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## **SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN**

**Abstract.** The article explores the socio-cultural barriers hindering the empowerment of women and their active participation in political life in Kazakhstan. It focuses on the analysis of gender stereotypes and social norms that limit women's economic participation and contribute to gender-based violence. Several research methods were employed, including secondary data analysis, qualitative analysis, and comparative analysis. The article provides examples from Kazakhstan and other democratic countries to illustrate differences in gender policies. Key findings include the need to improve legislative measures to combat domestic violence and promote gender equality. Special attention is given to issues related to violence against women, inadequate legal protection, and cultural factors influencing individual behavior in society.

**Keywords:** *socio-cultural barriers, women's empowerment, gender equality, political participation, Kazakhstan.*

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**ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ӘЙЕЛДЕРДІҢ ҚҰҚЫҚТАРЫ МЕН  
МҮМКІНДІКТЕРІН КЕҢЕЙТУДЕГІ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК-МӘДЕНИ  
КЕДЕРГІЛЕР**

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**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада Қазақстанда әйелдердің құқықтары мен мүмкіндіктерін кеңейтуге және олардың саяси өмірге белсенді қатысуына кедергі келтіретін әлеуметтік-мәдени кедергілер қарастырылады. Әйелдердің экономикалық қатысуын шектейтін және гендерлік зорлық-зомбылыққа ықпал ететін гендерлік стереотиптер мен әлеуметтік нормаларды талдауға баса назар аударылады. Жұмыста бірнеше зерттеу әдістері қолданылды, соның ішінде қайталама деректерді талдау, сапалық талдау және салыстырмалы талдау. Мақалада гендерлік саясаттағы айырмашылықтарды көрсету үшін Қазақстаннан және басқа демократиялық елдерден мысалдар келтірілген. Негізгі тұжырымдар тұрмыстық зорлық-зомбылыққа қарсы заңнамалық шараларды жақсарту және гендерлік теңдікті ілгерілету қажеттілігін қамтиды. Әйелдерге қатысты зорлық-зомбылыққа, құқықтық қорғаудың жеткіліксіздігіне және жеке адамдардың қоғамдағы мінез-құлқына әсер ететін мәдени факторларға ерекше назар аударылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** *әлеуметтік-мәдени кедергілер, әйелдердің құқықтары мен мүмкіндіктерін кеңейту, гендерлік теңдік, саяси қатысу, Қазақстан.*

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**Айгерим Серикжанова, Роза Нургазина, Инабат Серикжанова, Баян Нагасбекова**

## **СОЦИОКУЛЬТУРНЫЕ БАРЬЕРЫ НА ПУТИ К РАСШИРЕНИЮ ПРАВ И ВОЗМОЖНОСТЕЙ ЖЕНЩИН В КАЗАХСТАНЕ**

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматриваются социально-культурные барьеры, препятствующие расширению прав и возможностей женщин и их активному участию в политической жизни Казахстана. Основное внимание уделяется анализу гендерных стереотипов и социальных норм, которые ограничивают экономическое участие женщин и способствуют гендерному насилию. В работе использованы несколько исследовательских методов, включая анализ вторичных данных, качественный анализ и сравнительный анализ. В статье приводятся примеры из Казахстана и других демократических стран для иллюстрации различий в гендерной политике. Основные выводы включают необходимость улучшения законодательных мер по борьбе с домашним насилием и продвижению гендерного равенства. Особое внимание уделяется проблемам, связанным с насилием в отношении женщин, недостаточной правовой защитой и культурным факторам, влияющим на поведение индивидов в обществе.

**Ключевые слова:** *социально-культурные барьеры, расширение прав и возможностей женщин, гендерное равенство, политическое участие, Казахстан.*

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### **Introduction**

In practice, there is a difference in life expectancy, literacy, education and earnings between men and women in the global trend of human development. At

the same time, women's opportunities are more limited than those of men. Unequal status of men and women leads to negative socio-economic consequences: gender asymmetry in the labor market, feminization of poverty, the problem of "double employment" of women. Gender discrimination is also manifested in family decision-making, unequal access to household income, unequal participation in raising children and receiving family benefits, domestic violence, trafficking of women for sexual exploitation, maternal mortality, short life expectancy of men, and low health indices in the population as a whole.

