

FEMALE LEADERSHIP AS A TOOL FOR STRENGTHENING POLITICAL AND CIVIL INSTITUTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

Female leadership is one of the tools for improving civic engagement in governance. The aim of this article is to examine the factors that hinder women's participation in political and civic institutions and the development of female leadership in the Republic of Kazakhstan. To this end, an analysis was conducted on the representation of women in representative, legislative, and executive bodies, as well as in leadership and decision-making positions. The study also analyzed the results of expert interviews conducted with women from the North Kazakhstan Region regarding their perspectives on the development of female leadership and existing gender barriers to career advancement. The findings reveal relatively low female representation in high-level political positions within the public service, local councils, and Parliament. However, the high percentage of women in public councils (42%) indicates the potential for further development of female leadership in Kazakhstan. Key challenges restricting women's access to leadership roles in government institutions include societal stereotypes, the difficulty of balancing work and family responsibilities, high workloads, and the specific demands of leadership positions. Based on the research findings, several recommendations are made to improve policies that support female leadership.

Key words: Gender Policy, Civil Society, Public Councils, Women's Leadership, Accountability, Participation.

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Әйелдер көшбасшылығы Қазақстандағы саяси және азаматтық институттарды жетілдіру құралы ретінде

Аңдатпа. Әйелдер көшбасшылығы азаматтық қоғамның мемлекетті басқаруға қатысуын жетілдіру құралдарының бірі болып табылады. Осы баптың мақсаты әйелдердің саяси және азаматтық институттарға қатысуына, сондай-ақ Қазақстан Республикасында әйелдер көшбасшылығын дамытуға кедергі келтіретін факторларды зерделеу болып табылады. Осы мақсатта өкілді, заң шығарушы және атқарушы билік органдарында, ұйымдардағы басшылық позицияларда және шешім қабылдау лауазымдарында әйелдердің өкілдігіне талдау жүргізілді. Сондай-ақ, Солтүстік Қазақстан облысындағы әйелдер арасында жүргізілген сараптамалық сұхбаттың нәтижелері, олардың әйелдер көшбасшылығын дамыту перспективаларын, сондай-ақ мансаптық өсу жолындағы гендерлік кедергілерді қабылдауы тұрғысынан талданды. Зерттеу нәтижелері мемлекеттік қызметте, мәслихаттарда және Парламентте жоғары саяси лауазымдардағы әйелдердің әлсіз өкілдігін көрсетті. Бұл ретте, әйелдердің Қоғамдық кеңестер құрамына қатысуы айтарлықтай жоғары (42%), бұл Қазақстанда әйелдер көшбасшылығын дамыту перспективаларының бар екендігін айғақтайды. Әйелдердің мемлекеттік органдарда басшылық лауазымдарға орналасуын тежейтін негізгі проблемалар қоғамда қалыптасқан стереотиптер, жұмыс пен отбасылық міндеттерді үйлестірудің күрделілігі, басшы қызметкерлердің жоғары жүктемесі мен жұмысының ерекшелігі болды. Зерттеу нәтижелері бойынша әйелдер көшбасшылығын қолдау саласындағы саясатты жетілдіру бойынша бірқатар ұсыныстар беріледі.

Түйін сөздер: гендерлік саясат, азаматтық қоғам, қоғамдық кеңестер, әйелдер көшбасшылығы, есеп беру, қатысу.

