



Gender on the higher education learning agenda internationally: Co-constructing foundations for equitable futures



KAZAKHSTAN COUNTRY REPORT

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Contents

Executive summary	3
Project Introduction	5
Background to gender and higher education in country context	6
Gender equality	6
National higher education context.....	7
Brief summary of institutional case study.....	9
Methodology	10
Findings	11
1. Where is gender present and absent in the curriculum focus and approach of the university?	12
2. How is gender presented as an issue and awareness in curriculum focus and approach at the University?.....	14
3. Which individuals, values and agendas are driving the inclusion, rejection and co-opting of gender as a curriculum focus and approach across the University?	16
4. What are the challenges and opportunities in developing more gender equitable approaches in curriculum?.....	18
Recommendations	20
References.....	22

Executive summary

This work is driven by issues of gender equality, or lack thereof, in higher education institutions (HEIs). In this report, we focus the discussion on key findings about gender equality in higher education teaching and learning. Specially, we detail a study conducted at an HEI in Kazakhstan, extending research on gender in curriculum (CohenMiller & Lewis, 2019). The study is part of larger, internationally funded project, *Gender on the Higher Education Learning Agenda Internationally: Co-Constructing Equitable Futures*, funded by the British Academy's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). As foundational to this work, we recognise the persistence of gender and wider inequalities within (Pereira, 2007: 186) and beyond (Costa Dias et al, 2020) higher education, and the intersectional nature of this inequality (Bagihole, 2006). The overarching project compares cases, institutions of higher education, across five countries to unpack what is working and what is not as related to gendered practices and institutions.

Focused on teaching and learning, research questions centered on gender inclusion (or absence) as related to curriculum and pedagogical practices across disciplines. Across the cases, country teams implemented a mixed methods study integrating a survey of students and faculty across sciences and humanities, alongside interviews of students, faculty, and leadership. Our findings point to complex feelings and understandings of gender within the curriculum, within teaching practices, and across the institution. These insights highlight the struggle in the university to integrate concepts of gender equality within teaching and learning that particularly include conflicting views of responsibility for implementing policy and practice and who is included and/or excluded in the process. To address the uneven beliefs about gender in teaching and learning in the university, it is recommended to raise awareness, to incorporate trainings, and implement university-wide policy for gender inclusion.

This report provides essential insight into gender inclusion in one higher education case in Kazakhstan. It acts as an example for other institutions in the country and other similar institutions, to move towards moving towards gender equality.

Project Introduction

This report discusses insights from one institutional case study carried out as part of a larger international project exploring gender equality and awareness in higher education teaching and learning. Gender on the Higher Education Learning Agenda Internationally (GOTHELAI) is funded by the British Academy under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) through a targeted programme stream ‘Humanities and Social Sciences Tackling Global Challenges.’ The research is funded from January 2021-December 2022 and includes research teams at universities in five partner countries: India, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Nigeria and the UK. The GCRF sets out with a remit that includes to *‘strengthen capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in the UK and developing countries through partnership’* (GCRF 2021). The key thread unifying our research team is expertise and commitment around gender equality and feminist approaches across disciplinary and international contexts, with the shared agenda of co-constructing more equitable futures. In line with the priorities of the GCRF, we are committed to the importance of equality in gender and education for its own sake, but also for the importance of this to wider processes of equality, democratisation and development for all across wider, interrelated social, economic and political spheres.

The research set out to answer four core questions:

1. Where is gender present and absent in the curriculum focus and approach of the five institutions?
2. How is gender presented as an issue and awareness in curriculum focus and approach across the five institutions?
3. Which individuals, values and agendas are driving the inclusion, rejection and co-opting of gender as a curriculum focus and approach across the five institutions?
4. What are the challenges and opportunities in developing more gender equitable approaches in curriculum?



