

Challenges of empowering gender equality in the small and medium enterprises of the Republic of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This article explores the multifaceted challenges of fostering gender equality within Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Kazakhstan, with a detailed examination across the insurance, IT, marketing, and automotive sectors. Employing regression analysis, the study meticulously investigates the influence of gender on several professional dimensions: leadership roles, salary disparities, and marital status. The findings reveal distinct patterns of gender inequality across the industries. In the insurance sector, female leaders are notably compensated less than their male counterparts, highlighting a direct salary gap influenced by gender. The IT industry is characterized by a pronounced shortage of female professionals, attributed to prevailing stereotypes regarding gender suitability for technical roles. Although the marketing industry exhibits a comparatively smaller wage gap, it still struggles with underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. The most stark inequality is observed in the automotive industry, where women not only receive lower salaries but are also subjected to diminished professional privileges, underpinned by perceptions questioning their capabilities. The study underscores the critical need for targeted interventions by both the government and corporate sectors to mitigate these disparities. It advocates for the implementation of comprehensive measures, including specialized training programs for female leaders, alongside policies that ensure equitable pay and opportunities. This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality, urging for a strategic and collaborative approach to dismantle the systemic barriers that women face in Kazakhstan's SME landscape.

Keywords: gender asymmetry, gender equality, inequality, Kazakhstan, industry, numeration, compensation, gender pay gap

Қазақстан Республикасының шағын және орта кәсіпкерлік субъектілерінде гендерлік теңдікті кеңейту мәселелері

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Түйін

Бұл мақала сақтандыру, Ақпараттық технологиялар (ат), маркетинг және автомобиль өнеркәсібі сияқты салаларда егжей-тегжейлі талдаумен Қазақстанның шағын және орта кәсіпорындарында (ШОБ) гендерлік теңдікке жәрдемдесудің көп қырлы сын-қатерлерін зерттейді. Регрессиялық талдауды қолдана отырып, зерттеу гендердің бірнеше кәсіби аспектілерге әсерін мұқият зерттейді: көшбасшылықтағы рөлдер, жалақыдағы айырмашылықтар және отбасылық жағдай. Нәтижелер салалардағы гендерлік теңсіздіктің әртүрлі үлгілерін көрсетеді. Сақтандыру секторында әйел көшбасшылар гендерлік жалақының тікелей алшақтығын көрсете отырып, еркек әріптестерінен айтарлықтай аз алады. Ат саласы әйел мамандарының айқын тапшылығымен сипатталады, бұл техникалық рөлдерге гендерлік жарамдылық туралы басым стереотиптермен түсіндіріледі. Маркетинг саласында жалақының салыстырмалы түрде аз алшақтығы болғанымен, ол әлі де басшылық лауазымдардағы әйелдердің аз өкілдігі мәселесін қамтиды. Ең күрт теңсіздік автомобиль өнеркәсібінде байқалады, мұнда әйелдер аз жалақы алып қана қоймайды, сонымен қатар олардың қабілеттеріне күмән келтіретін қабылдаулар аясында кәсіби артықшылықтардың төмендеуіне ұшырайды. Зерттеу осы диспропорцияларды азайту үшін Үкіметтің де, корпоративтік сектордың да мақсатты араласуының маңызды қажеттілігін көрсетеді. Әйелдер көшбасшыларына арналған арнайы оқыту бағдарламаларын қоса алғанда, тең жалақы мен мүмкіндіктерді қамтамасыз ететін саясаттармен бірге шаралар кешені ұсынылады. Бұл зерттеу Қазақстанның ШОБ ландшафтында әйелдер кездесетін жүйелік кедергілерді жоюға стратегиялық және бірлескен көзқарасты шақыра отырып, гендерлік теңдік бойынша кеңірек дискурсқа үлес қосады.