Женское лидерство как инструмент совершенствования политических и гражданских институтов в Казахстане

Аннотация. Женское лидерство является одним из инструментов совершенствования вовлеченности гражданского общества в управление государством. Целью данной статьи является изучение факторов, препятствующих участию женщин в политических и гражданских институтах, а также развитию женского лидерства в Республике Казахстан. Для этой цели проведен анализ представленности женщин в органах представительной, законодательной и исполнительной власти, на руководящих позициях в организациях и должностях принятия решения. Также проанализированы результаты экспертного интервью, проведенного среди женщин Северо-Казахстанской области на предмет их восприятия перспектив развития женского лидерства, а также существующих гендерных преград на пути к карьерному росту. Результаты исследования показали достаточно слабую представленность женщин на высоких политических должностях в государственной службе, маслихатах и Парламенте. При этом, участие женщин в составе общественных советов достаточно высокое (42%), что свидетельствует о наличии перспектив развития женского лидерства в Казахстане. Ключевыми проблемами, сдерживающими занятие женщинами руководящих должностей в государственных органах, оказались существующие в обществе стереотипы, сложность совмещения работы и семейных обязанностей, высокая нагрузка и специфика работы руководящих работников. По итогам исследования дается ряд рекомендаций по совершенствованию политики в сфере поддержки женского лидерства.

Ключевые слова: гендерная политика, гражданское общество, общественные советы, женское лидерство, подотчетность, участие.

Introduction

The philosophy of gender equality and the issue of female leadership have gained special significance in the modern socio-political context, where democratic processes demand broad representation and the active participation of diverse social groups. Gender equality and female leadership are interrelated issues that exhibit a strong correlation. On the one hand, women's pursuit of leadership positions paves the way for the effective realization of gender equality goals. On the other hand, the promotion of gender equality issues brings more female leaders into view.

Female leadership contributes to the creation of inclusive and sustainable institutions, which is especially important for developing countries aiming to strengthen political and civic institutions. Numerous studies and practices today confirm that women's participation in politics and civic initiatives positively affects the quality of governance, social justice, and economic stability, enhancing trust in state institutions [1, 2, 3]. The concept of actively involving women in shaping civil society emerged long ago, dating back to the end of the 19th century. One ideological founder of this philosophical school of thought was John Stuart Mill, who highlighted past factors that hindered women's active roles in societies based on strong hierarchical power [4].

In recent decades, the notion of women's positive influence in parliament – leading to more substantive and constructive decisions – has gained popularity, as evidenced by numerous international organization documents [5]. Leveraging women's talents in addressing the complex problems of the modern world is an

undeniable necessity in the age of globalization. Women's representation in high governmental positions introduces fresh perspectives on the agenda and innovative approaches to policy implementation. Maintaining a natural gender balance in strategic decision-making enhances the quality of implemented policies and strengthens democracy, enabling timely responses to global challenges under various conditions.

Global perspectives on gender equality policies are reflected in such international documents as the Convention on the Political Rights of Women [6], the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [7], the Beijing Platform for Action [8], and the Millennium Declaration [9]. These documents serve as ideological and methodological foundations for governments worldwide to review and align local legislation, provided there is political will.

Relevance

A legislative review is essential to protect women's rights, particularly in regions undergoing economic and political transformation or recovering from conflicts. National gender equality laws play a key role in securing women's rights and facilitating their active participation in the region's political life. Kazakhstan, being on a path of reform and modernization, provides an intriguing case for analyzing the role of female leadership in enhancing the effectiveness of political and civic institutions. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Kazakhstan has implemented a series of measures to institutionalize gender policy processes. The National Commission on Women's Affairs and Family and

Demographic Policy under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan plays a crucial role in forming and implementing comprehensive state policies aimed at achieving gender equality [10]. The Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women also supports this goal [11].

Problem

Despite positive trends in gender policy, women in Kazakhstan still face barriers to participating in governance. However, their growing presence in state and public structures opens new perspectives for developing a more inclusive and just governance system.

Objective

The goal of this article is to explore factors that hinder women's participation in political and civic institutions and the development of female leadership in the Republic of Kazakhstan. To achieve this goal, an analysis of the current gender distribution within the executive and representative bodies of Kazakhstan was conducted, along with expert interviews with female leaders from the North Kazakhstan Region. The findings generated theoretical insights and recommendations for improving gender policy.

