

THE ROLE OF THE MAHALLA IN SOCIAL WORK: TRADITIONAL AND MODERN APPROACHES

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Annotation: *This article explores the role of the mahalla in social work, examining both traditional and modern approaches to community support and social cohesion. The mahalla, a unique institution in Uzbek society, has historically played a vital role in resolving social issues, fostering mutual assistance, and preserving cultural values. In the context of modern social work, the mahalla continues to serve as a bridge between governmental services and local communities, adapting to new challenges while maintaining its foundational principles. The study highlights the importance of integrating traditional community structures with contemporary social work practices for more effective social development.*

Keywords: *mahalla, social work, traditional approach, modern approach, community development, Uzbekistan, social support*

Аннотация: *В данной статье рассматривается роль махалли в социальной работе с акцентом на традиционные и современные подходы к поддержке сообщества и укреплению социальной сплоченности. Махалля, являясь уникальным институтом узбекского общества, исторически играла важную роль в решении социальных проблем, развитии взаимопомощи и сохранении культурных ценностей. В условиях современной социальной работы махалля продолжает выполнять функцию посредника между государственными структурами и местным населением, адаптируясь к новым вызовам, сохраняя при этом свои традиционные основы. Исследование подчеркивает важность интеграции традиционных общественных структур с современными методами социальной работы для более эффективного социального развития.*

Ключевые слова: *махалля, социальная работа, традиционный подход, современный подход, развитие сообщества, Узбекистан, социальная поддержка.*

Introduction

Social work as a professional field is deeply connected to the cultural, historical, and structural foundations of the society in which it is practiced. In Uzbekistan, one of the most distinctive and historically significant social institutions is the *mahalla*. The *mahalla*, which refers to a local neighborhood or community unit, plays a central role in the everyday lives of citizens, acting as a hub for social interactions, mutual assistance, and local governance. Traditionally, the *mahalla* has functioned as a grassroots mechanism for solving communal problems, mediating conflicts, supporting vulnerable families, and preserving cultural norms. In recent years, with the increasing professionalization of social work and the modernization of state social services, the role of the *mahalla* has evolved. It now stands at the intersection of tradition and progress, offering a unique model of community-based support that blends customary practices with formal social work principles.

This paper aims to explore the dual nature of the *mahalla* in social work, analyzing both traditional functions and modern transformations. By understanding the historical legacy of the *mahalla* and its current relevance, we can better appreciate its potential as a strategic partner in sustainable social development and community resilience.

• The Traditional Role of the Mahalla in Social Support

For centuries, the *mahalla* has served as a self-regulated social unit where members collectively addressed communal concerns. Elders and respected figures in the neighborhood would lead initiatives such as organizing weddings and funerals, distributing charitable aid (*ehson*), and supporting families in times of need. These activities were not guided by formal laws but by cultural values such as solidarity (*hamkorlik*), hospitality (*mehmondo‘stlik*), and mutual respect.

Traditional *mahalla* structures encouraged a high level of social cohesion and accountability. Individuals grew up with a strong sense of belonging, knowing that their neighbors could be relied upon in times of crisis. Vulnerable groups such as the elderly, widows, orphans, and people with disabilities were supported informally through collective efforts and moral obligation.

• The Modernization of Social Work in Uzbekistan

In the post-independence era, Uzbekistan began developing its own system of social protection, introducing policies and institutions to support vulnerable

populations more systematically. Social work emerged as a professional discipline, drawing on international best practices while adapting them to the local context.

As the role of the government in social welfare expanded, so did the functions of the *mahalla*. It became an intermediary between the state and the community, responsible for identifying at-risk individuals, facilitating access to state aid, and participating in public awareness campaigns. Mahalla committees now work in collaboration with social workers, healthcare professionals, and educators to deliver services more effectively.

Modern social work in Uzbekistan emphasizes principles such as human rights, empowerment, and evidence-based intervention. While these principles may differ in language and structure from traditional practices, they align in spirit with the *mahalla*'s original goals: helping people lead safe, dignified, and fulfilling lives.

• Challenges and Opportunities in Integrating Mahalla Structures with Modern Social Work

Despite its many strengths, the *mahalla* system also faces challenges in adapting to contemporary needs. There can be gaps in training, coordination, and accountability when traditional leaders are expected to carry out tasks that require professional expertise. Additionally, the expansion of urbanization and changing social dynamics sometimes weaken the close-knit bonds that once characterized *mahalla* life.

However, these challenges also present opportunities. With proper training and resources, *mahalla* representatives can become powerful allies in the implementation of social programs. Their intimate knowledge of local conditions makes them ideal partners for social workers aiming to create targeted, culturally sensitive interventions. By fostering a cooperative model that respects both traditional values and modern methodologies, Uzbekistan can strengthen its social protection system and promote inclusive development. The *mahalla* system remains an essential part of Uzbekistan's social landscape, serving as a unique example of community-based support that bridges the gap between traditional customs and modern social work practices. Its historical role in fostering solidarity, resolving local disputes, and providing informal care continues to influence how social support is delivered today.

In the era of modernization, the *mahalla* has taken on new responsibilities, acting as a liaison between state institutions and the public. This transformation has

created opportunities for more integrated and responsive social services. However, to fully realize the potential of the *mahalla* in contemporary social work, it is essential to address challenges related to capacity-building, training, and formal recognition of its contributions. Strengthening the collaboration between professional social workers and *mahalla* committees can lead to more inclusive, culturally relevant, and sustainable social development. By respecting traditional values while embracing innovative practices, Uzbekistan can create a hybrid model of social support that reflects both its heritage and future aspirations.

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