

**Chopping carrots and becoming ‘real’ men: Uzbek boys, household work and the reproduction of masculinities in post-Soviet Uzbekistan**

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# **Chopping carrots and becoming ‘real’ men: Uzbek boys, household work and the reproduction of masculinities in post-Soviet Uzbekistan**

Since Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, nationalist discourses have been overtly masculinised, continuing to inform Uzbek males’ daily lives. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Uzbekistan, this article illustrates how Uzbek boys’ domestic relations contribute to the way they learn to (re)produce masculinities, foregrounding a high degree of agency and utility. The analysis uncovered three themes central to the (re)production of Uzbek boyhood in Uzbek families as a site of informal learning: (1) being helpful through domestic labour; (2) being social through showing hospitality; and (3) being *tarbiyali* through practising national culture. Through scrutinising the intersections of gender, education and nationalism, this article concludes by connecting Uzbek boyhood in the domestic sphere and nationalist campaigns fostering masculine hegemony in Uzbekistan’s nation building process. Through domesticity – a contentious concept in feminist criticism – this article expands our understanding of the (re)production of boyhood in a conventionally feminised space.

Keywords: boyhood; domestic masculinities; household work; informal learning; gendered nationalism

## **Introduction**

Males are a critical ideological site of nation building in the fifteen nation-states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This article focuses on one of those nation-states: Uzbekistan. First colonised by Imperial Russia in the 1860s, Uzbekistan remained under Soviet control until 1991 when it declared its independence. The post-Soviet Uzbekistani government and elites have been using Uzbek nationalism to legitimatise Uzbekistan’s continued existence since its independence (Akbarzadeh 1996; Laruelle 2017). Uzbek nationalism manifests itself not only in numerous public spaces and national ideologies but also in people’s everyday life. Nation-building measures employed in Uzbekistan include reframing the nation-state ideology,

redesigning the nation-state logo and flag, and setting up a national airline and tourist bureau (Zarkar 2015). Furthermore, nationalist discourses in Uzbekistan are notably gendered, serving to establish and promote a hyper-masculinised national identity and heteronormative gender norms. Political, religious and economic agendas in Uzbekistan have often focused on males as an ideological target (Kudaibergenova 2016; Zhao 2022). For example, as a symbolic representation of the shift away from Soviet influence, statues of Amir Timur, a prominent military figure from Uzbek history, were installed in numerous urban plazas across Uzbekistan, replacing the Vladimir Lenin statues. Integral to the formation and maintenance of gendered nationalism in Uzbekistan, the connections between Timur and other public male figures, such as Alisher Navoi and Abdulla Qodiriy, and contemporary masculinised Uzbek identity and culture are significant in both everyday public and private realms.

This article examines how gendered nationalism is produced in the private realms of everyday life (e.g. Uzbek family life) via the lens of household work as a site of informal learning. Uzbek family life, which is largely patriarchal (Ilkhamov 2013; Tokhtakhodjaeva 1997), particularly emphasises hierarchical relationships. Uzbek parents, along with other members of the extended family, usually expect obedience from their children well into adulthood (Crowley 2016; Ubaydullaeva 2021; UNICEF 2019). In his reflection on Uzbek childhoods, Crowley (2016, 1) notes: ‘the best behaviour was for children to sit quietly and just to follow the instruction’. Furthermore, Uzbek families usually value altruism and sacrifice, especially for the family and nation-state (Crowley 2016; Ubaydullaeva 2021). These expectations of children among Uzbek parents closely align with their perceptions of ideal ‘Uzbekness’, described by Rasanayagam (2011), which include adherence to multiple moral frames, including Islam, and the values of collectivism, to educate Uzbek children to be religious,

patriotic and filial (Kendzior 2014; Rasanayagam 2011; Ubaydullaeva 2021). Uzbek children are among the primary recipients of gendered moral education, for which parents bear the main responsibility (Lex.uz 1998). However, scholars studying Uzbek families, masculinities and moralities tend to focus on adults, especially the pressure on adult men to be breadwinners (Rasanayagam 2011). With this in mind, this article addresses the research gap to understand how boys and young men learn to engage in household work to meet parental expectations, which is integral to the state-monitored programme of gendered moral education.