Literature Review

An important avenue for female leadership development is civic engagement. Women's involvement in public organizations, NGOs, and other civic initiatives is seen as a key factor in fostering social cohesion, justice, and improved public administration quality. Unlike political participation, women may be more actively engaged in civil society participation. For example, participation in NGOs plays a vital role in expanding civil rights and opportunities for women in countries where these are significantly limited [12]. One stream of research highlights gender quotas for women's representation in local governments as potential measures for improvement [13, 14]. However, increased female participation is not always feasible due to various structural issues, including governmental reluctance and socio-cultural factors [15].

The political participation of women and female leadership are subjects of numerous studies exploring the complexities of their influence on democratic processes and the strengthening of state institutions. In diverse countries and cultures, women's political participation is viewed as an indicator of the democracy and maturity of the socio-political system, as well as an essential factor in promoting social justice and improving governance quality. Researchers, in particular, focus on the role of women in politics [16], their influence on decision-making and political stability [17], and the barriers they encounter on the path to leadership [18]. Several theoretical

approaches, such as feminist theory [19] and the concept of inclusive governance [20], view female leadership as essential for building more inclusive political structures where diverse viewpoints foster better understanding and meeting of societal needs. Empirical studies indicate that women's presence in leadership positions positively impacts the implementation of gender equality policies, social climate improvement, and increased trust in government institutions while also reducing corruption [21].

In Kazakhstan, female leadership is attracting increasing attention from both academic and practical circles. Women's growing involvement in various aspects of national life and their influence on societal development highlight the need for a deeper understanding and examination of this issue. Studies on women's political participation in Kazakhstan reveal positive trends [22] and analyze the challenges women face in their efforts to assume high positions in government, parliament, and other political institutions. Traditional views on gender role distribution remain one of these challenges [23].

The research relevance is underscored by the increasing role of women in the contemporary global context. Their involvement in various leadership areas, including the political system, offers an additional channel for their abilities and potential, enabling greater influence on decision-making and public policy development. The extent of female leadership is also a marker of political system quality, civil society development, and democratic maturity.

Methodology

In this study, a comprehensive analysis was conducted to examine the role of women in the political, governmental, and civic institutions of Kazakhstan. The research was carried out in two phases.

In the first phase, an analysis of available data on women's participation in various institutional structures across the country was performed. This included reviewing official reports and survey data accessible from public sources. This approach enabled the identification of existing trends and the quantitative characterization of female leadership within Kazakhstan's institutions.

The second phase employed a qualitative research method through expert interviews conducted in 2024 with women from the North Kazakhstan region. Women who had participated in a national information and educational program were selected to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers hindering female leadership in the region. A total of 10 women participated in the

interviews, during which they were asked the following questions: (i) What obstacles prevent women from demonstrating leadership qualities and taking on managerial roles? (ii) What reasons do women give for avoiding leadership positions? (iii) What measures do they believe could enhance women’s representation in senior management roles?

The data obtained from these interviews were analyzed to identify common themes and typical barriers faced by women aspiring to leadership positions in Kazakhstan’s political and governmental institutions.

Women’s Participation in State Policy in Kazakhstan

Leadership plays a crucial role in positioning women across various fields, such as politics, public administration, and civic institutions. It empowers women to influence decision-making processes, promote gender equality, and

initiate social change. In each of these areas, leadership allows women to leverage their skills and experiences to address challenges and achieve common goals, while also serving as role models for others, encouraging active participation in public life and the pursuit of leadership positions. Additionally, a female leader can amplify the influence of other women in less powerful positions [25].

The expression of leadership can be seen in the representation in positions that enable decision-making and the oversight of the implementation of those decisions. To assess the prospects for the development of women’s leadership in Kazakhstan, it is essential first to examine the current state of such representation.

