

A study of political party affiliation as a means to enhance gender equality and women's political participation in Kazakhstan

Parties and
gender politics
in elections

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Abstract

Purpose – The article aims to identify the main mechanisms for promoting more Kazakhstani women participation in the legislative authorities based on a study of the competition of political parties in 2023.

Design/methodology/approach – Utilizing the structural-biographical method, the article investigates the ways of increasing women's participation in the political life of Kazakhstan. This empirical study comprises a total of 18 biographies of women deputies / candidates on party lists who were elected to the legislative body. Content analysis was also conducted to investigate the pre-election programs of the political parties.

Findings – This study has identified that political party is the main resource for promoting gender equality and involving women in the decision-making process. All 18 women deputies of the Mazhilis, the lower house of parliament, are members of political parties. The findings show that women candidates without party affiliation were unable to get into representative body. The results of the election campaign of 2023 provided evidence for determining the gender order in the Kazakhstani political space. The party has become an effective channel for promoting women participations in the parliament of the country. By comparison, in single-mandate constituencies no woman was able to pass to the elected body.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature of gender equality and women's political participation in Kazakhstan and may be relevant for other countries. It also has practical significance and policy implications for the government and political parties.

Keywords Gender equality, Women representation in politics, Political participation, Political parties, Political biography, Party programs, Kazakhstan

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Rwanda, New Zealand, Mexico, Nicaragua, the United Arab Emirates and the United States of America have shown high growth in women's representation in legislative bodies. The process of inclusion of women in Rwanda began with the establishment of a 30 percent quota for women in elected positions in 2003 (WE Forum, 2023). Women make up 61.3 percent of the Rwandan



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parliament making Rwanda not only the first country in Africa in terms of women's representation in parliament but the leading country worldwide (UN Women, 2023). India is following the similar scenario, as in 2023 it passed an ordinance to reserve 33 percent of seats in the lower house of parliament and state assemblies for women. The Indian electoral system is showing a steady positive trend. Realization of the principle of proportional representation will probably be achieved by 2029 (UN Women, 2023).

Equal rights and opportunities of men and women in Kazakhstan are regulated by the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "On State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women" under the Concept of Family and Gender Policy until 2030. Article 1, paragraph 2 (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009) defines gender equality as a legal status ensuring equal rights and opportunities for men and women and effective access to participation in the political, economic, social, public and cultural spheres of life, irrespective of their sex. The introduction of a minimum 30 percent quota to include young people under 35, women of all ages and persons with disabilities on electoral lists is an important step in addressing the gender issue.

In 2021, the Election Law was also amended to provide for a 30 percent minimum for women and youth. This quota is in effect when the parties that passed to the Mazhilis decide within themselves who exactly will get the mandates they won (Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995). In 2022, a third category, persons with disabilities, was added to the two categories of citizens. According to Article 89, paragraph 4: "In the party list, the number of representatives of the three categories: women, youth, persons with disabilities, in the aggregate, shall not be less than thirty percent of the total number of candidates included in the list" (Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995). At the same time, the Law does not oblige to include all three named categories of citizens in the lists and does not establish their percentage ratio. For this reason, there was such an asymmetry based on the results of the election campaign in 2023.

In Kazakhstan, despite the attempts to meet international standards, women's participation in political decision-making remains insufficient. The 2023 election campaign (Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023) provided an opportunity to analyze the gender order in Kazakhstan's political space by showing the following results. The proportion of women in the 8th Mazhilis was lower than that in previous convocations. The total number of women deputies did not reach 30 percent, which can be explained by the fact that the quota was extended to the other two categories of the population, youth and persons with disabilities.

Of the six parties that entered the Mazhilis following the 2023 election campaign, only two parties passed the 30 percent women's quota threshold. These are the Respublika Party and the People's Party of Kazakhstan (PPK). At the same time, an analysis of the pre-election program documents displayed the PPK as the main advocate for women's rights and freedoms. The ruling party Amanat declared its focus on solving many problems related to family, demographic and women's issues, but delegated the smallest number of women to the Mazhilis.

