



Women in Leadership in Education in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

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INTRODUCTION

Across the world, universities remain gendered (Amsler & Motta, 2019; Filipek & Stone, 2021; Rosa et al., 2020). This is clearly manifested in the persisting underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in academia when compared to men. While the share of women presidents has been increasing over the last decade in some countries, most commonly in the Global North, parity is yet to be achieved. In 2022, only a third (33%) of the U.S. college presidents at all levels were women (Melidona et al., 2023). In a similar vein, women held only 31% of university president posts in Canada in 2021 (Cafley, 2021). The proportion of women in leadership positions in Australian universities was 41.2% in 2021 (Calderon, 2022). According to a report titled *Gender Equality:*

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How Global Universities are Performing (UNESCO, 2022), in 2022 only 18% of university rectors were women in nine Latin American countries, while only 15% were women in 48 European countries.

Central Asia is not an exception in this global trend of women's underrepresentation in university leadership. Although women are well represented among faculty and academic support staff at universities of the region as a legacy of the Soviet gender policies, which supported women with flexible working hours and relatively good pay (ADB, 2005), women remain under-represented among top leaders of universities. Based on the estimate by Harden-Wolfson and Shakirova in this book, the representation of women in higher education leadership in the region varies from just 5.3% of the total in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to 26.1% in Kazakhstan. In 2022, women comprised a third of university leaders in Kazakhstan, occupying only 22 out of the total 116 rector positions (FactCheck, 2022). Kazakhstan seems to be a leader in this gender-equity parameter and this statistic is similar to global estimates mentioned by Harden-Wolfson and Shakirova.

Research on women leaders in Central Asian higher education is still in the nascent stages. This region, in general, is largely ignored in global research on higher education. In addition, the topic of women's leadership female lead tends to be marginalized and attracts limited attention from both local and international scholars. Furthermore, existing global knowledge on women's leadership at universities is limited in its reliance on the empirical data collected mostly from universities in the West (Acker, 2014; Aiston, 2014; Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Obers, 2015). Meanwhile, Central Asian research on women's leadership could inform human resource practice at universities and international and domestic gender-equity-promoting policy initiatives in the region by providing a better understanding of (1) the challenges faced by women in attaining leadership positions, (2) the nature of the positions, which are attainable for them, (3) the barriers they face when they become leaders, and (4) the factors, which facilitate their success and persistence. This knowledge could also inform the development of policy strategies for more effective recruitment, training, and support structures at universities.

Furthermore, examining the experiences of women higher education leaders in Central Asia could offer important insights for global scholarship, given the unique features of the Central Asian context. As an ambitious project of the Soviet state aimed at liberating women from

patriarchal and religious subjugation, women in Central Asia were encouraged to contribute to economic growth through labor force participation, supported by policies like extended childcare leave for mothers and universal access to daycare (McAuley, 2022). Women were overrepresented in Soviet academia, attracted to the work by the flexible work hours and the relatively low workload (Rudakov & Prakhov, 2021). However, the political nature and the centralized appointment mechanism to university leadership positions at Soviet universities restrained women from pursuing career aspirations outside the classroom or administrative chairs within their immediate departments (Katz, 2001). Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the governments of Central Asian states strive to implement gender-equity-promoting policies, including increasing the presence of women in leadership in general and in academia more specifically, some legacies of the traditional past and the Soviet times continue to exert their influence, stalling the advancement of women as leaders (Darbaidze & Niparishvili, 2023).

This paper summarizes the results of a study that explored the experiences of female leaders in Central Asian academia using empirical data from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Implications of the results of the study are discussed in terms of their relevance for global research on the topic and for domestic policies aimed at promoting the representation and advancement of women in the labor force and leadership in particular.

PRIOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN ACADEMIA

Most of the existing knowledge on women leaders in academia has been informed by the data collected in the West (e.g., Acker, 2014; Manongson & Gosh, 2021; Townsend, 2021; Wallace & Wallin, 2015). Recently, more studies have been conducted on women outside the Western contexts, including East Asia (e.g., Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Sueda et al., 2020), Africa (e.g., Obers, 2015), and the Middle East (e.g., Arar & Oplatka, 2016; Samier, 2015). However, Central Asia remains largely underexplored (c.f. Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2021).

