

## Higher Education Leadership Agency in Mainstreaming Gender Equality: Insights From Universities in Kazakhstan

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### Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### Abstract

This qualitative study explores the perspectives of senior leadership on gender equality within higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kazakhstan, addressing a gap in the literature on the agency of senior leaders in mainstreaming gender equality in post-Soviet contexts. Based on interviews with 13 leaders across 10 universities this paper analyzes how they perceive the relationship between gender and education and their potential role in advancing gender equality. Utilizing Butler's theory of performativity, the analysis reveals that senior leaders disregard structural or institutional gender-related concerns. They tend to uphold and embody traditional gender norms and attribute existing gender inequalities to cultural norms which limit their agency. While leaders acknowledge the role of higher education in promoting gender equality, they perceive gender issues as resistant to change, which creates obstacles to effective gender mainstreaming. The findings provide insights into reimagining gender mainstreaming strategies in HEIs in post-Soviet contexts and beyond.

### Full paper

Over recent decades, gender mainstreaming (GM) in higher education institutions (HEIs) has gained prominence, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 to promote gender equality. Establishing HEIs that strive to build gender-equal policies and practices in teaching, research, and service is essential to advancing gender equality worldwide (Mott [2022](#); Roos et al. 2020; Rosa and Clavero 2022). However, HEIs often perpetuate discriminatory gender norms and power hierarchies (Acker, 1990; Clavero and Galligan 2021; Roos et al. 2020; Rosa and Clavero 2022), often as a result of systemic factors rather than deliberate planning (Mott 2022).

The overrepresentation of men in senior leadership positions highlights how HEIs reinforce structures, cultures, policies, procedures, and practices that favor male perspectives. Senior leaders such as presidents, rectors, provosts, vice-presidents, vice-rectors, deans, and department chairs play a pivotal role in shaping HEI values and practices, directly impacting gender hierarchies and power dynamics. They are increasingly pressured to build sustainable, inclusive environments that prioritize justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (Salmi & D'Addio 2021).

Furthermore, research indicates that educational leaders play an agentic role in institutional transformation (Chingara and Heystek 2019). Their actions in developing strategies, practices, and processes significantly impact the organizational culture of higher education (HE) and societal knowledge (O'Connor, 2014; Schein 2010). Nevertheless, they often remain part of the power structures that reinforce existing gender norms (Roos et al. [2020](#)).

Kazakhstan is committed to promoting gender equality and has signed major global gender equality initiatives. In 2022, it ranked 65th out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum 2022). As a part of its "modernization" agenda, Kazakhstan has initiated gender mainstreaming (GM) in HE through the establishment of gender studies research centers and the introduction of gender-focused courses in wide-ranging disciplines. Despite these efforts, there is limited understanding of how GM courses and initiatives are enacted on the ground and the role of senior leadership in their implementation.

This paper draws on Butler's (2000) theory of performativity, which posits that our gender forms through performative acts that constantly recite the normative expectations governing gender identity in a given context. In other words, gender is not an inherent trait but rather a series of actions or performances. Gender norms in society instigate people to think within binary oppositions, such as man/woman, male/female, and masculinity/femininity (Butler 2000). This binary construct intertwines gender and sexuality, forming what Butler terms the heterosexual matrix, which enforces compulsory heterosexuality as the norm, marginalizing same-sex desire and relationships and delegitimizing non-binary identities. In addition to sexuality, gender interacts with other social structures, such as class, ethnicity, religion, age, and nationality, producing differentiated gender experiences and outcomes.

In line with the theory of performativity (Butler 2000), which emphasizes the discursive construction of identities (Foucault 2002), and using a poststructuralist qualitative design and qualitative in-depth interviews with 13 participants including six male and seven female leaders the study attempts to understand how they construct ideas about gender, gender equality and gender mainstreaming in HE.

The findings reveal that the narratives of Kazakhstani leaders reflect a “gender blindness” and “silence,” with both male and female leaders denying structural gender inequality. Their perspective, which points to the feminization of academia as evidence of gender neutrality, overlooks deeply embedded hierarchies which continue to perpetuate gender biases. Women leaders in higher education face pressures to conform to normative masculinity, balancing assertiveness with avoiding perceptions of aggression, which reinforces a masculine leadership paradigm and limits their advancement.

Despite participants' acknowledgment of the crucial role of HE in tackling gender inequality, they also perceived gender as a challenging aspect that conflicts with existing societal norms, affecting their ability to act as agents of change and resist such discourses. Considering the vital role of senior leaders in mainstreaming gender equality, these contradictions leave little space for the subversion of gender discriminative norms. The analysis demonstrates that HEIs in Kazakhstan remain gendered organizations in which pre-existing gender norms hinder the implementation of GM policies.

Overall, the introduction of top-down GM initiatives without the necessary groundwork—such as securing the buy-in of leadership responsible for enacting these initiatives, building their capacity in GM, and addressing conflicting cultural discourses—is unlikely to achieve the intended outcomes of promoting gender equality in and through education. The introduction of gender-focused courses is a significant step, but it alone is insufficient to advance gender equality or effectively mainstream gender in HEIs. The paper will discuss the implications for advancing GM in HEIs in Kazakhstan and beyond.