None of the self-nominated women who are not affiliated with any party were elected to the Mazhilis. This is confirmed by the results of this study, according to which the only effective channel for promotion to the highest representative body in the current situation is membership in a political party. Changes in the gender policy of Kazakhstan are primarily due to the initiatives of the authorities and their aspirations to comply with the global agenda in this issue. The study aims to identify the main mechanisms and tools for promoting more Kazakhstani women to the legislative authorities based on the example of the competition of political parties in 2023.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

This study is based on the theory of elites by Best and Higley (2018). In the modern Kazakhstani political system, the elite is formed due to inclusion of women's participation. In accordance with

the theory of elites, the advancement of women in politics occurs according to the principle of “consensually united elites”. These systems are structurally integrated, concentrated within functionally differentiated sectors. They are characterized by an approximation to common norms of political behavior among disconnected elites competing for the support of economically successful voters who are not prone to abrupt changes in the status quo. In addition, members of such elites have reached a tacit consensus on the norms and rules of political behavior.

Studies on gender equality and women’s involvement in politics in some countries

The issue of forming a female political elite is a discourse in the academic community. [Kantola \(2019\)](#) highlighted the strengths of women’s organizations of political parties in promoting the main issues of gender equality in Finland. However, both the “feminism” and the “politics” of women’s organizations of political parties which have been traditionally evident in Finland and other European countries are now considered obsolete, and this paradox is critically explored in this article.

According to some of the Russian scholars, parties can be considered as the main channel for promoting women in politics ([Pushkareva, 2008](#)). Pursuant to the rational choice theory, candidates may run for various positions only if applicable. [Norris and Lovenduski \(2004\)](#) believe that these opportunities are determined by the institutional and political situation as well as by the specific structure of elected positions and the rules. Therewith, the paramount importance is attached to the values dominating in a particular society, which in their turn influence the social and political roles of women and men. According to scholars, the higher the level of economic development, the more democratic the state is ([Inglehart and Norris, 2010](#)).

The relatively low engagement of women in politics and decision-making, according to a number of scholars, can be primarily explained by the socio-economic position of women ([Gnedash, 2007](#)). The reset of the gender order is extremely slow, because “gender continues to be viewed through the prism of reproductive and biological functions of the sexes” ([Pushkareva, 2008](#), p. 119). A study by Russian scholars devoted to the promotion of women to the highest echelons of power can also be of some interest. The low level of engagement of Russian women in politics, according to [Zhidkova \(2003\)](#), is determined by the strong influence of parties and their leaders. The applicability of foreign experience and practices to reduce the gender gap in the political field is analysed in [Herbut \(2014\)](#). On the basis of comparative analysis, the thesis about the influence of party characteristics on the representation of the female sex in parliamentary institutions is maintained.

The gender specific features of Russian representative institutions at the regional level have been researched by [Kolesnik \(2021, p. 470\)](#). Based on empirical studies of career trajectories, Kolesnik concluded that “women are admitted to the governmental bodies”, but the political elite is formed on the closed principle. Therefore, there are no “outsiders” in politics. Moreover, there is no open political competition.

Since the 1990s, gender quotas have been introduced to improve women’s equality. In 2023, [Kim and Fallon \(2023\)](#) examined cross-national and longitudinal effects on attitudes toward female politicians and the mechanism through which gender quotas are allocated. Using multilevel modeling in 87 countries, they examined how different types of quotas, with different characteristics and levels of power, shape perceptions of women in politics. In [Asanbekova and Karabayeva’s article \(2022\)](#), there are several examples of violations of gender principles set forth in the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic through the analysis of constitutional and legal acts of the Kyrgyz government in order to identify the norms consolidating the principle of equality of rights and freedoms for men and women in all regions of the Kyrgyz Republic.