Within recent decades, women's empowerment has been the central theme of international development policy and practice. Empirical studies show that countries where opportunities and rights are more evenly distributed between women and men are more competitive generate higher incomes and have greater economic growth. Greater equality is also associated with less poverty. This essay seeks to elucidate the challenges of integrating gender in a development project to empower women. It demonstrates social and cultural factors that restrict women's economic participation and prevention of gender-based violence in Kazakhstan. It also illustrates how existing social networks, relations, and links disadvantage women.

### **Materials and Methods**

The aim of this study is to identify and analyze the socio-cultural barriers that hinder the empowerment of women and their active participation in political life in Kazakhstan. We utilized several research techniques including:

- secondary data analysis: collection and analysis of statistical data on women's position in the labor market, their unemployment rate, income levels, and educational attainment. Review and evaluation of existing legislative measures and programs aimed at combating domestic violence and promoting gender equality;
- qualitative analysis: investigation of gender stereotypes and social norms affecting women's behavior in society;
- comparative analysis: comparison of gender relations and policies in Kazakhstan with gender policies in developed democratic countries such as Germany and other European Union countries;
- documentary analysis: Examination of reports and recommendations from international organizations and programs aimed at empowering women, as well as other documents related to gender equality in Kazakhstan and beyond.

### **Results and Discussion**

The consequences of the transition period have increased gender inequality in the political, economic and social spheres of post-Soviet countries.

The consequences of the Kazakhstan claims to be a democratic, secular, legal and social state whose highest values are the individuals, their lives, rights and freedoms. It is a unitary state with a presidential form of government. As of April 4, 2024, the total population of Kazakhstan was 20 million, of which 10,2 million, or 51.2%, were women. Representatives of more than 100 ethnic groups and 18 confessions live in the country in peace and harmony [1].

Compared to other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is a positive example

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of progress in the region. Kazakhstan ranked 76th out of 146 countries, according to the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) – a comparative measure of gender gaps developed by the World Economic Forum to measure gender gaps in resources and opportunities regardless of a country's level of development [2]. The GGGI considers the following four main categories: economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

Kazakhstan is a full-fledged subject of international law and a party to more than 60 multilateral universal human rights treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and seven UN human rights conventions, the so-called "international human rights instruments. The state has signed the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1998) and signed the Optional Protocol of CEDAW (2001). But there are still unresolved problems of violence against women at the level of legislation: there is no simplified procedure for documenting the facts of violence, the removal of beatings, legal mechanisms to isolate the rapist from his victims, inadequate legal acts on sexual harassment, on compensation for damages - moral and financial. In general, there is a problem of poorly developed anti-discrimination mechanisms of rights protection and anti-discrimination legislation. There is a significant gap between the principle of equality between men and women proclaimed in the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and its implementation in practice.

Following organizations work in the field of women empowerment in Kazakhstan United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), International Labor Organization (ILO), United Entity for Gender and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank Central Asia Regional Office in Almaty (WB), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Asian Development Bank (ADB), Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

### **Economic participation**

Kazakhstan is dominated by a patriarchal system of values and strong Muslim traditions. Kazakhstani society is prone to traditional notions of the roles of women and men with a rigid distribution of responsibilities in families. Because of this, Kazakhstani women face a double burden of work due to household duties and employment in the workplace or business. Early marriage of girls is an openly unconcealed phenomenon in Kazakhstan, and bride kidnapping is extremely common, especially among ethnic groups such as Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Kurds, Turks and Azeris [3].

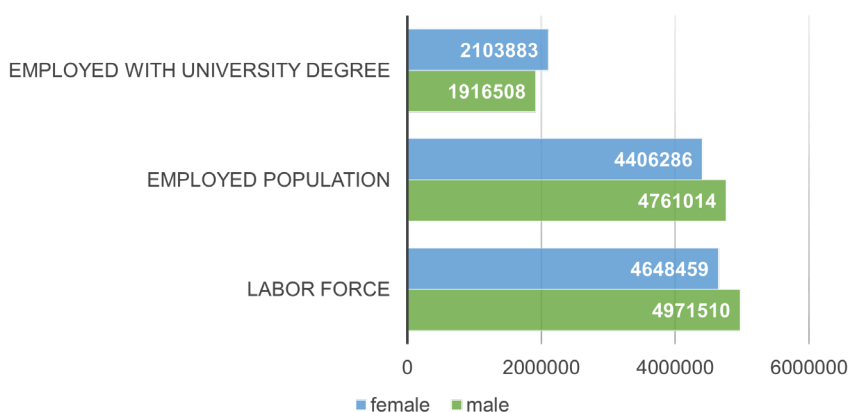
One of the most important gender problems in Kazakhstan's labor market is the high level of vertical segregation. The high level of vertical segregation, combined with the higher level of education of employed women, indicates not only the inefficient use of the educational and professional potential of the country's labor force, but also the widespread traditional gender stereotypes in Kazakhstan and