The existing research has produced several promising theories helping to explain the women leaders' underrepresentation: (1) human capital theory; (2) psychosocial or gender-role theory; (3) gendered organization theory; (4) professionalization theory; (5) performative leadership theory; and (6) intersectionality theory. In the rest of this chapter, a summary of

the main ideas and results of research conceptualized with these theories will be provided. A combination of the theories was used in the interpretation of the results of this study on women leaders' experiences in higher education in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

1. *Human Capital Theory* attributes the inability of women to advance to leadership positions to the systematic underinvestment in their human capital resulting from interruptions from pregnancy, child-care leave, and familial preponderance in some cultures to underinvest in girls' education (Hakim, 1996). This theory is particularly relevant in the context of developing countries (Adusah-Karikari and Ohenmeng, 2014; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013), but is less relevant in the context of transitional economies, where educational levels of males and females have leveled off (Harden-Wolfson and Shakirova, here).
2. *Gender-Role Theory* developed by Eagly (1987) connects women's underachievement as leaders to the differences in psychosocial characteristics and behaviors of women and men resulting from differences in socialization. According to this theory, the differences are the product of the sexual division of labor and the social structures, which evolved to support it—the organization of individuals into social categories of women and men (gender), with expectations about the associated social roles (child-caring or bread-winning), as well as behaviors, which are deemed appropriate for the roles. Women are expected to be primarily responsible for housework and childcare at the expense of pursuing careers (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). They develop lower levels of motivation for pursuing education, lower leadership aspirations, and weaker sense of self-esteem (e.g., Adusah-Karikari & Ohenmeng, 2014) as a result of being socialized into these gender roles (Coogan & Chen, 2007).
3. *Gendered Organization Theory* argues that gender stratification and associated inequality reincarnate in organizations in the form of hierarchies, promotion structures, organizational division of labor, communication patterns, and leadership ideals (Aiston, 2014; Bain & Cummings, 2000; Jones et al., 2015). Research informed by this theory revealed that in many organizations, male leaders act as “gatekeepers” to women's advancement (Aiston, 2014; Jones et al., 2015) and exclude women from “informal networks of male bonding and information sharing” (Luke, 2011, p. 58). It also shows that the common organizational stereotype of an ideal leader

is based on an image of a man and is associated with male traits, such as self-confidence, independence, and ambition (Madera et al., 2009), which leads to the common perception that women are unfit for leadership positions (Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015).

4. *Professionalization Theory* by Blackmore (2014) attributes the lack of women's advancement to leadership positions to processes extraneous to organizations. Blackmore (2014) points to the gendered division of labor in the academic profession, where full-time positions are designed with a man in mind, failing to accommodate the maternity-associated needs of women, women are often marginalized into part-time positions, encountering challenges with obtaining tenure or promotion, making it impossible for them to join the leadership candidates pool (p. 90).
5. *Performative Leadership Theory* perceives gender not as a fixed construct of reality, but as something fluid and constantly re-shaped in discourse, structuring reality itself, whereby the performance of the gender role by an individual according to the socially prescribed scripts leads to the reproduction of the structure of gendered power relations, while improvisations allow for agency and historical changes in gender conceptualization (Fuller, 2014; Morris, 1995; Reed, 2001). This critical feminist view goes beyond the victimization of a woman as a silent sufferer of the social order to empowering her as an agent overthrowing social categorization and structures. Performative leadership theory assumes that an individual may assume various gender and leadership characteristics depending on the context in which they find themselves (Acker, 2012). A woman leader may enact "traditional femininity" in general, but in specific situations, depending on expectations of the surrounding individuals, they may display switch from one gender identity to another ("gender heteroglossia") (Francis, 2012; Fuller, 2014, p. 324).
6. *Theory of Intersectionality* by Crenshaw (1989) argues that the social experiences of women are shaped not merely by gender, but rather by a complex interaction among various social structures, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and ability, which affect the conditions of marginalized groups in society. As a result of this interaction, women with different combinations of social structures and identity markers may experience different forms of oppression resulting from

different power influences. In fact, some women may be subject to multiple forms of subordination within society, thus being put in particularly marginalized positions (McCall, 2005).