For the political role of women, the analysis of gender relations shows that a new item has been introduced into the system of nominating candidates by political parties in the Uzbek

political system (Ochilova, 2022). Article 22 of the Elections Act was supplemented by a new provision: “The number of females must account for no less than thirty percent of the total number of candidates for deputies from political parties” (Ochilova, 2022). Hence, the institution of private quotas for nomination of political parties has been imposed by the Uzbek national legislation. As of January 1, 2022, Uzbekistan ranks 45th among 190 parliaments of the world with a 32.7 percent share of women in the Oliy Mazhilis.

Gender equality and political employment of women in Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, Naizabayeva and Yessim (2022, p. 59) noted that “nowadays, the majority of Kazakhstani women highly appreciate the importance of traditional values and behaviors determined by ethnic and religious customs for women”. However, gender equality in the Republic of Kazakhstan is considered by the authors of the article on the identification of gender issues from the perspective of implementing the gender equality strategy in the country for the period from 2006 to 2016. The results of the article are controversial. On the one hand, the authors claim the impossibility of a traditional gender order and gender socialization. On the other hand, the findings also indicate that the situation in the Republic of Kazakhstan is changing very slowly towards the gender equality (Shelomentseva *et al.*, 2019).

Women’s integration into politics is blocked both by stereotypes that women are not suitable for leadership and by the phenomenon of the “family cage”. That is, when the patriarchal family creates not only external but also internal obstacles to women’s leadership in politics (Lipovka *et al.*, 2023). The work by Lipovka and others represents the first cross-cultural study of gender stereotypes about political leaders embracing post-socialist Central Asian and Central European countries. Interestingly, Potluri *et al.* (2016) report existence of a typical pyramid of gender bias, according to which women should automatically occupy the lower and middle levels in the political and managerial hierarchy. Despite the fact that in the legal context, the state forms legislation aimed at ensuring equal rights, but the gender issue does not lose its relevance (Moniruzzaman and Kazi, 2019).

The issue of women’s participation in the political process are investigated by the Kazakhstani political scientist, Tlegenova. According to the author, despite the desire of the authorities to comply with international norms and requirements on gender equality, women’s participation in political decision-making processes is extremely low. In reality, political parties play an intermediate role in the development of gender equality. But it is the parties that have mechanisms for promoting candidates for political positions through their inclusion in the electoral lists (Tlegenova, 2021).

Promoting gender policy in Kazakhstan is attributed to non-governmental and international organizations. The Kazakhstani Government often cooperates with NGOs focusing on gender equality. But even in this case, collaboration is limited to social issues of women. Gender equality is often understood as the representation of women in governmental bodies. However, in this way, a formal approach has evolved, as the goal of gender development is active participation of women in decision-making in all policy areas, including allocation of resources.

The topic of gender equality and women’s participation in the political process has been sufficiently studied in foreign historiography. In Eastern Europe, the experience of overcoming gender inequality since the 1990s has been described. The research of Russian authors examines women’s practices of coming to power, where political parties play the central role. Central Asian researchers mainly focus on the analysis of normative acts regulating the representation of women in the highest authorities. In Kazakhstan, researchers are concerned about issues related to the influence of traditions and customs, prevailing stereotypes in society on ensuring equal rights and opportunities in politics between women and men.

This study fills the research gap as follows. First, this article identifies the main mechanisms and tools for the promotion of women in the Mazhilis. The 2023 election

campaign is being analyzed for the first time. In this election race, the analysis of the program documents of political parties is carried out in order to identify topics on gender equality. Then, this information correlates with how many women have passed to the Mazhilis on party lists and reveals how much the declared slogans in the election race were reflected in the number of women from certain political parties in the legislature. Second, with the help of structural and biographical analysis, the career trajectories of women deputies are analysed. As a result, the pattern is revealed – all women deputies entered politics through party membership.