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Background to gender and higher education in country context

Gender equality

Kazakhs, being nomads historically, paid great attention to the role of women in the family as the main guardian of the hearth, as a wife and mother, and helped in working with herds, other chores, yet held a low social status (Abdikadyrova et al., 2018). A turning point began to occur when Kazakhstan became part of the Soviet Union and rules regarding gender equality were adopted, such as equal access to education, health care and work (CohenMiller *et al.*, 2021). Today, there is gender parity in access to schooling and women are the predominant teaching staff in higher education. However, there are limited leadership positions filled by women in academia in Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, 2017).

Multiple conflicting expectations are imposed on Kazakhstani women in the academy, with obligations to maintain Western behavior with colleagues and bosses (e.g., independence, accountability) and traditional family norms at home (Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, 2017). Thus, while women have *access* to higher education and to teaching professions, there are problems with movement through the academic pipeline with an overshadowing of women's knowledge in favor of men in both formal and informal settings (CohenMiller and Lewis, 2019; CohenMiller *et al.*, 2020).

National higher education context

At the time when Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union, higher education was planned centrally including educational programs and curriculum standards with free training and research carried out at research institutes (Jumakulov and Ashirbekov, 2016). After gaining independence in 1991, a number of reforms were carried out in the education system of Kazakhstan with HEI beginning to integrate into the global academic network (Kuraev, 2014). As the development of human capital was one of the country's top priorities, prompting educational reform, the echoes of USSR policy do still remain visible (e.g., highly centralized, unified education system based on well-defined curricula, assessment approaches) (Gimranova *et al.*, 2021).

In 2010, a notable comprehensive reform was proposed for the entire Kazakhstani education system to align with international standards by joining the Bologna Process (Gimranova *et al.*, 2021). Since then, changes have taken place, such as implementation of a credit system, a three-level system of higher education (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral studies), and academic mobility programs (Dzhumabayeva, 2017; OECD, 2015b). Due to market demands, the number of universities increased more than three-fold from 1991- 2005 to a total of 181 (Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, 2014).

In the systems of higher and postgraduate education, educational activities are conducted by a variety of universities including the country's flagship academic institution, which was granted autonomous status through a special law, along with 10 national, 32 state, 18 corporatized, 54 private, 1 international and 14 non-civil universities. The total number of Kazakhstani students in HE in 2016-2017 was about 420,000 ranging in age from 18-29, with about 50% women (MNE, 2017). While inclusive educational spaces are being emphasized in Kazakhstan, a lack of understanding (Makoelle, 2016) and how to create inclusive HEI contributes to financially supporting only a small number of students. Thus, for women with disabilities, there are concerns for the accessibility of HEI's and availability of necessary support for their needs (ADB, 2013).

Brief summary of institutional case study

This study was conducted at the first English-speaking university in the country. In 2010, the University was established in the capital of the country (Hartley et al., 2015), the only one guided by principles of autonomy and academic freedom. The University offers a Foundation Program, 20 undergraduate programs, 25 graduate programs and three doctoral programs with almost 3,000 undergraduate students, approximately 1,000 graduate students and about 750 Foundation students (NU, 2021). There is a gender balance of students, with more women represented in education and social sciences, and men in the STEM fields (NU, 2021) and approximately 30% female faculty. Each school of the university was created in collaboration with renowned universities in the world (e.g., University of Cambridge, UK; University of Pennsylvania, USA). Through these partnerships, a focus is the development of international cooperation and partnerships, including hiring of international faculty and staff and conducting joint research projects. Examples of research and initiatives include the development of The Consortium of Gender Scholars (GenCon, 2021) and this GOTHELAI project.

According to the mission, the University expects “to be a model for higher education reform and modern research in Kazakhstan and to contribute to the establishment of Astana as an international innovation and knowledge hub” (NU, 2013). The State Education Program emphasizes the role of the University for other Kazakhstani universities, indicating that all universities in the country should implement the experience in terms of academic and administrative autonomy (SPESD, 2016).