METHODS

This study used a qualitative phenomenological case study design (Groenewald, 2004). The design aims to describe as accurately as possible the structure of a phenomenon, which in this study refers to the experiences of women leaders in Central Asia. More specifically, phenomenology helps to uncover what a particular experience means to a group of people. This approach requires the researcher first to describe the lived experiences objectively and then reflect on the description with reference to the existing theories about the phenomenon.

The choice of the two countries as cases for inclusion in the case study was determined by three considerations. First, the two neighbors share common nomadic origins and, as a result, have similar views on the role of women in the family and society. Second, Kazakhstan (0.72) and Kyrgyzstan (0.70) have demonstrated average performance on gender equity in Eurasia, gaining relatively high scores in the Global Gender Gap Index (2023) and staying behind Moldova (0.78) and Belarus (0.75), while surpassing Azerbaijan (0.69) and Tajikistan (0.67) (Statista, 2023). Third, the two countries also displayed some differences, promising the desired extent of variability in the participants' responses (Table 10.1). Table 10.1 shows essential differences, including the size of the population, levels of national income per capita, unemployment, and the extent of representation of women in the labor force, educational enrollment, and national parliaments.

The study was organized around two key research questions:

RQ1 What are the experiences of women in leadership positions in higher education in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?

RQ2 How do the countries compare in terms of the experiences of female academic leaders?

To obtain an understanding of the experiences of the participants in their own terms we conducted in-depth Zoom interviews with 30 women

Table 10.1 Basic background information about Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Kazakhstan</i>	<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>
Territory	2,724,902 sq. km (2014)	199,949 sq. km (2014)
Population size	19,62 mln (2022)	6,98 mln (2022)
GDP per capita	11,492.2 USD (2022)	1,655.1 USD (2022)
Unemployment	4.9% of the labor force (2022)	4.2% of the labor force (2022)
Labor force participation	63.3 females/74.6 males % of population (2022)	53.5 of females/79 of males % of population (2022)
Main economic sectors	Services (52.6), Industry (35)—mostly mining and oil and gas extraction, Agriculture (5.25) as % of GVA (2022)	Services (59), Industry (26)—mostly mining, clothing and textiles, Agriculture (15) as % of GVA (2021)
Fertility rate	3.32 (2021) live births per woman	2.89 (2021) live births per woman
Gross enrollment (school), gender parity index	1.16 (2020)	1.14 (2022)
Women parliamentarians	27% (2022)	20 (2022)

(15 in Kazakhstan and 15 in Kyrgyzstan), who occupied leadership positions at various levels in several universities in the two countries. To achieve variability in the responses, we used a maximal-variation sampling approach (Creswell, 2013). The following criteria of variation were set: (1) age, (2) marital and parental status, (3) ethnicity, (4) type of institutional ownership, (5) geographic location of the participant, (6) level of leadership occupied, (7) disciplinary affiliation, (8) leadership and higher education experience.

The sampling frame was constructed by identifying universities of different types of ownership (public and private) and orientation (national/regional/other) in various regions of the two countries, which provided employee contacts on their websites. The participants were sent an invitation to take part in an interview with an explanation of the purposes of the study. The final participants were selected from volunteers after an additional background search using the Internet. Table 10.2 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 10.2 Demographic characteristics of the participants of the interviews