Household work, such as cooking, housekeeping and caring for younger siblings, is an important site of informal learning where parents and children engage in doing gender (Bozok and Bozok 2019; Dotti Sani 2016; Goldberg 2013). As children of different genders are heavily socialised through domestic life and their participation varies from culture to culture (Kokko 2012), household work has re-emerged as a point of contention in feminist critique (Bone 2019). Foundational to the arguments presented in this article, household work is a ubiquitous part of family life and widely considered a necessary means to the gendering of children (Goh and Kuczynski 2014; Lin and Adserà 2013). Although many studies on household work and children examine the impacts of household work on the formation of gender roles of children, domestic labour by girls and feminine expectations (Bone 2019; Carvalho 2015; Khan 2012; Leonard 2004), most tend to focus on ‘market-oriented activities (e.g. wage employment) or production for the household’s consumption (e.g. farm labor)’ (Lin and Adserà 2013, 554). Relatively less research has investigated domestic labour as a site of informal learning, inculcating boys directly or indirectly with beliefs about masculinity. This article aims to build on feminist critiques of the traditionally feminised space of

household work by depicting how masculine subjectivities are produced through everyday household practices and parental expectations in Uzbek society.

This research explores how boys are engaged in domestic relations and learn to do gender and masculinities through undertaking household responsibilities. Within Uzbekistan, the family usually expects women to prioritise household responsibilities such as preparing meals, cleaning the house and everyday childcare over their professional careers. In contrast, Uzbek men, as breadwinners and leaders of the family, are expected to perform heavier labour and undertake more economic and financial responsibilities. This article selects Uzbek boys as a case study to investigate the gendered distribution of household work and discuss how it becomes a critical site for the (re)production of masculinity during their transition from Uzbek boys to men within contemporary Uzbek society. The article is organised into four sections. Following a review of literature (mostly English language) on how boys construct masculine subjectivities through household work in different contexts, I will locate the discussion in the current literature on domestic masculinities and hegemonic masculinities. Then, I will present the ethnographic data from my fieldwork based on a thematic analysis, followed by a discussion section to reflect on the major findings and a conclusion to enlighten future research on boys, household work and the (re)production of masculinities.

### **From domestic masculinities to hegemonic masculinities**

Masculinity is a social construct made up of the heteronormative expectations placed on males in society (Ellis 2008; Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005). One view of masculinity is that it is a collective masculine practice that places women, and some subsets of men, below a specific exalted form of masculinity (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985). Connell (2005) introduced and popularised the concept of hegemonic

masculinity, which refers to the configuration of gender behaviours that legitimise and (re)produce men's dominance over other subordinate groups. Hegemonic masculinity has been widely discussed in relation to power and sociality (Jansen and Sabo 1994; Sabo and Gordon 1995). Even though Connell's conceptual work has advanced masculinity studies by highlighting that male identity is not always fixed and universal and that a multiplicity of masculinities exists (Connell 2005), the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been widely criticised for its binary models of gender traits, rigid typologies and the limits to its discursive flexibility (Rubin 2003) – even by Connell herself (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

The research presented in this article draws on conceptions and feminist critiques of hegemonic masculinity to explore the (re)production of gender behaviours through a focus on Uzbek boyhood in the domestic space. While not discounting the hyper-masculinised national discourses present in Uzbek society, this research was conducted during a time of tremendous social and economic change in relation to gendered nationalism in the nation-state. In recent years, post-structuralist discourses about uncertainties regarding identity, employment and societal connections have had an impact on males' perceptions and practices of masculinities (Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2012; Wild 2012). As a result, arguably, the continuous uncertainties lead to multiple configurations and meanings of masculinities which vary across contexts and over time (Cornwall, Karioris, and Lindisfarne 2016; Stahl and Zhao 2023). Much research in the last few decades has concentrated on the disproportionate representation of the changing masculinities of privileged men. Men from marginalised backgrounds, including boys, working-class men, and sexual and gender minority men, have received relatively less scholarly attention (Ellis 2008).

