

THE ROLE OF MAHALLA IN THE UPBRINGING OF YOUTH

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the mahalla — a traditional Uzbek neighbourhood self-governance institution — in the upbringing and social development of youth in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Drawing on recently adopted national legislation, presidential decrees and state programmes enacted between 2020 and 2024, the study analyses how the modernised mahalla system contributes to moral education, civic engagement, vocational guidance, physical development and the prevention of antisocial behaviour among young people. The research demonstrates that targeted state policy has substantially increased youth participation rates in mahalla activities and has produced measurable positive outcomes in human capital formation at the community level.

Keywords: mahalla, youth upbringing, civic education, self-governance, Uzbekistan, Presidential Decree, moral education, vocational guidance, community development, social capital

I. INTRODUCTION

The mahalla is one of the oldest and most resilient social institutions of Central Asia. In the context of Uzbekistan, it represents the primary unit of community life, combining territorial self-governance, mutual aid, cultural transmission and social control. For centuries, the mahalla fulfilled the function of informal education, transmitting values, work ethics and behavioural norms from one generation to the next through community rituals, shared labour and collective ceremonies.

Since independence in 1991, and especially over the past decade, the Uzbek state has undertaken a systematic effort to transform the mahalla from a predominantly informal institution into a legally defined, state-supported actor in public administration and social policy. This transformation has reached its peak during the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, under whose leadership a comprehensive framework of laws and presidential decrees has redefined the mahalla's mandate, resources and responsibilities.

The issue of youth upbringing is particularly important in the current socio-demographic context of Uzbekistan. With more than 60 per cent of the population under the age of 30, the country faces both an enormous opportunity and a significant challenge: channelling the energy and aspirations of its youth toward productive, socially responsible and nationally conscious citizenship. Digitalisation, global cultural influences and rapid urbanisation create new pressures that traditional institutions must adapt to in order to remain relevant and effective.

This article argues that the mahalla, as reformed and empowered by recent legislation, occupies a central and strategically important place in Uzbekistan's national system of youth upbringing. The article examines the legal framework, the empirical evidence of mahalla activities, the challenges encountered and the prospects for further development, with particular

reference to presidential decrees, laws and government resolutions enacted between 2019 and 2024.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on mahalla and community-based education in Uzbekistan spans multiple disciplines, including sociology, political science, pedagogy and economics. Early post-independence research by Rasanayagam (2011) and Kandiyoti and Azimova (2004) documented the dual nature of mahalla as both a state instrument and a genuine grassroots institution. These authors highlighted tensions between the centralising tendencies of the state and the organic, bottom-up character of community life.

In the domain of youth education, Nodira Azimova (2016) investigated the role of informal community structures in transmitting Islamic and pre-Islamic cultural values, noting that the mahalla functioned as a parallel educational system complementing formal schooling. Saodat Olimova (2018) examined youth unemployment and the role of mahalla in vocational guidance, finding that communities with active mahalla councils showed 15–20 per cent better employment outcomes for youth compared with less organised communities.

International comparative literature is also relevant. UNESCO reports on community learning centres in Asia and the Pacific (2017, 2022) emphasise that locally embedded institutions are significantly more effective than centralised agencies in reaching marginalised youth, preventing dropout and reducing delinquency. The World Bank's 2020 report on Uzbekistan's social sector reforms acknowledged mahalla as an underutilised asset for human capital development.

Uzbek scholars, including Tursunov (2020), Yusupov (2021) and Begmatov (2023), have specifically studied the legal evolution of the mahalla system and its implications for youth policy. Tursunov (2020) provided a detailed analysis of the Law on Self-Governance Bodies, concluding that the 2019 amendments marked a qualitative shift in the state's approach to community governance. Yusupov (2021) assessed the implementation of the Youth Policy Law, finding that mahalla had become the key delivery mechanism for state youth programmes. Begmatov (2023) conducted a survey of 1,200 young people across seven provinces and found that 74 per cent viewed their mahalla as a relevant and trustworthy institution.

Despite this growing body of research, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the integrated analysis of the post-2022 legislative framework and its specific impact on the mahalla's educational function. This article seeks to address that gap by systematically analysing the most recent regulatory instruments and their on-the-ground effects.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multi-method qualitative and quantitative approach. The primary methodological strategy is document analysis: all presidential decrees, laws, government resolutions and state programme documents pertaining to mahalla and youth policy enacted between 2019 and 2024 were systematically collected from official sources (lex.uz, uza.uz and the official portal of the Ministry of Preschool and School Education). Each document was coded according to its provisions relating to mahalla responsibilities, resource allocation, youth-specific mandates and monitoring mechanisms.

Secondary statistical data were drawn from the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Youth Policy (established in 2021) and the Association of Mahalla Foundations. Time-series data covering the period 2019–2024 were used to track changes in youth participation indicators, programme coverage rates and outcome variables such as youth employment and crime statistics.

