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Gender Policy in Kazakhstan

By Venera Khairullayeva¹, Meiram Sarybayev², Assiya Kuzembayeva³, Adilbek Yermekbayev⁴, Gulnara Baikushikova⁵

Abstract

This article discusses the issues of gender policy in Kazakhstan. Since gaining independence, in order to strengthen the international image of the state, Kazakhstan has attempted to provide equal opportunities for women to participate in politics. The purpose of this article is to detail the history of formation and the main problems and prospects for the development of gender policy in Kazakhstan. The main principles of political research were used as a framework for analysis. This article attempts to dissect the perceptions of women's participation in politics as a result of Kazakhstan's mostly conservative views of the expansion of women's participation, that is, that it is a threat to national traditions. Nonetheless, despite this, the situation is changing for the better.

Keywords: Gender equality, Kazakhstan, Women's participation, Politics, Women's rights, Democratic values.

Introduction

In modern Kazakhstan society, the problems of formation and implementation of gender policy of the state have become relevant due to the institutionalization and rooting in the mass consciousness of positive democratic norms and procedures. An important point was the state's commitment to such values as freedom and equality of citizens, democratic election of the highest bodies of state power, multi-party system and ideological pluralism.

Gender equality is seen as beneficial to the state, as it improves the state's image of democracy, promotes the use of half of the population in the economy, culture, politics, and other fields, promotes social justice, and reduces social tensions and poverty (Shakirova, 2015). The 23rd Special session of the UN General Assembly was devoted to this issue. It recommended that UN member governments take measures to ensure women "equal access and full participation in

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all areas and at all levels of life, especially in decision-making and decision-making positions, in political parties and political activities, in all ministries and key decision-making institutions, as well as in local bodies” (General Assembly, 2000).

In many countries, there is a growing pattern of fundamental change in understanding of women’s social roles in society, which is marked by addressing women’s rights and needs. The most advanced democratic societies perceive equal opportunity for participation of women in the political and public life as essential for achieving progress in socio-economic development and solving topical political, socio-cultural, racial, ethnic and other problems. However, uneven socio-economic development, specifics of government systems of the countries pose barriers to the global idea of humanity as individual rights and freedoms, including women's rights.

Since independence, supporting women at all levels has been on the public policy agenda. Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian country that established a national body on ensuring gender equality in all spheres of society—the National Commission for Women's Affairs and family and demographic policy under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. However, the process of ensuring the equal status of women is still one of the complicated processes, requiring governmental guarantees, determined by the country's gender policy. Gender policy refers to a set of state decisions and measures aimed at ensuring de facto equality of women with men in all spheres of life and activity (Strategy for Gender Equality in the RK, 2005).

The societal value of the real equality of men and women and substantial experience in this field, as well as the need to analyze the results of 30 years of Kazakhstan’s independence have determined the choice of this research topic. In order to get an in-depth understanding of the current situation in Kazakhstan and define strategies and tactics aimed at the implementation of the state gender policy set out by President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, it is important to examine and analyze globally.

The purpose of the paper is to examine Kazakhstan's gender equality policy and its prospects for its development.

Background context

The concepts of "gender" and "gender equality" in Central Asia and Kazakhstan have been circulating among the academic community and civil service. However, for most women these concepts seem to be distant, since they are generally absent in their discourse. Historically, this issue has never been acute in Kazakh society, since the role of mother, sister, wife was initially defined as equal to men. While with the advent of Islam, Sharia law impacted the role of women, women were always granted the right to vote, regardless of their religious affiliation. Hence, there has not been a pressing need for equalization of women's status as in the West. Once Soviet power was in place, women have become equal with men more than ever. After gaining independence, Kazakhstani women did not lose the right to vote or career opportunities, that is, have the same rights as men.

A common definition of gender equality provided by UNESCO Gender Mainstreaming Framework (2003) runs as follows:

“Gender equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is therefore the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society”.

For that reason, we believe that Kazakhstan no longer lags behind the “developed world” in tackling issues of gender equality. It is therefore opportune to ask to what extent this equality is

actually important to Kazakhstani women, how they perceive it. and to what extent the rights guaranteed by legislation are enjoyed by both men and women.

There are still different theoretical approaches in uncovering the problems of feminism and in this article postcolonial feminism approach has been applied that focuses on the differences between women in the global South and North and discusses the role of such factors as race, ethnicity and class in gender equality issues. Postcolonial feminists argue that Western liberal feminism principles are not suitable for women in the global South; because of different cultural backgrounds, they are confronted with various challenges; they have different needs and interests (MacLaughlin, 2003).