<i>No</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Type of ownership</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Number of children</i>	<i>Years in higher education</i>	<i>Years in leadership</i>	<i>Code</i>
1	Dean	Private	Kazakh	South	46	Married	1	26	18	A
2	Head of Department	Private	Kazakh	North	36	Single	1	15	10	B
3	Vice Rector	Private	Kazakh	North	41	Single	3	11	1	C
4	Head of Department	Private	Tatar	North	30	Single	0	7	6	D
5	Head of Department	Public	Kazakh	East	45	Married	3	20	9	E
6	Head of international office	Public	Kazakh	East	49	Married	2	20	2	F
7	Dean	Public	Kazakh	South	53	Married	3	30	25	G
8	Head of Department	Public	Kazakh	South	40	Married	3	17	2	H
9	Head of Department	Public	Russian	South	46	Married	1	14	3	I
10	Dean	Quazi-private*	Kazakh	North	59	Married	2	30	25	J
11	Vice Rector	Private	Russian	South	50	Married	3	7	7	K
12	Vice Rector	Private	Russian	North	42	Married	1	20	17	L
13	Director of academy	Private	Kazakh	South	30	Single	0	4	4	M
14	Head of Department	Public	Kazakh	West	45	Single	0	7	7	N
15	Vice-dean	Public	Kazakh	West	37	Single	1	5	3	O
16	ExVice Dean	Quazi-private (AUCA)	Kyrgyz	North	40	Widowed	2	7	15	P

(continued)

Table 10.2 (continued)

<i>No</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Type of ownership</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Number of children</i>	<i>Years in higher education</i>	<i>Years in leadership</i>	<i>Code</i>
17	Head of Department	Public	Kyrgyz	North	48	Married	1	16	11	Q
18	Head of Department	Private	Kyrgyz	North	39	Married	4	1	1	R
19	Head of Department	Private	Kyrgyz	North	55	Married	2	11	30	S
20	Head of Department	Private	Kyrgyz	North	35	Married	2	9	9	T
21	Head of Department in the Ministry	Public	Russian	North	51	Single	0	8	8	U
22	Dean	Public	Kyrgyz	North	66	Married	3	40	34	V
23	Head of Department	Public	Kyrgyz	South	45	Single	3	23	11	W
24	Head of Research Center	Public	Kyrgyz	South	38	Single	0	16	7	X
25	Ex Vice Dean	Private	Kyrgyz	North	40	Widowed	2	7	15	Y
26	Head of Department	Public	Kyrgyz	North	48	Married	1	16	11	Z
27	Head of Department	Private	Kyrgyz	North	39	Married	4	1	1	AA
28	Vice Rector	Public	Kyrgyz	South	45	Married	1	23	15	AB

(continued)

Table 10.2 (continued)

<i>No</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Type of ownership</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Number of children</i>	<i>Years in higher education</i>	<i>Years in leadership</i>	<i>Code</i>
29	Vice Rector	Public	Kyrgyz	South	47	Married	2	25	17	AC
30	Dean	Private	Kyrgyz	South	36	Single	1	10	7	AD

RESULTS

Psychosocial Determinants of Individual-Level Challenges

The individual-level experiences of women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were similar to the experiences of women leaders in higher education in previously explored countries across the world (e.g., Adusah-Karikari & Ohenmeng, 2014), in that their professional pathways continued to be affected by the gender-role expectations and gender norms influenced by the patriarchal legacies of the sexual division of labor. Consistently with the norms, women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were expected to be primarily responsible for caretaking roles in the family, associated with child-caring, house-keeping, and senior-tending. The society's ideal of a woman is that of a modest and unambitious member of the family, who draws life-meaning in serving and complying with the husband and his extended family. In fact, in the two culturally related countries, these expectations have merged into the archetype of the "Ideal Bride", a metaphor, which is frequently referred to in both humorous and serious manner at family dinners and functions, on official media, and in entertaining contests between young female students organized at universities.

As predicted by gender-role theory and has been revealed in research on other countries (Eagly & Carly, 2007a), both women and men are inculcated with the dominant beliefs about the responsibilities and characteristics of both genders since early childhood. These beliefs are so ingrained in the minds and hearts of women that even women who advance to high levels of university leadership, who have achieved distinctive qualifications and notable achievements, who are expected to contribute to equity-promoting policies in their current positions, and,

thus, who may be familiar with research on the condition of women around the world, at the bottom of their heart remain committed to the dominant beliefs that their primary role is that of a woman, who should put their families ahead of her career. Some of the high achieving interviewees confided that they had never aspired to advance in leadership careers to begin with and, at times, had been pushed into the career path by their own supervisors. In fact, the majority of them indicated that they continued to reject offers of promotion because they did not want to complicate their already challenging family lives with new difficulties. The quote from a head of the department from a public university in Kazakhstan reveals the low level of self-confidence and lack of aspirations some of the women had at the time they were forcefully appointed to their first leadership position:

I have always been somewhat shy and tried to stay away from any politics in our department. As a mom of a young child, I also wanted to focus on teaching and my research. However, when our departmental chair retired, nobody wanted to take over because the pay was not really that much higher than the pay of a regular faculty, while there was much more responsibility and work. All other colleagues were pre-retirement age, so the dean told me that either I agreed or I had to leave. So, I never really wanted to become an academic leader to begin with. I just complied with the demand.

