



## CHAPTER 1

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# Situating Gender and Education in Central Asia: An Introduction

*Aliya Kuzhabekova, Naureen Durrani, and Zumrad Kataeva*

This edited volume is devoted to a comparative analysis of gender equality in Central Asia. The region is comprised of five post-Soviet countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, which became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. These countries share common historical and linguistic roots and neighbor one another in the landlocked area in the center of Eurasia. The countries are multiethnic with a dominant Muslim majority and a significant share of youth in the total composition of the population. They vary in the level of economic development with Kazakhstan being the richest and Tajikistan being the

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A. Kuzhabekova (✉)

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada  
e-mail: [aliya.kuzhabekova@ucalgary.ca](mailto:aliya.kuzhabekova@ucalgary.ca)

N. Durrani · Z. Kataeva

Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan  
e-mail: [naureen.durrani@nu.edu.kz](mailto:naureen.durrani@nu.edu.kz)

Z. Kataeva

e-mail: [zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz](mailto:zumrad.kataeva@nu.edu.kz)

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poorest among the five (Tabaeva et al., 2021). The countries have inherited a well developed educational system from the Soviet Union and at the start of independence had strong legacies of the Soviet gender equality promoting policies.

Due to the presence of similarities and differences between the Central Asian countries, the region is an interesting context for comparative analysis of gender equality in education. Such an analysis would provide useful insights into how variations in gender equality might be explained by differences in economic, social, and cultural contexts across the countries, as well as reveal some common features of the country contexts, which might explain similarities in gender-related issues, norms, and policies. Moreover, the comparative study would bring an important contribution for global scholarship of gender in education. Despite the uniqueness of the context, the region shares some similarities with both the Global North and the South. Like the Global North, the region exhibits nearly universal access to schools, with the teaching profession largely feminized. Yet at the same time, these countries are young nation-states involved in constructing and consolidating their national identities which is a gendered process globally but more so in emerging nations.

Gender equality has been one of the main priorities in educational reform in Central Asia for over a century. The region's pursuit of a better condition for women and girls both in education and in other spheres of social and economic life is as old as that in the West and other countries of the world. Interestingly, throughout most of the history of the region, the concern about gender equality has been fueled, to a larger extent, by a variety of external players rather than by local activists. Recently, however, the increase in socio-economic differentiation across the region, as well as the accompanying revival of traditional and Islamic beliefs and practices, have led to the worsening of the situation with women's rights. This contributed to the awakening of local activism and scholarship, which was concerned about the declining situation with gender equality in education and other spheres of social life. Gender equality will most likely continue to be an important item on the education reform agenda in the region.

The first efforts at expanding women's access to education and other human rights date back to the beginning of the twentieth century during the first achievements of the women's suffrage movement in Europe. These achievements were reincarnated in the Bolshevik's women's rights agenda in pre-revolutionary Tsarist Russia, whose struggle for women's liberalization, educational opportunities, and universal voting rights,

together with the struggle for access to capital for peasantry and factory workers played a pivotal role in the October revolution, the fall of Tsarism and, eventually, the creation of the Soviet Union. As the Soviet leadership tried to maintain imperial Russia's grip on Central Asia, the problematization of gender became an important tool in the recolonizing discourse of the Soviets. This facilitated the framing of the traditional social structures in Central Asia as patriarchal and backward and the valorization of the educational reform efforts in the region as acts of civilizing modernization (Kennedy-Pipe, 2004).

With the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the arrival of the new West-driven modernization project across Central Asian countries, gender has been re-problematized on the educational reform agenda in Central Asia. The Soviet achievements have been frequently and conveniently disregarded, while the reviving of traditional norms has been often and somewhat unjustifiably blamed for impeding progress toward the currently idealized Western achievements in gender equality in education and beyond. Central Asia countries are now part of international gender assessments (such as the Global Gender Index) and are committed participants of the UN's initiatives aimed at the elimination of discrimination against women and the achievement of gender equality around the world. Influenced by the Western liberal democratic agenda, gender equality in education has surfaced in the region's policy discourse for the first time, albeit in rather subtle and subdued ways.

