

**Women Underrepresentation in the Akimats of Astana: exploring
barriers and challenges**

by

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Table of Contents:

1. Introduction.....	2
1.1 Importance of Addressing Underrepresentation.....	2
1.2 Problem.....	3
1.3 Research questions.....	4
2. Literature Review.....	4
2.1 International experience.....	5
2.2 Kazakhstan’s experience.....	10
3. Theoretical framework.....	13
4. Methodology.....	15
5. Findings.....	16
6. Discussion.....	21
7. Conclusion.....	24
8. Acknowledgments.....	26
9. References.....	27

Abstract

Underrepresentation of women in civil service poses a great challenge for the inclusivity, gender equality, and political representation of women's needs and interests in society. Cultural norms and societal pressures exacerbate the situation further limiting women employee's career aspirations and advancements. In the presence of systematic barriers perpetuating underrepresentation, promotion of policies that encourage women's participation are found to be an effective solution. This work explores the reasons and factors behind the underrepresentation of women in local governments through a qualitative case study of several akimats of Astana city. By interviewing representatives from local municipalities research reveals emerging themes from the experiences and challenges women employees face during their work and advancement to decision-making positions. Results of the study indicate that societal and cultural biases are prominent reasons behind the underrepresentation of women in akimats. Systematic pressure built on the base of male preference and historically developed assigned roles for women was found to be significant in defining the barriers women face during promotion to decision-making positions. Additionally, the study underlines the importance of domestic responsibilities in evaluating factors that influence women's decision to pursue political careers in Astana akimats.

1. Introduction

1.1. Importance of Addressing Underrepresentation

The insufficient number of women in decision-making positions in local government is an acute problem for the following reasons. To begin with, it should be noted that this destroys the basic principles of equality and inclusivity on which a modern democratic state should be built. When women move away from the decision-making process, their experiences, views and needs are often ignored. The equal representation of men and women in the decision-making process has a significant impact on ensuring that the interests of the entire population of the State are fully taken into account.

Research shows a positive relationship between gender diversity in leadership and the fruitfulness of any organization. Companies and institutions with both male and female leaders tend to be much more effective at dealing with any problems and finding innovative and sustainable solutions. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), gender equality in decision-making processes is crucial for achieving sustainable development and inclusive governance (United Nations Development Program, 2018). Similarly, the World Bank Group (Vegh and Vuletin, 2015) highlights the importance of gender diversity in leadership for fostering inclusive and responsive governance structures.

However, in regions like Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, cultural beliefs, norms, and biases present pose serious obstacles to women's advancement in decision-making

positions at all levels, especially in political institutions. These deeply ingrained biases perpetuate gender inequality and hinder women's access to decision-making positions (take from lit review).

In December 2019, President Tokayev instructed the introduction of a 30% quota for women and youth on electoral party lists. Just before the quota, the percentage of female members of parliament was 19.7%, and after its introduction, the rate remained almost the same, at 21% and 19.6% respectively (Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024; Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). Despite the governmental effort, the dynamic was absent. Now, let us look at the local government level where women participation is equally vital. Since Kazakhstan's independence, there have been 0 out of 298 city akims and 2 out of 190 regional akims who were women representing 0% and 1%, respectively. We decided to study the case of Astana, being the capital and a more developed city (The Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). As of 2023, there are no female akims and only 2 (10%) female deputies (Akimat of the city of Astana, 2024).

Dire state of Kazakhstan's underrepresentation in local government is seen through comparison with other developed democratic nations. We consider two countries, with high and average democratic development: Finland and France (Democracy Index, 2023). In 2020, in Finland, the proportion of women council members (equivalent to city akims in Kazakhstan) and women board chair (heads of departments of city municipalities) were 39% and 31%, respectively (Juhola, 2020). As of 2023, in France, there were 42% and 20% women advisors and mayors in municipalities, respectively (Statista, 2023).

1.2 Problem

The underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions in local government in Astana presents a critical gender equity issue that necessitates in-depth investigation. This disparity highlights a systemic problem that not only inhibits women's participation in decision-making processes but also hinders the development of inclusive and representative governance. Therefore, this research aims to identify the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in these roles and seeks to propose effective strategies for promoting gender parity and improving the overall representation of women in Akimat's government institutions.

To achieve that, the study aims to conduct a case study of Astana akimats and semi-structured interviews with local government employees, to elucidate and analyze the factors and underlying reasons that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in the local government institutions. Through qualitative interviews, this research seeks to gain insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by individuals working in local government with a particular focus on gender-related issues, in order to shed light on the root causes of gender underrepresentation.

1.3 Research questions

The main purpose of this study is to explore and uncover the factors that in one way or another can serve as barriers to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the akimats of Astana city. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the primary factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within Astana's akimats?

RQ2: How does domestic responsibilities play a role in women's decision to pursue or avoid political careers in akimats?

2. Literature review

Woman underrepresentation has been a prevalent issue since the emergence of feminism and it inevitably concerns every other discussion on the topic of democracy. As a citizen of a free country, women should be entitled to the same treatment as men, and in theory, this simple idea should work in every instance of men/women debates. However, as numbers of researches on the topic show, there is a realm of factors that affect the disproportionate representation between male and female in the given occupation, population, culture and ideology. To address the initial advocacy of the discussion of gender inequality at the workplaces and the influence of biases on it, there is substantive research linking political world and gender inequality conducted by Kenworthy and Malami titled "Gender Inequality in Political Representation: A Worldwide Comparative Analysis" (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999). In this work, authors advocate for three groups of factors that significantly affect the women's representation in national legislatures. Three groups consist of political, socio economic and cultural factors that by authors' identification influence representation of women in legislative structures. To identify involvement of mentioned factors authors conducted research across 146 countries and separate analysis of 20

wealthiest and longstanding democracies in the world by 1998. Conducting ordinary least squares regression of 146 countries over the share of seats in the country's main legislative body, authors identified the most prominent factors of political, socioeconomic and cultural influence. Authors' findings propose that following factors influence the variation of women's representation in the nation's legislature: electoral system structure, left party government, timing of women's suffrage, share of women in professional occupation, cultural attitude towards women in politics (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999).