Apart from postcolonial feminism, other researchers have explored more specific topics of gender equality in Central Asia and Kazakhstan such as Asian feminism, Islamic feminism, etc.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is one of the major works that has had a significant impact on postcolonial feminism. Said's work focused on orientalism as a discursive approach to conceptualizing the history of relations between East and West. Orientalism is defined as the discourse of the era of Modernity, in which the West's notions of the East are associated with its dominance. In fact, the Western perceptions of women's role in the Third World are misrepresented by mass media, Hollywood, and other sources that distort the reality of life. This article uses secondary data from national statistics and gender reports that show the reality on the ground in Kazakhstan.

Nanette Funk (2004), Kristen Ghodsee (2004), Olga Zubkovskaya (2007), Hanna Havelkova (1997), Madina Tlostanova (2009) and other authors deal with the problems of postcolonial feminism in post-Soviet countries. To understand the current balance of power in society and probability of changes in gender roles, it is necessary to take into account the cultural status of institutions and groups and their impact on the women's empowerment in Kazakhstan.

Historical Overview: Woman in Kazakh Society

Kazakhstan's case is interesting for several reasons. It is a multicultural society, which combines eastern traditions affected by the Soviet legacy and Western trends. Generally, it is considered a Muslim nation; however, religious traditions are weaker than in most of Central Asia. It is a widely recognized high status of Kazakh women who are rather free and independent due to the nomadic past. However, written documents detailing historic institutions are limited, because customs and traditional nomadic practices are transmitted orally. This later also allowed for tsarist Russia to strengthen its rule over a multi-ethnic population.

The tsarist administration conducted research and studied the structure of a nomadic society, family and marriage relations, and in its reports pointed out that a woman as a property of Kazakh tribes played an important role in family ties, and Islam encouraged this phenomenon and permitted polygamy by referring to the Sharia law. It was also mentioned that often woman was seen as a mean of enrichment, or simply an opportunity to "make money on her by arranging a successful wedding," this form of receiving payment for a woman is better known as "kalym", and it is still actively used in the southern regions of Kazakhstan, although the struggle for banning kalym was actively pursued during the reign of the Bolsheviks.

Strengthening the colonial expansion of Russia and the beginning of the resettlement of Russian peasants to Central Asia, contributed to the development of the "instinct of self-preservation" or preservation of the cultural identity of the Kazakhs, which led to the strengthening of religious traditions. So, for example, in Western Kazakhstan "under the auspices of the khansha (queen) Fatima, more and more Tatars came to the horde. This contributed to the rapid spread of the "Tatar literacy" in the Horde, and at the same time the spread of Muslim fanaticism". As the best, only, and completely reliable means to suppress the spread of evil among the Kyrgyz in Mullah (religion) schools could be the spread of educational institutions of the Ministry of Public Education (Shotanova, 2020).

In order to strengthen its power in the region, the tsarist administration explored the structure of a nomadic society, marital and family relations of Kazakh tribes, and in its reports

indicated that a woman was a tool of establishment of family relations, and it was specified more than once that the Muslim faith encouraged this phenomenon and permitted polygamy by referring Sharia law. Woman was often seen as a means of wealth-generation, or simply an opportunity to make money by arranging a successful wedding, such form of receiving payment for woman is better known as “kalym”, and it is still actively used in the southern regions of Kazakhstan, despite Bolsheviks attempts to ban it.

Entrenchment of Russian colonial expansion and resettlement of Russian peasants to Central Asia had catalyzed Kazakhs' desire for self-preservation or maintaining cultural identity leading to a reinforcement of religious traditions. In Western Kazakhstan, for instance, under the patronage of khansha Fatima (wife of Zhangir Khan, the last ruler of Kazakhs steppe) increasing numbers of Tatars were attracted to the region. This facilitated the rapid diffusion of "Tatar literacy" and hence dissemination of Muslim fanaticism. Opening and spreading of schools of the Russian Ministry of National Education was the only credible tool to destroy this evil among Kyrgyz in madrassas at its source.

Kazakh women along with men could attend early public schools in the regions where the colonial governance was strong and there were mainly Russian-Kazakh schools. In the southern regions, which were annexed relatively later and there was prevalence of Muslim clergy the schools were combined with traditional Muslim madrassas and therefore the question of granting women the right to educate had not been raised. Thus, it can be argued that the first women's educational institutions were opened in the West and North of Kazakhstan.

With the Bolsheviks coming to power, Kazakh women's status had started to change. Bolsheviks aimed to emancipate and actively involve women of the East in public and political life as the basis for the functioning and legitimation of colonial domination and further promoting the ideas of the world revolution (Khalid, 2006).