Methodology

Our approach in this international case study was of multi-directional learning (O'Shea 2015) within and between disciplines, institutions and countries; to collaboratively build new understandings and approaches (ILO 2012; CohenMiller and Lewis 2019). The intention of such a cross-national approach is not direct comparison seeking out a most effective approach, but complementary parallel case studies (Hantrais, 2009) as a powerful tool to generate new perspectives on existing challenges through the benefit of what might be learned from each other (Boddy et al. 2013). In line with the principles of our funding through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and as feminist researchers, we set out with the aim of collaborative research design from the beginning of the research, as an international, interdisciplinary team from Kazakhstan, the UK, Nigeria, Morocco, and India. Our goal was to identify three academic disciplines (one science, one social science, one humanities) across all partner universities. After receiving institutional ethical approval, within each discipline we invited teaching staff ($n=7$) and final year undergraduate students (those anticipated to have the most extensive experience of being taught within their university) ($n=7$) to complete an anonymous online survey that included quantitative and qualitative responses, yielding a total of 42 institutional survey responses.

Initial analysis of survey responses informed our design of interview questions for four teaching staff (three department Heads and one institutional teaching lead) and three student representatives within the university. Interviews were carried out online via Zoom, generating audio recording and written transcripts automatically generated by the online platform. The transcription was then reread, clarified and anonymized for analysis by the research assistant. To analyze the data, the full team across universities and countries met to discuss the emerging themes collectively and iteratively in multiple meetings. Data analysis was carried out using Excel for widest international team access. In this way, we sought to maintain the same access to all data and analysis steps for all country teams.

While we recognise that gender is nuanced in being more than a binary between male and female, for the purposes of this report we have identified the female, male, and other gender categories that participants selected as part of their survey and interview responses. These identifiers are intended to provide a reference point for readers alongside other key aspects of participant identification



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Findings

1. Where is gender present and absent in the curriculum focus and approach at A HE institution in Kazakhstan?

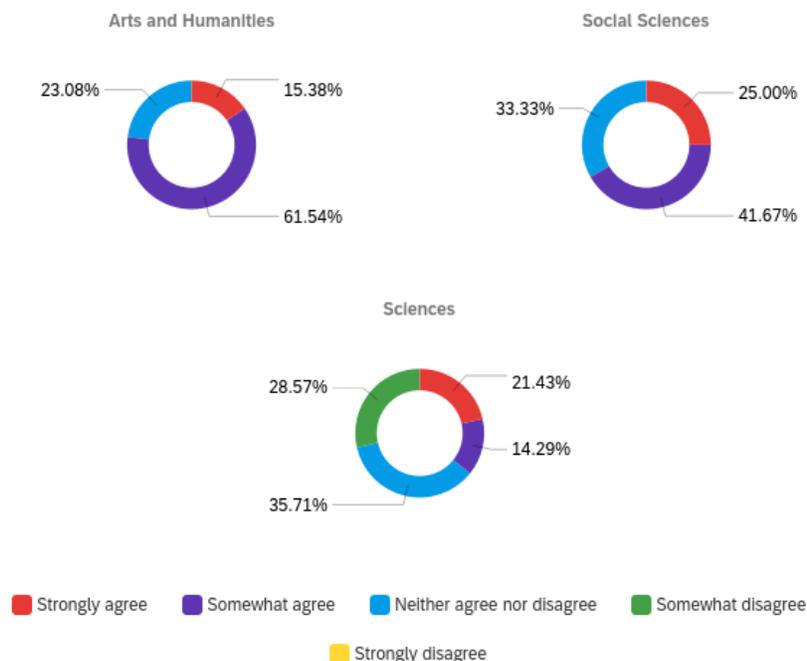
Responses by participants included linking gender to inclusion. As a woman in administration explained, inclusion is formally part of the learning and teaching strategy of NU: 'We have a learning and teaching strategy which has four elements to it and one of them is inclusion.' Some noted that despite being formally part of the learning and teaching strategy, gender is not sufficiently covered in the curriculum. 'There is some representation but insufficient' (KZ Arts and Humanities Female Staff). Some participants see gender discussion as part of a separate course or elective rather than incorporated into their courses.' I think we need some electives but not a very strict requirement for the curriculum' (KZ Sciences Male Student). In some disciplines such separate courses or electives were pointed to as present while in others they are not, such as noted by KZ Sciences Male Student in an interview: "In engineering, we don't have such course or such electives or just such things, but I know my friends from the humanities, and they have course that teaches about gender and gender equality'.

