

**PROCESSES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN UZBEKISTAN: GENERAL TRENDS
AND SPECIFIC FEATURES**

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Abstract: The new independent countries that appeared after the Soviet Union are experiencing both similar and unique changes in how society is divided into groups. As market reforms continue, these social divisions are becoming deeper. By comparing different theories, the author describes nine main types of stratification systems and explains their historical roots. The article briefly shows what is special about each type. It also focuses on how Uzbek society is divided into groups with different social status levels.

Keywords: classes, middle class, social strata, social stratification, status indicators, strata, stratification systems

Introduction

Theories about social stratification (how society is divided into social layers) were developed in sociology in the twentieth century. Today, this topic is one of the main issues in sociology.

Because of this, researchers need to study not only how stratification works, but also how the social structure of the population changes over time, using real sociological data.

Around the world, scientists' study social stratification in different ways, for example:

- The role of different social groups (classes) in stratification and how they affect people's ability to move up or down in society.
- How cultural and social factors help create and shape the middle class.
- How innovation and the creation of new jobs help improve people's living standards.

However, in our opinion, the specific features of stratification processes in post-Soviet countries, including Uzbekistan, have still not been studied enough.

First, it should be said that an early example of a stratification approach can be found in Beruni's book *Relics of Ancient Peoples* (1968), in Narshakhi's *History of Bukhara* (1996), and

in many other sources. Abu Rayhan Beruni describes five thousand years of world history using a dynastic classification. The social processes he explains in these valuable works show an early, Eastern way of thinking about social stratification. In these texts, we can see how communities, individuals, and even types of work are classified into different groups.

Many famous foreign sociologists have contributed to theories of social stratification, including M. Weber, P. Sorokin, T. Parsons, D. Bell, R. Bendix, S. Lipset, R. Merton, G. Simmel, A. Giddens and others. Russian scholars such as M. Rutkevich, T. Zaslavskaya, O. Radaev, O. Shkaratan, V. Yadov and others have examined difficult questions about the social structure of society and social stratification in detail. Research on how social stratification changes during the transformation of society has mainly been carried out in empirical studies led by Z. Golenkova, T. Zaslavskaya, A. Balabanov, K. Rimashevskaya and others (Radaev, 1995; Tikhonova, 1999; Golenkova, 2003). These studies analyze topics such as the labor market, employment, housing and property differences, consumer behavior, growing lifestyle differences, and ethnic and gender stratification. There are many theories and methods for studying stratification in modern societies. When we look at the concept of “stratification,” we can use both historical and modern approaches that examine how stratification systems stay stable and how they change, and how these systems appear in everyday social life. Researchers also study key ideas related to social stratification, such as social inequality, social mobility, and social status. In modern societies, stratification is marked by the appearance of new social groups and by movement between these groups. In general, studying stratification processes helps us understand important social processes, such as how social groups are formed and how people move within and between these groups. At the same time, examining stratification together with social mobility and social movements helps us see the condition and structure of social layers in society (Zakirov et al., 2021; Dahiya & Chaudhary, 2016; Chica et al., 2017).

Studying the dynamics of stratification also makes it possible to clearly understand the structure and scale of social change in society.

The term “stratum” comes into sociology from geology. The word “stratification” is based on the Latin stratum and means “layer.” In nature, the layers of the earth’s crust lie on top of each other. The lower layer is under the pressure of the upper one, and the borders between layers usually stay fixed. There is no movement from one layer to another, especially from the lower layer to the upper one.

In society, the situation is different. Social strata and groups are internally mobile and interact with each other. Their place in the social hierarchy, that is, their social status, often

changes. In a broad sense, social stratification means the division of society into different classes and strata (Groce & Hoodkinson, 2019; Ponomarenko et al., 2021). In functionalist theory, which goes back to Durkheim, social inequality is seen as a result of the division of labor. This theory distinguishes mechanical and organic forms of division of labor. The first reflects physical, gender, and age differences, while the second reflects differences that arise from education and professional training.

At different times, some forms of inequality may weaken or return. The way social stratification is organized in a given society is called its stratification system. The literature shows three main historical systems: caste, slavery, and class. Some belong to the distant past, but others still exist. Social space is always hierarchical and has many dimensions. Each group, layer, or class has a position and enters into relations with other groups. One group may be richer, have more income, or more prestige, often linked to political power (Buchmann & Park, 2009; Xiao & Tong, 2012; Nyandra et al., 2018).

Based on a comparative analysis, the author identifies nine types of stratification systems: natural-genetic (physical-genetic), slavery, caste, population strata, etacritic, social and professional, cultural and symbolic, and cultural and normative.

Natural-hereditary stratification : Social positions are based on natural and demographic traits such as age, gender, health, and physical strength, which are reinforced by customs and traditions.

Slavery: People are divided into owners and slaves, where slaves are deprived of rights and property and are treated as the private property of another group.