Bolsheviks had relied on women's paid labor in constructing a harmonious socialist society that ultimately would result in full equality between men and women. In Kazakhstan, certain measures were taken, such as outlawing polygamy (Rasnake, 2000) and within the framework of the Red Yurt campaign special programs were offered targeting Kazakh women which include literacy training, legal counselling and medical care (Paula, 2003). This was all done for the sake of creating a new image of Soviet women, who were guaranteed job security, maternity protection, and maternity leave in supporting women's position as valuable members of the workforce (Shchurko, 2016).

Women's red yurts served as the main centers of all cultural-educational work. In the "red yurts", classes aimed to raise the status of women in society had been taught. In 1928, four red yurts operating in the Dzhetisu region supported eighty-three women in various educational institutions. According to archival documents, in 1926, the literacy rate among women in Kazakhstan made up only 11.8%, and among Kazakh women it was even lower than 5.6%. (Archive, 1927). At the time of the collapse of the USSR, this figure had changed significantly, and literacy rates in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KazSSR) were 76.3% and among women, 56.3%.

In the 1930-40s, educational institutions targeted at women were opened. For instance, the Kazakh Women's Pedagogical Institute was established, which continues to operate. Women were encouraged to enter other traditionally male fields, and the mass media propagated the image of women as tractor drivers, women-miners, etc.

However, women's emancipation policy in Central Asia remained merely a political slogan, as it was in the hands of top-down control. The promised freedom and equality often meant that they, like men, worked equally, took an active part in social and political affairs, but at the same time they were obliged to fulfill their traditional family responsibilities.

Whatever its contradictions, Soviet gender policy in Central Asia had more positive sides. In the 1920s, the payment of kalym and polygamy were legally barred and cases of domestic violence, convictions for polygamy, and divorce proceedings had become commonplace. On June

14, 1921, the government of the Turkestan Soviet Socialist Republic issued a Decree on the abolition of kalym and the minimum age of marriage (Astapovich, 1971).

Divorces were more commonly discussed at meetings of primary party organizations, and people's courts, where women had been actively involved. For polygamy, hard labor threatened up to 1 year, for forced marriage, the term of punishment was up to three years in prison, and the paid kalym was not returned to the husband's side but was sent as social assistance to women and low-income families. There were many cases of husbands killing their wives out of jealousy and unwillingness to come to terms with the new reality.

Polygamy was punishable by hard labour for one year, imprisonment sentence of up to three years for forced marriage, and the paid kalym was not returned to the husband's side but was sent as social assistance to women and low-income families. There have been many examples of femicides in the context of domestic violence. Many lawsuits were terminated in connection with reconciliation, women took back the claim because of social pressure and traditional patriarchal values. A divorced woman often risked being left outcast in society.

The active involvement of women in the political process began rather late in Kazakhstan. In 1926, there were 31,910 people in the Bolshevik party, with 2,093 out of them were women, this represents 15.7%. One year later, the percentage of women increased to 24.1%. But they were urban inhabitants. In 1927, there were 1230 Kazakh women or 10.4% of the total number of people's assessors (Archive, 1927).

During that period, the sheer magnitude of ethnic Russians had been resettled in KazSSR to but also to occupy and control positions in the "national" Communist Party. Therefore, ethnic Kazakhs not only lost their culture but also modes of economic survival upon which they had long depended.

Although the system offered some advantages through Zhenotdel, a special organization which protected their interests or the adoption for gender quotas, guaranteeing a certain level of political representation; women were still not part of the major decision-making process. Between 1938 to 1993, the number of female deputies has risen steadily. Committees, structural units of the Ministries and large industrial facilities, regional and district political party organizations were headed by women.

In general, at the time of colonization and Sovietization in Kazakhstan, the role of women had grown tremendously; however, this fact is viewed somewhat ambiguously by Kazakhstani academicians, since there is a noticeable trend to rethink the historical heritage, and Soviet policy in the promotion of women's rights is evaluated from a negative standpoint, which is regarded as a processes of liquidation of traditional society.

Promoting Gender Equality in the Independent Kazakhstan

After gaining independence, in Kazakhstan political and intellectual elites had embarked on the process of national identity formation. The emphasis has been on reviving national feeling and returning to traditional cultural values, which is also influenced on restructuring gender roles. Such values had a strong impact on both men's and women's choices regarding employment, family, education, healthcare, etc. At the same time positive dynamics of economic development and institutional reforms contributed to encouraging gender equality policy.