However, gender is primarily reported by both staff and students to be discipline-dependent and considered as not relevant to some individual courses or disciplines. For example, KZ Social Sciences Female Student in the survey wrote: 'I don't think gender is important in my discipline' and KZ Arts and Humanities Male Staff noted, 'I don't see gender as relevant to teaching and learning in my discipline. 'While some participants pay attention to gender in terms of the proportion of male and female faculty in their programs or gender of the authors of the readings for their course, only some see needed changes. For example, KZ Arts and Humanities Female Staff noted how, 'We need more non-men as faculty, and more non-men taught on syllabi'. In contrast, some students and staff see no problems related to gender:

'It's not clear to me why gender should receive greater attention than other sociological phenomena such as class. Obviously, it may be relevant for student learning, and it is an important factor in how people relate to the world and themselves. It should be taught'(KZ Arts and Humanities Female Staff).

It may be assumed from the responses that there is no clear understanding of the relevance of gender to teaching approaches, 'There is still a lack of theoretical knowledge about gender inequalities' (KZ Sciences Male Student). Some participants think that in their opinion there is no discrimination against gender then the topic of gender is not relevant to the curriculum. Other participants who also report the absence of gender discrimination in the classroom think that gender is not considered. They report that there is no university-wide policy of gender question in learning, it is left at discretion of each professor, which could be improved such as suggested by KZ Arts and Humanities Male Staff, 'More effort could be made to find sources and readings that address this topic'.

Figure 1 - Response to question 'Do you think representations of gender in your discipline promote gender equality? (Broken down by discipline):



2. How is gender presented as an issue and awareness in curriculum focus and approach at a HE institution in Kazakhstan?

The data shows that there are multiple ways the participants perceive gender in the context of higher education. Despite the fact that both students and staff, in general, have a clear understanding that gender is an important consideration in the development, and it is a way of looking at how social norms and power structures impact men and women, there are split views on the importance of gender in higher education, such as the following comments:

- it is extremely important and should be part of the curriculum,
- it is not important and should not be part of the curriculum,
- it is important but it should have been incorporated into the curriculum much earlier, in the context of high school and even kindergarten.

When responding to the question about the importance of gender in achieving wider social development goals, such as democracy and economic development, the majority of women (62.5%) but only a quarter of men indicated gender as extremely important. Regarding the curriculum, the vast majority of women (83%) consider gender should be part of all students' higher education experience, with less than 10% of all men agreeing. Instead, the majority of men (60%) say that gender should not be included in teaching and learning, or just dependent on academic discipline:

'Not sure how gender representation would help in my discipline. As I mentioned above, for example in a small scale and in my research group, I have students who are female and male and in choosing them I have only looked into their technical skills and qualifications. I am not sure why I need to include gender as an additional factor in choosing my students. I hope this is the case elsewhere'(KZ Sciences Male Staff).

