



Lessons Learned and Pathways to the Future

Aliya Kuzhabekova, Naureen Durrani, and Zumrad Kataeva

This volume marked the first attempt to compile current research on the intersection of gender and education in Central Asia. Divided into two distinct parts, the first section offered a comparative examination of the gender policy landscape, encompassing both contemporary and historical perspectives, along with an analysis of various gender equality indicators across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The subsequent section introduced the reader to an array of contemporary empirical studies authored by both established and emerging researchers, shedding light on crucial facets of gender equality in education within the region. In this concluding chapter we draw some general observations about the current trends concerning gender equality within

A. Kuzhabekova (✉)

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

e-mail: aliya.kuzhabekova@ucalgary.ca

N. Durrani · Z. Kataeva

Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan

e-mail: naureen.durrani@nu.edu.kz

Z. Kataeva

e-mail: zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz

© The Author(s) 2025

A. Kuzhabekova et al. (eds.), *Gender and Education in Central Asia*,

Palgrave Studies in Gender and Education,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75301-5_12

Central Asian education systems, reflect on the current state of research on the topic, as well as identify future directions for scholarship, policy, and practice. Our aim is to pave the way for future policymaking and research, identifying directions for strategic action and transformative change.

LESSONS ON THE STATE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

A noteworthy theme emerging across the studies is that gender equality is widely acknowledged as an important area of action by policymakers in the region. All countries have become signatories of important international agreements, adopted domestic legislation pertaining to the protection of the rights of women, and most have joined international assessments on gender equality. While the level of commitment to translating policies into action varies among countries—with some countries falling short in tracking policy implementation or allocating adequate resources to achieve policy targets—in general, the governments of all Central Asian states seem to realize that the economic competitiveness and social development of the region depend on adherence and success in the implementation of gender equity policies.

Another important observation across Central Asia is the complex interplay of the Soviet, traditional, Islamic, and Western neoliberal discourses on the formation of modern gender role expectations, the conceptualization of the role of education in the reproduction of gender norms and structures in societies, as well as in the process of implementation of gender equity-related policies. These influences play out differently both between and within country contexts, as well as across organizational, professional, and family environments, producing varying dynamics influencing the educational aspirations and pathways of women. At the same time, these influences clash and compete with one another in each of the countries observed. The emerging conflicting gender role expectations complicate women's experiences, and require skillfulness in navigating the different sets of such expectations and the ability to produce different performances depending on the specific audience and the related gender norms at play. However, they also empower the women, allowing them to play one set of conflicting expectations against the other.

The complex interplay of Soviet, traditional, Islamic, and Western discourses is complicated further by the displacement of the Russian colonial discourse by the Western neocolonial one. This displacement is accompanied by the appropriation of the self-ascribed modernizing role in the liberalization of the Central Asian woman. Both the old and the new colonizing discourses obscure local voices and initiatives, misrepresent some influences in the region, such as religion and tradition and silence local players and activists in the development of gender policies, including those in education.

The studies in the volume also revealed the complex mechanisms by which gender norms are constructed and impact the educational choices and experiences of women. Gender expectations are communicated through various channels, including within families (by parents, siblings, in-laws, and spouses), educational organizations (by teachers/faculty members, peers, and educational materials), future employers at internship sites, supervisors and colleagues in case of women leaders, and society at large via social media, gossip, and other ways of communicating general societal discourse. Conventional gender expectations are pervasive, whereas any non-compliance with them is more consequential for women than men in each of the countries we explored.

As in the Soviet Union, the key rationale justifying women's participation in the labor force and their pursuit of education is economic. Neoliberal capitalism, which has brought about significant socio-economic differentiation and fierce competition, pushes families to consider women as serious economic players who can contribute to the family budget via participation in the labor force or can increase a family's social position by attracting higher levels of dowry or a more educated and economically promising match. Economic reasoning pushes some spouses and parents to accept their wives' and daughters' enrollment in higher education and employment, as well as assume some of the conventional women's roles in the family despite the prohibitive gender stereotypes to provide support to the female earner.

Similar to other emerging nations, another characteristic of gender dynamics in Central Asian societies is the importance of women in the societal construction of national identity in the context of linguistic and ethnic identity revival after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In most of the countries of the region, the woman is viewed not only as the primary caretaker but also as the Mother of the Nation and the Keeper of the Traditions. The societies are very prescriptive with respect to a woman's

acceptable wardrobe, behavior, and gender roles. Education plays a vital role in national identity formation, and girls are constrained in their educational choices and educational experiences not only due to the social views about their role as women but also due to their important roles as keepers of ethnic/national identity. This inter-dependence of gender and national identity constructing roles of women complicates the experiences of girls in education and increases the complexity of any actions aimed at achieving equal status of women with men in the societies.