Despite significant advancements in state policy regarding the support of gender equality since the country’s independence, women’s participation in elected bodies remains at a low level (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Representation of Women in Kazakhstan in Representative, Legislative, and Executive Bodies, as well as in Leadership Positions and Decision-Making Roles (2021-2023)

	2021		2022		2023	
	Total	women	Total	women	Total	women
Senators of the Parliament of Kazakhstan	48	9	49	9	50	11
Deputies of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of Kazakhstan	107	29	107	29	98	18
Deputies of the maslikhats of regions, cities of Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent	570	154	613	171	668	138
Deputies of city maslikhats	722	201	687	193	617	166
Deputies of district maslikhats	2,158	687	2,049	631	2,130	482
Akim (mayors) of regions, the capital, and cities of republican significance, along with their first deputies and deputies	94	9	81	5	81	6
Akims of cities that are administrative centers of regions	214	5	217	5	217	5
Political civil servants	737	67	726	59	731	61
Administrative civil servants	82,056	46,039	83,237	46,487	82,278	46,055

Note – compiled by the authors based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics [26].

The representation of women in Kazakhstan’s highest representative bodies (the Mazhilis and the Senate) is significantly below global averages. On average, there is 1 woman for every 4 men, indicating systemic barriers that hinder gender equality in the political sphere. The situation is slightly better in maslikhats, local representative bodies, where the percentage of women reached about one-third in 2021-2022. However, these figures still fall short compared to global practices. Moreover, in 2023, there was a negative trend

in women’s representation in regional and city maslikhats, which adversely affected the overall indicators (see Figure 1)

Regarding the executive bodies of government, official statistical data indicate that the share of women among all civil servants in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2023 was 55.4%, which is more than half. However, only a small portion of them are represented in the category of political civil servants who make strategic decisions (8%). Even lower are the representation figures for women in the subcategory of

political civil servants – akims at all levels, who also hold the status of political civil servants (Figure 2). These figures highlight the weak positions of female leadership in the field of public administration in Kazakhstan.

One of the important institutions of civil society in Kazakhstan is public councils. Special attention is currently paid to the participation of women, among other categories of citizens, as this ensures inclusivity and diversi-

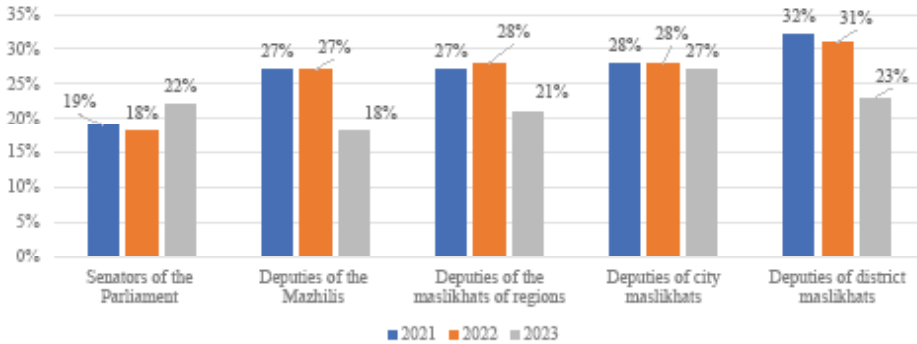


Figure 1 – Share of female deputies in the Senate, Majilis of Parliament, and local maslikhats of Kazakhstan

ty in the exercise of public oversight and political discussions. However, there are no legal provisions in Kazakhstan for special quotas for women, youth, etc., in the formation of the composition of public councils. Moreover, there is expert opinion that in the context of the activities of public councils, emphasizing

gender issues is not relevant:

“...And as for gender policy, I wouldn’t particularly highlight it. If it’s a woman and she doesn’t work, then this person is of no use. Or the opposite. There are active individuals; the most important thing is that this person cares about the people, about improvements...” [27].