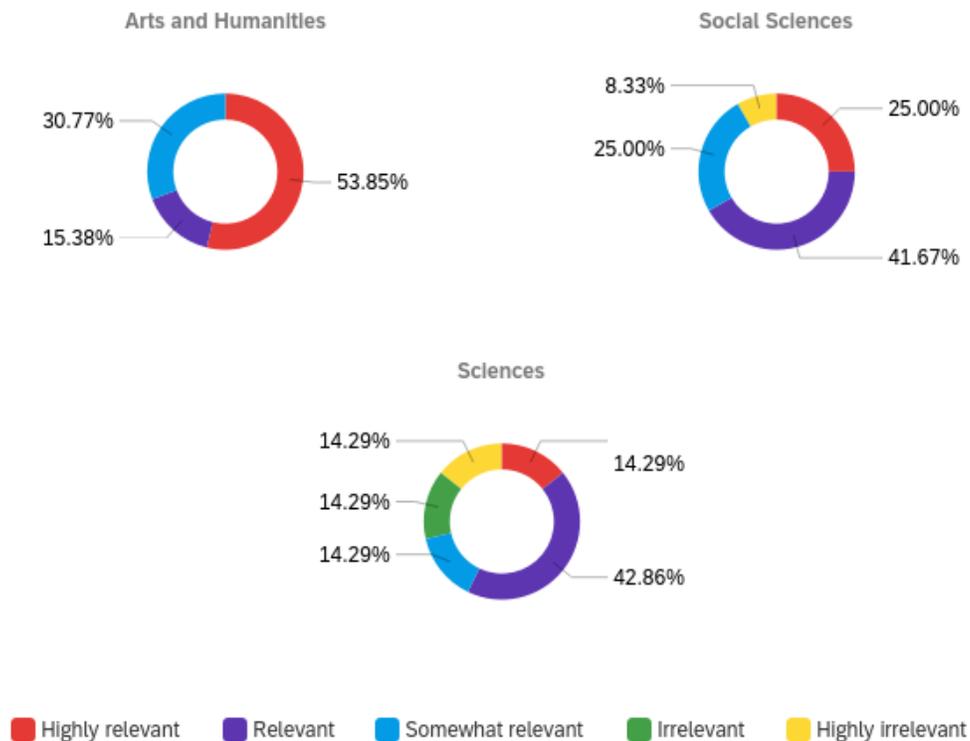
However, some faculty (both men and women) note how more could be done to find resources to address gender. For many students, there was discussion about updating curriculum to

address student interests with women seeing the relevance of gender to teaching and learning such as in the following key ways:

- the topics that are taught (73% compared to 20% for males),
- the way teachers teach, such as using gender-inclusive examples, inviting contributions from students of different genders (65% compared to 26% for males),
- experts whose ideas are taught and valued (73% compared to 9% for males).

Thus, similar to the previous finding where gender is present and absent, the curriculum and gender demonstrate a division of thoughts about its inclusion.

Figure 2 - Response to question 'To what extent do you see gender as relevant to teaching and learning in HE (higher education) of the following academic disciplines:



3. Which individuals, values and agendas are driving the inclusion, rejection and co-opting of gender as a curriculum focus and approach at a HE institution in Kazakhstan?

The data shows that the general perception of gender inclusion in higher education teaching and learning is that of a top-down approach. The participants believe that the drive for gender inclusion should come from the university management (20%) and particular groups of teachers (21%). A limited number of people suggest the responsibility could be addressed by the whole university community (15%), particular groups of students (12%) and students collectively (10%).

Practically all the participants of the study indicated that the whole community is aware of the gender question, at the same time it is clear from the survey responses and interviews that not every staff and student are concerned about it, as only particular groups of professors and students raise the gender question and encourage gender awareness and inclusion.

According to the participants the group that attaches little value to the gender question consist of either men “as the dominant gender’ or those who have never encountered gender as part of teaching and learning, ‘People who are not educated about the issue of gender inequality, they kind of reject this [idea of gender]’ such as noted by a KZ Arts and Humanities Female Student. For some participants it is only female students who drive the gender agenda. For others there are some groups that do it, but they have a vague understanding of who it might be which reflects the lack of interaction on this topic.