Cultural factors by Malami and Kenworthy are representative of Sociopsychological theory, which used to fill the gaps of human capital theory in terms of social norms influence on decisions to invest into education and career development. Sociocultural theory argues that traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes shape popular social norms and beliefs about women's career; therefore significantly limit the opportunities and self-perception of women's professional abilities. Traditional gender roles of taking care of children and home, results in the stigma of supporting roles women play in society, constraining career and leadership aspirations of women in question (Caceres-Rodriguez, 2011).

Additional dimension for this issue can be presented by Alice Eagly's book titled "Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders", which presents a new look towards the notion of glass ceiling, and suggests that the idea of labyrinth should be used instead because the issue under discussion is complex and structural in the first place. Issue is comprised of societal patterns, cultural institutions and work practices of modern organizations that make it difficult for women to reach leadership positions. Book's novelty lies in arguing that not personal prejudices of the sole person, but rather culture and organization are to blame for the low number of women in decision-making positions these days. Therefore nudging researchers and public entities to rethink their approach to cultural and organizational behavior in consideration for balanced representation. Acknowledging the broad structure of the issue allows us to aim efforts at concrete problems that compose the issue of gender underrepresentation, and therefore are useful to this work (Eagly & Carly, 2008).

2.1. International experience

Moreover, a survey conducted by the Bureau for Employers' Activities have surveyed 13,000 people across 70 countries and found that the majority of respondents (57%) agreed

that promotion of gender diversity initiatives results in improvements of performance for businesses. Additionally, three quarters of companies that apply diversity initiatives have tracked that performance has increased up to 20% (Bureau for Employers' Activities, 2019). Respondents pointed out improvements in innovation, openness and creativity, and ultimately the reputation of the company they worked for increased with introduction of balanced representation initiatives.

Beside the positive relationship of economic developments towards gender equality, there is social context under which gender workplace inequality becomes greater. This context is presented in the work "Interactional Processes and Gender Workplace Inequalities" (Mueller et al., 2002). Authors applied the theory of mixed-gender interaction in a collective task-oriented work group, and derived the following conclusions: in male dominated industries (agriculture) work group involving face-to-face mixed-gender interaction, gender workplace inequality is increased in comparison to settings where males and females work independently of each other (Mueller et al., 2002). This research points towards a biased attitude of male worker population in an industry that is dominated by men, which results in professional and social obstacles towards women's career progression.

Another finding of the study by Kam, A.J.Y.;Oboh, J.S.;Sufian, J.;Othman, Z. indicates that gender inequality has a significant negative impact on economic growth, as it limits the participation of women in the labor force. The regression analysis shows that female labor participation has a positive and significant impact on economic growth. The content analysis of the qualitative data reveals that gender inequality in the civil service sector is perpetuated by cultural and societal norms, lack of support structures for working mothers, and discriminatory policies (Kam et al, 2022).

One more work focused on similar premises introduced by Aki Iida's analysis conducted on the book of Kazuo Yamaguchi "Gender Inequality in the Workplace". Author emphasizes that Japan's employment system is inherently discriminatory towards women in higher positions through statistical gaps in managerial positions between men and women, and attributes these findings to conservative corporate culture. Authors show that the cultural background of a country plays an important role in employment, work relations and finally economic development by attributing Japan's cultural male-centric attitude as the reason behind the gap between 6480 males and 3023 females in 1677 companies (Aki, 2018).

Another significant work by Bonnie G. Mani's who studies "The Human Capital Model or Location! Location! Location? The Gender-Based Wage Gap in the Federal Civil Service" examines the gender-based wage gap in the US Federal Civil Service. The study aims to determine whether the wage gap is the result of differences in human capital or due to location factors. Mani's study (Mani, B. G, 2018). Study reveals that the gender wage gap persists even after controlling for human capital factors such as education, experience, and job tenure. However, the author mentioned that location factors such as job title and geographic location also play a significant role in the gender wage gap. Women are more likely to be in lower-paying positions and in areas with a lower cost of living, which contributes to the gender wage gap. Author suggests that both human capital and location factors contribute to the gender wage gap, and that policymakers must address both factors in order to close the gap.

Similar in relationship between men and women, yet in a culturally varying context is presented in the work of Lazaro et al. titled "Housework Gender Inequality in Spain: Is the Sharing of Housework within Couples Solely Driven by Economic Rationality?" In this work, authors discuss several hypotheses of the family model, under which housework is divided between partners regarding their employment. The most important insight this work provides is that even in the position of income provider, wives still do and are expected to handle the majority of the housework (Lazaro et al., 2022). Stepping in the territory of cultural bias and expectation of women as an obstacle towards career progression, this research points out exactly after which models of societal behavior, women are less expected to appeal to decision-making position, simply because the model suggests that her time must be devoted to taking care of people at home instead of work.

The article "Gender Inequality Nexus in Employment: A Content and Consistency-based Analysis of Female Labour Participation in the Civil Service" by Oboh, Othman, Jia Yi, and Jusoh examines the issue of gender inequality in the civil service sector, particularly in relation to female labor participation. The authors used a content and consistency-based analysis to explore the factors that contribute to the low level of female representation in the civil service workforce. According to researchers' analysis, the issue of underrepresentation emerges because of social and cultural barriers, including but not limited to gender stereotyping and institutional bias. To tackle this problem, authors suggest the civil service

sector to address this issue through promotion of gender equality policies. Additionally, to provide equal opportunities for women, authors suggest addressing gender-based discrimination and biased preferences at the civil service institutions (Oboh, J. S., Othman, Z., Jusoh, S., & Cam, A., 2021).

Similarly, an experiment led by Utkina and Gasparyan on identifying restrictions that prevent young women from entering Russian civil service asks familiar questions. Authors' experiment involved sending identical resumes to governmental agencies from fictional male and female applicants. Amount of responses received back from the agencies suggest that fictional male applicants are more likely to be invited for an interview than female applicants with identical resumes (Utkina, & Gasparyan, 2019). These findings suggest the existence of gender-based discrimination in workplace management and hiring practices in Russian civil service.