Notably, the region is not homogeneous in terms of the achievement of gender equity. There is much differentiation in women's experiences in education shaped by cultural, linguistic, rural/urban, religious, and other dimensions. This differentiation is difficult to capture, research, and address in policy and educational practice.

THE STATE OF CURRENT RESEARCH ON GENDER EQUALITY

This volume clearly demonstrates an increasing interest within the scholarly community in understanding the interplay between gender and education in Central Asia. Importantly, much of the scholarly work has been done by local scholars. Many of these scholars are current graduate students, raising questions about the sustainability of the research, given the uncertainty surrounding how many of them will pursue research careers in the future. However, even this student-driven research is important as it lays the foundations for understanding complex issues, brings unique local perspectives, and helps expand the currently limited empirical data. Moreover, most of the local scholars are women with few male scholars contributing to the discussion. While women researchers provide an insider perspective, the lack of men among the scholarly community has negative consequences for gender advocacy. The absence of men in research and advocacy has reduced "gender equality" to "women's problem", putting the onus of women to fight the struggles for gender equality. The alienation of men from gender activism and research casts a long shadow on the hopes of transforming gender relations in Central Asia and across the globe.

As should be clear from our collection, as well as literature reviews conducted by the authors included in the volume, much of the existing research on gender in education in Central Asia is qualitative. This can be explained by the nascent state of research on the topic, but, even more

so, by the absence of reliable statistical data and difficulties in conducting survey research in the context of Central Asia, which could facilitate quantitative explorations. Available statistical data is not disaggregated and is not collected in a way that would allow cross-country comparisons.

In addition to that, most studies focus on the experiences of women in a single country and there is a lack of comparative explorations. Our volume includes only three studies that explore the issue of gender in education comparatively using secondary data from international assessments and qualitative data from interviews with women leaders in higher education. Meanwhile, given the shared past and many parallels in the way gender norms influence the experiences of women in education in the region, it is important to engage in comparative studies across regions.

One limitation of the existing scholarship is that current explorations of gender focus on the experiences of women. We have not been able to identify studies analyzing boyhood, manhood, and the experiences of males in education, as well as the influence of gender norms and stereotypes on the males' educational pathways and employment in education. Few studies have also explored the views and experiences of males and females comparatively. Meanwhile, it is essential to understand the experiences of both genders since the viewpoints and insights about the challenges and needs of one gender may improve our understanding of the challenges and needs of the other.

We also faced difficulties in securing a chapter on LGBTQ+ issues in the region. These difficulties also speak to the point that gender is understood by policymakers and scholars in Central Asia mostly in terms of the women/men binary, and broader conceptualization of the field is necessary to include sexuality and gender orientation. The societies in Central Asia continue to be closed to the discussion of the rights of LGBTQ + individuals, and gender equality policies do not discuss any measures addressing discrimination of the social group. Meanwhile, very few scholars problematize the fact and engage in the exploration of the experiences of LGBTQ + students and employees in education.

Another important revelation from our volume is that much of existing research is conceptualized with Western theories, and there are very limited efforts aimed at providing local interpretations and conceptual frameworks to understand the mechanism by which gender norms and stereotypes are formed and exert influence on educational choices and experiences. Meanwhile, the unique history and current context of

Central Asia is a fertile ground for the identification of new theories, which can be used to understand both women's and men's experiences in education.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In general, research on gender and education in Central Asia is still in nascent stages and more scholarly effort in this regard is required. The Central Asian context is very unique and has a lot to offer in terms of both novel empirical insights and theories. Edited volumes and special issues focused on the topic could stimulate interest among and support the first steps of emerging scholars from the region, as well as bring together more experienced and early career scholars, also contributing to the emergence of collaborative and comparative efforts.

While there is definitely a place for more qualitative explorations, more studies of the quantitative nature need to be conducted. This might require government support in improving the quality of data collection and in funding data collection implemented by the researchers themselves. Quantitative studies could lead to local theory building and testing, as well as might have a greater influence on policy and practical decision-making in education. With the inclusion of socio-demographic data, such as ethnicity, location, religious affiliation, socio-economic circumstances, sexuality, and so on, nuanced intersectional analyses can be undertaken to identify groups experiencing multiple disadvantages that need greater policy support.

There also seems to be a need for more critical studies of gender issues in education. Most of the existing research tends to be informed by pragmatism and is descriptive in nature. There is little critical assessment of colonial and neocolonial discourses and their influence on the construction and reproduction of gender in Central Asian societies. More studies need to be conducted from the critical and decolonial perspectives.