Research methodology

Scholars consider that the study of socio-demographic characteristics of the political elite is the dominant approach in modern elitology. Firstly, biographical data are available. Secondly, they can sufficiently characterize the career trajectory of the political elite (Best and Higley, 2018). One of the effective qualitative methods appears to be structural-biographical. The adoption of this method made it possible to scrutinize both individual characteristics and the typical structure of the life path of women who came to power.

This study is based on secondary data including biographies of deputies / candidates shown in the public domain: on the websites of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the information system “Paragraph” under [Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan \(2023\)](#). Biographies comprise the brief information on the life trajectory of female candidates including the details about their education, career path, and marital status. The official biographies occupy no more than two pages. The authors also identified the main social characteristics of the candidates. The next step was to determine the typical scenario of entering the power. A total of 18 biographies of the candidates who were elected to the legislative body were analyzed.

Content analysis was applied to analyze the pre-election programs of the political parties. The texts of pre-election programs and campaign documents of the party platforms were studied, and the frequency of raising the issues of gender equality in them was counted. The content analysis of the texts revealed the number of references to the following wordings: gender, women, family, children, domestic violence, etc.

Findings and discussion

Current situation in the Kazakhstani party arena

In 2023, the majority of the political party system was returned to the electoral process. This contributed to the inclusion of a large number of women by political parties in their party lists. At the beginning of the election campaign, there were 80 women in the party lists for the elections to the Mazhilis. The number of women in Kazakhstan accounts for more than 51 percent; hence, the female population represents the majority of the electorate. As a result, it is important that the programs and speeches of candidates delivering addresses from political parties or independently be gender specific.

The election campaign of 2023 has made the “female factor” relevant in the political life of the country. Democratic processes require the development of gender equality. The role of parties in this process is evident. Considering the 30 percent quota, the Kazakhstani parties have updated their composition in order to meet the quota requirements. At the same time, parties cannot ignore gender issues in terms of women’s political engagement. Policy papers and campaign materials are of special interest in terms of investigating the gender agenda, how it is translated both into the real policy regime and into the statutory documents.

The program of the Amanat Party was updated in 2023. Being the party dominating the political space, it tries to serve the interests of all segments of the population. In the new

edition, the program contains 10 sections - requests covering issues that are relevant in their opinion: from ecology, development of villages to special attention paid to the young generation. The key emphasis in her party document is placed on the social sector. Out of the 10 sections - requests of the Amanat party program, No. 7 "To be part of a united society with common values" is devoted to women's issues and contains gender terminology. Content analysis of the program text has revealed the number of mentions of the following words: "gender" – 1; "women" – 2; "family, family-related" – 17; "children, children-related" – 10; "domestic violence" – 1; "sex" – 2.

The context of the two theses foregrounds the development of the potential of women politicians and their participation in the life of the country. In the first case, women's rights are declared among other listed values in terms of their observance: traditional moral principles, state and native languages, the ability to understand and respect all points of view. In the second case, the Amanat party claims that the active participation of women in public administration needs to be expanded. That includes creating an inclusive culture and gender parity, where salaries and positions will be allocated based on skills rather than gender.

The Ak Zhol Party updated its program in February 2023. The party views itself as a right-liberal political force. According to the statistics, women currently make up 36 percent of the total number of the party members. Despite compliance with the norm of 30 percent quota, there are no women from the media sphere in the party, i.e., recognizable persons who would be really involved in political activities. The Congress approved the party list of candidates for deputies of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan. 54 people were approved as candidates for deputies of the Mazhilis according to party lists, of which 15 were women.

As far as the scope of the party's program is concerned, it does not conceptualize gender issues. There is no gender terminology in the text. Content analysis of the text reveals 7 mentions of the word "family, family-related". But there are no concepts such as "gender", "woman", "children", "abuse", "domestic violence". The current gender agenda was not reflected in the policy document. It should be noted that Ak Zhol considers itself the legal successor of the political legacy of the Alash Party. Alash has broached the problem of women more than 100 years ago in its program published in 1917 where women's issues take up an entire section.

