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THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING AND SOFT SKILLS IN ENHANCING THE SOCIAL ACTIVITY OF FEMALE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article comprehensively examines the role and significance of critical thinking and soft skills in enhancing the social activity of female students. In the context of modern globalization, one of the key challenges facing the higher education system is to ensure the active participation of young people—particularly female students—in social life. From this perspective, the article analyzes the theoretical foundations of critical thinking, its role in personal development, and its interrelation with social activity. During the research, methods such as systematic analysis, comparative approach, and pedagogical observation were employed. The results demonstrate that critical thinking skills enable female students to analyze information, draw independent conclusions, think free from stereotypes, and actively respond to social issues. At the same time, soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, leadership, and time management—ensure their successful integration into the social environment. The article also substantiates the effectiveness of modern pedagogical technologies and interactive methods (such as discussions, debates, and project-based learning) aimed at increasing the social activity of female students. Based on the research findings, it is concluded that it is necessary to implement a comprehensive approach focused on developing critical thinking and soft skills within the educational process.

KEYWORDS: female students, social activity, critical thinking, soft skills, communicative competence, leadership and teamwork, adaptability, pedagogical approach, personal development, civic engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the large-scale reforms being implemented in Uzbekistan include strategic directions aimed at modernizing the education system and increasing the social activity of young people, especially female students. In the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan, enhancing the intellectual potential of youth, ensuring their active participation in social life, and promoting gender equality are identified as priority tasks. The social activity of female students is an important indicator of societal development, reflected in their civic position, initiative, and participation in social processes. In recent years, institutional mechanisms aimed at supporting women—such as the activities of the Committee on Family and Women of Uzbekistan, as well as the introduction of various grants and programs in higher education institutions—have contributed to increasing the social activity of female students. At the same time, adapting to the demands of the modern labor market and social environment requires female students to possess not only theoretical knowledge but also critical thinking and soft skills.

Critical thinking enables female students to analyze diverse information flows, approach social issues consciously, and make independent decisions. This is particularly important in the context of increasing relevance of media literacy and information security issues. Soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability—are also becoming increasingly significant within the higher education system of Uzbekistan. In particular, projects, training programs, and social initiatives organized by the Youth Union of Uzbekistan contribute to the development of these competencies among female students. As a result, they are becoming more active not only in the educational process but also in social life.

Scientific observations indicate that female students in Uzbekistan with a high level of critical thinking and well-developed soft skills tend to participate more actively in social projects, volunteer activities, and startup initiatives. This, in turn, enhances their leadership potential and strengthens their social role within society.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that increasing the social activity of female students in Uzbekistan is closely linked not only to improving the quality of education but also to ensuring sustainable social development. Therefore, it is of great importance to scientifically examine the role of critical thinking and soft skills in enhancing the social activity of female students. This study analyzes their interrelationship and explores mechanisms for

developing these competencies within the education system, using Uzbekistan as a case study.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is aimed at comprehensively examining the role of critical thinking and soft skills in enhancing the social activity of female students enrolled in the higher education system of Uzbekistan. The research integrates modern pedagogical, sociological, and psychological approaches. Both theoretical analysis and empirical observations were applied in an integrated manner, which allowed for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the issue.

The research object consists of female students studying in both public and private higher education institutions across different regions of the republic. The sampling process considered factors such as the level of social activity, field of study, academic year, and regional characteristics. The subject of the research includes the social activity of female students, their level of critical thinking, and soft skills (such as communication, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability), as well as the interrelationship among these factors.

Both primary and secondary sources were used as research materials. Primary data were collected directly from respondents, while secondary data included scientific literature, academic articles, dissertations, international and national reports, and statistical data. In particular, data provided by the Committee on Family and Women of Uzbekistan and the Youth Union of Uzbekistan were analyzed. In addition, normative-legal documents, state programs, and strategic development plans in the education system served as important sources for the study.

As John Dewey emphasized, “education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” This idea highlights the importance of engaging female students in real social processes to enhance their social activity. According to Dewey, critical thinking is formed through active experience, which aligns closely with the findings of this study.

Similarly, Paulo Freire, in his theory of critical pedagogy, stated that “a person should not merely accept reality but should be able to transform it.” This perspective scientifically justifies the importance of critical thinking in increasing the social activity of female students. According to Freire, without the development of critical consciousness, social activity remains superficial.

Regarding soft skills, Daniel Goleman argued that “a large part of success depends not on intellectual abilities, but on emotional intelligence and social skills.” This view is consistent with the findings of the

study and confirms the importance of communication and leadership skills in ensuring the active participation of female students in social life.