The time may also have come for scholars of gender equity education in the region to enrich Western conceptualizations with some local theoretical interpretations, which might help better explain the condition of women in education in Central Asia, as well as inform the existing global discourse on the topic by bringing new conceptualizations, variables, and explanations. Similarly, local scholars might consider bringing local methodological approaches, which might not exist in

current global scholarship on the problem of gender equity in education. These approaches might be informed by local traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices.

The current conceptualization of gender is limited to the men/women binary with most studies focusing on the experiences of women. Meanwhile, current views of gender assume fluidity and performativity with the notions of “male” and “female” being constantly re-defined by gendered actors and structures. What remains underrepresented is research on how gender norms shape the experiences of non-binary and gender-fluid individuals. Without the missing LGBTQ + individuals’ perspectives, no complete picture of gender equity in education can emerge. Future studies must address these gaps to present a more inclusive and holistic perspective on this issue.

Finally, some implications can be made for future research on gender equality in other country contexts or research on the region conducted by scholars from outside. First, more studies need to be conducted in post-Soviet countries outside Central Asia. The broader post-Soviet region offers many important insights about the interaction of past and emerging colonial structures with traditional cultural norms in shaping gendered experiences in education. Understanding this dynamic is important for addressing gender inequality in many formerly colonized societies. Second, important insights can be drawn from comparative explorations of gender inequality in education in Central Asian countries and countries outside the region. Such explorations could make some differences in the causative mechanism more visible and could reveal factors contributing to the differentiation. Third, our volume reveals that there is a growing number of scholars from the region, who can conduct rigorous research on gender issues in education. These scholars bring a more critical and culturally informed perspective on gender dynamics in their native countries and have a greater commitment to put the results of their studies to action, to change the condition of women, as well as to ensure that the solutions are locally relevant and locally owned. Future scholars of gender equality in the region should put greater effort to engage the local scholars in their studies both to empower the local agents of change, but also to counteract colonialism in knowledge production.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE POLICY AND PRACTICE

Several policy and practical recommendations can be made from the collection of studies in this volume. It is important to recognize that the implementation of the suggested approaches should be tailored to the specific socio-economic and cultural context of each country. However, some common recommendations applicable across the country contexts analyzed can be identified.

First, many of the studies we analyzed reveal that young women and girls in Central Asia seem to lack positive role models. Many women participants indicate that they would like to have such role models available in education, as well as in the public policy arena. Some of our studies revealed that positive role models are missing from textbooks, other books, movies, and other media of mass culture productions. Meanwhile, success stories are available both from the history of the countries and from present-day reality. Some concerted effort on behalf of education and cultural policymakers is necessary to infuse curriculum and artistic productions with positive examples of women who managed to achieve influential roles and leave an impact on society. Such role models will encourage women in Central Asia to overcome and gradually change gender stereotypes and gender expectations.

Second, given that family is important in shaping girls' educational pathways, policy makers and educators concerned with gender equity need to pay greater attention to parental engagement in the education of both girls and boys. Parents need to be included in the decision-making about curriculum, teaching approaches, financing mechanisms, and teacher professional development. They need to understand why and how gender equity policies and practices are conducted and what their role in the process of reshaping gender norms with respect to girls' education should be.

Third, economic mechanisms have been shown to play a decisive role in shaping the educational pathways of girls. Availability, sufficiency, and disciplinary distribution of financial aid to support higher education can significantly influence family decision-making about girls' education and the choice of majors. In the long term, such financial mechanisms can change the balance of men and women in currently male-dominated professions, can multiply the number of available women and male role models in gendered professions and may gradually change labor market and leadership opportunities for both genders. Greater caution and more

thinking should be put into the development of effective mechanisms of quotas and financial aid targeting girls in non-traditional specializations.

Fourth, governments in each of the countries in the region should put more effort into systematic data collection on gender equity in the region, as well as put more resources to support independent data collection via surveys by scholars. Data is essential in providing a detailed picture of the distribution of educational opportunities and resources across genders. It is also essential to understand effective mechanisms for addressing the unequal distribution of such opportunities.

Fifth, some government support might be necessary in the form of funding to support comparative explorations of gender in education across countries of the region. There are many commonalities in the experiences of women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Comparative studies could help identify commonalities and differences, lead to the development of local theories, and identify effective regional solutions.

As the final word in this volume, we would like to express our strong belief that education can play a transformative role in gender equality in the region and in the world in general. By bringing together the voices of local and international experts on gender in education in Central Asia we wanted to play a role toward that end. We hope that we have achieved the goal, have strengthened the scholarly community specializing in the topic, and have made an important contribution to the improvement of the status of women in education in the region.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