Кілттік сөздер: гендерлік асимметрия, гендерлік теңдік, теңсіздік, Қазақстан, индустриялар, нөмірлеу, өтемақы, гендерлік жалақы айырмашылығы

Проблемы расширения гендерного равенства в субъектах малого и среднего предпринимательства Республики Казахстан

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Аннотация

Эта статья исследует многоаспектные вызовы содействия гендерному равенству в малых и средних предприятиях (МСП) Казахстана, с детальным анализом в таких отраслях, как страхование, информационные технологии (ИТ), маркетинг и автомобильная промышленность. Используя регрессионный анализ, исследование тщательно изучает влияние гендера на несколько профессиональных аспектов: роли в лидерстве, различия в зарплате и семейное положение. Результаты показывают различные модели гендерного неравенства в отраслях. В страховом секторе женщины-лидеры заметно получают меньше своих мужских коллег, подчеркивая прямой разрыв в зарплатах, обусловленный гендером. Отрасль ИТ характеризуется выраженным дефицитом женских специалистов, что объясняется господствующими стереотипами о гендерной пригодности для технических ролей. Хотя в маркетинговой отрасли наблюдается сравнительно меньший разрыв в оплате труда, в ней все еще существует проблема недопредставленности женщин на руководящих должностях. Наиболее резкое неравенство наблюдается в автомобильной промышленности, где женщины не только получают меньшую зарплату, но и подвергаются уменьшению профессиональных привилегий на фоне восприятий, ставящих под сомнение их способности. Исследование подчеркивает критическую необходимость целенаправленных вмешательств со стороны как правительства, так и корпоративного сектора для уменьшения этих диспропорций. предлагается комплекс мер, включая специализированные программы обучения для женщин-лидеров, наряду с политиками, обеспечивающими равную оплату и возможности. Это исследование вносит вклад в более широкий дискурс по гендерному равенству, призывая к стратегическому и совместному подходу к ликвидации системных барьеров, с которыми сталкиваются женщины на ландшафте МСП Казахстана.

Ключевые слова: гендерная асимметрия, гендерное равенство, неравенство, Казахстан, отрасль, нумерация, компенсация, гендерный разрыв в оплате труда

Introduction

Kazakhstan is considered as one of the most developed Central Asian countries since the moment of getting its independence. It should be highlighted that the country stands as a nation at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, where the dynamism of its economic landscape is connecting with an active development and growth of activities of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) [1]. However, not depending on its sufficient economic vibrancy, a critical examination of gender dynamics within the Kazakhstan's enterprises reveals a complex of challenges and opportunities. The pursuit of gender equality has become a global challenge, so the journey towards empowering women in the SME sector of Kazakhstan can be observed as a complicated road to boosting the interest to gender issues from the side of both government and society [2].

As the global community collectively strives for greater inclusivity and diversity, the focus on gender equality has intensified in Kazakhstan for the recent decades. However, despite its pivotal role in the country's economy, the SME sector in Kazakhstan presents a distinctive set of challenges when it comes to fostering a gender balance [3]. The following article would like to rely on a comprehensive exploration of major strategies and specifics of the realization of gender equality in small and medium enterprises across different industries and regions of Kazakhstan. By delving into the regional nuances, the study aims to clarify the complexities that shape the landscape of gender empowerment within the SME sector, realizing both common challenges and the unique aspects in specific regions.

From an urban dynamism of Almaty to a rich cultural tapestry of Shymkent, each region contributes its own narrative to the story of encouraging gender equality in Kazakhstan's SMEs [4]. Through this spectrum, it would be possible to emphasize such issues as cultural norms, an access to education, and workforce stereotypes, underlined reasons that become obstacles on the way to obtaining a full participation of women in the entrepreneurial sphere. Through a navigation of the challenges, it is necessary to point out potential solutions and initiatives that have emerged at the regional level, showcasing the resilience and innovations, demonstrated by SMEs in addressing gender disparities and asymmetries.

The article is going to investigate the gender equality, drawing on data, case studies, and firsthand accounts from such industries as insurance, IT, marketing, and automotive business. The results from both theoretical, statistical, and econometric tools would contribute to the ongoing dialogue on fostering inclusivity and equal opportunities within the SME landscape of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Literature review

Gender equality refers to the equal legal status of both men and women, allowing them, regardless of gender, to exercise their abilities to participate in political, economic, social, and other spheres of life [4, p.5]. Over the years of the independence, Kazakhstan has made a significant progress on gender equality. The beginning of the state policy of gender equality was marked by the accession of Kazakhstan to the Beijing Declaration in 1995. In December 1998, by decree of the Head of State, the National Commission for

Family and Women was created. In 1998, it was transformed into the National Commission for Women and Family and Demographic Policy. Undoubtedly, the transition of the National Institute for gender development to the Presidential Administration has strengthened it and provided an opportunity to influence all levels of government [2, p.5].

Much more attention was paid to gender equality issues during the Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010. On the eve of this event, legislative acts were signed in the field of protection of women's rights, including the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On state guarantees of equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women” [5]. The law has established basic principles and norms concerning the creation of conditions for gender equality in all spheres of state and public life. Currently, the development of gender and family policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan has been reflected in the development and adoption of the Concept of Family and Gender Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan for the period up to 2030.