Although to a different extent, women in the countries of the region continue to have less economic and political power, as well as experience greater rates of poverty, exploitation, marginalization, and violence. They are more likely than men to be unemployed. In 2022, the labor force participation rate of women stood at 48.5% for women as compared to that of men—64.3%. The gender wage gap is larger than the similar gap in other countries of the world: working women earn about 60% of what men earn in Tajikistan, 61% in Uzbekistan, 75% in the Kyrgyz Republic, and 78% in Kazakhstan (Proskuryakova & Seitz, 2023). Women are persistently underrepresented in the governments and leadership positions across the countries of the region. In 2022, the lowest female representation was found in the upper and lower houses of the Uzbekistan parliament (17% and 16%, respectively) and the upper house of Kazakhstan (10%) (UNICEF, 2022). Finally, 18% of women in Central Asia have reported being victims of domestic violence in 2023 (Paramo et al.,

2023). The deteriorating state of gender equality in the region can be attributed to increasing socio-economic disparities, declining educational quality, and the resurgence of patriarchal traditional and Islamic norms and practices, which have been brought about by economic liberalization at the expense of social support and associated policies. Unsurprisingly, Central Asia has recently seen an increase in domestically originating gender equality activism (Mattei, 2022). Although the situation with the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals is harder to assess in the absence of official statistics, gay activism is also present in some countries of the region (Amatbekova, 2023). Overall, gender will stay a key item of the socio-economic reform agenda in Central Asia for decades to come.

Gender equality remains a significant focus in the region's educational reform efforts. In some aspects, gender equality indicators in education are similarly low across the countries of the region, whereas, in other aspects, the region is very heterogeneous. For example, across all Central Asian countries, women are poorly represented in educational leadership at various levels, whereas in Kazakhstan women's representation in leadership surpasses the global trends (UNESCO Almaty, unpublished). In addition to that, they continue to be rather underrepresented as both faculty and students in science, technology, mathematics, and engineering fields (UNESCO Almaty, unpublished). On the other hand, in terms of rates of enrollment in postsecondary education, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have women outnumbering men, whereas the opposite is true for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (UNESCO Almaty, 2021). On a similar note, the representation of female teachers at the tertiary level varies between 37% in Tajikistan to 66% in Kazakhstan (UNESCO Almaty, 2021). The variation in achievement on gender equity parameters is determined by a variety of socio-cultural and economic factors. Educators in the region are increasingly concerned about achieving greater equality in education.

Among Central Asian policymakers, there is a growing recognition that achieving gender equality in education plays a crucial role in advancing the more general goal of achieving greater gender equality in society. Concerning the rights of women and girls, for example, some of the cited benefits include the following:

1. Quality education that is inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners can help to break down gender stereotypes and promote gender equity in the rest of society.

2. Gender-equitable education is one of the best ways to empower women and girls, help them reach their full potential, and contribute to national economic growth as productive members of society.
3. Educated women and girls are more likely to be active and informed citizens, and to participate in social and political activities.
4. Girls' education has a multigenerational impact. Educated girls are more likely to educate their own children, breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality.
5. Gender-equitable education, which provides girls and boys with education on healthy relationships and gender equality, can help to reduce the risk of gender-based violence (Gray Group International, 2024).

The renewed attention to gender equality in education in the policy and practitioner circles has been accompanied by the growth in scholarly interest. Increasingly, studies on gender equality in education in Central Asia are conducted by emerging local scholars. In some country contexts, such as Kazakhstan, this research is now supported not only by external donors but also by domestic funding agencies. This research holds the promise of improving the existing understanding of the causes and extent of the gender equality-related problems in education, as well as producing innovative research approaches, and resulting policy and practical solutions. Much of this research remains sporadic, spread across institutions and research centers, and scattered across domestic and international publication venues in a variety of disciplines. In the absence of local scholarly societies, local scholars have issues connecting with their international counterparts and one another. The transformative capacity of this research is undermined by this lack of a common research agenda and systematic understanding of the regional research community specializing in the topic.

This book serves as a timely and pivotal contribution to the field of gender and education research in Central Asia, offering a foundational framework for comparative research on the ways the region's educational policies, contents, processes, and practices impact gender relations. Despite the growing body of educational (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021) and gender studies research (Kataeva et al., 2023) in post-Soviet nations, including those in Central Asia, their global influence remains marginal in a global context. For instance, Hernández-Torrano et al.'s (2021) comprehensive review of educational research spanning

30 years (1992–2020) within post-Soviet regions revealed a mere 1.95% contribution to all education publications in the Web of Science Core Collection, with Central Asian nations collectively accounting for 4.2% of the total 6609 publications (p. 4). Similarly, Kataeva et al.'s (2023) analysis mapping gender studies literature from 1993 to 2021 in the Web of Science database illuminated the limited international visibility of gender studies publications within the region, which are predominantly found in local rather than global journals. Both studies underscore Kazakhstan's dominance in published research within these fields, overshadowing the other four Central Asian nations. Notably, Turkmenistan made a solitary contribution to both education (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021) and gender research (Kataeva et al., 2023), reflecting the challenges researchers face in the country with limited civil liberties and firmer control of the state on knowledge production.