The PPK is one of those parties that actively promotes women's rights and freedoms. As the concrete results of their activities in the previous convocations of the Mazhilis of the Parliament, the election program of the PPK supported the movement of women for retirement at 58. Consequently, a moratorium has been put on retirement at the age of 61 for 5 years. PPK believes that women should be present in all the governmental bodies. The former Communists plan was to raise the profile of doctors and nurses, preschool teachers and childminders, instructors and coaches. The PPK's gender agenda can be divided into several topical units – maternity fund and assistance to large families, lowering the retirement age and combating domestic violence.

The PPK advocates the development of the State program for free housing construction for large families in villages. Within the implementation of the Rural Development Program, this will solve a great number of social issues in urban areas, such as unemployment, lack of places in kindergartens and schools. The PPK supports an increase in payments for the birth of a child and child care allowances by five times, monthly payments to mothers in single-parent families for children under three years old, the development and raise in the number of specialized centers for pregnant women.

As a social assistance to children from large families, the PPK plans to provide free education in higher and secondary educational institutions, to reimburse expenses for sports and creative clubs through the Artsport program. The party takes a stand in favor of lowering the retirement age for women to 58 years, and for women with more than 4 children

to 55 years. Another promise by the PPK is to provide support to single-parent families and to establish a State Alimony Fund. Within the campaign against domestic violence, candidates from PPK consider the issue of rendering legal and psychological assistance to women as very important. In addition, stiffening criminal penalties for such offenses is also regarded as essential.

In the opinion of representatives of the People's Democratic Party Auyl, moving to the city has turned into a "one-way ticket" for many rural residents, in particular, for women and youth. Therefore, to restore and develop the infrastructure of the village, the Auyl Party intends to apply an integrated and systematic approach. One measure to take is to improve the social situation of women from villages, to establish comfortable conditions for them. In addition, they promise to use food payment cards for low-income families and representatives of vulnerable social groups.

In comparison with the election program of 2021, it can be stated that there was a gap in the social and gender equality issues at that time. Thus, the program included such items as lowering the threshold level for obtaining the status of a "multiple children mother" (above 3 children), as well as setting the retirement age for multiple children mothers upon reaching 53 with the payment of a basic pension; developing a family well-being index to improve the quality of life in rural areas; introducing the institute of support of a family in a difficult life situation; paying the guaranteed children's capital, starting from birth and until the age of 18, instead of inefficient, short-term payments; ensuring equal access of families with children to educational services at mandatory and additional levels.

Candidates from the National Social Democratic Party (NSDP) pay considerable attention to social support. They advocate the adoption of a new Labor Code which would eliminate gender inequality in calculation of wages for people holding similar positions and performing the same functions. They also plan to lower the retirement age of women to 58 years and reduce the working day by one hour for women with children. In the third section of the program, the Respublika party considers the formation of a unified cultural space of the people of Kazakhstan based on family values to be its main task.

The historical pattern of the representation of women in the Mazhilis of the Parliament is shown in [Table 1](#).

In comparison with the previous convocations, positive dynamics has been evidenced only since the 6th convocation. However, the recent elections displayed a decrease in the proportion of women in the lower chamber of the Parliament.

In order to trace the dynamics of changes in the number of women in the Parliament, it is necessary to consider statistical data for each year, since women's promotion to the highest legislative power is not limited only to election campaigns ([Figure 1](#)). For example, every three years, there is a rotation of members of the Parliament. [Figure 1](#) shows the general increase in

Convocations / years	Mazhilis	
	Percentage of Men	Percentage of Women
1 st convocation (1996-1999)	86.57	13.43
2 nd convocation (1999-2004)	89.61	10.39
3 rd convocation (2004-2007)	89.61	10.39
4 th convocation (2007-2011)	85.98	14.02
5 th convocation (2012-2016)	79.44	20.56
6 th convocation (2017-2020)	72.9	27.1
7 th convocation (2021-2023)	72.6	27.4
8 th convocation (2023 - up to now)	82.4	17.6