Over the past two decades, the Republic of Kazakhstan has made commitments to a number of international agreements and enacted a large number of laws and measures that have become a key condition for increasing women's participation in public activities. A number of strategies and laws have been adopted over past years: "Law of State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women", "Law on the prevention of domestic violence", and Gender equality Strategy for 2006-2016. Gender equality Strategy for 2006-2016 has been adopted in compliance with such international agreements as the UN Convention on The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and the recently adopted Sustainable Development

Goals and it has become fundamental reference point for the state activities in the area of gender equality for the past ten years.

In 1999, a National Action Plan on improving women's status was created. It was targeted to eradicate stereotypes in society regarding women's roles. However only 80% of the plan was implemented by 2002 (Shakirova, 2005). In the line with Millennium Development Goals, Kazakhstan adopted the Concept of Gender Policy. It continued the ideology of the previous document. It states a comprehensive approach to gender inequalities in the country and highlighted specific tasks such as increasing representation of women of at least 30 per cent at the decision-making level, training and promoting women-leaders through leadership schools and other education mechanisms, and encouraging a more active NGO sector (Strategy for Gender Equality in the RK, 2005). Many planned elements of the Strategy were only partly implemented, because of limited awareness and understanding among government structures and local executive bodies; a lack of funding and gender analysis skills and tools for gender mainstreaming; and limited overall government capacity to measure policy impacts (OECD, 2017).

In order to address the remaining gaps and eliminate any gender-based discrimination, the Concept of Gender and Family Policy of Kazakhstan--2030 has been adopted. This provides an unprecedented opportunity to develop a national approach to achieving gender equality in practice. It has adopted a dual approach to gender equality, where gender considerations are embedded in all policies, laws, and regulations. Yet, little attention is given to gender mainstreaming in the design and implementation of mainstream sectoral policies as well as in the development of sector-specific guidelines and development of gender-disaggregated data.

There have also been important changes in women's participation in public and political life in Kazakhstan, but women are still not well represented in key political positions. Currently, the percentage of women in the Parliament is 25 % in the Mazhilis (the lower house of the Parliament) (Mazhilis, 2021) and 19% in the Senate (Senate, 2021).

Women's rights and women's position within the society encounter multiple challenges. Despite the fact that principles of nondiscrimination and gender equality are clear, and are theoretically, part of the country's development plans, the realization of gender equality goals has remained a top-down process very much, characterized by high-level declarations and programs planned centrally over several years. According to the Global Gender Gap Report for 2020, the situation with women's participation in politics, as evident from the table blow is very weak (Global, 2020). Kazakhstan is well positioned in terms of such indicators as providing equitable access to education. Kazakhstan has almost reached gender parity in accessing education in terms of literacy rate and enrollment in education. Women form the majority of students at universities making up 64% at master's programs and 58% at PhD programs (see OECD Gender Policy Delivery Review, 2017).

More than 70 % of Kazakhstani women are represented in the areas of education, health care and social services that are considered as more appropriate for their employment (Man and women, 2017), as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

Sectors of the economy	Employment rate of women
health and social services	74.5%
education	74.0%,
services	72.9%
finance and insurance	59.1%
trade	59.8%
arts and entertainment	57.4%
agriculture	44.2%
public administration	39.3%

There are considerable gaps in the one main indicator as “political participation” (see Global Gender Gap Report-2020) as indicated in Table 2:

Table 2

Sphere	Rank
Education	63
Health and survival	74
Economic participation and opportunities	37
Political participation	106
Total	72 out of 153

Source: Global Gender Gap Report-2020

Although women have made substantial progress in development, this has not translated into higher positions of authority, decision making within government. A large portion of female politicians are concentrated in social sectors and they have less political experience than males. The Asian Development Bank’s research on gender issues in Kazakhstan has found that the overwhelming majority believes that women play a vital role in family life even when they work outside of the home. It was recognized that men hold higher positions in society because of their gender and due to domestic burdens, women may have insufficient time for self-education, professional training, or entrepreneurial activities (ADB, 2013). Another study conducted by a local NGO revealed men’s attitude towards women's role in politics; they reject their participation in politics, because it impedes women's access to their traditional roles, and they believe political activity is too complicated for women (Uskembayeva, 2016).

The presence and consequences of stereotyped perceptions of gender roles were reported by many local experts. Women face with traditional norms prevailed in the society, which do not permit them successfully combine family and career. Current stereotypes in the public discourse of Kazakh society are very traditional: first of all, women should be good mothers, wives, and daughters, and at the same time successful professionals and socially active persons. However, family obligations are prioritized over individual desires (Shakirova, 2015; Kuzembayeva, 2020). At the same time, others point out that as neoliberal reforms and associated Western values have also affected Kazakhstan women, they are thereby recognized as economically important actors and essential contributors to their families’ earnings (Kuzhabekova, 2017).

