



# Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in Kazakhstan

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## *Abstract*

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Kazakhstan is strongly committed to ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment at the national level. Not only is this critical for the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda but also for Kazakhstan's aim to join the group of the 30 most developed countries by 2030. This policy brief looks at various aspects of Kazakh women's participation in the economic, social and political life of the country. It also sheds light on the role of gender policy in EU-Kazakh relations bilaterally and in the framework of the EU-Central Asia Strategy. It concludes with a brief outlook to 2050.

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## **Women empowerment and gender equality in Kazakhstan**

The pursuit of gender equality has gained a great deal of traction in the international community since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Long-held attitudes and traditions continue to adapt and modernise, while coming to the realisation that discriminating against half the population on the basis of gender, results in the discouragement, prohibition and loss of half the overall human potential. No country has so far achieved total gender equality, but a conscious effort to improve and enhance the said equality has become a hallmark of modernisation and progressive governance across the globe. States that are dedicated to this effort undoubtedly improve their international standing, which in turn may yield greater cooperation and investment with like-minded states and actors. Furthermore, gender equality is critical to the overall achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. This encompasses not only SDG 5 targeting gender equality; but also others such as SDG 8 (promoting decent work and economic growth); SDG 4 (access to quality education); SDG 10 (reducing inequalities) and SDG 16 (promoting peace, justice and strong institutions).

This policy briefing outlines the progress made by Kazakhstan in this field since its independence in 1991. It addresses the challenges and stumbling blocks it is facing, as well as the prospects and opportunities at hand as Kazakhstan is mainstreaming gender in its socio-economic development process. In particular in reinforcing its aim to join the exclusive group of the 30 most developed countries in the world by 2050.

During the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, in order to foster gender equality, the state adopted various labour laws, heavily promoted women's education and employment, and provided women with maternity leave and substantial benefits.<sup>1</sup> Kazakhstan's 'legacy of equality'<sup>2</sup> in the post-Soviet era concealed many of the problems related to gender equality. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Kazakhstan gained its independence. But the transition to a market economy had (short-term) negative adjustment effects on employment and poverty, and led to increased gender discrimination.<sup>3</sup> Kazakhstan has worked hard since to revert the negative impacts of its economic transition, which has had a generally positive effect on gender equality.

The government has been actively targeting gender discrimination since the 1990s. Kazakh women were afforded full suffrage in 1993, two years after independence, while already having been granted limited voting rights in 1924.<sup>4</sup> In 1999 the country adopted the National Action Plan on 'Improving the Status of Women in the Republic of Kazakhstan', which outlined twelve points to improve Kazakh women's lives.<sup>5</sup> In 2006, Kazakhstan adopted a ten-year national gender equality strategy, intending to improve women's participation in Kazakh public life. In that same year, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to establish a national entity to promote gender equality (the

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Zellerer and Dmitriy Vyortkin, 'Women's Grassroots Struggles for Empowerment in the Republic of Kazakhstan', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 11 (1 January 2004): 439–64.

<sup>2</sup> Iveta Silova and Cathryn Magno, 'Gender Equity Unmasked: Democracy, Gender, and Education in Central/Southeastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union', *Comparative Education Review* 48 (1 November 2004): 417–42, <https://doi.org/10.1086/423358>. 441.

<sup>3</sup> Zellerer and Vyortkin, 'Women's Grassroots Struggles for Empowerment in the Republic of Kazakhstan'.

<sup>4</sup> The World Economic Forum, 'Kazakhstan (Country Report)' (The World Economic Forum, October 2016), <http://reports.weforum.org/feature-demonstration/files/2016/10/KAZ.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Zellerer and Vyortkin, 'Women's Grassroots Struggles for Empowerment in the Republic of Kazakhstan'.

National Commission on Women, Family and Demographic Policy). As part of the strategy, in 2009, the Kazakh parliament ratified the so-called 'Law of State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women' and the 'Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence'.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, Kazakhstan approved the Concept of Family and Gender Policy up to 2030, with the goal to ensure equal rights to women and prevent gender-based discrimination.<sup>7</sup> The policy committed the government to improve family and gender policy legislation in Kazakhstan, particularly through the removal of barriers to female employment and career growth. The policy also serves as a means for Kazakhstan to take a step closer to meeting its targets under the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) programme, which it joined in 2015.<sup>8</sup>