Similar to women leaders in universities in other countries (Rosa, 2022), many women leaders in the current study found it difficult to combine their family and professional responsibilities and experienced cognitive dissonance from the need to respond to two sets of contradictory expectations. Many were stuck to the perpetual feeling of guilt for being neither a good enough mom nor a good enough professional. They devalued their career success due to the feeling that they had achieved this success at the expense of their children's and their own wellbeing. Some participants in both countries complained about psychological issues due to the "double load" they had to carry at home and at work, as well as due to conflicts in the family originating from the pressures experienced by the husbands, who could not find peace with the fact that they had been outperformed by their spouses. In the words of one dean at a private university in Kyrgyzstan:

It is very difficult to balance your work and your family responsibilities and you can never be good at either. I feel like I have a never-ending stream of crisis situations that require my attention. These tend to switch from family-related ones to work-related ones. One week, it is my child's health issues. Next week, it is a situation with a problematic co-worker or a busy reporting period when I have to focus my attention on the Ministry of Education staff. I never have a quiet period when I can just relax and I am never able to deal with any of these situations perfectly. So, I have to find peace with the idea that I am not really a good Mom. The problem is that I am not satisfied with myself as a leader either.

Challenges Imposed by the Gendered Nature of Universities

Gendered organization theory is very relevant in the context of Central Asia in explaining how organizational-level gendered practices make the process of promotion to leadership, as well as performance as a leader, more challenging for women. Similarly to universities in other countries, which were studied in prior research (Aiston, 2014; Bain & Cummings, 2000; Jones et al., 2015), higher education organizations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have structures, cultures, and practices, which inherently favor men over women.

One of the most visible ways in which cultural expectations about gender roles shape organizational practices with respect to women's promotion at universities is manifested in the structure of career ladders available for women. Because employers assume that professional advancement is secondary for women who should prioritize their motherhood role, they do not provide women with any advancement opportunities until she gives birth and her children become relatively independent. As a result, many participants mentioned that opportunities for promotion were limited for young females of child-bearing age. In fact, some of our interviewees complained that they were asked about their marital and motherhood status during interviews and were cut off from any opportunities when getting pregnant. As a 40-year-old participant from a public university in the capital city of Kyrgyzstan shared with us:

At some point in my career, I felt as if I had reached some sort of a "glass ceiling". I was around 29 when I started to realize that I was stuck in the position I had at the time. I had received an advanced degree and had

gained rather good experience in several leading private and public universities by then, so it seemed as if I had everything to get promoted. In fact, I could see that male colleagues with the same credentials did get a chance to advance, while I remained invisible to our leadership. Then I overheard somebody saying that one of the 45-year-old single ladies working in another department was “an old spinster” whose bad temper could be attributed to the lack of a husband and a family. I suddenly started to realize that the real reason I was facing the ceiling was that I was not yet married, and I did not have kids.

Because being women, our participants did not comply with the societal masculine ideal of leadership, many of them felt that they had to work harder to prove that they were qualified. This was consistent with the findings of studies conducted in other cultural contexts (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Luke, 2011; Wilson, 2003). Not only the women leaders tended to be described by colleagues as being more responsible, hard-working, and detail-oriented, but they also were more demanding toward their subordinates than their male counterparts. This predisposition to be extremely demanding grew with the women’s progression to higher positions in academic hierarchy. This could be explained by the increasing need to compete exclusively with males at the higher levels, where women were less prevalent. Women reported that they needed to “become more like males” as their level of responsibility increased. As one Vice Rector from Kazakhstan reported: *“When among males, act as males do. I could afford being “nicer” when I was a chair and a dean. I can no longer afford this at this level. Too much responsibility for people. Too much to lose”*.