Another article spilling light on the Russian gender scene, is "Women In Power And In Business: Comparative Analysis Of Russian And French Practices" by Chirokova, discussing the dynamic developments of promotion of women to higher positions. Chirokova's study is concerned with comparing promotion of women in Russia and France, through conducting 47 interviews with women workers occupying expert, chief executive and managerial positions. The findings of the research suggest that promotion of women in power differs drastically in two regions: will of the chief executive remains to be main reason in Russia, while in France promotions are result of individual career strategies (Chirokova, 2015).

Article "Equal Employment Opportunity: Women Bureaucrats in Male-Dominated Professions" by Bishu and Headley examines the challenges faced by women working in male-dominated professions in the public sector. The authors (Bishu, & Headley, 2020) argue that despite efforts to promote equal employment opportunities, women continue to face significant barriers to entry and advancement in these fields.

Research titled "Gender-Balanced Seats, Equal Power and Greater Gender Equality? Zooming into the Boardroom of Companies Bound by the Portuguese Gender Quota Law" (Casaca et al., 2022). Authors concern themselves showing the potential of quota laws to promote institutional change and its influence on workplace boardroom seat availability for women. Evidence from qualitative and quantitative analysis to explain how government

driven promotion of gender equality affects the workplaces in the country. Study shows that even with immediate results, and support from both male and female workers, there is still a substantial gap in gender equality in terms of executive power and decision-making positions (Casaca et al., 2022).

Considering this researches focus on career promotion of the women towards decision making positions, and in the future hopefully to the parliament and ministries, studies show above with Portugal's changes in policies, and following analysis of gender representation in OECD and non-OECD countries explain the needed incentive to promote gender inequality in country's institutions. Authors of "A Comparative Study of Gender Representation and Social Outcomes: The Effect of Political and Bureaucratic Representation" present the effects of political and bureaucratic gender equality promotion on women's education and gender equality in the country. Gender equality oriented changes in the political representation of OECD countries has shown increased labor force participation and education, while non-OECD countries show that democratization is further needed to apply concepts of equal representation to a wider range of socio economic and cultural indicators.(Park & Liang, 2021).

Council of Europe's actions towards diversifying the political and public decision-making are promoted by balanced participation acts throughout the last two decades. According to the directorate of human rights and legal affairs, due to long-term consequences of decisions made by political and public bodies, women's rights, views and interests should be represented in order to achieve truly balanced representation. The Final Declaration of the Second Summit of Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe Member States has confirmed the notion and emphasized the importance of balanced representation in modern society, followingly Action Plan adopted in the third Summit, has made balanced representation a crucial part of member countries political and public sector development strategy (Gender Equality Division, 2009).

To shift from Europe to another foreign example of gender balancing activities through political movement, article presented by Bowling et al titled "Cracked Ceilings, Firmer Floors, and Weakening Walls: Trends and Patterns in Gender Representation among Executives Leading American State Agencies" argues the concept of glass ceiling and presence of women as agency heads. Analysis is based on 30 years of presence of women in

decision-making positions in American state agencies across 50 states. Findings of the work suggest that 1) women face fewer challenges in reaching top positions in agencies; 2) access to peak positions is a result of strong educational, organizational and career foundations; 3) career shifts allow for more presence in traditionally male-dominated agency types. Moreover, analysis involves assessment of the roles of active and passive representation, and finds that a framework for analysis of presence of women can be used to further investigate consequences of both types of representation in state municipalities (Bowling et al, 2006).

2.2. Kazakhstan's experience

Kazakhstan, being one of the most active partners in OECD, still suffers from the obstacles observed by Kenworthy & Malami. Gender inequality remains a pressing issue in Kazakhstan, with cultural norms and institutional barriers serving as significant causes. Some scholars identified three reasons of why there are so few women in Kazakhstan's political and public policy spheres: firstly, there is firm societal stereotypes about gender roles in Kazakh society; secondly, organizational structure of the political and public cultures is aimed at accommodating male interests rather than focusing on balanced representation; thirdly, historical and cultural association of women with more association with traditional spheres like medicine or education (Janenova 2017). Mendikulova and Mukhamadiyeva (2018) highlight that patriarchal attitudes and expectations regarding women's roles in society contribute to gender inequality. Women are often expected to prioritize their family obligations over their careers, which limits their opportunities for professional development and advancement. In addition, existing research shows that there is still substantive work needed to propose further development of gender representative culture.

From Kazakhstan's experience, there is still heavy underrepresentation of workplace equality. Work titled "Gender equality in employment: The experience of Kazakhstan" explains the need for change in modern Kazakhstan's labor market, exploring obstacles for women to realize themselves in male dominated sectors (Buribayev & Khamzina, 2019). Authors' findings show that 70% of employees working in the health, education, and social service sectors are women. Moreover, financial and public sector workers consist of 50% of women employees. Mingaleva and Golikova (2020) found that the gender pay gap in Kazakhstan is persistent, with women earning on average 30% less than men do. Women are also more likely to work in low-paid sectors such as education and healthcare. These sectors

being less paid than inherently male dominated fields like transport, oil and construction create unequal opportunities for men and women to realize themselves professionally (Buribayev & Khamzina, 2019). Women in Kazakhstan face several challenges in the labor market. Mendikulova and Mukhamadiyeva (2019) identify discrimination, gender stereotypes, and limited access to education and training as the main obstacles women face in the labor market. Discrimination against women is pervasive, with women being passed over for promotions and opportunities in favor of male colleagues. Women are also often stereotyped as being better suited for certain professions, such as teaching and nursing, which are traditionally associated with women. Access to education and training is also limited for women, which can lead to a lack of skills and qualifications necessary for higher-paying jobs. Moreover this prevents women from building career paths based on preferences and not on availability, which calls for change in legislation on labor protection of women and providing accessibility for professional retraining (Mendikulova and Mukhamadiyeva, 2019). Following this topic of unavailability, then emerges another problem of unwillingness of Kazakhstan's female population to participate in policy processes on a majority of levels, will it be applying for policy related positions or simply advocating for the acknowledgement of women's rights. This problem is more broadly discussed by Tanalinova in her work "Problems of Realization Women's Right to Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan". Author compares quoting methods employed in different countries, and their possibility to implement them in Kazakhstan, and identifies the reason behind Kazakh women's low political activity (Tanalinova, 2012). While the majority of works on the topic call for institutional or political reform towards inclusion, Tanalinova expresses the thought that women should educate themselves on the social, political and labor initiatives, civil rights, as well as promoting female leadership to achieve gender equality in the country (Tanalinova, 2012).