Source: By authors

Table 1.
Percentage of Men and
Women in the Mazhilis
of the Republic of
Kazakhstan

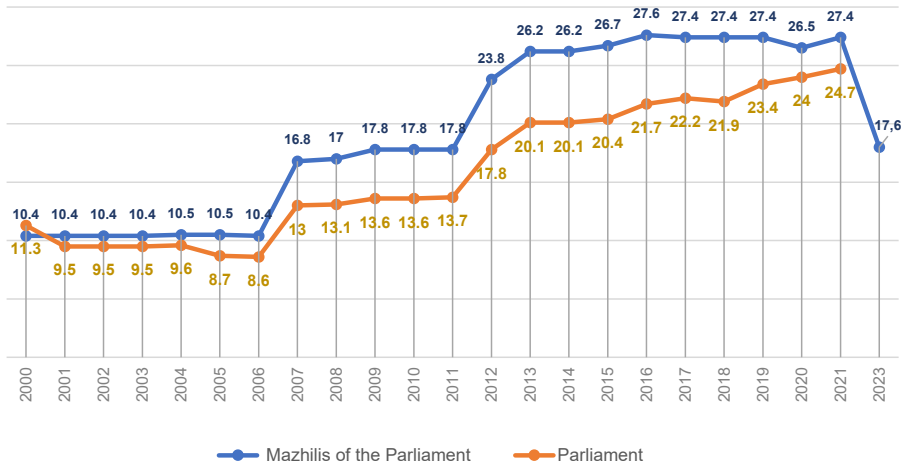


Figure 1.
Percentage of Seats Held by Women in the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Senate, Mazhilis)*, in percentage

Source: By authors

women’s representation in the Parliament from year to year. But this happens only due to the Senate, the upper chamber of the Parliament. Growth can also be observed in the Mazhilis, but the recent elections showed a negative effect.

Additionally, high female representation is shown by the Respublika Party, where 3 out of 6 deputies are women – i.e., 50 percent. The Amanat Party of power has only 10 women out of 62 deputies. The People’s Party of Kazakhstan nominated 2 women out of 5 deputies. The parties Auy!, Ak Zhol and NSDP nominated one woman each (Figure 2).

Structural and biographical analysis

When considering the general socio-demographic characteristics of the Mazhilis of the Parliament, it is worth paying attention to the legal status of deputies, for example, in terms of age (age not restricted), personal characteristics, and professional background. The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan states from what age it is possible to run for deputies of the lower chamber of the Parliament – this should be a citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan who has reached the age of 25. Representatives of the middle age (41-50 years

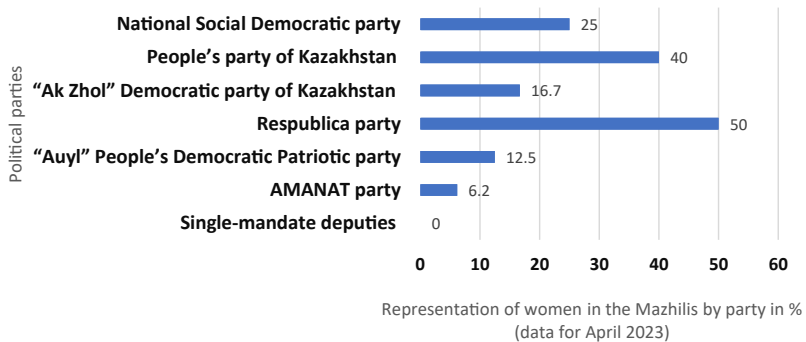


Figure 2.
Women Representation in the Mazhilis by party in percentage

Source: By authors

old) prevail among the female deputies. Female MPs aged over 60 were elected to the lower house of parliament from the Ak Zhol and PPK parties. The youngest deputy (26 years old) at the time of the election was a candidate from the Respublika Party.