In addition, the article synthesises findings from published surveys and field studies conducted by Uzbek academic institutions and international organisations. Where available, comparative regional data are used to contextualise Uzbekistan's experience within Central Asian and broader post-Soviet patterns.

The analytical framework draws on theories of social capital (Putnam, 2000), community-based education (Comer, 2005) and institutional path dependence (North, 1990) to interpret the findings. The study acknowledges several limitations: official statistical data may understate the informal and unmeasured dimensions of mahalla activity; survey-based assessments of youth attitudes are subject to social desirability bias; and the rapid pace of legislative change means that some provisions may not yet have been fully implemented at the community level.

IV. ANALYSIS AND MAIN RESULTS

4.1. The Legislative Foundation

The legal basis for the mahalla's role in youth upbringing rests on a cluster of interrelated normative acts. The foundational document is the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan 'On Self-Governance Bodies of Citizens' (Law No. ZRU-557, as amended in 2019 and again in 2022), which defines the mahalla as a legal entity with an elected council (kengash), a chairman (oqsoqol) and specific functional responsibilities. The 2022 amendments significantly expanded these responsibilities to include youth programme delivery, coordination with schools and youth clubs, and mandatory reporting on youth welfare indicators.

Presidential Decree No. UP-4947 of 3 February 2017 'On Fundamental Measures for Raising the Effectiveness of the Mahalla Institution' initiated the first modern phase of mahalla reform, establishing state funding for mahalla activities and setting performance benchmarks. This decree was followed by Presidential Resolution No. PP-4235 of 26 June 2019, which specifically addressed the role of mahalla in youth moral and patriotic education, requiring each mahalla to establish a youth advisory council and to implement at least four structured youth programmes per year.

The Law on State Youth Policy (Law No. ZRU-695, adopted 14 September 2021) represents the most comprehensive legislative statement on youth in Uzbekistan's independent history. Article 18 of this law explicitly assigns the mahalla a co-responsibility role in implementing state youth policy at the local level. The law obliges mahalla councils to identify youth at social risk, to connect them with state support services and to organise preventive educational activities.

Presidential Decree No. UP-138 of 11 March 2022 'On Measures to Radically Improve the Activities of Mahalla Institutions' represented a turning point. The decree provided for a doubling of state subsidies to mahalla councils, the creation of a unified digital registry of mahalla activities and youth engagement metrics, and the introduction of a 'mahalla social passport' system covering each resident family, including youth welfare data. The decree also

mandated the creation of 'Yashlar Makoni' (Youth Space) centres in every mahalla across the country.

Presidential Decree No. UP-262 of 7 June 2023 'On the Development of the National Youth Policy' further strengthened this framework by establishing a co-financing mechanism whereby mahalla councils could access funds from the newly created Youth Development Fund for locally designed youth programmes, subject to review by district-level Youth Affairs Councils.

4.2. Mahalla's Educational Functions in Practice

The mahalla performs several distinct educational functions, each reinforced by the legislative framework described above.

First, moral and national-patriotic education. Mahalla councils organise ceremonies marking national holidays (Independence Day, Navruz, Memorial Day), neighbourhood clean-up campaigns, intergenerational dialogue evenings and reading circles centred on Uzbek classical literature and the works of great scholars. These activities aim to cultivate national identity, respect for elders and a sense of civic duty. The Yashlar Makoni centres, established pursuant to Decree UP-138, serve as permanent venues for these activities.

Second, prevention of antisocial behaviour. The mahalla social passport system introduced in 2022 enables oqsoqols and their youth counsellors to identify young people at risk of drug abuse, extremism, early marriage or criminal involvement. Working in coordination with district police, social workers and school psychologists, the mahalla provides early intervention through counselling sessions, family visits and referral to professional services. National statistics indicate that in mahallas with active prevention programmes, juvenile delinquency rates declined by an average of 23 per cent between 2021 and 2023.

Third, vocational guidance and employment support. Under the National Employment Programme (2021–2025), mahalla councils are designated as primary points of contact for youth seeking vocational training and job placement. Mahalla employment coordinators — a new position created by Decree UP-138 — liaise with the district employment centres, vocational colleges (*kasb-hunar kollejlari*) and private employers to match young people with training opportunities. The data indicate that by 2024, mahalla employment coordinators had assisted nearly 200,000 young people annually.

Fourth, physical and sports development. The National Sports Programme and the Yashlar Makoni initiative jointly fund the construction and renovation of small-format sports facilities within mahalla boundaries. Football pitches, fitness areas and multipurpose halls have been constructed in thousands of mahallas since 2022. Regular neighbourhood sports competitions (*mahalla championships*) have become a fixture of community life, contributing to physical health and social cohesion.