One of the principal examples of cultural and institutional bias against women at working positions is explained in a paper by Janenova and Maltseva titled "Gender Inequality and Pension Reform in Kazakhstan". Janenova and Maltseva argue that the existing pension system in the country negatively affects gender inequality in the country, and call for pension reform to achieve fair conditions for women to work in. Authors identified several problems with the current pension system in the face of reform that aimed to raise the retirement age

for women from 58 to 63. Said problems include gender pay gap, informal sector employment and family care. Since the time consuming nature of family care for children or elderly and pay gap women accumulate less funds, and once retired receive much less compensation as pensioners. Moreover, women who are self-employed or employed in the informal sector might not even have contributions to the pensions while working, therefore exacerbating the pension contribution volume they are ought to receive, once retired. Authors call for a pension reform that will reduce the gap between male and female workers. They suggest that the government should introduce a minimum pension for all citizens and create incentives for women to enter the formal workforce, to raise contributions to pension funds (Janenova & Maltseva, 2023). Authors emphasize that pension reform could drastically impact gender inequality, especially older women ensuring competent retirement benefits and promote greater labor participation of Kazakhstan's population, reducing the dependent relationship of women on men in Kazakh society.

On similar note, another work of Kuzhabekova, Janenova, and Almukhambetova titled "Analyzing the Experiences of Female Leaders in Civil Service in Kazakhstan: Trapped between Economic Pressure to Earn and Traditional Family Role Expectations" explores the employment and work experience of female managers in civil service positions, active and formal job placement discussed in previous paragraph (Kuzhabekova et al, 2018). Authors emphasize the significance of Kazakh culture and traditional gender roles that prioritizes family responsibilities over career pursuing. Additionally, they mention that in recent years receding education and labor participation of women play an important role in the vision of women in leading positions. Based on the interview with women holding managerial positions in the civil service sphere, authors conclude that they are expected to balance family responsibilities and moneymaking careers, causing stress in an already existing unequal situation (Kuzhabekova et al, 2018). Authors argue that policymakers should address the work-life balance and role of traditional gender roles in modern employment in order to create more opportunities for strong female leaders in competitive decision-making positions.

In addition to the literature provided above, the main purpose of this paper is to study under-researched areas that fall under the description provided by authors above, namely employment of women in decision-making positions in Kazakhstan's municipal government.

This way, our research tries to cover several gaps in existing literature linking the reasons behind low employment of women in decision making positions as well as explaining low political representation of women in Kazakhstan politics. There are statistical data behind the numbers in higher branches of Kazakhstan's government that show improvements over the years, but this paper takes lower level municipal decision making as an integral part of Kazakhstan's citizens career path toward the seats in Ministry or Parliament, therefore focusing on the deeper level of reasoning on why Kazakhstan's politics lack female representation. Under municipal decision-making, this paper understands the positions in municipalities that directly affect the course of action in akimats and city administration. In other words, decision making positions concern heads of departments in akimats and administration, since higher positions are acquirable only by appointment.

3. Theoretical framework

Theoretical foundation for this research is based on the ideas derived from Alice Eagly's book "Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders". Eagly's suggests that there is a combination of societal and cultural factors that affect the journey of female professionals to the leadership positions.

Following this notion, we have adapted our theoretical framework for this paper with the assumption that in modern day Kazakhstan there is an effect of societal and cultural biases that affects women underrepresentation in Astana akimats.

To further develop this idea, we believe there is a need to explain what constitutes social & cultural biases and what we as a researcher understand as underrepresentation in so called decision making positions.

Societal biases - according to the Eagly's book, in terms of female leader underrepresentation, there are factors that project the expectations and norms of society on individuals based specifically on their gender. In the author's words, societal biases are the product of distribution of men and women in social roles within their limited society. When society emphasizes this difference in roles, developments establish a stigma, which cements the division of gender roles and limits the possibility of either genders to diversify their

possibilities and for our research specifically complicates the accomplishment of desired role in the organization of local government

Cultural biases - according to Eagly's book longtime coming ideas and perceptions of behavior embedded into the nation's beliefs. Cultural biases often define the interaction of men, women, and elderly with the youth. Because of the longevity of cultural biases, Eagly emphasizes the central idea of cultural bias as deeply ingrained in social structures and institutions. Cultural bias just like upbringing of the child shapes the perception of what is considered appropriate in terms of behavior of either gender exacerbating the gap between men and women in terms of personal interactions and specifically for this work - career ambitions.

Underrepresentation- according to the Catalyst, "Diversity and Inclusion Glossary, it refers to a subset of a population with a smaller percentage than the general population. For example, women, people of color, or indigenous people" (Barbour, 2020).

Decision making positions - In the context of "akimats," is a term used for a regional or local administrative head. These officials such as akims, vice-akims, and head of department and Deputy Director of the Department hold decision-making positions within their respective regions or localities. The decision-making authority typically involves overseeing various aspects of governance and development within their jurisdiction, including economic development, infrastructure projects, social services, and law enforcement.

Gender discrimination - unfair treatment or unequal opportunities experienced by individuals based on their gender or perceived gender identity. It occurs when individuals are treated less favorably or are disadvantaged in various aspects of life, including employment and promotion.

Mentality - collective thinking, attitudes, beliefs and cultural norms shared in the society. It includes values and perceptions vastly spread by the people of our state, shaped by historical, social, economic and political factors.

Municipality - type of administrative division that belongs to a specific local government area, often within a city. It is interchangeable with "akimat".