Caste system: Society is divided into rigid hereditary groups (castes) with fixed rights and duties, and movement between these groups is almost impossible.

Social estates (strata): Society is organized into legally defined estates (like nobles, clergy, peasants) with different rights and obligations, allowing limited social mobility.

Class system: People are grouped by their position in the economic system (such as capitalists and workers), with class differences based mainly on ownership and income.

Cultural-normative stratification: Groups gain higher status through recognized cultural styles, behavior, language, and values that become social norms and ideals.

Cultural-symbolic stratification: Higher status is linked to control over important information and symbols, especially religious or ideological knowledge, used to influence society.

Social and professional stratification: Positions in society depend on occupation, qualifications, education, experience, and professional skills.

Etacratric stratification: Social rank is determined by how close a group or person is to state power and government structures, which shapes their income, lifestyle, and prestige.

In this system, the level and form of stratification are defined by the state bureaucracy, and those close to officials receive extra privileges and benefits. The more authoritarian the state, the stronger this statocratic order becomes. Such systems existed historically in China, India, Cambodia, Egypt, Peru, and in many socialist countries in the 20th century (Radaev & Shkaratan, 1992).

Stratification systems are not limited to the types listed above, because social groups can also be classified using many other factors. P. Sorokin said that social space has many dimensions, and stratification can be based on things like citizenship, nationality, occupation, economic position, and religion (Sorokin, 1925). T. Parsons argued that in social space, social groups can be divided into three main levels: upper, middle, and lower (Sorokin, 1994). For the post-Soviet countries, researchers focus on the patterns and criteria of social stratification in a specific way. Sociologists usually distinguish four main social strata:

- a) upper,
- b) middle,
- c) basic,
- d) lower.

They also identify a fifth group called “social sediment,” which refers to the lowest layer of people who have largely lost their social status. Scholars describe five main social strata in post-Soviet societies: upper, middle, basic, lower, and a marginal group sometimes called “social sediment.” The upper stratum is a very small elite with high income, strong economic resources, and close ties to political power. The middle stratum is broader and includes small and medium entrepreneurs, managers, highly qualified specialists, local officials, and officers. The basic stratum covers a large part of society: engineers, teachers, doctors, office workers, and service employees. They generally have stable qualifications and prefer to adapt to the existing system rather than challenge it. The lower stratum includes people with low education, weak job prospects, and unstable income, such as the unemployed, refugees, and forced migrants. Below them is the “social sediment” – groups cut off from mainstream society, often linked to criminal or semi-criminal activities, heavy addiction, or begging.

In many post-Soviet countries, only about a quarter of the socially active population belongs to the upper and middle strata, whereas in mature democracies 70–75% of people are in the middle and basic strata and form a stabilizing middle class. The middle class itself is not a single, clear-cut group but a mix of various strata with different values, education levels, and political views. In developed, post-industrial societies, it usually makes up 55–70% of the population and helps reduce sharp class conflict because many workers have decent wages, assets, and opportunities for upward mobility.

For Uzbekistan, reforms after independence such as marketization, private property, entrepreneurship, and support for farms have weakened old Soviet stratification barriers and increased social mobility. Education, professional skills, and business activity now play a bigger role in status and income. Government policies to reduce poverty, create jobs, improve access to credit and housing, and support small and medium businesses have lowered the share of people living below the poverty line and helped create a new entrepreneurial middle group, including farmers and business owners.

Economically, these stratification changes in Uzbekistan have several effects:

- A gradual shift from a state-command system to a market economy, which increases income differentiation but also creates more opportunities for merit-based advancement (meritocratic mobility);
- The emergence of a stronger middle class, which supports consumption, investment, and social stability.
- Continued challenges, because low-income groups still make up a significant share of the population and remain vulnerable to unemployment, price shocks, and regional inequality.

The structure and dynamics of social strata in Uzbekistan are closely tied to economic reforms: as entrepreneurship, private ownership, and human capital development expand, the middle class grows and plays a key role in long-term economic growth and social stability, while social policy must protect vulnerable groups and prevent deep polarization. On this basis, social policies to build a strong middle class should not reduce economic efficiency and should also not deepen the gap between high-income and low-income groups. These points will be analysed in the Methods section.

Methods

This paper draws on an empirical study of stratification processes conducted in the regions of Uzbekistan between September 2018 and January 2019, involving 261 social experts. The

findings from this survey were also compared with patterns observed in other developing countries.

Results and Discussion

The survey results show that the main factors that divide society into different social strata are material security (50%) and social status (44%). Education is the third important factor, chosen by 33% of experts. This means that people see higher education as a way to improve their social position, especially moving into higher groups. At the same time, this may become a problem if differences in education create barriers for low-income groups and prevent the whole population from becoming well educated. In this context, the policy of the government of Uzbekistan to raise the share of citizens with higher education to 40% of secondary school graduates can be viewed as a timely step.