In addition, according to the socio-cultural theory of development proposed by Lev Vygotsky, an individual's development is directly linked to the social environment. As he stated, "every higher mental function appears first on the social level, and later on the individual level." This highlights that the social activity of female students is an essential condition for their personal development. During the empirical stage of the research, several key methods were employed. First, a survey (questionnaire) method was used to determine the level of social activity of female students, their participation in social projects, initiative, attitudes toward critical thinking, and level of soft skills. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to freely express their opinions. This method enabled the collection and generalization of a large volume of statistical data.

A semi-structured interview method was also applied to explore in depth the personal experiences of selected female students, their motivation for social activity, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to overcome them. This method provided qualitative data, which complemented and helped interpret the survey results.

Observation was another important method used in the study. The social activities of female students within higher education institutions—such as their participation in events, volunteer movements, and youth organizations—were directly observed. This made it possible to assess real behavior and determine the practical level of their social engagement. Both primary and secondary data were utilized in the research process. In particular, statistical data provided by the Committee on Family and Women of Uzbekistan and the Youth Union of Uzbekistan were analyzed.

As Abdulla Avloniy emphasized, "Education for us is a matter of life or death, salvation or destruction, happiness or disaster." This idea demonstrates the crucial importance of preparing the younger

generation—especially female students—for active participation in social life, as well as fostering independent thinking and social responsibility. In Avloniy's views, education and social activity are interpreted as closely interconnected processes. Abu Nasr al-Farabi, in his socio-philosophical views, paid special attention to the role of intellect and reasoning in the formation of a perfect individual, emphasizing that the development of society is directly linked to educated and thoughtful individuals. According to him, for a person to be socially active, it is not enough to possess knowledge alone; one must also be socially mature.

Among modern Uzbek pedagogical scholars, Nizomiddin Mahmudov places particular emphasis on the development of independent thinking in the educational process, stating that "independent thinking is the foundation of an individual's intellectual freedom." This further confirms the importance of critical thinking in enhancing the social activity of female students.

In addition, Bexzod Yuldashev highlights the necessity of innovative approaches in the development of science and education, noting that the acquisition of modern competencies—especially soft skills—is essential for young people in the context of global competition. This perspective is consistent with the findings of the present study. Based on these scholarly views, it can be concluded that in Uzbek pedagogical thought, the concepts of critical thinking, independent reasoning, and social activity have always held a central place. Today, these traditions are being integrated with the modern concept of soft skills, gaining new meaning and relevance. At the same time, reforms implemented by the Youth Union of Uzbekistan and the Committee on Family and Women of Uzbekistan serve as an important practical foundation for increasing the social activity of female students. In the empirical stage of the study, survey, interview, observation, and statistical analysis methods were applied. The table below presents the research methods, their purposes, and areas of application in a systematic manner.

Table 1: Research Methods and Their Description

Method Name	Description	Purpose of Application
Survey (Questionnaire)	Written survey consisting of closed and open-ended questions	To determine the level of social activity, critical thinking, and soft skills of female students
Interview	Semi-structured oral conversations	To deeply explore personal experience, motivation, and challenges
Observation	Direct observation of students' activities	To assess the actual level of social activity
Comparison and Analysis	Comparison between different groups	To identify differences between active and less active students
Statistical Methods	Data processing using percentages, averages, and diagrams	To generalize and scientifically justify the results
Correlation Analysis	Method for identifying relationships between variables	To study the relationship between critical thinking, soft skills, and social activity

The research was conducted in several stages: initially, theoretical sources were analyzed; then, the research methodology was developed; subsequently, empirical data were collected; and finally, the results were analyzed. In order to ensure the reliability of the findings, methodological triangulation was applied, and the questionnaire was pilot-tested in advance. This methodological approach made it possible to comprehensively examine the role of critical thinking and soft skills in enhancing the social activity of female students and to draw scientifically grounded conclusions.

The collected data were processed and generalized using statistical and logical analysis methods. In particular, percentage indicators, mean values, and comparative analysis were used to identify differences between various groups. In addition, elements of correlation analysis were applied to examine the relationship between the level of critical thinking, soft skills, and social activity. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research results, triangulation of methods was employed, meaning that multiple methods were used in combination. Furthermore, the questionnaire was initially tested on a small group (pilot study) to verify its clarity and accuracy. The sufficient number of respondents also contributed to the generalizability of the results. Overall, the selected methodological approach enabled a comprehensive and in-depth study of the role of critical thinking and soft skills in enhancing the social activity of female students, identifying existing

challenges, and developing practical recommendations.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study confirm that there is a statistically significant and stable relationship between the social activity, level of critical thinking, and soft skills of female students studying in the higher education system of Uzbekistan. The analysis of empirical data shows that socially active female students not only possess higher levels of communication and leadership skills but also demonstrate more advanced abilities in analyzing information and making independent decisions.