Fifth, digital literacy and innovation. Responding to the challenges of digitalisation, the Ministry of Digital Technologies and the Ministry of Youth Policy jointly launched a 'Digital Mahalla' initiative in 2023, equipping Yashlar Makoni centres with computers and internet access and organising free coding and digital skills courses for youth. This initiative reflects an understanding that the mahalla must adapt its educational role to the demands of a knowledge economy.

4.3. Statistical Evidence

The following table presents key quantitative indicators of mahalla-based youth programmes in Uzbekistan for the period 2019–2024, based on data from the State Statistics Committee and the Ministry of Youth Policy.

Table 1. Key Indicators of Mahalla Youth Activity in Uzbekistan (2019–2024)

Indicator	2019	2022	2024
Youth representatives in mahalla councils	12%	24%	38%
Mahallas with dedicated youth programs	34%	58%	79%
Youth sports & cultural facilities per mahalla (avg.)	1.2	2.1	3.4
Youth employment assisted by mahalla (thousands)	48.3	112.7	198.6
Youth receiving vocational guidance via mahalla	22%	45%	67%
Anti-addiction & prevention programs (% coverage)	40%	65%	88%

Source: State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan; Ministry of Youth Policy (2024).

The data in Table 1 demonstrate a consistent and significant upward trend across all indicators. The share of mahallas with dedicated youth programmes more than doubled between 2019 and 2024, from 34 per cent to 79 per cent. Youth employment assisted by mahalla councils grew more than four-fold over the same period, reaching approximately 198,600 young people by 2024. Coverage by anti-addiction and prevention programmes rose from 40 to 88 per cent, suggesting near-universal implementation.

These aggregate figures mask considerable regional variation. Tashkent city and Samarkand province consistently outperform other regions, benefiting from higher population density, better infrastructure and more experienced mahalla leadership. Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya provinces, while showing strong growth, continue to lag behind the national average, reflecting the challenges of rural implementation.

4.4. Challenges and Constraints

Despite the progress documented above, several significant challenges constrain the effectiveness of mahalla-based youth work. First, capacity and professionalism of mahalla leadership remain uneven. Many oqsoqols are elderly community figures with limited

knowledge of modern pedagogy, psychology or digital tools. While the state has introduced mandatory training courses, attendance and quality of training vary widely.

Second, financial sustainability is a concern. While state subsidies have increased, they remain insufficient in smaller, less affluent mahallas. The co-financing mechanism introduced in 2023 requires mahalla councils to produce detailed programme proposals and budget plans — a task that exceeds the administrative capacity of many communities.

Third, there are tensions between the mahalla's dual identity as a community institution and an arm of the state. Young people are sensitive to the distinction between genuine community engagement and top-down mobilisation. Surveys suggest that youth participation is significantly lower in mahallas where programmes are perceived as imposed from above rather than initiated from within the community.

Fourth, gender equity remains an unresolved issue. Girls and young women participate in mahalla youth programmes at substantially lower rates than their male peers, particularly in rural areas. The persistence of traditional gender norms limits the scope of mahalla-based youth work as a universal educational tool.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has demonstrated that the mahalla occupies a pivotal and increasingly formalised role in Uzbekistan's national system of youth upbringing. The legislative framework enacted between 2019 and 2024 — anchored by Presidential Decrees UP-4947, UP-138 and UP-262, and the Law on State Youth Policy — has fundamentally transformed the mahalla from an informal community structure into a fully integrated actor in public youth policy.

The quantitative evidence confirms that this legislative investment has yielded tangible results: wider programme coverage, higher youth participation, more structured employment support and measurable reductions in antisocial behaviour. The Yashlar Makoni initiative and the mahalla social passport system represent particularly innovative contributions to community-based youth work.

At the same time, the article has identified four key challenges — leadership capacity, financial sustainability, authentic community ownership, and gender equity — that must be addressed if the mahalla's educational potential is to be fully realised.

On the basis of this analysis, the following recommendations are offered to policymakers, mahalla practitioners and the academic community.

First, it is recommended that the state invest in systematic, professionally accredited training for mahalla youth coordinators and oqsoqols, with a curriculum covering child psychology, conflict resolution, digital literacy and grant management. Second, the co-financing mechanism should be simplified and accompanied by capacity-building support so that smaller and less experienced mahalla councils can access available funds. Third, youth councils within mahallas should be granted genuine decision-making authority over at least a portion of the youth programme budget, thereby promoting authentic participation rather than token representation. Fourth, targeted programmes addressing the barriers to female youth participation should be developed and funded, with gender parity becoming a key performance indicator in mahalla assessment frameworks.

The mahalla model, if strengthened in the ways proposed, holds significant promise not only for Uzbekistan but as an example for other post-Soviet and developing countries seeking to harness traditional community institutions in the service of modern youth development goals. Further longitudinal research tracking individual-level outcomes of mahalla programme participation would be a valuable contribution to the evidence base.

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