Thus, during the beginning of the independence period and at the heart of immense political, social and economic transitions, Kazakhstan has made remarkable achievements in promoting gender equality; and yet, most initiatives were focused on protecting stereotypical notions of Kazakhstan women rather than creating equal opportunities and changing the relations between men and women. Kazakhstan has adopted only a lower level of national machinery to deal with gender mainstreaming.

It is apparent from experiences worldwide that women's participation in political life plays an important role. In many European countries, the state and its bodies do play an active role in promoting gender equality. Special government structures work on advancing gender equality through such tools as public support programs, upward mobility of women, and passing new laws. (Stetson, 1995). In Sweden, for instance, there are specific government agencies like the Special Minister for Gender Equality and Gender Equality Coordinator. The Swedish Government has also launched a development program to strengthen gender mainstreaming in 59 government agencies (Lindhagen, 2019). A majority of the EU countries have taken great steps forward in achieving gender balances in power structures and peacekeeping operations. European countries like Sweden and Norway have a long and widely appreciated history of involving women in politics and male-dominated work environments. Norway, for instance, officially encourages women’s participation in power structures and peacekeeping. About 46% women are working in the Police Service and

it is planned that by 2022 30% women would be in leadership positions (Implementing, 2019). Sweden, France, Germany, and Denmark governments are gender balanced (at least 40 % of each gender). The Nordic group of countries are leading in female representation with 42.3% of seats in national parliaments (These countries, 2019). Some of the European countries' practices in this area might be relevant in post-Soviet society.

Conclusion

Underestimating gender policy undermines the foundation of the democratic structure of the state and society, rendering civil society ineffective, undermining the authority of the democratic value system, and causing disbelief and distrust in the process of democratization of the political system. The implementation of gender policy is becoming particularly relevant now, when this direction can become an important resource for strengthening Kazakhstan's statehood and modernizing society. By examining some issues of gender policy in Kazakhstan, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. The lack of women's political rights is accompanied by negative trends in women's participation in politics.
2. Many of the planned elements of the Gender Equality Strategy 2006–2016 were only partially implemented, due to uneven implementation of indicators and a lack of government capacity to monitor gender equality performance.
3. Until now, equal opportunities for women and men have not been a priority for the political elite of the state. Gender imbalance as shown by both global and domestic experience, hinders the sustainable development and stability of society and contributes to wasteful use of human and natural resources.
4. The institutional content of women's political rights determines the level of democracy of the political system, acting as a basic component of its internal content.
5. To ensure gender equality in governmental structures a political and vertical institutional authority (a single national mechanism) is being created.
6. The active participation of women in the political life of society is influenced by patriarchal traditions, characterized by a long-standing and deep alienation from power through gender roles and specifically political socialization, as well as prejudices and stereotypes that have developed in society. However, in modern Kazakhstan, there are trends in the political participation and representation of women, reflecting the increasing political activity of many women and the variety of forms of their political mobilization. The qualitative indicators of women's political participation and representation have changed—they have gained social experience of influencing political life, gaining power, increasing self-esteem and understanding of the gender aspect of policy.
7. In Kazakhstan, participation of those women who are active in politics has raised the bar for women's participation in general. In politics, the role model of a female leader has emerged, offering a new vision of politics, communication style, and leadership style.

Despite positive shifts in gender policy, today, we do not see a woman politician with a sufficiently powerful potential and perspective in Kazakhstan. A lot of work is required to stop the mass consciousness that rejects women in positions of leadership and, of course, adequately perceives the image of a woman as a politician and a head of state. It is necessary to promote and to form women-politicians based not only on the grounds of gender, but also to choose politically promising and competent women leaders.

The development and implementation of new laws is not enough to ensure gender equality. Achieving this goal requires a society that as a whole lives and is led by the hearts and minds of country leaders, politicians and company leaders. Ironically, high-profile scandals in this area help us better understand injustice and call for balance.

In general, a woman has always been considered honorable for the Kazakh society. Moreover, more than half of the population of our country are women. It's no secret that today women, despite the fact that they are less active in the political life of the country, make a great contribution to the development of health care, the education system, public service, and also in the field of business.

It is well known that equal and full participation of women in public and political life is necessary for the effective functioning of a democratic society; 2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and UN Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by representatives of 189 states as an agenda for the empowerment of women around the world. Despite some progress in the field of women's participation in political activity, today women make up only about a quarter of the members of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

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