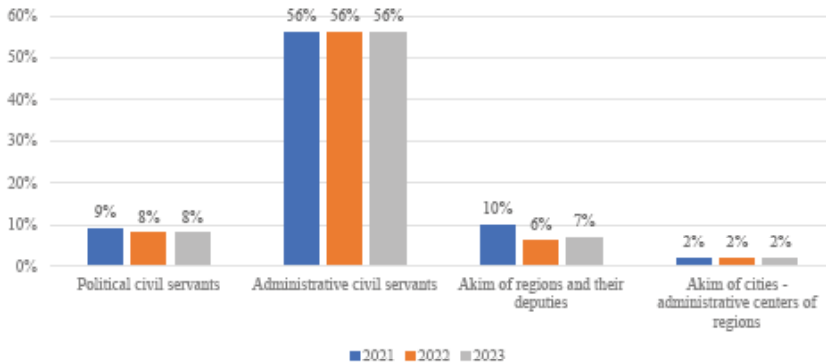


Figure 2 – Structure of the Number of Women in Public Service in Kazakhstan

Official statistical data on the gender composition of participants in public councils in Kazakhstan are not published. As a data source, survey data conducted by the Public Association “Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan” [28] were used (Figure 3).

According to the survey results from 1,491 respondents, more than half of the members of public councils (58%) are men, while 42% are women. Considering that women in public councils typically serve as opinion leaders or represent specific organizations (associations, unions, etc.), it can be said that these figures are quite high compared to the situation in government agencies.

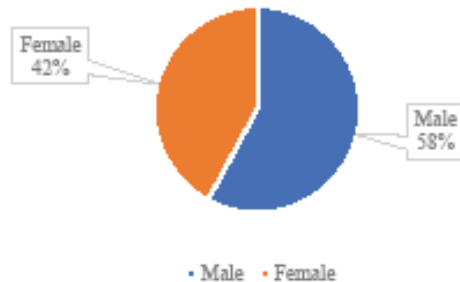


Figure 3 – Gender Composition of Representatives in Public Councils of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Although there is significant activity among women leaders in Kazakhstan's civil society, their advancement in the public sector remains limited. Many women who have distinguished themselves as opinion leaders and active participants in public organizations rarely transition to leadership positions in government structures. This situation highlights the gap between opportunities for women in civil society and the barriers they face when attempting to occupy strategically important positions in politics and public administration. The study will further explore the reasons that hinder this transition, as well as the factors influencing the representation of women in leadership positions.

Results of Expert Interviews: Perspectives, Obstacles, and Necessary Qualities of Women Leaders

For the analysis purposes of this research, the results of a survey conducted among women in the North Kazakhstan region who participated in the Women's Leadership School training under the concept of the republican information and educational program «Tomiris» were studied. During the expert interviews, women were asked about their vision for developing leadership qualities. Additionally, a block of questions focused on the barriers women face in obtaining leadership positions.

Question 1: In your opinion, what prevents women from demonstrating leadership qualities, building careers, and occupying leadership positions?

Based on the analysis of the respondents, the following obstacles can be identified:

(a) Socio-cultural stereotypes.

This category of obstacles that hinder the emergence of women leaders is related to societal expectations. Historically, in Kazakhstan, as in many other countries, there are gender roles according to which women should primarily focus on raising children and household duties. This is a significant limitation on women's career advancement.

(b) Inequality in access to education and professional training.

This factor is largely related to the broader socio-cultural issue mentioned above. Society tends to invest more in the education of boys than girls, as it is viewed as a more profitable investment.

(c) Discrimination in the workplace.

Women may face difficulties when searching for jobs or advancing in their careers. Although in public service, salary levels are not gender-dependent, such issues can arise in the private sector. This, in turn, creates a barrier to leadership.

(d) Work-life balance.

Due to the societal distribution of gender roles, women find it more challenging to balance work and personal life. Numerous family responsibilities can create difficulties regarding career aspirations.

(e) Self-confidence.

Some women, due to inherent qualities associated with their gender, lack confidence in their abilities and skills. This can hinder their pursuit of leadership roles and career growth.

To overcome these barriers, it is necessary to work on changing societal stereotypes, ensuring access to educational and professional resources, creating conditions for work-life balance, and developing support and mentoring programs for women.