My research is interested in how Uzbek boys learn to (re)produce domestic masculine subjectivities through household work and how this is an integral part of their passage from adolescence to manhood. Domestic masculinities refer to ‘the creation of masculine identity by forging a distinctly male domain of consumption activity at home’ (Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013, 298). Home, conventionally considered a feminised space but experiencing an increase in male involvement, is a critical space for males to learn to (re)produce domestic masculinities (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2016). Some feminist researchers have argued that the construction of domestic masculinities by males often involves the de-genderisation of domestic participation (Aarseth 2009), although the consequence of this could be an increase in the masculinisation of domesticity or the gender neutrality of the household.

Exploring domestic masculinity further, Swenson (2009, 45) describes how domestic masculinity ‘allows men to be at the stove without fully engaging in “women’s work”’, and prevents men from acknowledging the benefits of ‘achieving manhood through nurturing and family-centred labor’. Certain types of work, for example, the do-it-yourself trend of household maintenance involving manual and heavy work (Gelber 1997) and leisurely cooking as a masculine lifestyle activity (Hollows 2003; Swenson 2009), are considered an instrument for domestic masculinities for identity construction and affirmation (Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013; Moisio and Beruchashvili 2016). Recent research on domestic masculinities in relation to homosexuality, space and migration tends to conceptualise home as a critical domestic space where males learn to reassert their alternative masculine identities (Attwood 2005; Gorman-Murray 2008). In addition, the reaffirmation of alternative masculinities is usually emotive, expressive and affectionate in the domestic domain (Gorman-Murray 2008), which further blurs the spatialised expressions of gender and is

commonly considered men's practices of undoing gender (Swenson 2009). However, how domestic masculinities are (re)produced in boyhood and their role in post-Soviet transitions continue to receive limited attention.

Boys may be exposed to masculine norms through family and domesticity (Hussain et al. 2015; King 2015, Roy and Allen 2022), and this continues to gain traction in feminist studies of masculinities (Gorman-Murray 2008; Roy and Allen 2022). Existing research on family and masculinity has extensively focused on fatherhood, highlighting the positive effects of fathers' involvement in gendering children (Leland 2017; Roy and Allen 2022). Rather than seeing boys' construction of masculinity as an individual process, Roy and Allen (2022) conceptualise masculinities as intergenerational family-level processes and collective family work. To understand how boyhood is (re)produced in families, we must therefore consider the involvement of multiple generations of family members in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinities in various circumstances. Also, the participation of each generation may vary according to economic and social change.

While families educate boys according to notions of masculinities, orientation, evaluation and policing of what they consider to be acceptable norms (Roy and Allen 2022), the construction of masculinity is typically integrated into sites of informal learning such as play and household activities within the family (Boe and Woods 2017; Goldberg 2013; Hussain et al. 2015). Researchers in the social sciences have looked at how play and learning have become gendered and an essential place for boys to learn about gender norms (Dill and Thill 2007). We have also seen new forms of boyhood and masculinities produced through the domestic sphere, which have challenged the gender hegemonies (Roy and Allen 2022). However, while I recognise the value of this research, there continues to be a dearth of research exploring the interconnectedness of



masculinities/boyhood, domestic labour and the gender ideologies of nation-states promoting gendered nationalism. The research presented in this article is an effort to contribute to this line of inquiry by specifically examining boys' subjectivities, perspectives and experiences.

## **Methods**

This article is based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Uzbekistan (mainly in Tashkent), from 2021 to 2022, including in-person and online participant observation and 30 in-depth interviews with young Uzbek men. Ethnographic fieldwork is a set of participatory, observational and communicative methods to study the phenomena, behaviours and interactions among people (Harrison 2018). The research question of this article is part of my doctoral project investigating how Uzbek males perceive and practise masculinities as they navigate between changing social expectations and growing personal aspirations amidst recent change such as gendered nationalism and economic liberalisation. My fieldwork spaces in Uzbekistan included university classrooms and campuses, Uzbek households, men-only teahouses, gyms, cafés and barbershops. In addition, as part of digital ethnography, and while in-person interactions were greatly limited during COVID-19, I created TikTok videos to recruit research participants and collect data related to masculinities from Uzbek TikTok users. Through TikTok I managed to reach out to Uzbek males from different regions, education levels and class backgrounds, resulting in a two-month stay in a rural household in the Ferghana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan. The research received ethics approvals from the University of Queensland Research Ethics Committee and the local institution in Uzbekistan that I was affiliated with.