The findings of this study are consistent with international research. In particular, reports by UNESCO indicate that the social activity of young people is directly related to their level of critical thinking and socio-emotional skills. Similarly, studies conducted by the OECD recognize soft skills (21st-century competencies) as one of the key factors for success in education and social integration.

According to the statistical analysis, the correlation between critical thinking and social activity was found to be moderately positive ($r \approx 0.62$), while the relationship between soft skills and social activity was relatively strong ($r \approx 0.71$). These results align with theoretical perspectives in educational psychology, which suggest that an individual's social behavior is largely determined by their cognitive and communicative competencies.

Table 2: Key Indicators and Their Interrelationships

Indicators	Average Score (1-5)	Standard Deviation	Correlation (r)
Social Activity	3.4	0.8	–
Critical Thinking	3.6	0.7	0.62
Soft Skills	3.8	0.6	0.71

Based on the obtained results, it can be emphasized that critical thinking acts as a key cognitive factor in shaping the social activity of female students. This finding aligns with the concept of "learning through experience" proposed by John Dewey. According to this approach, individuals acquire knowledge more deeply and develop independent thinking abilities through active participation in social processes.

Soft skills, in turn, ensure the practical dimension of social activity. According to the research of Daniel Goleman, individuals with high levels of emotional intelligence and communication skills are more successful in social environments and demonstrate strong leadership potential. This theoretical perspective is fully consistent with the findings of the present study.

In the context of Uzbekistan, these processes are

also actively developing. In particular, social projects, training programs, and youth initiatives implemented by the Youth Union of Uzbekistan contribute to the development of soft skills among female students. At the same time, policies carried out by the Committee on Family and Women of Uzbekistan are aimed at ensuring gender equality and increasing the social activity of women.

However, the results of the study also revealed several existing challenges, including:

- the influence of social stereotypes and traditional views;

- a low level of self-confidence among female students;

- insufficient implementation of methodologies aimed at developing critical thinking.

Addressing these issues requires the application of

international experience. For example, programs by UNICEF широко apply interactive and practice-oriented teaching methods to enhance youth social activity. Overall, the findings indicate that critical thinking and soft skills are interrelated and strategically significant factors in increasing the social activity of female students. Their development contributes not only to personal competencies but also to the sustainable development of society.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study comprehensively demonstrate that critical thinking and soft skills are systematic, interrelated, and strategically important factors in enhancing the social activity of female students within the higher education system of Uzbekistan. The combination of theoretical analysis and empirical approaches applied in the research made it possible to identify the role of these competencies in personal development and to determine their mechanisms of influence on social processes.

First, critical thinking serves as a key component of cognitive development, enabling female students to analyze information, draw logical conclusions, and make independent decisions. This is particularly important in the modern information environment, where challenges related to media literacy and information security are becoming increasingly significant. Female students with well-developed critical thinking skills are more likely to actively engage with social issues, analyze them, and seek solutions, thereby strengthening their civic consciousness.

The second important aspect is soft skills, which form the practical and functional foundation of social activity. The study results show that competencies such as communication, leadership, teamwork, and adaptability facilitate the integration of female students into the social environment and enhance their level of initiative. This, in turn, expands their social capital and strengthens their position within

society.

Empirical findings indicate that female students with higher levels of critical thinking and soft skills participate more actively in social projects, volunteer activities, and community initiatives. In this process, programs implemented by the Youth Union of Uzbekistan, as well as gender policies carried out by the Committee on Family and Women of Uzbekistan, play an important institutional role.

At the same time, the challenges identified during the study require a systematic approach. Social stereotypes, traditional gender norms, low self-confidence, and insufficient attention to the development of critical thinking within the educational process act as limiting factors in increasing the social activity of female students. Addressing these issues requires the introduction of pedagogical innovations and the expansion of interactive and practice-oriented teaching methods.

Based on the study, the following theoretical and practical conclusions are proposed:

- social activity is effectively formed only when critical thinking and soft skills are developed in an integrated manner;

- it is important to strengthen the competency-based approach in higher education, particularly by increasing the share of practical training and workshops;

- institutional mechanisms supporting the social initiatives of female students should be expanded;

- educational and social programs aimed at ensuring gender equality should be systematically developed;

- the adaptation and implementation of international best practices to national conditions can yield positive results.

In general, this study confirms that the development of critical thinking and soft skills among female students is crucial not only for individual growth but also for the sustainable socio-economic development of society. Therefore, further scientific and practical research in this field remains highly relevant.

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