The constant improvement of the legal framework has allowed Kazakhstan to create conditions for the realization of equal rights and opportunities for women and men in many areas of life. For example, according to the latest Human Development Report, the gender gap in Kazakhstan has narrowed in areas such as education and health, and women's economic opportunities are expanding. The active role of women is manifested primarily in small and medium-sized businesses [6]. According to the Report “Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM): Kazakhstan 2017/2018” in Kazakhstan, men (11.7%) and women (11.3%) have almost the same indicators for TEA (early entrepreneurial activity). This aspect has distinguished Kazakhstan from other GEM countries (more than 50 countries in the world). In addition, the development of women's business in the country is carried out through the state programs “Employment Roadmap - 2025” and “Business Roadmap – 2025”, as well as various programs, such as the Damu Entrepreneurship Development Fund [7].

However, not depending on the governmental efforts to create reliable legislative frameworks for gender equality, there are still barriers in Kazakhstan that women face both in their professional and personal lives. For example, among studies on gender issues, the issue of unequal remuneration between men and women for equivalent work remains relevant. In 2018, such a pay gap between men and women was 34.2%, in 2019 – 32.2%, and in 2022 – 25% [8].

In the situation with female representation in politics, most Kazakh women highlight the lack of political and legal equality between women and men. As of January 1, 2019, the proportion of women among civil servants in the country was 55.4% of the actual number. At the same time, the share of women holding leadership positions is - 39.8% [3, p. 4]. In 2022 this proportion has got 52.3%, which is not so sufficient progress [7, p. 2].

A key issue is the issue of professional segregation, manifested in a sustainable division of professions and positions between different groups of employees [9]. Women still make up more than 70% of wage earners in such low-paid areas as health, education, and social services. Women's representation in the financial, insurance, and public sectors is just over half. According to experts, men involved in these sectors receive 3.5 times more wages than women working in the field of education [10].

Kazakh scientists consider the gender aspect as an important condition for the political institutionalization of the middle class. The attention of theorists and practitioners to the situation of women has increased due to the fact that the economic, physical, and mental state of women determines the quality of existing and future human potential [11]. Women make up the majority of the population in almost all countries of the world, their numerical superiority is mainly due to mature and older ages. In Kazakhstan, the share of women in the total population in 2022 amounted to 51.4% [12].

An important characteristic of the position of women in the Kazakh labor market is the sectoral and professional gender asymmetry of employment. Women are forced into the sphere of less skilled and less advanced labor. So in 2022, women occupied a large share (more than 65%) in the employed population of such areas as education, health care, and trade. Women, on average, tend to choose to work with a more flexible schedule and less intensity, which is easier to combine with home concerns. Using the fact of motherhood as a selection tool, the employer pays the motherless regardless of the real contribution. The female workforce is less competitive in the labor market [13]. It leads to a higher unemployment rate among women, the official level of which is higher than among men (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Unemployment rate among women for 2018-2022

Indicator	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
A level of unemployment among women	5.4%	5.4%	5.4%	5.5%	5.1%

Note: compiled by author by source World Bank [14]

The reason for the pay gap between men and women is the difference in the average duration of the working week [9, p.7]. However, women, on average, spend much more time on unpaid domestic labor. The sectoral and occupational gender asymmetry of employment also explains gender pay differences. These differences are not only unfair but also harmful to the economy, as they lead to poverty and social isolation. Difficulties in finding jobs for women who contribute significantly to household well-being lead to an increase in the risk of families becoming poor [15]. The priority direction of policy in this area is to increase the competitiveness of women in the labor market by developing mechanisms that allow women to combine motherhood and work, and expand part-time employment [16].

The active economic role of women led to an objective increase in the social status of women in the family and society. In turn, it leads to changes in gender roles in the family and to the formation of new gender models of the family in Kazakh society.

Methodology

The following article would like to investigate whether there are challenges related to gender equality in small and medium businesses in Kazakhstan. Therefore, it was decided to select the period from 2019 to 2023 to find out whether there is an aspect of

inequality in the chosen industries, such as insurance, IT, marketing, and automotive industry. Three companies were selected from each specified field (Table 2).