Akim - mayor of the city.

4. Methodology

Our work is based on a case study, which will analyze both the conditions under which such cases of discrimination arise in the akimats of Astana, as well as the phenomena of underrepresentation in the workplace based on gender. Such data will be taken by analyzing secondary sources on the issue of female employment and immediacy; in addition, primary sources will be analyzed using semi-structured interviews. What is the case study method? This method uses descriptions of real social situations. The case study helps to analyze the practical situation, helps to understand the essence of problems, suggests possible solutions and helps to choose the best ones. Using a situational approach helps to narrow the gap between theory and practice. Case study is an effective approach to analyzing real or fictional cases from practice in order to identify problems and develop strategies to solve them.

The concept of qualitative interviews in this study is to explore the root causes, consequences and potential ways to address the imbalance in gender representation. Considering the research nature of our work and our goal to gain a deeper understanding of the non-representation of women in Astana akimats, we studied five akimats: Yesil, Nura, Saryarka, and Baikonur and city akimats. Our main interviewees were supposed to be women working in departments and holding senior positions. Given the fact that there are a small number of women in senior positions in Astana, we found and tried to establish contact with both male and female civil servants, with a total of 10 people. The interviews were organized and conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured questionnaire. We aimed for insights from women occupying high-rank positions representing varying backgrounds in terms of (1) age, (2) educational background, (3) parental and marital status (4) department at civil service establishment and (5) position at civil service establishment. The interviews were arranged in advance through government civic engagement platforms such as e-otinish and social media communication channels such as WhatsApp, Facebook and phone calls. Duration of the interviews was around 25-80 minutes.

The interview participants were provided with all information about the objectives of the study before obtaining their consent to participate. The participants were provided with anonymity throughout the study and the opportunity to refuse to participate in the interview

at any stage without consequences and coercion. The research is aimed at raising awareness about the importance of gender diversity and representation in the akimat, to promote policy changes to eliminate systemic barriers.

Due to the difficulty of contacting people working in senior positions, we considered the possibility of contacting both the heads of any departments, as well as participants in joint ventures and activists who work closely with akimats. Of course, due to the nature of their work and confidentiality, not all potential respondents were able to answer the questions we wanted answered in the first place. Despite this, we tried to select all the respondents available to us who in one way or another held high positions or had some experience in their field of activity.

Content analysis was also used to explore the transcripts of the interviews in more depth. Content analysis is a research tool that is used to highlight the presence of certain words or concepts. This type of analysis helped in identifying the patterns in the issue of gender inequality in the akimats of Astana. Thus, we were able to analyze the presence of the re-emerging concepts and opinions of respondents on the underrepresentation of women. Content analysis was performed based on 10 interviews spanning 8 hours 43 minutes with average interview taking 45 minutes. Transcribing the interviews, we were able to derive repetition of significant concepts that explain the major reasons behind women's motivation to pursue decision-making positions in local governments - Astana akimats.

“While we planned to interview a larger sample of female leaders, we were constrained by the size and the poor accessibility of the population: very few women can be found in leadership positions in Kazakhstan and only a small number of them agreed to participate due to the high visibility of their positions and the resultant difficulty in achieving confidentiality” (Aliya Kuzhabekova, Saltanat Janenova & Ainur Almukhambetova, 2017).

5. Findings

Findings part of this research aims to present the data acquired through 10 cases of interviews with representatives from various akimats across Astana. Interview respondents range from regular employees to deputy chairwomen of the commissions to deputy akims of separate Astana city district akimats and Astana city akimats. Interview respondents vary in

terms of their professional occupation within the akimat, age, marital status, education, experience and gender, to evade biased or one-sided data in the process of data collection.

Due to the nature of this paper being based on the idea of systematic bias arises from expectations and perceptions of women at the workplace and going back to the theoretical foundations of this research, our team sought to seek answers to the questions of if and how societal & cultural biases affect the women underrepresentation in decision making positions in Akimat of astana city.

Content analysis: word count

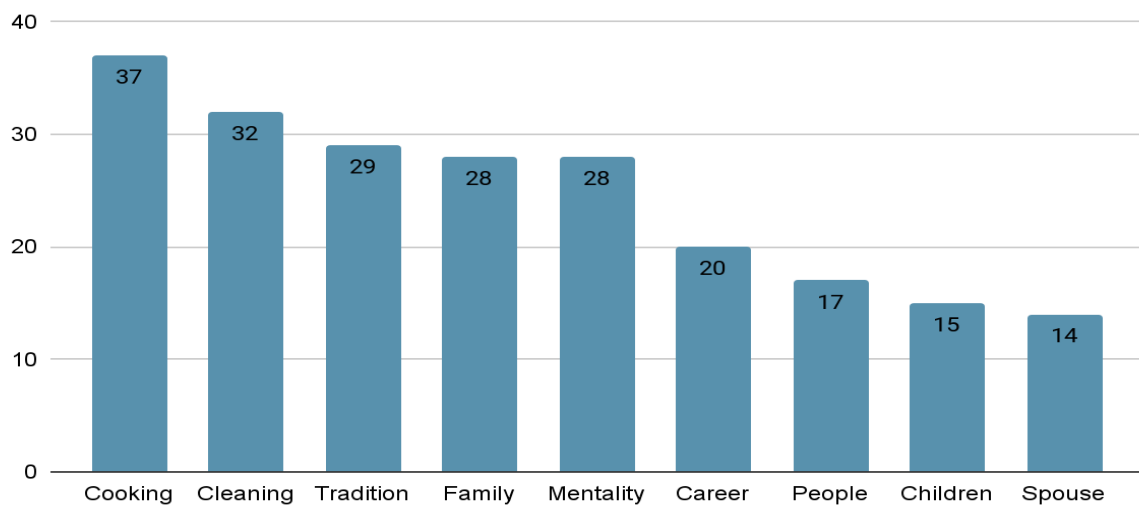


Figure 1. Content analysis of 10 interviews.

Based on the content analysis of 10 interviews spanning 8 hours, 43 minutes our team reports the bar chart presented in Figure 1, which presents 10 most used words across all 10 cases.