The analysis of the data shows that there is a gender disparity at the highest levels of government, in the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Career paths

Empirical data on the female deputies of the Mazhilis of the Parliament enable us to identify the focal points, the transition points, and the beginning of a professional career in the life paths of representatives of the political elite. Professional career is a part of the multidimensional life path of an individual and has an impact on other areas of their life, while being dependent on them. For instance, the gender analysis of the biographies of deputies demonstrates that, subject to their age, there is an asymmetry in evidence among men and women when they enter the elite. Women for the first time occupy an elite position much later than men. 11 percent of women are represented in the young cohort of deputies of the Mazhilis (from 18 to 40 years old). 89 percent of women appear to be in the middle-aged group. Women achieve high positions in power hierarchies at a later age on average. This is most likely to show that when women plan their professional trajectory, other aspects of the life scenario come to the fore (perhaps family, marriage). In this regard, it is appropriate to mention the biological reasons for the low representation of women in politics. Proponents of the biological approach believe that “a woman herself is responsible for low participation in politics, since she allegedly not only lacks desire, but also has a ‘natural shift’ of interests in the field of family and household relations, in the private / personal sphere” (Kolesnik, 2021, p. 480).

The variable related to the characteristics of career trajectories – “pre-elite work” – allows us to identify which work precedes the occupation of the first elite position by a representative of the deputy corps. In this context, data analysis demonstrates that women generally are employed in the highest hierarchical positions in education, culture and healthcare – 38 percent, more than 20 percent of women are recruited to the legislative authority through the highest positions in economic institutions. The data on the positions of “deputy assistant, employee of the representative body of the regional and republican levels” and “head of the representative bodies of the republican level” are also of interest, when in the groups under consideration (the position of “pre-elite work”) women make up about 28 percent.

The analysis of the structural biographies of female deputies reveals that their career started in the local executive authorities. They used to be either employees or heads of departments of healthcare, education, and social protection. Kazakhstani executive bodies act as one of the main channels of recruiting to deputy positions. For instance, the empirical data show that 28 % of women were engaged in political and administrative spheres, i.e., they could work in the parties or be deputies of previous convocations. In addition, they could hold administrative positions in public authorities. 22 % of women were involved in the economic field, i.e., in business. The majority of the female deputies used to have managerial positions in healthcare, education, and social protection.

Another aspect is the “status trigger” in the elite career of female deputies. The analysis is based on individual biographies of female representatives of the political elite. Formalized data (i.e., information from their official biographies) show that they began their professional path in the social sphere, for example, in kindergartens and schools. Typically, their career developed dynamically, so, in some time, they became heads of departments of healthcare, education, or social protection. For instance, the turning point in the biographies of one of the deputies was appointment to the managerial position. We may observe her vertical

movement from the lower to city level the higher regional one within 10 years. After having achieved the highest elite position in regional administrative authorities, she experienced horizontal movement, which means that she could hold a position of a head of regional department of education, and then change to the analogical position in social protection. After they started moving up their career ladder, they usually entered a political party.

The second case of the biography of a female deputy also illustrates that the professional journey was connected with teaching at a university as well as working in executive authorities in Astana, the capital city of the country. But then there was a turn in the biography, and she ran for the presidential election from the National Alliance of Professional Social Workers. After participation in the presidential race, she was proposed as a candidate to the Mazhilis deputies.

The third case of the “social” biography of a female representative of the political elite demonstrates the “purest” case of a career ascension within educational institutions when there had been twenty years of experience in preschool institutions before professional experience was converted into a deputy position.

Thus, even a schematic analysis of the biographies of the political elite in terms of connection of the career of female deputies with the social sphere traditionally mentioned in the academic literature as the main channel for recruiting for the position of a deputy of the Mazhilis reveals that out of three cases, only one professional biography turns out to be an example of a career ascension within one social institution (preschool).