gender discrimination in hiring and promotions.

Women's labor has its own specific features, the main of which are substantiated by the prevalence of ideas about "women's professions" and women's "double responsibility. In this regard, there is a need to reproduce gender stereotypes that determine and fundamentally change attitudes toward women's labor force not only at the macro, but also at the meso and micro levels. An important problem is that it is necessary to find adequate methods and ways to influence the motivation of company managers and employees.

In assessing the situation by Gender Gap Index, it can be noted that Kazakhstan has already eliminated inequality between the sexes at all levels of education: quantitative gender inequality in primary and secondary education does not exist, and there is no problem of girls' access to any level of education [2].

**Figure 1.** Main indicators of the labor market in the Republic of Kazakhstan (1 quarter 2024)



The level of education for women in Kazakhstan is much higher than for men. Women make up 48% of the total labor force. In terms of gender, of the employed population, 4,7 million people were male and 4,4 million were female in 2024. It is noteworthy that the level of education among women is significantly higher than among men: 40.3% of employed men have a university degree, while for women the figure reaches 47.7%. [4] (figure 1) Nevertheless, a high level of education among women in the country does not guarantee them a prestigious, promising job with a decent income, promotion and does not protect them from being released from the labor market, while the level of education is one of the most important qualitative characteristics of the population, which is the basis for the formation of the country's human resources potential.

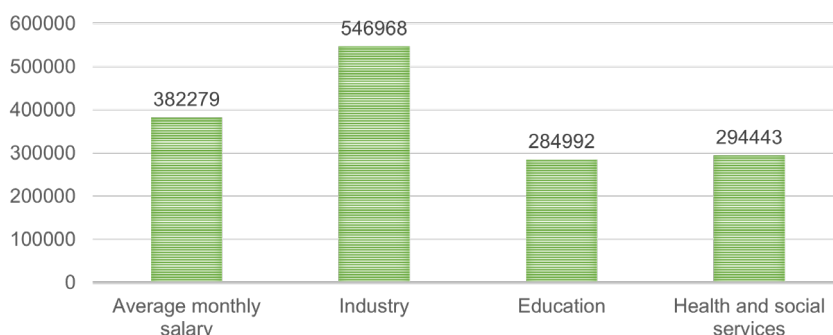
Gender asymmetric release of personnel is one of the manifestations of gender inequality in employment. The dynamics of the unemployment rate shows that during the first stages of radical reforms women suffered the greatest blow. The reduction of the total number of the employed population in the early 1990s was due to the active displacement of women from paid employment to the household or to the rapidly expanding field of irregular employment, the most common forms

of which are small retail trade and shuttle business.

A long period of unemployment reduces the competitiveness of an individual, reduces his chances of getting a job again. As a consequence, the chronic, "stagnant" unemployed have less motivation to work, to professional improvement and retraining, which can lead to the development of psychological apathy, change of lifestyle to dependent, focused on casual earnings against the background of falling living standards. It should be noted that unemployment is most common among women living in rural areas (5.6% vs. 5.3% in urban areas) [4].

Another result found in the earlier studies on this topic is that there are differences in accumulated experience and length of service. As a rule, women have less seniority due to breaks in employment related to the birth and upbringing of children. This fact can significantly reduce the competitive advantage of women in their careers. Especially, since the accumulated experience, which turns out to be relevant for professional advancement, is accumulated precisely in the periods when women have a particularly high probability of a break in employment. Thus, women may lose out on their starting positions compared to men.

