

Worker making concrete at a production plant in Kazakhstan.
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Masculinities and Transition in Kazakhstan: Country Brief

“The traditionalist order discriminates [against] women, not the Labour Code or employer.”

(MALE RESPONDENT, ENERGY SECTOR)

This brief is based on a larger study (Edström *et al.* 2019) (that also includes Egypt, Turkey and Ukraine), which explores how transition in different countries has been experienced by different groups of men, and its impacts on gender relations. It aims to assist the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and other stakeholders to consider ways of engaging men as agents of positive change for gender equality – alongside women and girls – as well as to complement women-focused projects and investments to enhance both the resilience of transitions and equality of opportunity.

Kazakhstan has transitioned from lower middle-income to upper middle-income status over the past two decades. Women’s participation in the labour force, while lower than men’s, is the highest in Central Asia, at 66 per cent (Dubok and Turakhanova 2017). Women are increasingly active in starting their own businesses, with over 40 per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) now headed by women. Unusually, more women than men (56 per cent compared to 52 per cent) hold an account at a formal financial institution.

Yet gender disparities persist. Horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market restricts women’s economic opportunities and earnings, reflecting women’s concentration in traditionally feminised and lower-paid sectors. The sharp reduction in poverty that has

characterised the post-Soviet transition, at least since 2002, has been driven by growth in the energy and mining sectors; the oil sector alone accounts for 60 per cent of total exports and over 25 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) (OECD 2017). These sectors remain heavily male-dominated, both in terms of workforce and management.

The family remains a key foundation of social and economic life. Time-use studies show that women spend three hours more per day than men on household activities (Dubok and Turakhanova 2017). Gender role expectations of males (breadwinners) and females (homemakers) are celebrated as expressing Kazakh tradition, even as the institutions of marriage and the family are changing (Kazakhstan has one of the highest rates of divorce among spouses under 30 years old) (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2016).

Urbanisation and migration (internal and external) are reshaping family and community relations, amplifying urban/rural economic inequalities as well as regional and ethnolinguistic disparities that cut across gender (Bissenova 2017).

Analyses of the gender dimensions of transition tend not to consider the variety and complexity of men's gendered experiences of these changes. Male health is an emerging area of policy concern, including men's lower life expectancy, linked to alcohol and tobacco use and work-related injuries, and the high rate of juvenile suicides among boys (Dubok and Turakhanova 2017). Studies have mostly been concerned with the legacies of the gender politics of the Soviet era and the significance of gender in the interrelated dynamics of modernisation, post-Soviet nation-building and 'retraditionalisation'. In an overview of post-Soviet societies in Central Asia, Kandiyoti (2007: 601) emphasises that '[p]ost-Soviet gender ideologies do not represent a simple return to national traditions, interrupted by Soviet policies, but constitute a strategic redeployment of notions of cultural authenticity in the service of new ideological goals'.

Policy context and study methods

The Concept of Family and Gender Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2030 (henceforward, the Concept) outlines the priorities for the national response to the issues raised above. The Concept notes the persistence of discriminatory gender stereotypes and their impact on vertical and horizontal segregation in the workforce by gender, in turn linked to women's disproportionate burden of care (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2016). A recent amendment to the Labour Code, which previously barred women from 287 forms of employment (concentrated in the mining, metallurgy, hydrocarbon processing, construction and transportation sectors), has reduced this list by nearly a third and opened up jobs for women in transport, construction and chemical industries.

The Concept sets targets for women's economic empowerment and greater representation in senior decision-making positions in business, law and politics, as well as for reducing domestic violence and the gender gap in life expectancy. It also notes that prevailing norms of masculinity can damage men's health, whether owing to the stress of trying to fulfil the breadwinner role or to the harmful behaviours associated with manliness, such as alcohol and tobacco abuse.

Assessing the gender inclusion gap in Kazakhstan as 'medium', the EBRD has channelled its efforts to promote gender equality through its Women in Business programme and work with the energy and transport sectors to improve women's access to employment and skills. The substantive study therefore focused on these sectors. A total of 13 single-gender focus group discussions were conducted with respondents (management and workforce) from the energy and transport sectors and from women-led small businesses, in Astana, Almaty and Aktobe. A further 24 individual interviews with key informants were completed. Focus groups and interviews, using a semi-structured survey tool, were conducted in Kazakh, Russian and English.

