

219 STUDENTS' AGENCY IN MAINSTREAMING GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This study explores the ways the Government of Kazakhstan's policy of mainstreaming gender in higher education institutions (HEIs) is enacted on the ground and to what effect by examining the perspectives of students' who have been exposed to gender-focused curriculum in Kazakhstan. The paper draws on 13 focus group discussions with 59 higher education students in nine universities across Kazakhstan to explore students' understanding of gender and gender equality. The collected data is currently being analyzed, and as the analysis progresses, differences in students' views will be explored; however, preliminary findings suggest that students acknowledge the existence of unequal gender relations and prescribed gender norms in society and are able to challenge and alter these gender norms and behaviors; nonetheless, there are instances where the university curriculum and teachers entrench prevalent gender stereotypes, leaving little spaces for students to defy the reproduction of unequal gender relationships.

Full paper

This paper reports on the second stage of a project focused on exploring how the Government of Kazakhstan's policy of mainstreaming gender in higher education institutions (HEIs) is enacted on the ground and to what effect. Kazakhstan has initiated the policy of gender mainstreaming in HEIs to fulfill its commitment to global gender equality initiatives, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Declaration on advancing women's Rights, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including SDG 4 (Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Kazakhstan has also promulgated legislation to promote gender equality, including the Law on Equal Rights and Opportunities and the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence. A number of commissions, furthermore, have been established, including the National Commission for Women and the Family, demonstrating concerted efforts to address the issue of gender equality in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has made remarkable achievements in expanding access to all and its gender parity index in school and tertiary participation is the best in Central Asia (OECD, 2017). Yet, female students in Kazakhstan continue to be overrepresented in traditional areas of study and underrepresented in science and technology related fields (OECD, 2017). The segregation of students in particular areas of study produces gendered labor outcomes resulting in the concentration of women in feminized occupations with high prevalence of low-wages. The gendered labor outcomes and career choices in Kazakhstan are linked to expected gender roles and unequal power relations (ADB, 2013).

To respond to the government's agenda on gender equality, higher education institutions established centers and institutions on gender research. In 2016, 60 elective courses on gender equality were introduced in wide-ranging disciplines across 38 higher educational institutions, including "Education", "Humanities", "Social Science, Business and Economics". Among others, these courses include "Gender Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan", "Introduction to gender theory", "Constitutional and legal basis of gender policy", "Gender and Feminism Studies" and "Gender psychology". However, very little is known about how gender equality is understood or mainstreamed in educational courses in HEIs in Kazakhstan and how these courses are being developed and enacted.

Previous research demonstrates that gender-responsive curricula and educational initiatives aiming to interrupt unequal gender relationships influence students' agency (Bajaj and Pathmarajah's, 2011). The construction of gender identities via the curriculum and the understanding and learning of students are often mediated by student agency and their multiple identifications, such as socio-economic status, geographical location, home language, religion, race, and age. Bajaj and Pathmarajah's (2011) study on the differentiated impact of educational initiatives in Zambia and India demonstrates that curriculum innovations focusing on gender equality and human rights brought positive changes in attitudes toward gender amongst students and teachers; however, there were differences among boys

and girls; boys tended to enact more “transformative agency” and efficacy when asserting new understandings of gender and gender relations, while for girls, translating a new “sense of equality and respect into agency and action is often encountered with greater retaliation and difficulty” (p.62) due to the structural inequalities within the society which tend to privilege boys over girls. Understanding how educational initiatives are aimed at promoting gender equality received by students is important to tackle gender inequality both in the professional and domestic spheres. Thus, this paper aims to explore 1) students’ understanding of gender and gender equality, 2) how they receive the enacted gender curriculum in their respective schools, and 3) how they enact gender equality in professional and personal spaces. The paper draws on 13 focus group discussions with 59 higher education students including 50 female and 9 male students both undergraduates and graduates across nine universities located in South, North, West, and Central Kazakhstan.

The collected data is at the stage of the analysis, and differences among the views of students will be explored as the analysis goes in-depth; however, preliminary findings suggest that students acknowledge the strict gender boundaries within society and are able to challenge and disrupt the existing gender norms and behaviour; however, few cases demonstrate that university curriculum and teachers entrench the existing gender norms and gender stereotypes leaving little spaces for students to defy the reproduction of unequal gender relationships. The paper will discuss the implications for advancing, reimagining, and reinvigorating gender mainstreaming in HEIs in Kazakhstan and beyond.

References

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