The most popular words are “Cooking and Cleaning”. Most of the time this pair of words were mentioned together as a part of the domestic responsibilities women take part in daily, without consideration for her career or work life.

Next trio of most mentioned words are “Tradition, Family and Mentality”. These words were mostly mentioned in explanations of Kazakh culture and why women in Kazakhstan are expected to take up the majority of domestic chores, even if they work full time.

Next curious pair of words that requires attention is “Children and Spouse”. These words are also important for the definition of Kazakh traditional family. These words were

used in order to explain the place of the family in the bigger social picture of modern Kazakhstan. Additionally, children were mentioned as an important part of the domestic responsibilities for Kazakh women, in the means of traditional upbringing and cultural expectations.

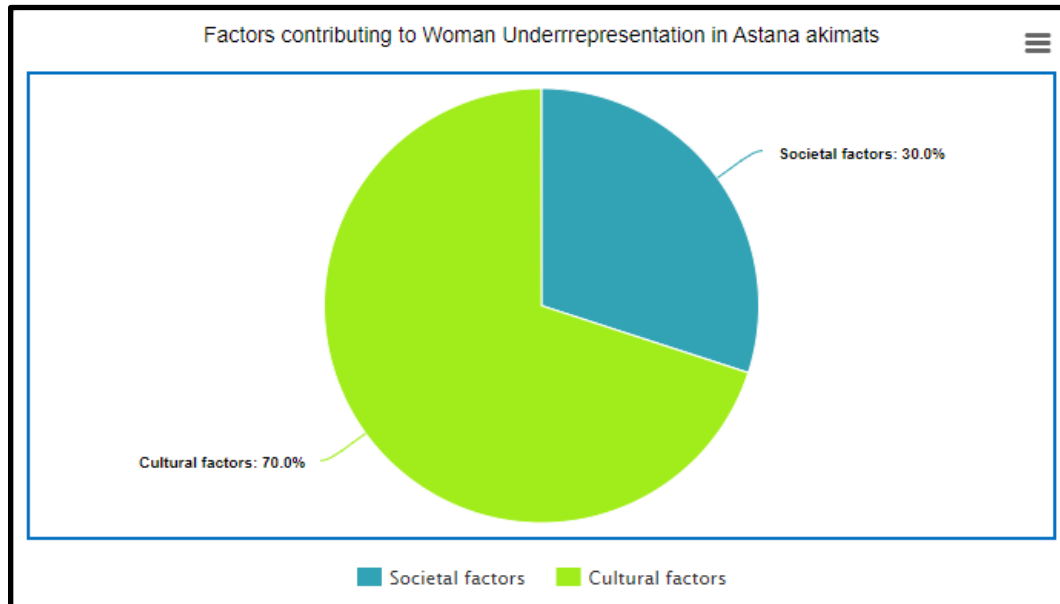


Figure 2. Pie chart representation of the factor alignment of interview responses.

This division of answers shown above is based on each interview’s skewness towards the nature of the underrepresentation, and takes into account the content analysis of the most used words during the whole interview process.

First group of respondents were identified as the group that accounts for the most used words on the topics of family, people, spouses and society. These people when asked about the origin of underrepresentation were confident in reporting that societal factors are the main obstacle for women’s career development in akimats. This group advocates for the 30% of the interview respondents pool. Respondents agree with the notion that societal norms and expectations projected to them and their behavior in society contribute to the long-developed systemic bias in the society. Following that, expectations and gender norms affect the representation of women in these cases severely. Prominent answers from these groups of interviewees include next several remarks:

Respondent from internal policy department of one of the city akimat:

“Women who choose career development, often sacrifice a lot to do so”

“Modern feminists that say that they are oppressed by the society, should think about

the opposite side of the problem, and be ready to take as much work and pressure as men do in heated situation to prove the cause of their battle” (Respondent №5, Astana city akimat, 2024).

Along with the gender-clash at the workplace, this respondent underlines the importance of the family as a key social institution in the society and presents the arguments where family dynamics might be a barrier in pursuit of a decision making position for a woman. She mentions that when a woman advances in her career, and her man does not, it might create a situation of envy that results in prohibition to work, moral and physical abuse from the significant other. In addition, she pointed out that the popular saying “behind every successful man there is a woman behind him” does not work in opposite circumstances as men rarely support the career oriented mindset of their wives.

Moreover, she mentions that in an even situation between a man and a woman, preference would be offered to a man, as there is societal belief that women are not “cut” for the leadership position, and cannot take much pressure and workload, which brings us back to the problem described above (Respondent №5, Astana city akimat, 2024).

Another respondent adds to this argument on the family support importance with the saying “Sociocultural expectations can create pressure on women who seek positions in the akimat, even if she is supported by her family”. She also reiterates the fact that support from the spouse might be crucial in representation of women in the political sphere and that harmony in family is a key to the arranging societal conditions that would influence representation of women in professional-type jobs and local governments (Respondent №1, Esil district akimat, 2024).

Second group of respondents' answers skew towards the problem definition of underrepresentation of women in akimats, as the systematic outcome of the cultural factors of the Kazakh nation. These were the people, who most mentioned the impact of traditions, mentality and family image on the career development of the women seeking career development in akimat. This group of people accounts for 70% of the respondents' pool of the interviewees. Many of the respondents in this category have mentioned that “Kazakh traditions” and mentality of the society towards women choosing career over family drastically influences the number of women in modern day local policy making and their

numbers in city and district akimats. More popular arguments people have mentioned during their interviews include:

“Strong cultural heritage and background of Kazakh women create token roles for young women to follow, even if that means abandoning one's vision and ideals.” (Respondent №7, Nura district akimat, 2024).

“Family in Kazakh history was primarily in the hands of the women to take care of, and the choice to shift this paradigm is often faced with critique from family members and close circle of individuals that surround the woman in question.” (Respondent №7, Nura district akimat, 2024).

“Modern day Kazakh society is not ready yet for true gender equality” (Respondent №3, Astana city akimat, 2024).