Question 2: In your opinion, what needs to be done to help women demonstrate leadership qualities, build careers, and occupy leadership positions?

The responses from the interviewees to this question were diverse. Summarizing the data obtained, the suggestions can be grouped into the following categories:

Firstly, the surveyed women believe that it is necessary to implement legislative quotas for women in various spheres of state management and decision-making.

Secondly, the introduction of mentorship practices for women aspiring to careers (in the form of regular meetings, seminars, and workshops for sharing experiences) is needed. Successful women leaders could serve as mentors.

Thirdly, communications among like-minded women can bring practical benefits. This suggests the organization of professional communities, clubs, and networking meetings, mutual assistance forums and conferences, and business breakfasts for women ready to share experiences, find partners, and discuss career advancement opportunities.

Fourthly, a large-scale informational campaign is necessary to change gender stereotypes and raise public awareness of the importance of gender equality.

Question 3: What are the reasons why women do not pursue leadership positions?

Below are the main responses obtained during the interviews:

(a) Fear and uncertainty about their abilities in the face of increased responsibility.

"...Once I had the opportunity to take a leadership position. It was a very responsible decision that could impact my career. However, I suddenly felt fear and uncertainty about my abilities. I thought I wasn't ready for such serious challenges and that I wouldn't be able to handle new responsibilities. These feelings made me refuse this opportunity, and I certainly regretted that deci-

sion later..." (Participant No. 1)

(b) Reluctance to leave the comfort zone.

"...When I was offered a leadership position, I didn't want to step out of my comfort zone. I felt that my current role and responsibilities suited me well, and that transitioning to a new, more responsible position would bring too much uncertainty and change. At that moment, I decided to stick to the familiar and comfortable environment, declining the opportunity to become a leader..." (Participant No. 2)

(c) Societal stereotypes.

"...When I was offered to head a department, I felt some pressure. There were many people around me who firmly believed that only men should be leaders. I felt uncomfortable because I didn't fit these standards. Even if I were to choose between a man and a woman for a leadership position, I think I would vote for the man..." (Participant No. 3)

(d) Conflicts within the team and a spirit of competition.

"...Once, I decided to decline a promotion offered to me because at that time, there was a strong spirit of competition within our team. Conflicts among colleagues and divisions into functional blocks hindered normal interaction and collaboration. If I had accepted the offer, it would have exacerbated the situation..." (Participant No. 4)

(e) High workload in government agencies.

Participants noted that due to the recent optimization of the government apparatus, some departments were reorganized. Functional responsibilities were redistributed among the remaining departments. The increased workload on employees led to significant stress and a deterioration of the overall atmosphere within the team. Consequently, the leader had to combine work in their professional area with learning new directions and responsibilities.

(f) Difficulty maintaining a work-life balance.

During the discussion, the difficulty of balancing work and family responsibilities was highlighted. Dedicating oneself to work in a leadership position requires effort and time, which must be taken away from one's family. Additionally, some are reluctant to go on long business trips, which is also a reason for refusing a leadership position.

The aforementioned aspects were priorities for many participants in the expert interviews, leading them to sacrifice career advancement in exchange for a more balanced personal life.

Conclusion

Analysis of Women's Leadership in Kazakhstan has revealed a high level of activity

among women in civil society but also highlighted their limited access to leadership positions in the public sector. Despite their significant contributions to public organizations, the transition of women into managerial roles in politics and public administration remains challenging. These barriers indicate the existing structural and cultural obstacles affecting women's career advancement, reflecting the gap between their opportunities in the civil sector and government structures.

The political lessons of this research underscore the need to eliminate obstacles that limit women's representation in top positions and call for targeted efforts to promote gender equality. Implementing measures such as legislative quotas, mentorship programs, and expanding networks of professional support can help overcome the existing inequalities. An important task is also to change societal stereotypes through informational campaigns aimed at recognizing the value of women's leadership. These steps can contribute to creating a more balanced and inclusive political environment in Kazakhstan.

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