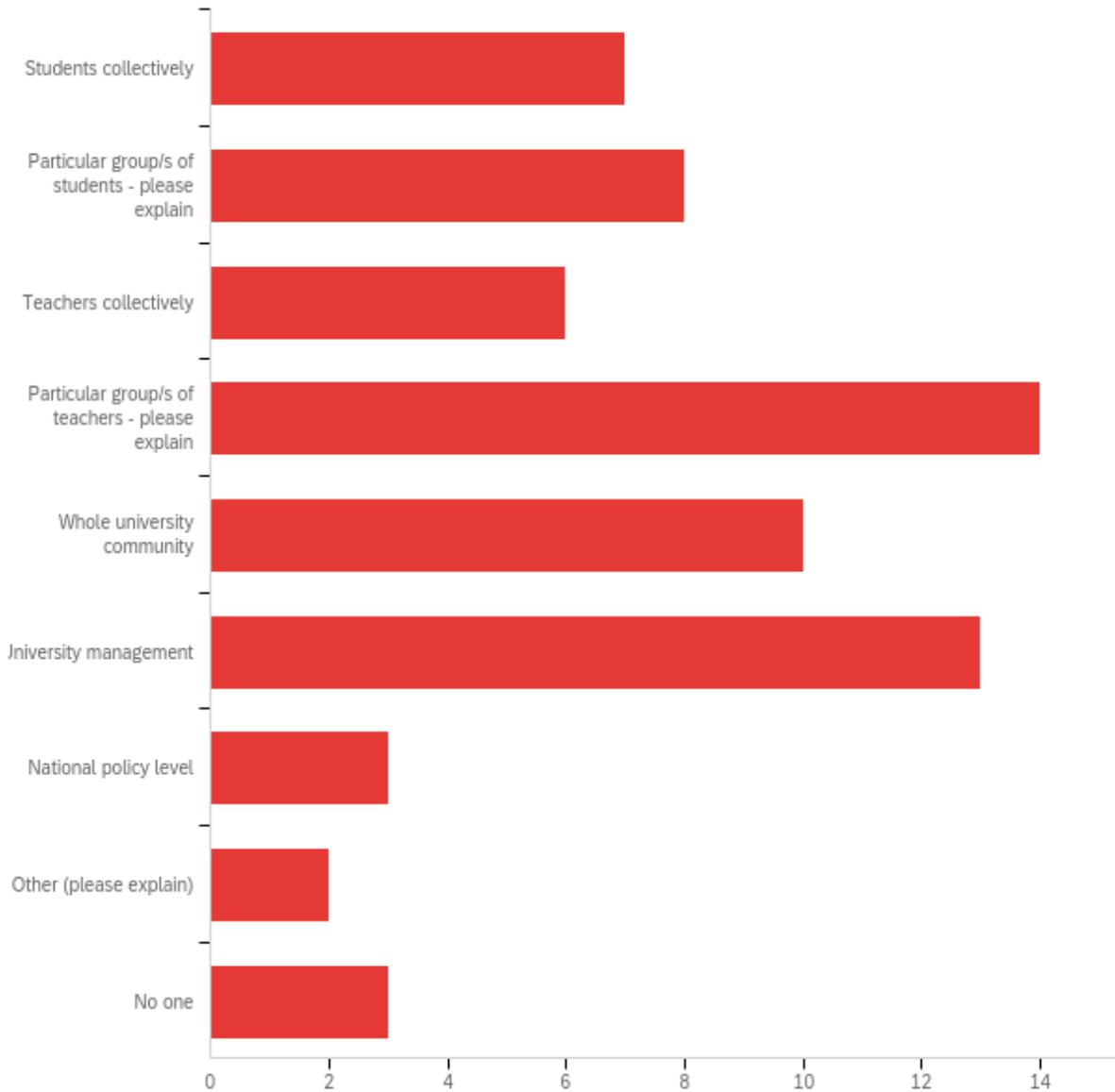
The group that drives gender inclusion was noted as mainly of women rather than men. In an interview with KZ Arts and Humanities Female Student, she noted

‘I don’t see any male student or male Professor or male administrative staff, who is talking about it. It depends on the administrative staff, I think, because mostly the administrative staff sets the tone, they formulate the policies on whom to recruit or

not to recruit, I believe'.

Overall, the onus of incorporating gender inclusion appears to broadly fall on the shoulders of women and female students.

Figure 3 - Response to 'Who takes responsibility in your university for including gender in HE teaching and learning?'



4. What are the challenges and opportunities in developing more gender equitable approaches in curriculum at a HE institution in Kazakhstan?

Most participants (2/3rd) agree that there are challenges for representing or incorporating gender equality in higher education teaching and learning, with significant challenges identified as teacher interest and expertise, student interest, policies (both national and university and department-wide) and lack of time. However, a little over half of the female participants think that there are challenges against representing or incorporating gender equity in HE teaching and learning; the same percentage of male participants believe that there are no challenges that exist in that particular capacity. The most frequently cited challenges in staff and student surveys identify social constructs, underestimating women and biases against them, stereotypes, social stigma, mentality and ideology of people, misogyny, and queer-phobia.