Table 2 – Selected companies for the analysis

Industry	Company
Insurance	Halyk Insurance Company JSC Eurasia Insurance JSC Standard Life JSC
IT	LeverX JSC AI Solutions JSC iLink JSC
Marketing	Grey Cardinals JSC Mediocre JSC Athena Plus JSC
Automotive	Astana Motors LLP Allur JSC AutoCenter Bavaria LLP

Note: compiled by author

This study employs regression analysis to investigate the influence of key inequality factors on the gender pay gap within four distinct industries: insurance, IT, marketing, and the automotive sector. The primary objective is to unravel the relationships between variables that contribute to gender-based salary disparities within each industry.

It is possible to specify the selected variables.

Dependent variables:

1. Difference between salaries of male and female employees.

Independent variables:

1. Percentage of women in the company's staff.
2. Percentage of women in leadership positions.
3. Percentage of unmarried women.

Based on selected independent variables, the following four hypotheses were generated, such as:

H1: The effect of the percentage of women on the staff leads to the difference between the salaries of male and female employees.

H2: The is effect of the percentage of women taking leadership positions leads to the difference between salaries of male and female employees

H3: The is effect of a high percentage of unmarried women leads to differences between salaries of male and female employees

Comprehensive data is sourced from employee records, encompassing gender, salary structures, educational backgrounds, years of experience, job roles, and industry classifications. The dataset ensures representation from each industry, facilitating a thorough examination of gender pay dynamics.

A linear regression model is chosen for its suitability in analyzing the continuous dependent variable, the gender pay gap. This methodological approach aims to uncover industry-specific nuances in the gender pay gap, providing valuable insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders and advocates working towards equitable compensation practices.

Findings and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive results

The first step in any econometric analysis is to conduct descriptive statistics to see whether the data has some challenges. Table 3 below demonstrates significant characteristics of both dependent and independent variables, which were taken to reveal challenges of gender equality in four selected SME industries, such as insurance, IT, marketing, and automotive business, for the period from 2019 to 2023. See descriptive statistics in Table 3.

Table 3 – Descriptive statistics

Statistics		Min.	Median	Mean	Max
Dependent variable	Difference between salaries	0,83	0,89	0,89	0,94
	% of women in staff	1,8	16,2	13,25	18,8
Independent variables	% of women in leadership	4,16	9,52	9,84	16,15
	% of unmarried women	59,15	72,40	74,73	94,97

Note: compiled by author

Based on Table 3 above, it is possible to highlight some key findings. First, the minimum difference between salaries in the dataset is 0.83, meaning that the women’s wage and the men’s wage difference is 0.83. Generally, the results from descriptive statistics prove that the difference between salaries is significantly higher for unmarried women than for married women. This finding suggests that marital status may be a factor sufficiently contributing to the gender pay gap.

Overall, Table 3 provides a snapshot of the gender pay gap in Kazakhstan. It shows that the gender pay gap is significant and persistent and that it varies across different occupations and marital status.

4.2 Regression

For the reliable investigation of challenges of gender equality in four industries (3 enterprises were selected in each sector) of Kazakhstan, it was decided to apply a regression analysis using a linear regression model, which allows to see an interconnection between the gender pay gap and such factors as a difference in salaries between male and female employees, the number of female employees, the number of women, taking leadership and management positions, as well as a marital status. For the

reliable investigation of challenges of gender equality in four industries within Kazakhstan, where three enterprises were selected in each industry, applying a regression analysis through a linear regression model is indeed a practical approach (Table 4-6).

Table 4 – Output of regression analysis

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.49
R Square	0.24
Adjusted R Square	0.20
Standard Error	0.08
Observations	60

Note: compiled by author

Table 5 – Analysis of variance (ANOVA) based on the collected data

ANOVA	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	3	0.12	0.04	5.92	0.00
Residual	56	0.37	0.01		
Total	59	0.49			

Note: compiled by author

Table 6 – Result of regression analysis

Result	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
Intercept	0.66	0.06	10.66	0.00	0.54	0.79
% of women in staff	0.002	0.00	1.41	0.16	(0.00)	0.00
% of unmarried women	0.002	0.00	2.93	0.00	0.00	0.00
% of women in leadership	0.005	0.00	2.32	0.02	0.00	0.01

Note: compiled by author

The model suggests that gender composition and marital status within an organization can have measurable impacts on salary differences. Remarkably, the role of women in leadership positions appears to be a more influential factor. This insight can guide organizational policies and practices toward achieving gender parity and addressing salary disparities. Thus, according to Tables 4-5, the regression model is following formula 1:

$$\text{Difference between salaries} = 0.66 + 0.002 * \% \text{ of women in staff} + 0.002 * \% \text{ of unmarried women} + 0.005 * \% \text{ of women in leadership}, \quad (1)$$