Moreover, there is a scarcity of comparative studies within the region concerning education (Li, 2019) and gender studies (Kamp, 2009), with limited integration between these disciplines. This lack of disciplinary interaction emphasizes the urgent necessity for scholarly dialogues at the intersection of education and gender studies from a comparative standpoint. This book, therefore, seeks to provide a comparative perspective on education and gender dynamics in the region, aiming to enrich our comprehension of education's role in social transformation and reproduction within Central Asia.

Furthermore, historically, gender studies within post-Soviet contexts have predominantly focused on gender and sex disparities among children and adolescents (Kataeva et al., 2023). Yet, the recent shift toward a heightened emphasis on gender and gender equality indicates a pivotal juncture in academic discourse. By fostering essential scholarly discussions and interactions within a broader gender conceptualization as a social construct, which entails “norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other” as opposed to “biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons”, which entail sex (World Health Organization, 2024), the book endeavors to illuminate critical insights for academic advancement and improving policy and practice.

The purpose of this book is to present the ongoing research on gender equality in education in Central Asia. The edited volume brings together established and emerging scholars from Central Asia and scholars conducting research on the region from the West to explore policies,

statistical trends, and representative research on gender equality in education across post-Soviet Central Asia. In particular, the book provides (1) an overview of the development of policies aimed at the promotion of gender equality in education adopted by the governments of Central Asian countries since the countries became independent from the Soviet Union; (2) a comparative summary of statistics on change in gender equality indicators at various levels of education in the four countries throughout three decades of independence; (3) a sample of current research on various issues related to gender equality in education across the region by scholars from the region and beyond. We cover all five countries in the region—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, although to a different extent. This difference in coverage is linked to the variation in the local research capacity, levels of the country's openness and participation in international gender-related indices, as well as the different extent of public access to the statistical data.

The book presents a broad picture of the state of gender equality in education, relevant policies, and research, which will be beneficial for (1) scholars of educational reform, comparative education policy, international development, and gender equality in the post-Soviet area and beyond, (2) practitioners, development experts, and policymakers in the field of education in the region and other transitional economies with similar issues, (3) students enrolled in courses in sociology of education, educational policy, comparative education, development studies, and gender studies at universities within the region, other post-Soviet countries and Global North institutions that focus on Central Asia and post-Soviet contexts. The book serves as the first attempt to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of gender issues in education in the region.

Many chapters in the book are the result of collaborative efforts between established and emerging scholars, some of whom are our own students or alumni pursuing further education abroad or within the region. Our goal was to introduce the reader to the current research leaders on the topic, but also to give voice and offer training opportunity to local scholars entering the field, who will likely lead scholarship on the topic in the region. We believe that the voices of the emerging scholars are critical, especially considering that many come from the region and are women who have experienced gender inequality in their education and employment trajectories. Ensuring representation is crucial, as

Chankseliani (2017) points out that the majority of first authors of publications on post-Soviet countries are associated with institutions outside the region, and Waljee (2008) expresses concern that gender dynamics in Central Asia are predominantly studied by Western scholars. In contrast, the authors and editors of this volume are predominantly Central Asians. In the rare instances where they are not, they have either resided and worked extensively in the region or focused their studies on it at length. Thus, the book amplifies the marginalized indigenous perspectives within the uneven landscape of knowledge creation concerning Central Asia.

## OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

The volume is organized into four parts and 12 chapters. The first part includes this introduction, the second part of the book sets the stage for understanding the context in terms of gender equality in education while presenting some systematic analyses of existing scholarship, policy documents, and statistics on the region, while the third part provides examples of empirical studies of different issues in education with respect to gender equality. The chapters within the third part are organized without any particular order because we do not believe that any of the themes or countries are more important than others. The last part of the book entails key conclusions and recommendations.