Students and staff both pointed to gender stereotypes and bias in society in general that need to change, such as explained by KZ Sciences Female Student:

'The society in our country and many countries, mainly think that technical STEM is not for women. For example, in my case, my mom and dad also told me, why are you going there..? It should be easy in other professions'

In another interview, this time with KZ Social Sciences Female Student:

'Sometimes I hear some stereotypes about females, for example, that female directors are not good, that it is too hard to work with females, that we are detail oriented and often cannot provide... objective view of point in some issues/ we have a traditional society.'

One of the major obstacles for incorporating gender into teaching and learning was cited as lack of interest from students or a major imbalance in some fields:

'I think because of the unbalanced number of genders in certain fields, it influences the teaching approach and the subject content. It seems challenging because it may

take time to change. People's ideology and the "convention" are hard to change immediately' (KZ Social Sciences Female Staff).

As noted by students, the gender composition of the department appears to influence the way they use or do not use gender in teaching, 'When all the staff are males, it's highly unlikely they will even bother to talk about non-male researchers/scientists' (KZ Social Sciences Student, identifying as other). Some participants see gender inclusion as a threat to meritocracy which they find more important than gender: 'I object pushing gender equality in HE teaching and learning. I believe the system should be based on meritocracy instead of gender identity' (KZ Sciences Female Staff) or stated as "The challenge to equal opportunity could arise if the merit is given second priority as compared to gender representation' (KZ Social Sciences Male Student).

Another important obstacle that hinders integration of gender into curriculum is lack of time. And given the fact that there are no policies or regulations that in a certain way measure or monitor gender inclusion into curriculum, faculty do not take an initiative to do it on their own 'It means that this is extra work, and someone has to do it as the only barrier, I can think of. And it means we had to take extra responsibilities' (KZ Sciences Female Staff).

As for the opportunities, there seems to be a rising awareness about the importance of gender in teaching and learning in HE among all stakeholders. Student and faculty-led co-curricular initiatives also bring gender discussions outside the classroom and to involve the wider university community.

By supporting gender conferences, seminars and events which are open to the public the university administration sends the message about the importance of gender equity to the society which has a positive impact on challenging existing cultural stereotypes about gender.

Recommendations

The findings of the study demonstrate that in Kazakhstan, and in particular, at the University focused on for this study, gender is not fully integrated into higher education learning agenda. There are a number of challenges and barriers identified by the study participants and discussed in the earlier sections of the report that hinder this process. Based on these findings the following recommendations can be made:

- 1) To foster integration of gender in the learning agenda,
- 2) To strengthen the incorporation of gender in the curricular focus and approach,
- 3) To support individuals, values and agendas that are driving gender equity and inclusion.

To achieve these ends, universities can **raise awareness** to the integral nature of gender to equity and inclusion in higher education. Such approaches can include communications that would indicate gender as a consideration for curriculum development, in trainings, in hiring/promotion, and in informal communication (see CohenMiller et al., forthcoming).

As many faculties and students reported a lack of theoretical basis for driving gender inclusion in teaching and learning, it is important to **link awareness with educational trainings and curriculum design** for faculty, staff, and students.

Lastly, our findings suggest the **incorporation of documents to guide curriculum design**, which could be expanded to address practice (e.g., hiring, promotion). The lack of curricular policies at the university and departmental levels was reported as challenging for gender inclusion in teaching and learning. Not incorporating gender in teaching and learning did not necessarily mean that faculty rejected it, it could also mean a lack of faculty expertise in gender (e.g., lack of theoretical understanding of the place of gender in higher education which leads to misinterpretation and confusion of gender inclusion with other issues, such as noted by KZ Sciences Male Staff, 'We need to understand gender inclusion issues in higher

education as a focus in its own right, separate to other issues'). In particular for emerging teachers and those who have never had such experience in their teaching practice. By offering clear guidance for incorporating gender in curricular practices, emerging teachers and those who have not had such experience in their teaching can develop their skills to address inclusion.

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