The gendered stereotype of an academic leader is sustained in Central Asia even despite the fact that men are relatively rare species in some women-dominated disciplines. This causes the phenomenon of “mothering”, which was described in prior research on other contexts (Simpson, 2004). The deficit of males increases their value in universities and intensifies the administration’s efforts to ensure their retention. Some of our participants reported that males are getting opportunities for professional development and promotion even when they are underqualified compared to their female counterparts. When they do get to leadership positions, women tend to value them and, at times, assume some of their direct responsibilities to make sure that the man does not leave the organization. As one of the Kazakhstani participants reported:

Men are rare species in our higher education, so we need to take care of them so that our students have some fatherly figures to model. We “carry our men in our arms” to make sure they stay with us. In some cases, that involves putting together their syllabus or filing their academic reports when they “accidentally” forget to do this (Vice-dean from Southern Kazakhstani public university).

Consistent with studies conducted in other countries (Heilman et al., 1987; Schein, 1973), women tend to be undervalued as compared to men in peer and performance evaluations. Some of our participants believe that they and other women lack “strategic thinking and the ability to think globally” because these are male strengths. These stereotypes lead to the common perception that women are naturally less qualified for leadership positions and that men fit the positions much better. In addition to that, women tend to be excluded from informal male communication networks, a barrier described in other studies (e.g., Aiston, 2014; Bain & Cummings, 2000). Three of our participants pointed out that decisions are “often made in smoking rooms, pubs while drinking a bottle of beer, while playing golf, football or billiards”, all of which constitute “games that only guys play”. These activities often take place outside the normal working hours, when females are expected to be at home performing her family responsibilities.

Challenges at the Professional Level

According to official statistics in both countries, although Kazakhstan surpasses the world average and Kyrgyzstan is doing fairly well in terms of representation of women in leadership positions in higher education, women are still underrepresented (Harden-Wolfson & Shakirova, this volume). Professionalization theory (Blackmore, 2014) helps to explain the phenomenon. Women rarely reach the position of rectors and ministers because they cannot access a separate career track, while the administrative track is designed exclusively for men. There are opportunities for women in the separate career track in academic affairs, which ends with the position of a Vice Rector for Academic Affairs. At the same time, there is a parallel track in administrative affairs (Finance, Administration, International Affairs, and Research), which is reserved for males and leads to the position of a Rector and, ultimately, Minister of Education. It is these positions that require the notorious “strategic vision and

global thinking” and which are associated with a “male face by external stakeholders”.

Modern work in academic affairs administration in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is associated with a high degree of bureaucratic control, and, consequently, with overtime work and much responsibility. Hence, the positions are not really that attractive for males. It is to these positions that women are frequently “promoted” or, rather, “marginalized”. Meanwhile, the administrative track position often requires a degree in engineering or sciences, as well as an active research profile and research administration experience because universities are increasingly expected to play a key role in innovation-driven economic growth. Even when women have a degree and work as faculty in engineering or sciences, they tend to have a lower level of research productivity due to the additional pressures from the family, pregnancy, and child-bearing interruptions. Therefore, they are rarely considered for advancement along the administrative track and very few of them reach the positions of rectors and ministers.

Performativity, Intersectionality, and Agency of Women as Academic Leaders

Due to the transitional state of the development of the two post-Soviet countries, a unique feature of the societies in terms of gender-role expectations is that several sets of such expectations exist at the same time. One set is associated with reviving traditional and Islamic norms, which require a woman to sacrifice her career for family responsibilities. The other is linked to the Soviet views on the role of women at work and in the family, which expect a woman to contribute to family income while being primarily responsible for child-rearing and senior-tending. The third set has arrived from the neoliberal democratic West, which sees the distribution of family responsibilities as a solution to the problem of optimizing a specific set of job market opportunities, whereby either of the spouses can assume caretaking responsibilities depending on their potential as a “bread-winner”.

