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Book Review

GENDER AND EDUCATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Gender and Education in Central Asia provides an interdisciplinary analysis of how gender roles influence and are influenced by educational systems across post-Soviet Central Asian countries. Gathering regional and international scholars, the book places education within larger social and cultural shifts, emphasizing both advances and ongoing inequalities. It examines how historical legacies, policy decisions, and societal norms affect women's and girls' access to education, demonstrating that education serves both as a tool for empowerment and a space for traditional reinforcement, negotiation, and social change.

The authors begin by providing a foundational introduction to the book's main themes, offering detailed context for understanding gender dynamics in education across the five post-Soviet Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The authors connect historical, political, and socio-cultural factors to explain how gender equality has progressed and regressed in the region's educational systems. Building on the book's broader discussion of post-Soviet reforms, Chapter 2 explores gender equality in education, highlighting both progress and ongoing challenges. Post-independence reforms are placed within global frameworks such as the Beijing Declaration, CEDAW, and the SDGs, though domestic implementation remains inconsistent. Efforts in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have advanced the equality agenda but are limited by deep-seated social norms and weak enforcement. The chapter also discusses the Soviet legacy, which once promoted inclusion but now conflicts with growing cultural conservatism. While curricula still reinforce gender stereotypes, Kazakhstan emerges as a relative leader, with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan falling behind.

Specifically, Chapter 3 provides a data-driven yet thoughtful critique of gender equality in Central Asian education. Based on UNESCO and national statistics, the authors highlight increasing female enrollment especially, in Uzbekistan's

higher education, but warn that deep-rooted disparities remain. Gender-based field segregation and limited female leadership continue to be significant challenges, while curricula still reflect traditional norms. What makes this chapter compelling is its call for culturally sensitive, evidence-based policies that go beyond superficial reforms to address the root causes of inequality.

The Kazakhstan case study, discussed in Chapters 4, 6, and 9, starts with an analysis of how history education helps build national identity through gendered narratives. The authors used textbook analysis, which shows men as heroic nation-builders and women in domestic or supportive roles, reflecting and reinforcing gender norms. In the post-Soviet nation-building context, education functions as an ideological tool to maintain state narratives. Despite recent reforms, gender bias remains widespread, highlighting the need for more balanced representation. The subsequent section, Chapter 6, examines factors influencing young women's NEET status using Labor Force Survey data, revealing that women aged 20–28, especially those who are married, live in rural areas, or come from large households, face higher risks due to caregiving responsibilities, limited education, and regional differences. The chapter emphasizes ongoing gender and regional inequalities and advocates for targeted research and policies to address these structural barriers. The authors continue their analysis by exploring women's involvement in STEM in Kazakhstan through the Social Cognitive Career Theory in Chapter 9, demonstrating how cultural stereotypes, teacher attitudes, and institutional norms limit girls' confidence and interest. Conversely, family support, role models, and gender-sensitive education enhance engagement. The chapter emphasizes the importance of early interventions and inclusive policies to challenge stereotypes and promote women in STEM fields.

Chapters 5 and 7 shift the focus to Tajikistan, where deeply rooted cultural norms, early marriage, and financial hardship continue to limit girls' educational opportunities. Using both qualitative and quantitative evidence, the authors situate gender inequality within interconnected social, economic, and family structures, showing how traditional expectations of chastity, honor, and obedience reinforce educational barriers. While gradual changes are emerging in urban areas, persistent patriarchal norms, weak infrastructure, and limited institutional support hinder meaningful progress. Despite policies such as scholarships and legal reforms, enforcement gaps and cultural pressures continue to perpetuate inequality, underscoring the need for coordinated policies, community engagement, and awareness initiatives to promote real and lasting improvements in girls' education.

Chapters 8, 10, and 11 collectively offer a nuanced analysis of women's experiences in higher education across Central Asia, highlighting personal, institutional, and cultural factors that shape inequality. Chapter 8 examines doctoral student mothers in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, showing how societal expectations of motherhood, emotional strain, and rigid academic structures constrain their scholarly paths. Chapter 10 expands the discussion to women's leadership in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, revealing persistent underrepresentation despite women's strong academic presence and emphasizing the positive impact of mentorship and support networks. Chapter 11 focuses on Turkmenistan, situating women's education within overlapping traditional, Islamic, Soviet, and contemporary influences, and demonstrating how social norms continue to limit

participation and advancement across regions and social classes. Together, the chapters underscore the need for culturally sensitive, context-specific reforms, including equitable policies, mentorship programs, and community-based initiatives to promote genuine gender equality in education and academic life throughout the region.

The final chapter summarizes the book's main findings on gender and education in Central Asia, emphasizing both progress and remaining challenges. Although Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have implemented gender equality policies, their execution is inconsistent due to deep-rooted cultural norms and complex socio-political factors influenced by traditional, Soviet, Islamic, and Western ideas. Ongoing obstacles include limited educational opportunities, persistent stereotypes, and gaps in gender-disaggregated data. The authors recommend culturally aware, context-specific strategies that combine institutional reform, attitude shifts, research, community involvement, and regional collaboration to promote lasting gender equality.

In my opinion, the book's main limitations relate to the omission or insufficient treatment of key issues affecting gender and education in Central Asia. It does not explore the experiences of Central Asian students abroad from a gender perspective, overlooks the impact of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan on female education, and mentions the effects of COVID-19 only briefly, without thoroughly analyzing its gendered implications. However, the book's strengths include (1) providing a nuanced examination of gender equity across post-Soviet Central Asia, comparing trends and policies among countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; (2) employing a wide range of research methods from statistical analysis to qualitative case studies, offering a rich and multifaceted understanding of gender and education; (3) directly engaging with policy development and implementation, making it valuable for decision-makers and reform advocates; (4) including both established and emerging voices, helping to diversify academic discourse and highlight underrepresented perspectives; and (5) adequately covering Turkmenistan despite its isolation and the challenges of data collection there. Overall, the book offers a detailed, interdisciplinary analysis of how gender influences educational access and outcomes, making it especially useful for domestic Central Asian scholars across various fields, as well as international researchers and practitioners seeking to understand the region's educational trends. It also serves as a practical guide for policymakers and development experts aiming to create more equitable and culturally sensitive education policies in transitional and diverse societies.