**Figure 2.** Average monthly salary by type of economic activity (KZT)



One of the most important problems of women's labor in Kazakhstan remains the price of female labor. The size of the average wage of working women is increasing annually, but the gap between the average wage of men and women remains at 27% [5]. Currently, there is still significant sectoral wage differentiation. As in previous years, high wage levels remained in industries with predominantly male employment (Industry) - an excess of 143% the average wage. The lowest level of wages was in industries with predominantly female employment - education (74,5% of the national average), health care and social services (77%). [6] (Figure 2)

As for the gender pay gap, such a distribution in wages may be due to ethno-cultural specifics and women's active employment in domestic work, which is often not considered either as a profession or as an activity that should be paid for. The gender policy of the Kazakhstani state leads to a situation where "liberation" among women, expands their repertoire of possible roles and lifestyles, but does not affect men much. The Labor Code contains provisions for 126 calendar days of paid maternity leave, including 70 days prior to delivery, and 56 days thereafter; 56 days of paid adoption leave for a newborn child, and unpaid parental leave

(parental leave) for women or men until the child is three years old. As a result, the role of "breadwinner" is a normative male model and does not involve equal participation of men in domestic work, childcare and child rearing.

### **Gender-based violence**

Gender-based violence in Kazakhstan a common type of crime, however, it is difficult to find information on this topic. There are no specific statistics on this type of crime, and there are no specific scientific works that reflect at least approximately real figures of domestic violence cases in Kazakhstan. It is no coincidence that this issue has not been fully elaborated, because it is an extremely latent and complex issue of relationships that develop within a family. In Kazakhstan, where the way of life is a predominantly patriarchal one, it is difficult to imagine women being able to openly address family scandals.

Due to the taboo nature of the topic for certain cultural and social reasons, there is no clear and legitimate definition of domestic violence, neither in sociological science nor in the normative legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan. For this reason, definitions from international organizations or from Russian literature are often used in Kazakhstan.

From the materials of the national meetings held by partners with the support of the UN Population Fund - UNFPA in 2011 in the capital of Kazakhstan on the theme of strengthening the response to gender-based violence in the health sector of Kazakhstan, the term "violence against women" means any act of gender-based violence that causes or is likely to cause harm to a woman's physical, sexual or mental health or suffering, as well as threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

The main forms of gender-based violence:

- Domestic violence
- Sexual violence/rape
- Trafficking of women/girls
- Sexual harassment in the workplace

The most widely used definition of this term in academia and organizations working on the issue of domestic violence is as follows: domestic violence is a purposeful emotional or violent coercion/action by one person toward another, carried out with a specific purpose, against the consent, will, and interests of the victim. The main difference between domestic violence and other types of violence is that it occurs between people in close or related relationships.

As defined in the Russian Encyclopedia of Social Work, domestic violence is the intentional use of various forms of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence by one family member against another, resulting in physical injury, emotional trauma, developmental disabilities, or various types of harm. [7]

The social and cultural causes of gender-based aggression lie primarily in the strict differentiation of gender roles. Historical and ethnographic data show that gender-based violence is more common in societies where the roles of men and women are sharply separated and where power belongs to men. Where gender relations are more equal, violence is less common. [8]

The legal basis for the activity of the units on protection against domestic violence is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the



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Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Criminal Code of the RK, the Law of the RK on "On Administrative Violations", the Law of the RK on Prevention of Domestic Violence, the Law of the RK on Marriage and Family.

Perpetrators of domestic violence may be held administratively responsible under Article 73 of the Law on "On Administrative Violations" and if their actions constitute a criminal offense, they may be held criminally responsible under Articles 106 (Intentional infliction of serious harm to health), 107 (Intentional infliction of moderate harm to health), 108-1 (Intentional infliction of minor harm to health), 109-1 (beatings), 110 (torture), 120 (Rape), 121 (Violent acts of a sexual nature), 122 (Sexual intercourse or other acts of a sexual nature with a person under the age of sixteen of the Criminal Code. [9]

Until 2017, domestic violence in Kazakhstan was prosecuted under two articles of the Criminal Code - 108 (minor injury to health) and 109 (bodily harm). They were punishable by arrest, fine, imprisonment, or community service. On July 3, 2017, former President Nursultan Nazarbayev signed a law decriminalizing these articles. The Interior Ministry and the Prosecutor General's Office said this was done "to strengthen preventive work with offenders and simplify the process of bringing them to justice." Moreover, when an aggressor is prosecuted on the basis of criminal proceedings, this precludes the possibility of reconciliation. According to officials, women did not go to the police because they did not want to put the fathers of their children in jail and decriminalization means that the number of domestic crimes will decrease, but the plan failed. The number of these crimes has not decreased; on the contrary, it has increased. Moreover, women have to collect the evidence and witness statements themselves. The police do not always accept victims' testimonies, do not explain their rights, and investigations and inquiries are often superficial.