The second part of the volume, as mentioned above, provides a context for gender equality reforms in the region, discussing key policy initiatives and related statistics. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the policy context for gender equality reforms in education in the region. It analyzes the evolution of gender equality policies from the post-Soviet era to the present, examining the interplay between Soviet legacies and contemporary Western influences on gender policies and reforms. It presents a landscape of the key players shaping gender equality initiatives within and outside education in each of the five countries in the region. It also summarizes key policy documents and reports serving as a framework for shaping gender equality initiatives with a focus on the education sector. The chapter concludes by addressing critical challenges faced by policymakers in advancing gender equality within education.

Chapter 3 identifies current and emerging issues related to gender equality in education using available statistical data. More specifically, the chapter provides a comparative analysis of education-related gender

equality indicators across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Comparative data includes (1) girls' expected and mean years of schooling, (2) girls' net enrolment rates in school by level, (3) girls' out-of-school rate, (4) male and female enrollment in tertiary education, (5) upper secondary school and tertiary completion rates for males and females, (6) tertiary graduation rates by the field of study, (7) statistics on the representation of women in teaching professions, (8) share of female researchers in various fields, and (9) statistics on women representation in leadership.

Part 3 of the book showcases a collection of contemporary empirical research on gender and education in the region. Most of the studies have been conducted by collaborative teams of emerging scholars from the region and established researchers working at the intersection of education and gender studies in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The aim was to both provide an overview of gender issues in education and to facilitate the development of local research capacity on the topic. While the majority of chapters focus on Kazakhstan due to varying research capacities in the region, all Central Asian countries, including Turkmenistan, are represented, filling a critical gap in the literature. Two chapters offer comparative perspectives: one contrasting the experiences of doctoral student mothers in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Chapter 8) and another exploring female leadership experiences in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Chapter 10). The remaining chapters investigate a single country in Central Asia. Collectively, Chapters 4 to 11 investigate diverse topics, including gender and textbook discourses, the education of rural girls, the factors associated with the under-representation of women in higher education and challenges in implementing affirmative policies, factors associated with the propensity of women's inclusion in NEET (people who are not in education, employment or training) statistics, barriers and facilitators for women's progression in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), the experiences of women leaders in academia, and the experiences of women in the under-explored context of Turkmenistan.

Altogether, the diverse array of chapters sheds light on crucial gender and education issues across Central Asia. Nevertheless, despite our efforts to address the overlooked research on LGBTQ + youth experiences in education in Central Asia, this gap remains. We originally planned to include an empirical study to examine how sexuality education is incorporated into the curriculum for LGBTQ + youth. Unfortunately, this

chapter did not come to fruition as the author withdrew from the book due to safety concerns amid heightened persecution of gay activists in the region, exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Research on LGBTQ+ youth education will be covered in the next edition of the volume.

Part 3 of the book begins with Chapter 4, in which Bekzhanova and Durrani highlight the critical role of history textbooks in nation-building in post-Soviet Kazakhstan by exploring the complex interplay between gender dynamics, national identity construction, and textbook discourses in history, a compulsory subject taught across all secondary schools. The authors analyze seven textbooks for grades 7 to 11 in Kazakh medium schools, utilizing both discursive and quantitative methods that conceptualize gender as three interrelated constructs—gender as category, construction, and deconstruction. Using poststructuralist notions of gender and national identities as performative and produced discursively via social regulation, particularly within educational settings, they underscore the power of textbooks in shaping discourses of national and gender identities. The authors contend that history textbooks often uphold male dominance, invisibilize female icons in national historiography, reinforce hegemonic masculinities, and promote idealized femininities. Even when portraying gender nonconformity, such as the depiction of female warriors, textbook narratives fail to challenge patriarchal norms, perpetuating male dominance and glorifying warfare. To shift education toward fostering egalitarian gender relations rather than reproducing gender power relations in society, the authors advocate for immediate action in addressing gendered messages in textbooks, developing inclusive curriculum guidelines for authors and reviewers, and supporting teachers in implementing gender-responsive practices.

In Chapter 5, Yakubova, Whitsel, Kuzhabekova, and Kataeva present the results of interviews with girls in Tajikistan to understand how cultural expectations of marriage affect the girls' educational aspirations and pursuits. The analysis is based on the data from 20 such interviews conducted with students at the secondary level. The study found that marriage expectations significantly influence girls' educational attainment, contributing to the persistently lower completion rates among females compared to their male counterparts. The chapter ends with a discussion of implications for research and educational practice.

