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## DEGENERISATION OF PAID AND UNPAID WORK IN KAZAKHSTAN?

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### Abstract

The current article applies theoretical framework of degenderisation and aims to explore to what degree women are degenderised by state policies in the labour market and unpaid work in Kazakhstan. The study applied the qualitative research method of semi-structured focus group discussion among 30 women from Almaty and Turkestan. The findings in the current research demonstrate that women's paid work in the labour market and unpaid work at home do not prove the degenderisation, but rather confirm genderisation process. Women bear costs of emotional, social and time resources as a result of motherhood, which results in them fulfilling less of their potential in professional sphere. There is also a strong influence of cultural factor that causes women to prevent the degenderisation and reinforces genderisation in unpaid work due to their beliefs in traditional gender roles and division of labour in family. The research contributes to theoretical significance by applying theory developed by Western authors, degenderisation, to the case of Kazakhstan.

**Keywords:** degenderisation, labour market, female employment, maternity leave, Kazakhstan

### Introduction

#### *Theoretical framework*

The current article applies theoretical framework of degenderisation and aims to explore to what degree women are degenderised by state policies in the labour market and unpaid work in Kazakhstan.

Degenderisation describes cases when an individual is not differentiated according to gender in terms of allocating the share of employment and unpaid domestic work among men and women. The degenderisation is the ultimate goal of family policies aimed at gender equality [1; 2]. The concept degenderisation has been developed as an alternative response to drawbacks of defamilisation as it better describes how women are affected by the defamilisation in welfare states. Defamilisation, which was originally proposed by Esping-Andersen, has been met with critique arguing that instead of evaluating women's independence in terms of employment and unpaid work, it looks at the support to the overall family [3]. Moreover, defamilisation has been accused to fall short of covering immaterial aspects of care work such as social and emotional challenges [1]. The impact that the defamilisation measures in the welfare states have on gender dynamics in terms of work and family has been referred to as degenderisation.

The concept of the degenderisation addresses the criticisms about defamilisation presented by feminists because the degenderisation emphasises the importance of women's roles in defamilisation. It demonstrates that time resources and the well-being of family members should be given priority on the same level as employment and financial sufficiency by the welfare states' family policies (Lewis, 2010). To achieve higher efficiency of welfare states' help to families, care should be recognised as an unresolved matter until adequate policy mechanisms are developed that would not force women to choose between paid work and unpaid care but assist with care work [4].

### *Literature Review*

Based on the research works from the literature review, it might be argued that women in the labour market are genderised in Kazakhstan as a result of motherhood, gender discrimination, lack of flexibility in employment and this problem is exacerbated by the lack of support from the social policy.

The recent literature suggests that women still experience gender-based discrimination and gender stereotypes that negatively impact their progress in education and career [5; 6; 7; 8; 9]. Not only in male-dominated field such as energy industry there has been reported decrease of female employees and training incentives for them [7], but in female-dominated area of education women experience the 'leaky pipeline' issue when they are less likely to serve as academic supervisors to influential high-profile graduate students and transfer from academia to government work than men [8]. Moreover, women are not only subject to gender stereotypes preventing them from progressing further, but they also might be the source of the problem by believing in and reinforcing gender stereotypes that men are more fit for the role of business executives than women [9].

Three main problems women experience in the labour market, which are wage gender gap, gender disparity in managerial work positions and low-skilled low-paid service jobs and unequal share of unpaid work.

Despite the fact that there is close parity ranging between 0,9-1,1 from pre-school to higher education level in educational enrolment between women and men in Kazakhstan, women are still paid 21,7% less than men in the labour market [10]. The human capital does not guarantee higher payments in labour market and employers might look at other criteria such as gender during recruitment, promotion and evaluation processes. Gender parity index in educational enrolment into primary, middle and high levels of education is 1, which signifies of both girls and boys apply to jobs after university completion with the same level of human capital [10]. It seems as women in Kazakhstan are willing to study and work, thereby invest in their human capital, but the long-term outcome such as wage gender gap and occupational segregation considerably differs from the starting point. This implies that particular factors such as motherhood and discrimination systematically take place along the professional path of women that causes disruption. It might be suggested that work disruptions caused by motherhood and traditional division of domestic labour substantially lower women's human capital, which in terms of education and skills begun on the same level with men. Discrimination might also explain gender disparity in employment despite women and men's similar level of human capital. These two factors of motherhood and discrimination demonstrates depreciation of human capital.

Data on gender statistics from the bureau of national statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan suggests that the country has a distinct divide in high-status and low-status jobs between women and men. For example, in decision-making positions such as head of universities and schools, principal board members of the National Bank, the Parliament seats, deputies of local state institutions and CEOs of businesses, share of women varies between 20 and 38 per cent [10]. In several areas women's representation is quite scarce with two female ministers out of the total 18; 67 politicians in the overall 670; two female ambassadors out of the total 63; and 1.6 per cent female managers in defence forces [10]. In contrast, in the service sector and agriculture about half of labour force are women equalling about 53 and 47 and per cent respectively [10].