“...in society they often interpret tradition in a way that is most beneficial to them. Patriarchal attitudes: women are assigned traditional roles in the family (taking care of household chores and children) instead of an active political career” (Respondent №9, Nura district akimat, 2024).

“Local mentality plays an important role; if in the north this is strongly emphasized, then in the south there is more discrimination.” (Respondent №9, Nura district akimat, 2024).

“For men, women are domestic creatures” and “...a woman is only a social worker” (that is, she works only in healthcare and education)” (Respondent №7, Nura district akimat, 2024).

As harsh as these quotes to read, this describes the cultural beliefs around career-building women in modern Kazakhstan's society. Respondents reported that embedded roles that were established from centuries ago still terrorize women in 2024, resulting in severe distrust of women in the professional field and general expectation of women's education and role in the family. Caretaker role that is so prominent in southern regions still influences women in Astana, progressive landmark in Kazakhstan's modern history. Most of the respondents, representing women in decision-making positions mentioned that above all, cultural view and judgement from the elder family members have affected their progress in professional career, when they were initially pursuing positions in local governments. As positions and districts changed in the process of data collection, reasons for underrepresentation of women remained to be closely affiliated with the cultural norms and

traditions of Kazakhs society throughout all 10 interviews taken in the span of the last 6 months (Respondents №2, 6, 8, 9, 10, Astana local governments, 2024.).

For the sake of the research, one should understand that these findings are representative of the groups of factors chosen for this exact study and in reality responses of interviewees overlapped when deciding key factors of women underrepresentation in local akimats. Therefore, as for the sake of this work two groups of factors are observed separately, reality presented more of the venn-diagram type of presentation rather than individual pie chart parts.

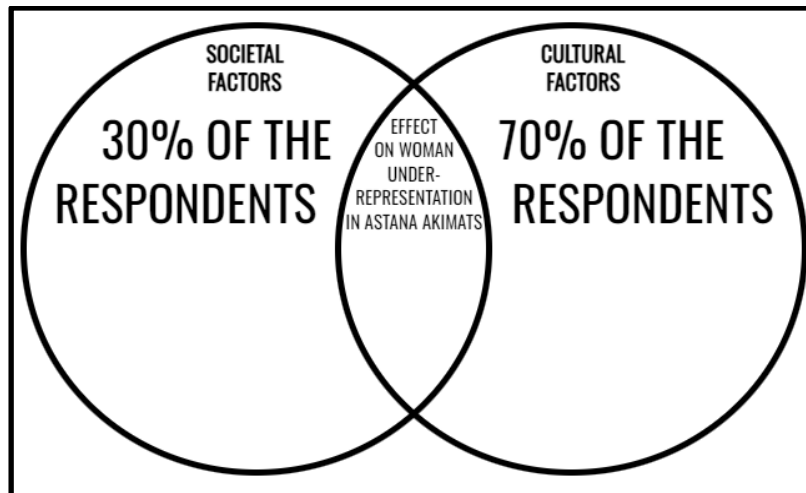


Figure 3. Interconnected and overlapped nature of the factors influencing women underrepresentation in Astana akimats.

Lastly, an interesting observation was made based on the interview pool of respondents that were available for the study. Comparison of answers between men respondents and women respondents has shown that men are more reluctant in identifying barriers for women's growth. 3 men participating in an interview were harder to work with as they gave broad answers that do not allow to define the gap of struggles of men and women in the workspace. On the other hand, women are more responsive when asked to identify what parts of their work or daily life creates constraints for healthy career development. As was mentioned before, for women balancing active career development and domestic responsibilities has proven to be a difficult and consuming task. Nature, reasons and implications of this division of arguments is to be discussed further.

6. Discussion

The low representation of women in the akimats of Astana remains outside the achievements in the field of gender equality. The interviews highlighted the multifaceted nature of this issue, while emphasizing the fact that cultural factors overlap, creating barriers to women's participation in government.

Deeply established cultural and social norms dictate traditional gender roles, assigning women most often household responsibilities, while men should work in leadership positions. These gender stereotypes reinforce the view that the female is less qualified or capable of making important complex decisions in akimats, thereby further strengthening barriers to their advancement. The respondents shared about the social expectations that determine the priority of men's leadership roles, consolidating discriminatory attitudes towards women in politics, in particular in the akimat. The pressure exerted on women by the family and society has not been canceled, which in turn further strengthens these norms, thereby discouraging women from seeking political positions and contributing to the creation of an atmosphere of gender inequality in akimats. Added to this is the lack of female leaders in akimats, which reinforces the perception that women are not suitable for senior management positions. The lack of role models or a small number of examples of successful women in leadership positions can deter aspiring candidates from realizing their potential, political ambitions, while perpetuating a vicious circle of underrepresentation.

Based on the content analysis conducted after receiving the interview results, we may notice a more frequent use of terms such as cooking, cleaning, parenting, which leads us to such a barrier as "domestic responsibilities". These responsibilities often serve as a stop for women to move up the career ladder. For example, "For men, women are domestic creatures" and "...A woman is just a social worker." (That is, she works only in the field of health and education). This directly affects a woman's ability to develop in this field.

On the contrary, respondents that base their answers on the political side of the question, report that developments in the Mazhilis, the lower chamber of the parliament, and senate that promote gender equality in the workplace, have spillover effect on the local governments, even though quotas do not directly affect the hiring process in akimats. This way, one respondent, from city akimat, Secretary of the women's affairs commission has informed us that currently in Astana, there are no systematic barriers for women to be employed in local government institutions and that women can aim for any position available

through meritocratic system of advancement. She, also, pointed out that modern women are born leaders and take equal part of the senior staff in that akimat. This respondent was the one to point out that the importance of quotas introduced in the Mazhilis, that required 30% of the decision making apparatus to consist of women, young leaders and people with disabilities, to have spillover effects on the representation in their workplace specifically. She proudly announced that in the offices nearby, the majority of the department heads were women. She attributed this result to the fact that “young women today are very talented and active in seeking excellence in fields of leadership, legislation, and critical thinking. This results in a growing number of women in humanitarian fields where the majority of men-attributed hard-skill jobs fall short in understanding the importance and relevance of policy making in local, district-wide and city-wide scale.” She has finished her argument with the fact that Astana, being a pioneer in active work-place representation, hosts a lot of opportunities for women to apply for decision making positions and that in the last five years women have made a giant leap in overcoming the gender barrier thanks to self-development and education.