In addition, I selected 30 research informants through purposive sampling for further one-on-one interviews eight months after starting my fieldwork. The criteria for

the purposive sampling were Tashkent-based young Uzbek men who had established trustable relationships with me before the interviews. Given my positionalities and identities, such as young cisgender man, Uzbek-speaking, Muslim and international university student in a Western country, most of my informants were male, Uzbek-speaking, religious, working-class, either with a university degree or nearing the completion of their degree, ranging from 20 to 30 years old, and holding a strong aspiration to study or work abroad. The interviewees came from different regions across Uzbekistan and had moved to Tashkent either for education or work. I conducted all the interviews by myself and I obtained verbal informed consent from each individual. The interviews were semi-structured with a prepared interview guide, and most of the questions were open-ended. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes and I conducted the interviews in Uzbek, English or Mandarin, depending on the preference of the interviewees. I am fluent in all three languages. Uzbek is the only official language in Uzbekistan and the first language of all of my interviewees. At the same time, some are also English or Mandarin speakers and they preferred using English or Mandarin for the interviews. I transcribed the interviews verbatim from the records and coded the transcripts in the languages spoken in the interviews to identify potential themes concerning boyhood and household work. The transcribed and translated interviews and my field notes from participant observation were the primary materials that I analysed to identify possible themes concerning boyhood and household work. I only translated Uzbek and Mandarin excerpts into English later.

During my fieldwork, I collected specific research data about household work, boyhood and domestic masculinities from interviews and participant observation. Each interview I conducted contained questions regarding boyhood and the construction of domestic masculinities among boys. The interviews were mainly based on the 30 young

Uzbek men's reflections on their own boyhoods. In addition, when I visited or stayed with key research participants in their family homes and *mahallalar* (neighbourhoods) in both urban and rural settings, I observed how they interacted with their family members, including their parents, brothers and sisters, in relation to boyhood and household work. I also queried and observed my research participants in different contexts, such as bazaars and gyms, to see how they interacted with others. This article's concept of household work encompasses not just interior domestic work but also outdoor and public domestic activities, which boys and men in Uzbekistan predominantly perform.

## **Findings**

In analysing Uzbek household work as a critical site for the (re)production of domestic masculinities informing the passage to manhood, I identified three prominent themes concerning domesticity's contribution to the formation and negotiation of masculinities from the ethnographic data, including parents' expectations that Uzbek boys will be helpful through doing domestic labour, will be social through demonstrating hospitality and will be *tarbiyali* [well nurtured] through practising national culture. As I explore these themes, I consider how each fosters a specific type of hegemonic masculinity in Uzbek boys which carries a certain currency in various settings (e.g. family, neighbourhood, religion, society and nation-state).

### ***Being helpful through domestic labour***

My fieldwork captured some of the ways Uzbek households perceive domestic labour as a gendering space for Uzbek boys. Many young Uzbek men I spoke with reported that their family members frequently expected them to contribute domestic labour when they were children, highlighting the relational nature of doing gender in Uzbek society

(McMain 2022). Through domestic labour, Uzbek boys learn how to be helpful by acquiring specific economic skills to gain further domestic masculine subjectivities. The economic connotations of domestic labour, such as developing essentials and evaluating costs, instil economic utility into Uzbek boys' passage to manhood.

Unlike girls, Uzbek families usually expect boys to participate in outside-the-home household work such as grocery shopping. For example, Azamat, a resident of a remote village in eastern Uzbekistan in the Ferghana Valley, noted that his parents and sisters frequently asked him to purchase *non* (bread) from a bakery five minutes' walk from his home. If he was unwilling to assist, Azamat told me his sisters would complain: 'We are all women. Therefore we cannot go out to buy, but you are a male, and it is your obligation. You are not useful if you do not assist us.' In order to be considered a helpful man, Azamat had to follow his sisters' request, even if grudgingly, and thus he felt that he situationally became subordinated to his older sisters. The situational subordination shows masculinities are not always fixed and can become dialectically subaltern, which speaks to the literature on the changing nature of masculinities across contexts (Cornwall, Karioris, and Lindisfarne 2016). Another participant I met in Tashkent was named Bobur. Bobur, the only boy in his family, also in eastern Uzbekistan, shared a similar experience to Azamat's: 'I do feel like I am the family's assistant'. Bobur explained:

My dad takes me to the bazaar every weekend. He teaches me how to find the freshest vegetables and meats, and those with the lowest price. We usually browse around in the bazaar first, say hi to the stall owners whom we know and see what they have today and how much they are. I usually make a shopping list, and I will remind my dad what to buy that day. I am responsible for paying each stall owner and carrying the groceries back home. If I go shopping with my dad, I will always keep my dad from carrying groceries. This makes me tired sometimes, but I know it is my responsibility.

For boys who reside outside urban areas, household work includes not only grocery shopping but also farming-related household activities. Timur is from a village in the southern region of Uzbekistan, and he has two sisters and an older brother. Farming is the primary source of income for Timur's family. During each growing season, Timur and his brother assisted their parents in farming the land, and planting and harvesting potatoes, an important cash crop in Uzbekistan. Agricultural labour creates a space where rural Uzbek boys can physically and mentally construct domestic masculine subjectivities. Alim, who hails from eastern Uzbekistan, lost his father when he was five. Alim, and his brother, who was one year older, were assigned additional labour to aid their mother with farming to make ends meet. Occasionally, Alim's mother also asked him to help relatives and neighbours grow and harvest crops. During non-farming seasons, Alim voluntarily decided to travel to the city to work casual jobs to assist his mother financially, as demonstrating economic utility is an integral part of Uzbek masculinities. Due to the current financial situation in Uzbekistan, many of my informants, particularly those from rural areas, were required to support their families through labour at a relatively young age. The money and skills they received from the labour experience prepared them to be helpful, consolidating the making of agentic masculinities.

### ***Being social through showing hospitality***

Hospitality is a significant aspect of Uzbek culture which emphasises mutuality. The manner in which guests are treated in Uzbekistan can often be highly gendered. This issue was present repeatedly in my fieldwork, and I will illustrate it by reflecting on my stay at Voris's home. Voris was 21 years old, coming from a rural region in Navai, southwestern Uzbekistan. When I was invited to stay in his home for a month, I had the opportunity to learn more about the culture of hospitality in Uzbekistan and how Uzbek

families do gender, often fostering a version of masculinity that is agentic through the normative practices of hosting guests. Although Voris has a younger sister and a younger brother, because I am a man, his younger brother was primarily responsible for taking care of me. If the guest is a woman, then the younger sister will look after her. The gendered distribution of showing hospitality highlights that the gendering of Uzbek boys is deeply entrenched in specific cultural and social contexts. Voris revealed his thoughts in a follow-up interview:

Finally, I grew up, and now my young brother has to undertake all the responsibilities of taking care of guests, especially male guests. He is ten years old and studies in the fifth grade. Still living at home, he is the only helping hand of our parents. It was mine, but now it is his turn to do these things. When a guest comes, he has to prepare and pour tea for each guest. Also he should go regularly to check if there is still hot water in the teapot. My mum prepared the foods, and my brother needed to bring the dishes to the guest room. If it is in the winter, he should check if there are enough coals on the stove to ensure the room is warm enough. You know, there is no heater in the villages. If a guest needs to go to the toilet, he is supposed to lead him to the toilet and wait outside. My dad taught me these things. It used to be my responsibility when my brother was still young, but now he needs to do these. My dad and I are teaching him right now. He is a good boy.

In addition, seniority is an integral aspect of Uzbek social order. While the younger brother did his best to be hospitable and serve me, he was also expected to maintain a respectful distance due to my seniority compared to him and his elder brother Voris. This highlights an awareness of the social customs involved with Uzbek hospitality. Specifically, he was not expected to sleep in the same room as me in the shared living room or to interrupt my interactions with his older brother and parents. Still, we did occasionally eat at the same table with other male family members. The

distribution of labour in relation to hospitality reveals that the hierarchies of genders and masculinities are still strictly performed in Uzbekistan.