According to the Performative Theory, these conflicting expectations leave women some room for heteroglossic interpretation (Francis, 2012) and some degree of agency in performing their social roles (Fuller, 2014; Morris, 1995; Reed, 2001). Many of our participants play a complex game of juggling the contradictory set of expectations (Acker, 2012). They may act as “Ideal Kelin” in front of the extended family pouring

tea to everyone and making sure that the table is ready to be laid out every day in case of an occasional guest, may act as a progressive “Wonder Women” with younger colleagues and friends, who “tolerate her free-spirit”, and as a perfect Soviet wife with their husbands, “trying to be a good Mom to kids, an ever beautiful and interesting companion to husbands, and a good worker at the job place”. In the words of one of the participants:

You have to wear different hats with different people. When I am at the meeting of the Academic Council, where most of my colleagues are reputable older academics, I try to keep quiet, give compliments and refer to the male colleagues as “*agha*” (respectful address to an older male). When I am in my department, where most of my colleagues are ladies of my age, I laugh out loud and feel as if I am with my friends. When I am with foreign colleagues, I can be bold and speak out, which would never be appropriate among senior local colleagues (Head of Department, Kazakh private university).

With everyone in society being cognizant of the difference in the norm sets, women are at times allowed to push boundaries and to act in slightly unacceptable ways due to their leadership position. As a result, the women constantly push boundaries and actively contribute to the reconceptualization of gender roles in response to the new reality and the social complexity.

Intersectionality Theory, in its turn, helps to explain how a particular set of expectations imposed on or enacted by a woman is determined by the interplaying influences (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005) of ethnicity, religion, age, socio-economic and educational background of relatives, type of employing organization (public vs. private), and the region of residence. Kazakh and Kyrgyz participants in our sample were more influenced by traditional gender-role expectations than their Russian or Korean counterparts. For these participants, family values were intricately linked to the reviving ethnic and Islamic identity and culture, which had been undermined during the Soviet times. Older women tended to be more influenced by Soviet values, while younger females were significantly affected by neoliberal norms, often pressured by their husbands and parents to achieve professional success, sometimes even at the expense of their family responsibilities.

Supra-Organizational Influences

In addition to individual, organizational, and professional influences on women leaders, in other contexts, this phenomenological study of women leaders' experiences in Central Asia has revealed some supra-organizational influences at the institutional level. This finding is consistent with existing political science research on Central Asia, which has identified an important role of informal networks in societies (Collins, 2004; Ilkhamov, 2007; Lewis, 2012). The findings of this study clearly indicate that certain rules of operation of the informal networks may create barriers to women's advancement.

Within political science, informal exchange networks are defined as groups of connected individuals representing formal bureaucracies who engage in an "informal exchange of influence or bureaucratic favors for equivalent services or cash" (Lomnitz, 1988, p. 42). These relations are based on principles of patronage, loyalty, and trust (Lomnitz, 1988, p. 42) and run "parallel to formal hierarchy" (Lomnitz, 1988, p. 42). They emerge because of inefficiencies inherent in bureaucracies (Lomnitz, 1988) and often occur in authoritarian societies (Lomnitz, 1988). In post-Soviet Central Asia, informal networks emerged from a combination of the Soviet clan networks, which shadowed the formal authoritarian bureaucracy, and the traditional kinship networks, which resurrected in the early years of independence (Ilkhamov, 2007).

Two of our participants from Kazakhstan explained how the ability of a woman to advance to the position of university rector is affected by the phenomenon of "team leadership" discovered in our prior study (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017). The position of a rector in Kazakhstan is that of a political appointed. It is often used as a testing ground for promotion to a ministerial chair for individuals, who come to the position with their previously established teams from outside academia. These teams are also often a part of informal political networks of influence, or they may use the position of a rector as a point of access to the networks. Women are rarely part of the teams for two important reasons. First, they have difficulty with geographic relocation. Second, engagement in informal networks may be associated with bribing and other forms of corruption. Meanwhile, due to their caretaking responsibilities at home, women are less prone to engage in corruption due to the danger of being imprisoned.