Experts rated education as a stratification factor lower than professional potential (24%) and the division of labor (22%). This suggests that, although highly educated workers are in demand in the regions, practical skills and professional abilities are often pushed to the background. As a result, people who have higher education enjoy a clear advantage over others. Young people who cannot match these expectations risk falling into the lower strata, which may lead to unemployment, migration, and other negative social outcomes.

According to 63% of respondents, stratification in the population is growing at a moderate speed, 19% consider the process slow, and 15% think it is fast. Alongside new, market-based forms of stratification, elements of the old non-market system still remain. The wealthy layer often remains hidden, but it can be assumed that social differences may increase in the future. The relationship between different strata is also important. Many respondents note that the position of the poor depends on the actions of the rich, especially in relations between employers and employees. About half consider this dependence moderate, 18% think it is very strong, and 26% believe it is weak. Some respondents still expect help mainly from the state or from rich people, which can be seen in views such as “the rich are ready to help the poor financially” or “the rich are stingy and closed.”

In interprofessional relations, the gap between high-paid and low-paid professions is also widening. According to 34% of respondents, high salaries are more than five times larger than low salaries. Another 33% think the difference is ten times, and 10% say it reaches twenty times. These results indicate a complex and multi-factor structure of stratification in Uzbek society. Traditional values, where status was based mainly on moral qualities, are being transformed. People still find

it difficult to accept that, under market conditions, division into rich, middle-income, and low-income groups is a normal feature of any stratified society. However, these differences do not necessarily mean discrimination, but rather differences in how people access and use social and economic opportunities as shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of social groups (I–IV) by selected status indicators

Status indicator	Group I	Group II	Group III	Group IV
Property (income)	Rich – 19%	Middle layer – 46%	Lower layer – 21%	Low-income – 14%
Social prestige	Elite – 16%	Middle class – 46%	Lower layer – 22%	Marginal groups – 16%
Prestige (property)	“Masters of life” – 18.5%	Managers – 26.6%	Salaried employees – 32.5%	Migrants – 22.8%
Employment sphere	Government officials – 30%	Non-government sector employees – 26%	Officially unemployed – 21%	Informally unemployed – 23%
Professional sphere	Entrepreneurs – 25%	Farmers – 19%	Small business representatives – 24%	Employees of state-funded (budgetary) organizations – 32%
Faith	Practising believers (perform religious acts) – 39%	Believers – 36%	Atheists – 10%	Believers in non-traditional religions – 15%
Type of labour	Humanities workers – 24%	Engineers /	Manual workers – 35%	Peasants – 24%

		“innovators” – 17%		
Kind of activity	Intellectual labour – 21.3%	Manual labour – 39.3%	Creative work – 17.5%	Not in public labour (pensioners, unemployed, etc.) – 22.2%

A fair wage system, growth in real incomes, and a higher standard of living are essential for keeping society united in the face of spiritual and ideological threats in the era of globalization. They also help prevent social conflicts and tensions between different groups and strata. For this reason, the processes of social stratification need to be studied regularly and systematically.

It is important for both researchers and state institutions to have a clear scientific basis for policies that ensure a decent life for citizens and support vulnerable groups. Reducing poverty remains a key challenge. Measures such as public declaration of income sources by senior officials and media coverage of this information could increase transparency and trust. It would also be useful to create a non-governmental, non-profit organization that monitors living standards across professions, tracks the cost of the consumer basket, and follows changes in minimum wages, in order to maintain socially acceptable levels of stratification.

At the same time, people should feel that they can improve their lives through their own effort. Therefore, it is advisable to publicly recognize and promote successful entrepreneurs and business leaders through television, radio, the press, and the internet. To better understand and forecast stratification trends, a national population census is also needed. This would support the development of targeted state programs to build and strengthen the middle class and to increase its social and economic activity.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that social stratification in Uzbekistan is both historically deep and strongly shaped by the post-Soviet transition. Using classical theories of stratification and nine main stratification systems, the study demonstrates that today’s social structure is organised into five key strata: upper, middle, basic, lower, and a marginal “social sediment.” The expert survey of 261 respondents confirms that material security and social status are the main factors dividing people into these groups, while education, professional potential and the division of labour add

further layers of inequality. Stratification is perceived to be growing at a moderate pace, with clear gaps between rich and poor and between high- and low-paid professions, but also with elements of the old non-market system still visible.

For Uzbekistan, market reforms, private property, entrepreneurship and support for farms have opened new channels of upward mobility and helped to form an emerging middle and entrepreneurial stratum. At the same time, a considerable share of the population remains in low-income or unstable positions, and expectations toward the state and the rich are still high. These findings suggest that future social policy must balance economic efficiency with social justice: strengthening the middle class, reducing poverty, improving access to quality education and decent work, and increasing transparency of incomes and living standards. Regular monitoring of stratification processes, including through national censuses and specialised surveys, will be essential to design targeted programmes that support vulnerable groups while encouraging individual initiative and merit-based mobility.

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