Chapter 6, by Alimkhanova, explores Kazakhstani youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Pointing to the overrepresentation of women among NEET youth in the region, the study aims to fill the current gap in research on the youth by investigating why young women more often arrive at the NEET circumstance in Kazakhstan. By making use of the nationwide statistical database (the Labour Force Survey and PISA), this chapter identifies the socio-demographic and economic factors that affect girls on their way to becoming NEET in Kazakhstan. Beginning by reviewing and discussing the world and local literature on NEET women, the chapter is then followed by the analysis of the secondary statistical data. The chapter ends with a discussion of the implications of the findings for policy and practice aimed at assisting NEET women in Kazakhstan.

In Chapter 7, Kataeva explores barriers to girls' access and persistence in higher education in Tajikistan. Noting that currently less than 40% of women and girls are enrolled in higher education institutions in the country, the government introduced quotas to admit girls from rural areas into higher education institutions without university entrance examinations. While this policy has helped many girls enroll in and graduate from universities, it has faced difficulties in its implementation due to economic and cultural barriers that women encounter in the country. Additionally, the quota mainly channels women into traditionally feminized fields like teaching and medicine, with few women entering STEM disciplines. Using the analysis of policy documents, statistical data, reports of international organizations, available research articles, media sources, and an interview with an alumna of the quota program, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications for advancing, reimagining, and reinvigorating gender equality policies in higher education in Tajikistan.

In Chapter 8, Tabaeva and Durrani explore the lived experiences of doctoral student mothers (DSMs) in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as they navigate the intricate balance of familial responsibilities and academic pursuits. Despite historical similarities between the two countries, their distinct gender norms and educational systems call for a comparative examination. Drawing on Butler's gender theory and O'Reilly's maternal theory, this qualitative study uncovers shared challenges faced by DSMs in juggling roles as mothers, spouses, academics, and *kelins* (young brides living with their husband's extended family), leading to feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Factors such as gender expectations, lack of support, financial constraints, and negative feedback from supervisors

hinder their academic advancement, emphasizing the need for extended study timelines, supportive mentors, and accommodating institutions. Coping mechanisms, including family and peer support, as well as self-motivation, play a crucial role in addressing the mental health impact of these challenges. Notably, differences in experiences between Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani doctoral student mothers emerge, with the latter facing heightened pressures as *kelins*, limited spousal support, mobility constraints to field sites, and encountering greater institutional biases. The study advocates for broader implications to foster equal opportunities for DSMs in the region.

Chapter 9, by Almukhambetova, brings the reader back to Kazakhstan to explore the experiences of girls and women in the STEM pipeline. Women continue to be underrepresented in STEM fields across the world, as well as in Central Asia. Although women's representation in STEM majors and jobs is improving in Kazakhstan, barriers remain, and women experience the challenges associated with gender stereotyping and gendered structures in family, society, academia, professional societies, internship sites, and hiring organizations. Almukhambetova draws insights from her multiple studies undertaken over five years on the topic to contribute to our understanding of barriers that hinder girls' and women's participation, as well as facilitators to their retention and progression in the STEM educational and occupational pipeline in Kazakhstan.

Chapter 10, by Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, shifts focus from women and girls in the STEM pipeline to their experiences as leaders in higher education, zooming on the context of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The chapter reports the results of a comparative narrative inquiry conducted in the two countries. The reported study utilizes a combination of theories from gender studies (psycho-social, organizational, professionalization, institutional) to analyze the factors that shaped the experiences of female leaders as compared to their male counterparts in university settings and at the departments and ministries of education. The research also identifies the strategies women use to succeed in leadership positions, exploring both similarities and differences across the two country contexts.

Chapter 11, by Orazova and Kuzhabekova, brings us to the first English-language exploration of gender equality in education in Turkmenistan, a country previously hidden from scholars due to its relatively restricted access to research and the lack of interaction of domestic scholars with the international research community. In this chapter, the

scholars provide an overview of the government documents and available statistics, which shed light on the state of gender equality in the country during the Soviet period and post-independence. Subsequently, the chapter summarizes current research on the topic, which is relevant to the situation in Turkmenistan. Finally, the authors present the results of a qualitative study based on written accounts of Turkmen women, which explored the experiences of the women in education and the way in which the women's educational and career pathways had been influenced by societal expectations and gender norms.

In Part 4, the concluding Chapter 12 presents some final thoughts and implications from the studies included in the volume. Some general observations about differences and commonalities in the state of gender equality in education are made. Recommendations are provided for educational practitioners and policymakers inside and outside the region. Some directions for future research are delineated, including thematic gaps, promising theoretical orientations, and methodological approaches.

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