The interviews explained the diverse nature of the underrepresentation of women in akimats, highlighting the interrelationship of cultural factors. Removing these barriers requires concerted efforts at both the systemic and societal levels, with an emphasis on promoting gender equality, empowering women and creating inclusive governance structures. By introducing various concepts based on interviews conducted, Kazakhstan has the opportunity to achieve significant success in the issue of gender equality in local authorities and subsequently with the development of representative democracy.

Interviews and their analysis demonstrate that cultural and social norms, including established stereotypes, customary practices and mentality significantly affect the representation of the female in leadership positions and hinder women's career growth. This is proved by the fact that the percentage of women in senior positions in local authorities in Astana is significantly lower than the total number of employees.

The women shared the importance of balancing family responsibilities with a professional component, highlighting cultural norms, which in turn consolidate the division of representation by gender, limiting the participation of women in leadership positions.

Thus, women emphasize how cultural expectations and traditional gender roles intersect with each other, creating huge invisible barriers to professional and career growth in Kazakhstan.

In addition, mentioning the terms used by respondents, such as "nation, people, traditions, and mentality" suggests that cultural factors are also one of the systemic barriers to this problem. "The rich cultural heritage and background of Kazakh women create symbolic roles for young women to follow, even if it means abandoning their vision and ideals." It is important to note that in this way the cultural problem is more acute for us in comparison with the social one. Three of the men interviewed find it difficult to provide detailed answers to questions about systematic barriers, since they encounter such problems much less often, almost never. In connection with the patriarchal society in Kazakhstan, the literary review also confirms these words. Accordingly, this made conducting interviews with men harder than with women.

By getting rid of these systemic barriers and developing gender equality, Kazakhstan can create equal opportunities for women to participate in decision-making processes and shape the future of its people.

7. Conclusion

The shortage of women in leadership positions leads to a lack of full legitimacy and effectiveness of political institutions. It is important to mention that gender equality in local government is not just about equity, it is more about creating a strong and developed society. This study examined the complex structure of systematic biases that influence women's representation in decision-making positions in Astana's akimats. It also provides key results that explain the existence of the problem and recommends solutions. Based on the results of interviews conducted with representatives of five akimats of Astana, it can be understood that there is a complex of factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in local authorities.

Cultural norms have been established as deep-rooted complex barriers to women's participation in local government. The majority of respondents cited ingrained cultural beliefs in society as the cause of gender inequality. These norms define social roles, reinforcing gender stereotypes, thereby constraining women to leadership positions. Speaking about traditional gender roles, in Kazakhstan, due to the expectations of society,

men are given priority, which reinforces the discriminatory attitude towards women in politics. Do not forget about the pressure from family and society, the lack of female leaders in Kazakhstan, leading to the opinion that women are less suitable for managerial work. This opinion echoes the conclusions from the existing literature and once again highlights the influence of cultural factors on the manifestation of women in the akimats of Astana.

Some respondents believe that there are no systematic barriers, while others pointed to the existing quota, which promotes gender equality in Parliament. Twenty percent of respondents emphasized their influence. Accordingly, the gender dynamics of power affects the representation of women everywhere and it is their encouragement and promotion that will help create equal conditions for all, which is an important step towards fair representation.

The practical meaning of this work extends to various stakeholders, including politicians, government agencies, civil society organizations and the public. To begin with, politicians have the right to use their work results to create and promote political reforms that aim to reduce or even eliminate all systemic barriers to women's representation in senior positions in local government. These can be systems such as gender quotas and the promotion of various educational programs that consider gender issues. Further, government agencies that are responsible for local government, such as city akimats, can use this information to approve institutional changes that predispose to gender equality and inclusivity. By eliminating any discriminatory practices and creating a supportive working environment, these institutions can encourage women's participation in the decision-making process. Of course, constant research and monitoring are needed in order to monitor progress in the implementation of gender equality in local governments, identify new concepts and make informed policy decisions. In fact, universal efforts from all sectors are needed to address the fundamental causes of underrepresentation of the women and promote inclusive and representative democracy.

The limitation of this study is that there were a small number of respondents in the interview. Most of the employees of the akimat, including the akims themselves and their deputies, refused to take part in the interview after learning the topic of our research. In addition, in light of the current discussions in Kazakhstan about the problems of discrimination, violence and harassment against women, many men have expressed their

hidden reluctance to engage in any discussion with us. These difficulties led to a decrease in the number of participants, which certainly limited the selection and depth of information received throughout the work. This limitation potentially leads to a less broad understanding of our question, missing key factors and nuances that could be highlighted with a diverse sample in the interview. In addition, the reluctance of men to answer our questions introduced bias into the study itself. A male perspective on this issue could provide valuable information about the structural barriers that women often face in local government.

The women did not feel completely comfortable talking about this topic. The number of possible respondents who felt unsafe and refused to be interviewed suggests that there are indeed problems that require immediate solutions.

In order to eliminate the problem of underrepresentation of the women in senior positions in the akimats of Astana, the introduction of gender quotas will be a significant action. In turn, gender quotas will contribute to ensuring the representation of women in leadership positions, which will gradually lead to gender balance and diversity in akimats. In addition, this implies increased transparency, which will promote accountability and fairness in the recruitment process, thereby ensuring that, regardless of gender, any qualified candidate will have the same opportunities for promotion. In addition, along with the introduction of quotas and the creation of transparency in hiring, it is necessary to focus on educating male employees about the importance of gender equality and the presence of women in leadership positions. Accordingly, the implementation of gender awareness programmes can help challenge existing traditional gender norms and customs. Such programs may consist of master classes, various seminars and training that will be aimed at promoting an understanding of the experiences and problems that all women most often face in the workplace.

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