In Kyrgyzstan, rectors are elected rather than appointed. However, the advancement of women in the country toward top leadership positions in higher education was affected by informal networks as well. Two Kyrgyzstani participants revealed that the informal networks are maintained by favorable exchanges, which occur in informal settings, such as funerals, weddings, anniversaries, and other life events, which are associated with social expectations of gift-giving. When a member of the informal network is invited to an event, they need to show up and satisfy the patron with the appropriate value of a gift to demonstrate their loyalty. The greater the value of the gift, the greater the loyalty demonstrated. Participating in this informal gift-giving is restricted for women for two reasons. First, it is less acceptable for women to show up at such events without their spouses, whereas it is somewhat socially awkward for their husbands to accompany their wives at the events organized by their colleagues. Second, to take huge amounts out of her family budget for the purchase of gifts, a woman must negotiate the withdrawal with her husband. In short, the rules of operation of informal exchange networks are gendered, are written by and for males, and are not played well by females, making promotion to the top leadership highly unlikely.

Differences in the Experiences of Female Leadership in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the most culturally similar countries in Central Asia. Therefore, we did not find many differences in the experiences of women leaders in academia between the two countries. The only difference was in the women's perceptions of opportunities. Kyrgyzstani women seem to be more confident in their ability to achieve career advancement. More participants in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan reported that they felt it was possible for a woman to become a president or a university rector. This can be explained by several factors. First, historically, Kyrgyzstan has experience with a female national leader—Kurmanzhan Datka. Second, Kyrgyzstan has already had a successful example of a woman president—Roza Otunbayeva, who has gained “much respect for her abilities and the changes she produced in the country at a turning point of history”. Moreover, during her office, Otunbayeva created opportunities for several other women to occupy ministerial positions, as well as positions in the presidential administration. The presence of these successful role models may have affected the

aspirations and the confidence of other women in society. We sensed that Kyrgyzstani women felt more empowered than women in Kazakhstan.

CONCLUSION

The findings of our study point to the relevance of existing theories in explaining the experiences of women leaders in higher education in post-Soviet Central Asia and might help to identify potential barriers and opportunities for the advancement of women to leadership. First, we found that human capital theory is not particularly relevant in the context of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where women have similar aspirations and opportunities for the attainment of higher education as men as a result of the Soviet legacy. Meanwhile, Gender Role, Gendered Organization, and Professionalization Theories are much more relevant in the explanation of the key factors, which affect women's self-confidence, aspirations, leadership conceptualizations, and ability to successfully balance family and professional life. As in many other countries, these theories correctly predict for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that women leaders have to balance the conflicting gender roles and career expectations, that as a result of the conflict, they experience psychological issues caused by the associated career and family pressures, and that organizational and professional structures and cultures in the region are also gendered and favor men in performance evaluations and advancement.

A unique feature of the regional context that was revealed in this research is that in Central Asian societies, the act of balance is complicated by the fact that women have to deal with a set of contradicting social expectations about gender roles. While this circumstance is unique for the context, Performative theory is available to explain how women perform in the conditions of heteroglossia and deal with the complex dramaturgy of society. By performing a variety of roles in different social contexts, women acquire agency and ability to outplay some of the social constraints, as well as to exert influence on the interpretation of gender roles within the societies. Intersectionality theory, in its turn, reveals how the extent of agency exercised by a woman is determined by the intersectionality of various power sources acting on her, by the influences of her ethnicity, age, regional location, as well as university ownership type.

Finally, our study points to the relevance of institutional theory in the explanation of the experiences of women leaders in academic contexts of Central Asia. In particular, available research in the neighboring field of

political science brings some light on the importance of informal social networks, which may create barriers for women. These networks exist in external power structures, but they also penetrate the bureaucracies within educational organizations. Their operation is highly gendered and favors males while creating unique barriers to the advancement of women.

The key implication from the study is that measures aimed at increasing university autonomy might have most positive effect on advancing women in higher education leadership. One of the key reasons why “team leadership” and political networks create barriers for women is that university rectors are currently being appointed by the government vs. elected within universities. If rectors are appointed, this may allow women to participate in the competition on equal terms with males and may contribute to greater representation of women in the top university leadership positions. Having women leaders would subsequently facilitate the advancement of women in lower leadership positions within institutions of higher education.

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