Educational trajectories of women

The educational level of deputies is regarded as an important characteristic when considering gender inequality in the political elite. Education is viewed as a pass not only to politics, but also to the political elite, militate in favor of this. For instance, the accumulated educational level enables the elite to remain a special cultural community for a long time, and shared values, attitudes, and commitments contribute to building social ties and reducing uncertainties within elite groups (Engelstad, 2018). The training of representatives of the European elite in prestigious (often closed) educational institutions allows us to argue that education often plays the role of an exclusive channel for recruitment into the political and economic elite of society and appears to be a way of its self-closure (Hartmann, 2011).

Empirical data on the first higher education in the gender context show that there is a difference in the main educational profiles of women and men. Among female deputies, diplomas in pedagogical (about 40 percent), economic (22 percent), and medical (11 percent) fields predominate. Representatives of the elite get their second higher education at a more mature age, while occupying elite positions in government institutions. The second higher education is generally related to economic and legal majors (11 percent).

Postgraduate education and a degree are essential elements of the educational capital of the political elite. The empirical data obtained reveal that about 17 percent of female deputies have master’s degrees, and almost 30 percent of deputies are Candidate of Sciences (the type of Kazakhstani scientific degrees equivalent to PhD which existed before 2010) and 5 percent are PhDs. All of them had defended theses on economic, legal and medical areas. This trend is very stable. In most cases, women become holders of PhD immediately after getting higher education which looks natural within the educational trajectory.

Conclusion

The investigation into gender equality issues in the highest legislative branch of the government of Kazakhstan has identified the unbalanced character of representation of men and women in the deputy positions.

The ideas and results presented in the article are new, as previous studies only provide general information about gender inequality in Kazakhstan, or how it manifests in the managerial sector, etc. For the first time, on the basis of content analysis of documents and campaign materials, the level of participation of political parties in addressing gender inequality is investigated. The relevance of the gender issue has shaped trends in electoral policy. In reference to the Election Law, the state initiated a 30 percent quota for the promotion of women. But this number included other categories: the disabled and the youth, which significantly reduced the possibility of women's political participation. As a result, only in two parties that women deputies were represented in numbers exceeding the 30 percent threshold.

Based on the structural-biographical method, the study discusses the ways and mechanisms of increasing women's participation in the political life of Kazakhstan. The results of the election campaign of 2023 provided material for determining the gender order in the Kazakhstani political space. Thus, the party has become an effective channel for promoting women in the parliament of the country. For comparison, in single-mandate constituencies, no woman was able to pass to the elected body. Analyses of biographies and career strategies confirm the thesis that women gain political weight by working across party lines. The changes in Kazakhstan's gender policy are primarily due to the initiatives of the authorities with endeavors to comply with the global agenda in this area.

The findings show that women candidates without party affiliation were unable to get into representative bodies. The situation is different for male candidates without any party affiliation. For instance, 7 male candidates who do not adhere to any of the parties could join the Mazhilis in a single-seat constituency (Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). The right to be elected in a single-seat constituency has been given to political parties, social movements, and citizens through self-nomination (Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan", 2024).

This implies that those women candidates with party affiliation were able to get representative bodies and thus the finding is consistent with the theory of elites. The theory of elites is concentrated around the leader having an advantage in electoral competition. The attempt by this study to explain the nature of women's political leadership through the theory of elites will give rise to a discussion in the regional space. In addition, it will make it possible to overcome the specificity of elite formation without gender conditioning through the creation of a new legal framework.

This study will hopefully make theoretical and methodological contribution in the discourse of gender equality and women political participation. The results in Kazakhstan can be used for comparison with similar studies in other countries and give impetus to further research of this topic. The study recommends that it is crucial for the political parties to revise the pre-election program documents in the direction of increasing the ways and measures to address gender inequality. It also has practical significance in terms of proposing the need to revise the quota principle in future, or increase the percentage of the allocated quota for women.

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