In 2006 Kazakhstan ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> globally out of 115 in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index (Figure 1). The country ranked particularly highly in women's economic participation, placed 16<sup>th</sup> in the world. Within this subsection, Kazakhstan was 1<sup>st</sup> in gender balance when it came to professional and technical workers. In health and survival, the country ranked 36<sup>th</sup>, and achieved number one in healthy life expectancy. Even though in overall educational attainment Kazakhstan only ranked 53<sup>rd</sup>, in terms of female enrolment in tertiary education, it ranked first.<sup>9</sup> In spite of policy efforts, by 2018 Kazakhstan dropped back to 60<sup>th</sup> place in the rankings out of 149 countries. In terms of female economic participation, it fell back to 32<sup>nd</sup>, while in health and survival to 42<sup>nd</sup>. However, these drops can largely be explained by the addition of 34 countries to the index between 2006 and 2018, it does not necessarily mean Kazakhstan's policy initiatives have been unsuccessful. In fact, Kazakhstan's overall score increased from 0.693 in 2006 to 0.712 in 2018. It is also important to note that Kazakhstan remains the highest ranked country in Central Asia and impressively, is 15 places above the Russian Federation. Indeed, in some criteria, Kazakhstan's rank increased significantly. In educational attainment, Kazakhstan rose from 53<sup>rd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> place, due to the country's strong classification in female enrolment in education.<sup>10</sup> There has therefore been tangible policy success in certain sectors.

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<sup>6</sup> OECD, 'OECD Gender Policy Delivery Review Kazakhstan' (OECD, 2017), [https://www.oecd.org/gov/Gender-Highlights-Kazakhstan.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2j1L9uAqAeJM6bBoLqNOFKrq\\_PuzdP3JJzrKaxACRQ-mKDo2\\_7iC1b8zA](https://www.oecd.org/gov/Gender-Highlights-Kazakhstan.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2j1L9uAqAeJM6bBoLqNOFKrq_PuzdP3JJzrKaxACRQ-mKDo2_7iC1b8zA).

<sup>7</sup> UN Women, 'Republic of Kazakhstan', UN Women | Europe and Central Asia, 2019, <https://eca.unwomen.org/where-we-are/kazakhstan>.

<sup>8</sup> Svitlana Pyrkalo, 'Kazakhstan's Gender Action Plan Discussed at High-Profile Forum', European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 10 February 2017, <http://www.ebrd.com/news/2017/kazakhstans-gender-action-plan-discussed-at-highprofile-forum.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2006' (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2006), [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2006.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2006.pdf). 83.

<sup>10</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2018' (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2018), [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf). 143.

	2006		2018	
	rank	score	rank	score
<b>Global Gender Gap score</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>0.693</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>0.712</b>
Economic participation and opportunity	16	0.713	32	0.741
Educational attainment	53	0.990	30	1.000
Health and survival	36	0.979	42	0.979
Political empowerment	69	0.089	94	0.130
rank out of	115		149	

Figure 1: Changes in Kazakhstan's Global Gender Gap score<sup>11</sup>

### 1.1. Education and equal pay

Gender equality advances in the field of education have been particularly successful in Kazakhstan. In 2018, the country ranked 1<sup>st</sup> globally in female enrolment in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, with a higher percentage of women being enrolled in all levels of education than men:

- 86.3 per cent of girls and 86.2 per cent of boys are enrolled in primary education.
- 100 per cent of girls are enrolled in secondary education in contrast to 99.7 per cent of boys.
- 55.5 per cent of women are enrolled in tertiary education, while only 43.9 per cent of men are.<sup>12</sup>

These figures represent a significant achievement for Kazakhstan, arguably making it a world leader in access to education for women. However, some notable difficulties in providing education for girls have presented themselves. These difficulties are tied to cultural and economic issues and include girls not being able to continue their education due to the prevalence of marriage at a younger age, and (particularly in rural areas) the continuing use of unqualified teaching methods and outdated curricula. There are also concerns about increasing suicide rates among girls, especially in rural areas where they can be linked to the limited societal acceptance of reproductive rights, early marriages and pregnancies out-of-wedlock.<sup>13</sup> These issues, however, are not unique to Kazakhstan and many countries face similar difficulties replicating and transferring successes experienced in urban environments to the countryside and remote areas. In time, logistical solutions should combat the cultural and economic issues acting as barriers to enhanced gender equality in these specific circumstances.

Although education has seen solid progress towards gender equality, there is still work to be done in improving the situation in employment. Women are overrepresented in Kazakhstan's master's (61.2 per cent are women) and doctoral programmes (60.9 per

<sup>11</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2018' (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2018), [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf). 143.

<sup>12</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2018' (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2018), [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf). 143.