The Prosecutor General's Office of Kazakhstan believes that it is "unreasonable and difficult to single out" a domestic article. After all, the Criminal Code already includes articles for beatings, rape, etc., on minors and women, which means that it is possible to sue domestic bullies for these items. However, as Human Rights Watch [10] has pointed out to authorities in Kazakhstan, international standards recommend that states establish separate criminal liability for domestic violence as a separate crime. Because general standards are insufficient, they do not adequately reflect or cover all components of domestic violence. Separating domestic violence into its own section of the criminal code will improve the response to such crimes and provide police, prosecutors, and court officials with specialized training on how to effectively investigate such cases while ensuring the safety of victims.

The state is a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1998) and the Optional Protocol to the Convention (2001), but has not ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention).

In 2024 the current President of Kazakhstan Kasym-Jomart Tokayev signed a law on ensuring women's rights and children's safety. The document, which toughens penalties for domestic violence was adopted by the Senate of Parliament



on April 11, 2024. The law criminalizes battery and intentional infliction of minor harm to health, and increases punishment for intentional infliction of moderate and serious harm to health. In addition, the law excludes the possibility of reconciliation of the parties in cases involving physical violence and abuse of minors. The document also establishes life imprisonment for murder, rape and violent acts of a sexual nature against minors. For this purpose, alternative punishments are excluded from the current norms of the Criminal Code. In addition, “molestation of a sexual nature” of adolescents under the age of 16 is criminalized.

### **Social norms and stereotypes**

Culture, traditions and beliefs have contributed significantly to the construction of gender identity and social norms in Kazakhstan, especially since independence. Gender roles and cultural norms are clearly highlighted in some regions of Kazakhstan. In southern Kazakhstan, for example, educated women often do not seek work outside the home because of the prioritization of the household. There is also a tendency to restrict women's choice of activities, which hinders women's more active participation in business, for example, because of fears that women will become too independent and that this will interfere with their household duties.

Violence against women is the cause and consequence of gender inequality. Despite the fact that legislation enshrines principles of gender equality, its implementation in practice is not always at an adequate level. However, access to justice for victims of violence in all its forms remains limited. Women's rights activists argue that only a fraction of legally established crisis centers can accommodate female victims of domestic violence (OSCE 2012). Many women hide the fact that they are suffering from intimate partner violence and often do not know where to go for help, or they knowingly do not seek it out for fear of being blamed or morally reprimanded. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, in her report on the state of violence against women in Kazakhstan, noted that women often responded with violence themselves as a result of an ineffective response to cases of violence: nearly 68 percent of female prisoners in Kazakhstan's prisons were charged with crimes in response to domestic violence.

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted by the Committee with UNICEF and UNFPA found that one in three women (33%) aged 18-75 who had ever had a partner reported experiencing at least one form of behavioral control by their intimate partner. [12] This suggests that controlling behavior is common in a significant proportion of close relationships in Kazakhstan. There is a significant association between a woman's experience of physical and/or sexual abuse by an intimate partner and her behavioral controlling behaviors.