Findings

There is little perception of a problem with equal opportunities in the workplace

Focus groups revealed high levels of scepticism about the need for equal opportunities policies and strategies. The widely held view – from operational staff to human resources (HR) managers – was that gender plays no role in employment opportunities or career development because of companies' professionalism and that any preferences based on gender would be punished by law. Similarly, problems of vertical and horizontal occupational segregation by gender were attributed to women's choices and capabilities. Male and female respondents felt that women were under-represented in senior management positions because they choose to prioritise their family and childcare responsibilities over their career.

Men's roles as husband and father remain tied to being the economic provider

Notwithstanding significant economic and social change over the past two decades, traditional views on the division of labour appear to remain dominant. There was near universal agreement, among male and female respondents alike, that men's primary role and responsibility within the family was as economic provider, while it was women's responsibility to take care of the family. Women prioritise, and are expected to prioritise, family over career. Provision for paternity leave exists, but men's lack of uptake is acknowledged as a problem in government gender policy, linked as it is to both economic pressures and social norms.



Bayterek Tower, Astana, Kazakhstan.
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Gender stereotypes persist, affecting both men's and women's working lives

Many gender stereotypes persist: men are risk-takers, women avoid risks; women's and men's brains are different (men's having more capacity for logical thinking, women's being more sensitive), etc. The sharp distinctions between men/masculinity and women/femininity drawn by these stereotypes serve to rationalise the vertical and horizontal gender segregations in the workforce. The force of these masculine/feminine stereotypes also confines men within restrictive notions of what it means to be a man, and reinforces hierarchies not only between men and women but also between men. Those men who actively and visibly take on the 'caring and sensitive' work of child-rearing in order to support their wives in their careers face the stigma of being seen as feminine and lesser men.

Men's attitudes towards social and economic transitions in gender relations vary

Male respondents expressed a range of views, from progressive to conservative, when asked about changes in gender relations. Some reported men's greater openness towards issues of gender equality, especially among the younger generation. Others expressed resentment about women's economic empowerment initiatives, which they

perceived as discriminating against men or as undermining the 'natural order' of the family and society. These views were not necessarily widely held but were forcibly expressed. Economic insecurities can affect gender attitudes; such insecurity has a particular impact on men, given societal pressures to be the family breadwinner.

Informal aspects of workplace culture and practice affect gender relations

Respondents identified aspects of workplace culture and practice as problematic for equal opportunities. Many male respondents in the Advice for Small Business focus groups acknowledged that decisions on hiring and promotion are sometimes influenced by the age of the woman involved, and thus their presumed likelihood of pregnancy. Some female respondents identified problems of sexual harassment in the workplace. Government action on violence against women has accelerated in recent years, but efforts to address sexual harassment in the workplace – either within legislation on violence against women or as part of the Labour Code and in line with International Labour Organization (ILO) standards – have thus far not been successful. Increasing awareness of the economic costs and social harms of sexual harassment, especially among male business owners and politicians, remains a priority.

Strategic implications and recommendations

The benefits of economic growth are still affected by persistent gender disparities in employment, income, and the burden of unpaid care. Pressure to be the male breadwinner distorts many men's work–life balance, in a context in which 'large-scale informal employment and the downward movement of wages indicates high labour market and wage flexibility and low job and income security for workers' (ILO 2015: ix). A *gender relational* approach, taking account of both women's and men's gendered experiences of economic and social change, can help to ensure that transition is both sustainable and inclusive, by focusing on the following:

- **Investments:** During preparatory stages, assessment and monitoring processes could be used to help loan beneficiaries identify problematic aspects of workplace culture that undermine progress towards equal opportunities. Within programmes for female entrepreneurs, male business partners and male business mentors are as yet untapped resources as champions of male support for women's economic advancement.
- **Policy dialogues:** Women's burden of domestic labour and the pressure on men to be the main breadwinner serve to limit women's economic opportunities and

exacerbate work-related stress among men. Existing government policy on gender equality provides a framework for campaigns on improving work–life balance and men's health, with an emphasis on shared responsibilities within the family as a win-win for women and men alike. Supporting business and trade union leaders to speak out publicly against traditional gender stereotypes about women's and men's roles is also a priority.

- **Technical advice:** Current efforts to reform HR policies to promote the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in male-dominated sectors and management tiers needs to address the informal barriers that women face, linked to masculinist workplace cultures. Male employees and management can be agents of change to transform such cultures if they are actively involved in questioning the negative impacts of masculine stereotypes, not only on women but also on themselves.
- **Internal capacity:** Current approaches to gender focus exclusively on women. Strengthening the capacity of staff to understand and apply a *gender relational* approach to their work is an urgent priority.

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