The p-value in Table 6 for the difference between salaries ANOVA is less than 0.05. This result indicates that the difference between salaries by gender varies

significantly. The R square (24%) value indicates that the variability difference between salaries of male and female employees is explained by the percentage of unmarried women, percentage of women in leadership, and the percentage of women in the staff model. The confidence intervals for the percentage of unmarried women and the percentage of women in leadership do not include zero, and their p-values are less than 0.05, which indicates that they have a positive impact on dependent variables. This means that we accept the following hypothesis:

H2: The is an effect of the percentage of women taking leadership positions leads to the difference between salaries of male and female employees

H3: The is an effect of a high percentage of unmarried women leads to the differences between salaries of male and female employees

Moreover, we fail to reject the first null hypothesis since the p-value for a percentage of women on staff is higher than 0.05. It means that the first hypothesis, which said that there is an effect of the percentage of women in the staff leads to difference between salaries of male and female employees is failed. Results of regression analysis according to industry are presented in Table 7.

Table 7 – Result of regression analysis according to industry

Code	Independent variables	Coefficients	Standard Error	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
Insurance	% of women in staff	(0.002)	0.00	0.06	(0.011)	0.008
	% of unmarried women	0.007	0.00	0.70	(0.001)	0.014
	% of women in leadership	0.012	0.01	0.07	(0.001)	0.026
IT	% of women in staff	(0.003)	0.03	0.93	(0.079)	0.073
	% of unmarried women	0.006	0.01	0.33	(0.007)	0.020
	% of women in leadership	(0.001)	0.02	0.97	(0.041)	0.039
Automotive	% of women in staff	0.0005	0.00	0.44	(0.0008)	0.0017
	% of unmarried women	0.0028	0.00	0.00	0.0017	0.0039
	% of women in leadership	(0.0027)	0.00	0.07	(0.0055)	0.0002
Marketing	% of women in staff	0.001	0.00	0.43	(0.002)	0.005
	% of unmarried women	(0.004)	0.00	0.13	(0.010)	0.001
	% of women in leadership	0.004	0.00	0.29	(0.004)	0.011

Note: compiled by author

According to Table 5, the percentage of unmarried women in the automotive sector is significant at 1%, and the percentage of women in leadership is significant at 10%, which means that there is a difference in wages according to marriage status and leadership position. In IT and marketing sectors are not proven that there is an any gender pay gap according to given independent variables. However, insurance sectors, there is an effect of percentage of women in leadership and percentage of women in staff on gender pay gap at 10% significance level. Given these observations from, it's clear that the dynamics of gender pay gaps vary significantly across different sectors, influenced by factors like marital status and leadership positions among women. The findings present a nuanced picture of how gender-related disparities manifest in the workplace, pointing towards sector-specific challenges and opportunities for intervention.

Conclusions

To conclude, the regression results have confirmed that gender inequality exists in Kazakhstan. The study found that women in leadership positions do not receive equal pay compared to their male counterparts in the insurance and automotive sectors. However, women are not underrepresented in leadership positions in the marketing and IT industries. In the automotive industry, there is the highest level of gender inequality. Women are not perceived as qualified employees, so they often receive lower salaries and have fewer privileges than men. The study recommends that the government and businesses take steps to address gender inequality in the workplace, such as providing training and support for women in leadership positions and implementing policies that promote equal pay and opportunity for all employees.

Building upon the regression analysis findings highlighting gender inequality within Kazakhstan, particularly in the insurance and automotive sectors, it's critical to delve deeper into the structural and cultural dimensions that perpetuate such disparities. The evidence points to a stark contrast in the treatment of women in leadership roles, not just in terms of remuneration but also regarding the recognition and opportunities afforded to them compared to their male counterparts. This discrepancy not only underscores the prevalent bias in these industries but also calls attention to the broader societal norms that influence such disparities.

In conclusion, while the regression results have laid bare the extent of gender inequality in Kazakhstan's insurance and automotive sectors, they also provide a clear directive for concerted efforts by government, industry, and society at large to dismantle the barriers to gender equality. Through a combination of legal, policy, educational, and cultural interventions, it is possible to create a more equitable and inclusive working environment that values and rewards the contributions of all employees, irrespective of gender.

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