Women were first asked if they had told anyone about their intimate partner's violent behavior. Overall, about half (51%) of women reported that they had never told anyone about their partner's violent behavior. [12] This suggests that for many women who had experienced intimate partner violence, the interviewer was the first person they spoke to about their experiences of violence. Very few said they had informed government officials-only 8% of women who had experienced intimate partner violence reported their partner's behavior to the police, and only 3% had reported it to a doctor or other health care provider. [12]

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As part of MICS rounds 3 and 4, a survey was also conducted on the attitudes (perceptions) of the population towards domestic violence against women. Thus, according to the results obtained, more than 10% of women aged 15-49 in 2006 and 12.2% in 2011-2012 believe that the spouse/partner has the right to raise his hand against the wife/partner in a number of cases (leaves the house for a long time without warning the husband; neglects the children; contradicts the husband; refuses to have intimate relations with him; when their food is burnt) listed in the question. And men are more likely than women to justify their use of violence (16.7% of men vs. 12.2% of women in 2010-2011). [12]

According to the NGO "Union of Crisis Centers in Kazakhstan", which unites 16 NGOs, hundreds of women die in Kazakhstan every year at the hands of aggressors, and domestic violence is present in every eighth family; every year they receive about 14000 calls related to domestic violence, the vast majority of them from women. [13]

The slanted gaze of others, pressure and rejection from the victim's family, economic dependence on the aggressor, and a basic lack of knowledge about where to seek help prevent women from reporting abuse and expecting support. Lack of trust in the police and justice systems and low representation of women in law enforcement and the judiciary make it difficult for victims to access justice. Crisis centers and organizations that help women in difficult situations are a very important part of the state's work in preventing domestic violence, but it turned out that even in a women's shelter, a woman does not always feel safe. The staff of the state crisis centers do their best to help victims of domestic violence. However, in some state centers there are serious violations of safety rules, and their work is too limited to reconciliation and preservation of the family - even though sometimes the staff accuses the woman herself of provoking the violence, invites the aggressor to the shelter, and persuades the woman to reconcile with him.

## **Conclusion**

First of all, there is an uneven distribution of resources between men and women. Statistical data on our republic shows that women suffer from gender inequality in the first place. It is difficult for them to access economic, social, political and power resources; full-fledged conditions for their personal realization are not created. It is more difficult for women to get a loan, since many of them do not have collateral.

The weaker competitive positions of women are manifested primarily in their concentration in low-paying industries. The unequal distribution of men and women in economic sectors and professions, as well as in positions in the job hierarchy, aggravates the poverty of working women. A high level of education does not guarantee working women-specialists prospects of promotion and decent pay. Women do most of the unpaid housework and have less time for careers, professional development, and self-education. Society of Kazakhstan still does not recognize the economic value of women's unpaid domestic work, including childcare, and unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities is known to be a form of discrimination against women.

In order to develop medium- and long-term measures to change gender

stereotypes in wages, it is necessary to determine, at the theoretical and empirical levels, how relations between managers and employees can be formed so that both do not focus on the "gender effect" when choosing an employee. In this sense, it is very important to identify the extent to which existing gender stereotypes ensure the successful inclusion of women in the workforce, to determine which stereotypes hinder the development of women's professional knowledge and abilities, and to what extent Kazakhstan's labor legislation supports gender stereotypes in the labor market.

In this connection a lot of work is needed to improve the legal norms in the field of gender policy, to bring them in line with international standards, to take institutional, organizational and administrative measures aimed at improving the status of women and protecting their rights and interests. Gender policy should include anti-discrimination laws, since the legal framework provides the necessary basis for the development of equality and serves as a protective measure against the practice of gender discrimination, particularly in the labor market. Existing labor legislation is essentially based on a protective ideology toward women, it does not help increase women's competitiveness in the labor market, and it is also difficult to implement in practice because it lacks mechanisms for holding women accountable for discriminatory actions.

In addition, a number of cultural, social factors should be taken into account that influence individual behavior in society. To a large extent, this depends on the historically determined traditions of the respective society, in which both social status and accepted norms of behavior of men and women are shaped. Gender relations in Kazakhstan are still dominated by traditional negative stereotypes of inequality and controlling behavior toward women. In Germany, as in many Western countries with a developed democratic society, gender relations are determined by strong gender politics.

Achieving gender equality and creating conditions for women's development is an important factor in human development. Gender inequality slows down the socio-political development of the country, institutions of civil society and local self-government. Inefficient use of the potential of the female half of the population, which does not have equal opportunities with men in realization of their life plans and tasks, leads to continuing tension at the level of interpersonal communication, institutional relations and in general between citizens and the state. Inequality between women and men is also disadvantageous for the state and society in economic terms, as it hinders the development of human capital, makes projects of economic development, eradication of poverty and reduction of unemployment ineffective.

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