<sup>13</sup> Lindabeth Doby, 'Girls' Education in Kazakhstan', The Borgen Project, 6 July 2018, <https://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-kazakhstan/>.

cent)<sup>14</sup> while they are underrepresented in the workforce as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Unemployment rates are higher for women than they are for men, with 5.7 per cent and 4.3 per cent respectively.<sup>16</sup> The wage gap also remains a persistent issue. In spite of the government's efforts to reduce the wage gap, it only decreased by 3.7 per cent between 2006 and 2015.<sup>17</sup> This is mostly due to women being concentrated in areas of work where wages are lower, such as administrative services, education and healthcare. Women are also less likely to reach senior-level positions in the workplace, contributing to their lower wages. The size of the wage gap varies between sectors and regions, but in certain parts of the country, it reaches 50 per cent. Despite this, Kazakhstan maintained its excellent 1<sup>st</sup> place position in gender balance among professional and technical workers. If the country can focus its efforts into getting more women into senior positions, the other criteria mentioned (unemployment and the wage gap) should improve consequently.

## **1.2. Women in power**

A lack of female political empowerment is another area requiring attention and will have contributed to Kazakhstan's 60<sup>th</sup> place position in the overall ranking. In 2006 Kazakhstan ranked 69<sup>th</sup> in the female political empowerment sub-ranking, by 2018 this position had slipped to 94<sup>th</sup>.<sup>18</sup> Again, this can be explained by the addition of new countries to the index, but it also implies that Kazakhstan made relatively little progress in this field. Recent developments point that Kazakhstan should raise again in future rankings, as for the first time in the nation's young history, a female candidate (Dania Espaeva) participated in the 2019 presidential elections. In 2006, only 10 per cent of parliamentary seats and 18 per cent of incumbents in ministerial positions were women.<sup>19</sup> In 2018, women held 27.1 per cent of the parliamentary seats (higher than the world average of 24 per cent), but only 5.6 per cent of ministerial positions were held by female politicians, which was only enough for 132<sup>nd</sup> place in the global ranks.<sup>20</sup> Thus, progress was made in one area and lost in another. Not having senior-level female politicians echoes the Soviet period, during which an unofficial quota was set at 30 per cent for women in low- and medium-level political management, but not in higher-levels.<sup>21</sup> Kazakhstan has no shortage of well-trained, academic women, due to the country's excellent progress in education. If Kazakhstan can encourage and facilitate the participation of these same women in the political process, it could quickly become a regional leader in yet another sphere of gender equality.

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<sup>14</sup> Asian Development Bank, 'Kazakhstan – Country Gender Assessment' (Asian Development Bank, December 2018), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/479136/kazakhstan-country-gender-assessment.pdf>. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Doby, 'Girls' Education in Kazakhstan'.

<sup>16</sup> Asian Development Bank, 'Kazakhstan – Country Gender Assessment'. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Asian Development Bank. 21.

<sup>18</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2018'. 143.

<sup>19</sup> Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi, 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2006'. 83.

<sup>20</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2018'. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Zellerer and Vyortkin, 'Women's Grassroots Struggles for Empowerment in the Republic of Kazakhstan'.

**Attitudes towards women: percentage of respondents who agree with the statements below**

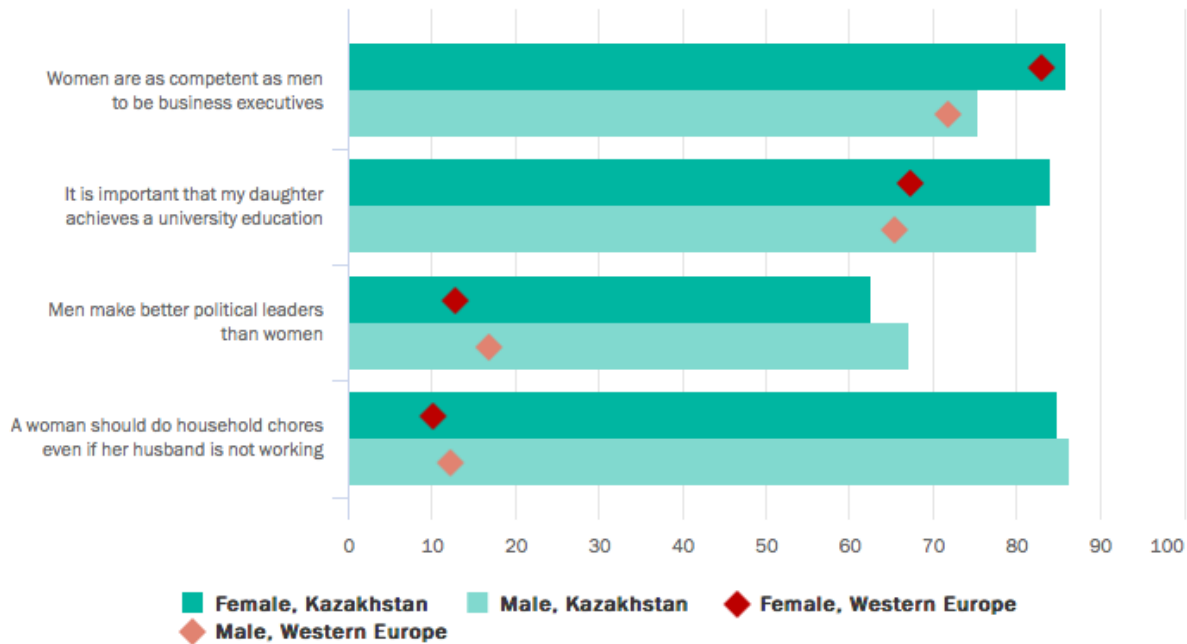


Figure 2: Attitudes towards women in Kazakhstan<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Gender policy in EU-Kazakh relations