Learning to be social by exhibiting hospitality is deeply rooted in Uzbek gender norms. When I arrived, all of Voris's female family members were standing in front of the house to greet me. Over time, I found this was my only interaction with them as it is inappropriate to interact with guests of a different gender, though there are a few exceptions. For example, boys often serve as a bridge between guests of different genders. It is deemed unacceptable for adult men to have unnecessary interactions with female guests who are not close relatives. This means boys may commonly take tea and food to both male and female guests. Furthermore, there is some domestic work associated with hospitality that boys are not permitted to perform that is confined to women and girls. For example, even though I did not interact directly with Voris's younger sister during my stay at his house, she still showed me care and hospitality in a culturally appropriate way. When I returned from a snowy mountain one day, I left my muddy shoes outside the guest room. After one hour, I discovered that his younger sister had washed my shoes. When I questioned this, Voris's mother reassured me that it was their obligation to make me feel I was being treated as a respected guest.

### ***Being tarbiyali through practising national culture***

Based on my observations and experiences, gendered household work plays a significant role in immersing Uzbek boys in national culture and contributing to how they see themselves becoming 'real' men. The study of the gendering of household responsibilities is about acculturation or the embedding of social norms. These norms are tied to national discourses regarding what is culturally respected. In terms of respectability, Rahim, another key informant of my research from a small city in southern Uzbekistan, mentioned that his father once said, 'Only by being cultural can

you be *tarbiyali*', highlighting the role of national culture in the gendering process of Uzbek boys through which they can be beneficial to broader communities. It also suggests that fathers play a significant role in their sons' (re)production of masculinity by making them aware of what is respectable in terms of gender norms. This resonates with previous research on the role of fatherhood in the gendering process of boys (Johansson and Andreasson 2017; Roy and Allen 2022).

Through the research, I found that domestic responsibilities associated with preparations for ceremonies and national festivals often link Uzbek boys and their families and wider communities, even extending to the Uzbek nation-state. These festivals also seem integral to how their masculinities are produced, where their responsibilities are part of their passage from adolescence to manhood. These intergenerational rituals and ceremonies include carrot chopping (*sabzi tugrar*), the cradle ceremony (*beshik to 'y*), weddings (*nikoh to 'y*), Navruz (*navro 'z*) and Eid al-Fitr (*qurbon*). Through engaging in these preparations Uzbek boys learn to do gender – producing masculine subjectivities closely aligned with Uzbek culture and the broader agenda of the nation-state. As Rahim shared:

I am so tired of chopping carrots for my relatives at a wedding. It is our Uzbek culture that we need to prepare enough chopped carrots to cook pilaf for all the guests coming to the wedding. Eating wedding pilaf is our Uzbek culture, and all male family members are supposed to help chop the carrots one day before the wedding. My father always said: 'You are a boy, so you should go and help them', with the expectation that I would help my relatives, when I was a child, and I always did it. I had no other choice; if I did not do it, my father would force me to go and blamed me, saying I was not *tarbiyali*. 'It is an opportunity for you to know Uzbek culture and be a social man', my father told me. I finally grew up, and sometimes I could say no to my father because I am occupied by my job.



According to Rahim and other research informants, attending the ritual of chopping carrots is not only an opportunity to undertake family responsibilities but also a chance to understand and practise Uzbek culture by engaging in homosocial networks. This is similar to Finnish boys, who more frequently participate in their male relatives' craft activities than those of their female relatives to learn masculinities (Kokko 2012). By participating in men-only socialising, Uzbek boys can practise domestic masculinities and present their agency in public, transcending home spaces where domestic masculinities are often formed.

Extending this, although women are primarily responsible for routine food preparation, Uzbek men, including boys I observed, do practise household work by cooking meals, but typically their involvement coincides with holidays and festivals. The distribution chimes with recent research where household work remains gendered, and the domestic participation of men is typically renegotiated situationally (Bozok and Bozok 2019). Furthermore, I found Uzbek foods also carry gendered overtones; for example, men usually cook pilaf (*plov*) and kebab (*kabob*) in special events which require heavy tools such as an iron cauldron (*qozon*). Both pilaf and kebab are popular Uzbek dishes and central to Uzbek national identity (Alymbaeva 2020). This aligns with Moisio and Beruchashvili's (2016) argument that domestic activities such as working with heavy metal tools while barbecuing enable males to assert their masculinity in the domestic realm. As a school student, Rahim mastered his father's unique pilaf recipe when his father cooked occasionally during festivals and ceremonies. In addition, Rahim also learned more pilaf cooking skills from his mother in everyday settings, and eventually was able to prepare the dish:

Sometimes, when my mom was preparing pilaf for us in everyday settings, she would bring me to the kitchen to take care of me. I just stood around and watched her cooking. Also, I know pilaf is a national Uzbek dish, and I want to learn how to

cook it so I can show off in front of my classmates. It proved useful, when I moved to Tashkent and lived by myself; I cooked pilaf for my friends when they came to my apartment. Later when I studied in China, I could also share the pilaf I cooked with my Chinese friends. I feel proud because they all liked it, and it is an excellent opportunity to introduce Uzbek culture to foreigners.

As a result of the rich cultural and social connotations of pilaf, cooking becomes a form of utility that prepares Uzbek boys for manhood and to be a *tarbiyali* Uzbek man. In addition, being independent, living away from home and being able to cook for oneself, which is a necessity for many unmarried young men who leave home for school or work, are crucial to the performance and reinforcement of domestic masculinities.

## **Discussion**

Contributing to domestic labour and demonstrating hospitality are crucial domains in which Uzbek boys learn to do gender while practising the national culture. The findings suggest that traditionally feminised domesticity plays a key role in forming a hegemonic form of masculinity, which has a particular currency in Uzbek society. In this section, I elaborate on how masculine identities, which hold agency and responsibility in high regard, are (re)produced in relation to moral education campaigns, which, in turn, further strengthens gendered nationalism in Uzbekistan.

Central to the analysis is how, by engaging in household work, Uzbek boys have an opportunity to learn to meet parental expectations by contributing domestic labour to families, enhancing relationships with guests and building up networks with broader communities beyond their extended families. Furthermore, the construction (and negotiation) of domestic masculinities has the potential to serve them well in terms of their participation in gendered forms of labour and sociality, all present in the national culture. Like Turkish culture, which Kagitcibasi (1996) and Özkan and Lajunen (2005)

describe as a culture of mutuality, Uzbek culture also greatly emphasises social bonds with families, communities (e.g. neighbourhoods and religious groups) and the nation-state. As a result, the masculine subjectivities of Uzbek boys are mostly (re)produced in relation to others located within various hierarchies. I recognise here that Uzbek masculinities are the result of firmly entrenched patriarchal tradition. As boys are inculcated with certain gender norms through household work, they are caught up in the reproduction of the patriarchal structure and gender inequality in Uzbekistan. For example, I regularly observed fathers and other older men, and sometimes female family members, undertake the responsibilities of allocating and supervising household work for boys. Through the allocated work, Uzbek boys participate in other relations to construct domestic masculinities, highlighting the mutuality of Uzbek gender norms.

This article also illustrates, through the experiences of research participants such as Rahim, who was constantly in contention with his parents, how individualist changes have challenged the patriarchal structure. While Uzbekistan is historically a patriarchal society, it is experiencing dramatic social and economic change due to the large-scale reforms initiated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev commencing in 2016. The reforms included opening up Uzbekistan to the world. Uzbek culture is undergoing radical change as a result of the reforms and the introduction of individualist ideas, mainly imported from the Anglo-American West (Hashimova 2019; Hedlund 2019). The emergence of individualism makes it more challenging to adhere to traditional patriarchal gender and social norms which emphasise obedience and collectivism, resonating with McMain's (2022, 474–475) argument that 'critical work with youth should recognize gender as a layer of identity shaped by systems of patriarchy, white supremacy, hyper-rationality, and individualism'. Bozok and Bozok's (2019) and Kikuta's (2019) studies of young Uzbek males have highlighted how they challenge

existing hierarchies and the classic patriarchy specifically after a long transnational migratory experience. Such experiences allow young men to step outside their culture and shared customs and see themselves differently.

