote areas.

*\*These apply to all directions of healthcare and public health in Uzbekistan.*