Promoting Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (GEWE) beyond the borders of the EU is one of the main goals of the European Commission’s Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-19 initiative. However, specifically confronting the issue of gender disparity in Central Asia is quite a recent trend on the EU’s agenda.

The primary aim of EU support in Central Asia is to enable countries in the region to enhance their ability to implement reforms, adopt strategies aimed at economic modernisation, and enable them to improve education. Kazakhstan, as the main EU partner in the region in terms of trade and investment, is of particular significance to the EU. Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian country with which the EU signed a next-generation Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) in 2015.<sup>23</sup>

The EPCA, signed with Kazakhstan in 2015 and ratified by the EU and all Member States by early 2020, entered into force in March 2020 and specifically includes a section on exchanging practices to enhance ‘gender equality by promoting the participation of women in social and economic life and ensuring equal opportunities between men and women in employment, education, training, economy, society and decision making.’ The European Commission (EC) also commissioned a gender study report for Kazakhstan in 2017, with the results published in 2018, as an initial step to provide the EU with a

<sup>22</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, ‘Life in Transition – Kazakhstan’, 2016, <http://litsonline-ebrd.com/countries/kazakhstan/>.

<sup>23</sup>European Council, ‘Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Kazakhstan, of the other part’ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/treaties-agreements/agreement/?id=2015045>

concise overview of the situation of GEWE in the country as well as identify where the bloc could use assistance for improvement.

The EU's involvement in Kazakhstan is also based on the EU-Central Asia Strategy. The EU adopted its first Central Asia Strategy in 2007, to promote economic development and increasing political cooperation.<sup>24</sup> The original Central Asia Strategy in 2007 did not mention GEWE specifically, but some of its target fields were closely related to GEWE, such as social development, human rights, democratisation, and education. A new Central Asia strategy was released and adopted in 2019, in light of changing regional dynamics and mounting global challenges, aiming to strengthen the EU-Central Asia partnership. Acknowledging that gender equality has many positive spillover effects in areas from counter-radicalisation to private sector development, the EU "will promote - including through the integration of the UN Agenda for Women, Peace and Security in the relevant aspects of EU cooperation - gender equality and empowering of women and girls, whose potential to engage in social, economic and political life remains largely untapped in the region".<sup>25</sup>

There are also projects initiated by the EU locally. In March 2019, the EU Delegation to Kazakhstan launched an initiative called 'Inclusive Kazakhstan' with the aim to help socially vulnerable groups. The project included supporting pregnant women in protecting their rights. In July 2019, the European External Action Service (EEAS) announced a triangular EU-Central Asia project to assist Afghan women in graduating from Kazakh and Uzbek universities. The launch ceremony was held in Almaty in October 2019.<sup>26</sup>

The EU has also indirect involvement in fostering gender equality in Kazakhstan, through working with the UN, OECD and World Bank among others. For instance, Kazakhstan, along with the other countries in the region, receives indirect financial support from the EU, through a global UNESCO initiative, called the Education for All (EFA) programme. One of EFA's main goals is to achieve gender equality in education and to allow girls full access to education.

## **Conclusion: Looking ahead to 2050**

Since achieving independence in 1991, quality of life in Kazakhstan has drastically improved with rising incomes and decreasing unemployment. As it transitions from a planned to a market economy, and as cultural norms evolve and society unequivocally embraces gender equality, policies to promote women's labour force and economic participation including notably in the private sector, political empowerment, and addressing the rural-urban divide, will contribute to the country's economic success and help the country meet SDG targets and its ambitions to join the 30 most developed countries by 2050.

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<sup>24</sup> European Commission, 'The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership', [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st\\_10113\\_2007\\_init\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st_10113_2007_init_en.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership', [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_the\\_eu\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_-\\_new\\_opportunities\\_for\\_a\\_stronger\\_partnership.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Amir Khaidar, 'EU, UNDP and Kazakhstan launch education programme to train Afghan women', Astana Times, 21 October 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2019/10/eu-undp-and-kazakhstan-launch-education-programme-to-train-afghan-women/>



Kazakhstan is already a pioneer in gender equality efforts in the region and has made a range of international commitments as well as national legislation to advance the cause of gender equality, clearly demonstrating the high level of commitment to mainstream gender at all levels of government.