The research also highlights the agency of boys in the process of learning to do gender. The Uzbek boys I interacted with not only do household work involuntarily in accordance with patriarchal rules, but also do it voluntarily. Interestingly, they often portray their involvement as part of being respectable and, by extension, a man. This is important because children's agency and experiences remain understudied (Clark and Castro 2019; Karlsson 2019). Instead of focusing primarily on parental demands and decisions, this article reveals the family dynamics and children's agentic spaces, which echoes Clark and Castro's (2019, 20) assertion that 'agency is simultaneously situated in structure, negotiation, and freedom' and the conception of 'autonomous-relational self' proposed by Kagitcibasi (1996). Recording the affective contours of the intergenerational dynamic of Uzbek boys doing domestic chores arguably reveals a conflation between filial obligations, personal aspirations and gendered expectations.

Another way to think about this is that doing household work gives Uzbek boys a chance to gain domestic masculine subjectivities, while choosing not to do some household work gives them different levels of freedom and time for other leisure activities, highlighting the conundrum of structure versus agency (Stahl 2013; Parry and Malcolm 2004). The different options could also be attributed to the recent rise of individualist ideologies. As a result, conflicts with families are an inherent part of the gendered process for Uzbek boys, as I heard of many instances of them actively pondering values and defining choices, leading to varying degrees of affective distress and everyday disobedience. Uzbek boys then draw upon, create and pass on the knowledge and experience they acquire via their interactions with family and society,

through which they dialogically produce agentive and mutual identities while also unintentionally reinforcing the heteronormative gender structure in Uzbekistan. This finding resonates with a report by UNICEF (2019) that there are some signs that the gendering of Uzbek children in Uzbekistan is gradually changing with increasing emphasis on children's agency in their gender socialisation. Some families in Uzbek society have become more open to child-centred educational styles and have created opportunities for their children to share different opinions and participate in the family's decision-making.

The final connection to make is how boyhood and domestic responsibilities are intertwined with state-monitored moral education, where parents bear the main responsibility (Lex.uz 1998). Within the nation-state, there is a version of Uzbek masculinity that is hegemonic and often closely aligned with the responsibility to family (e.g. the breadwinner role). Uzbek boys are moralised as part of the gendered nationalist campaign. Furthermore, the gendering of Uzbek boys in family spaces reflects the specific conception of household work as *tarbiya* (nurturing), which has significant moral connotations, especially in light of the recent rise of gendered nationalism in Uzbekistan (Rasanayagam 2011). *Tarbiya* is originally an Arabic word that means increase, growth and loftiness. In Arabic and other Islamic cultures, the word *tarbiya* is frequently used to describe how parents intentionally or unintentionally raise their children by meeting their physical, aesthetical, intellectual, moral and spiritual requirements to help them mature and become contributing members of society (MAS 2022). The Turkic languages particularly distinguish between *tarbiya* and *ta'lim* (education) because the former means informal moral education while the latter usually refers to formal education in school settings. As part of moral education, families provide instruction on domesticity, through which boys can acquire certain domestic

masculinities to be useful men (Ubaydullaeva 2021). Through participation in household work arranged by families, boys' senses of gendered self and usefulness are shaped in a culturally and socially desired way as required by the goal of moral education, as part of the gendered nationalist campaigns in Uzbekistan, further accentuating the masculine hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the performance of domestic responsibilities by Uzbek boys is essential for forming and performing agentic masculinities. These responsibilities signify an important rite of passage into adulthood in Uzbek contexts. Through domesticity – a contentious concept in feminist debates – this article expands our understanding of the (re)production of boyhood in a traditionally feminised space. Furthermore, in light of moral education as a component of gendered nationalism in Uzbekistan, the gendering of Uzbek boys is moralised and culturally and socially encouraged through their participation in household work. The findings resonate with the current literature on not only the agency of boys, but the importance of boys seeing themselves as agentic in pursuing respectable forms of masculinity. By studying how Uzbek boys do gender through household work, we can better understand the gender dynamic present in the former Soviet republics. In addition, the findings indicate that we should pay more attention to the recent social change due to economic and political reforms in the post-Soviet state of Uzbekistan, which has led to significant changes in gender norms and behaviours. Future research must focus more on how private realms of gendering are shaped by developing social phenomena such as outbound migration and emerging gender expressions.

## **Note**

All names of the research participants used in this article are pseudonyms.

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