Women in Kazakhstan are over represented in lower skill service, part-time, unofficial and unpaid types of work. Women today still predominantly occupy jobs labeled as '5 c's' which stands for cleaning, catering, clerical, cashiering and childcare. Share of women working in service sphere is higher by most 11 per cent than that of men [11]. Women are also engaged in self-employed types of jobs such as selling goods and providing beauty, nursing, catering, caring and tutoring services from their homes and by visiting. Number of self-employed people in the country has increased by more than 2 million people in between 1991-2019 [12]. These jobs are unofficial as it is not recognised by the state, less likely to lead to promotion and qualification of skills, and women's work is not protected by the job security laws and no contributions are made to their pensions [12]. Share of women working part-time is 6,6 per cent compared to 4,4 per cent of men, and unemployment rate among women constitutes 5,5 per cent compared to men's 4,2 per cent [10]. Moreover, women in Kazakhstan contribute enormously to the well-being of society by their hours spent on unpaid domestic work and family care, which constitutes 14,8 per cent of their twenty four hour day compared to 4,9 per cent of men's [10].

## **Methodology**

The study applied the qualitative research method of semi-structured focus group discussion. Qualitative research has been described as “a group of approaches for the collection and analysis of data aims to provide an in-depth, socio-contextual and detailed description and interpretation of the research topic” [13:100]. The focus group discussion research method seems to be the best choice to fit the aim of the study because it provides an in-depth understanding of encouragement and challenges mothers of young children face on their way to enter and stay in the labour market and reasons for it. Moreover, the choice of focus group discussion method was not made only to derive profound data on views and experiences, but also to acquire data that is produced as a result of collectivist action of sharing, transforming and formulating [14].

The participants have been recruited through snowball sampling, which was defined as when “the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants” and is frequently used sampling method in qualitative research in social sciences” [15:327] and “for the purpose of obtaining a nonprobability sample or for constructing a frame from which to sample” [16: 183].

Overall, six focus group discussions have been conducted: three in Almaty in December 2021 and three Turkestan in May 2022, where 30 women in total shared their experiences of employment after maternity leave. The focus group discussions lasted on average 90 minutes. All of the participants are mothers of young children aged between 1 and 6, as this is the period when women are likely to use childcare services and return to work. Women’s average age is 35, all of them are in married status except one widow and one divorcee.

Almaty and Turkestan were chosen as the locations for conducting focus group discussions and gathering participants for three main reasons. Firstly, both cities are contrasting in terms of social-demographic, economic and cultural characteristics, which is likely to provide rich diverse data for comparative analysis. Almaty being metropolis of 2 million inhabitants, the financial centre of the country and ethnically diverse while Turkestan is a small city with 200.000 residents, the agricultural economy, located in one of the poorest regions of the country and considered to be the traditional conservative South (17; 18; 19; 20).. Secondly, Almaty and Turkestan are located in the South of Kazakhstan, which makes the logistics process of data collection easier and cost-effective. Thirdly, the fact that Almaty is the hometown of the researcher conducting the focus group discussions helped the progress of participant recruitment and data collection processes as she used her networking opportunities and familiarity with the local context.

The results from focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis has been defined as “a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” [21:287].

The study aims to examine the impact of the state policies on degree of degenderisation of women in the labour market and unpaid domestic work in Kazakhstan by analysing focus groups discussions of mothers of young children from Almaty and Turkestan.

The research will contribute to theoretical significance by applying theory developed by Western authors, degenderisation, to the case of Kazakhstan, a developing post-communist Asian country with predominantly Muslim population with conservative family values. Relevance of well-established theoretical concepts will be tested and critically assessed.

The study has number of limitations. Firstly, it is not representative of the larger population of Kazakhstan as the study did not apply large scale quantitative research method. Moreover, the analysis results might fall under the risk of being subjective due to the interpretative nature of the analysis method.

## **Results**

### **Labour Market**

#### ***Gender-Based discrimination***

Women from the focus groups experienced discrimination based on their current or expected roles of mothers. Motherhood of young children of pre-school and primary school age disadvantaged these women's reputation of professional, productive and efficient employees in the eyes of employers.

*“When it was known that I am expecting a child, my employer did not consider me as a top employee and asked me to quit. It was painful because I invested so much of my time and experience in the growth of the company (which flourished) and reached a good position” (Rose from Almaty, works in management team of supermarket chain company, mother of a son).*

*“After i got married, the conduct to me at work changed I was not given serious projects because everyone was waiting for me to get pregnant and take maternity leave” (West from Almaty, works at a consulting company in finance, mother of two daughters).*

In a female dominated field such as education, due to a higher number of women working there, motherhood might be perceived not as a burden but rather accepted as a natural state of women for temporary absence from work. According to all the women in the focus groups who worked in sphere of education, they did not feel discriminated at their workplaces, but rather supported:

*“My workplace allows mothers whose children are under 3 years old to work flexibly and granted absence from meetings and students' examinations. For example, if there are 4-5 staff members are expected to be sent to attend a meeting outside of the university, male colleagues and women with older children are prioritised and women with young children are not bothered with public duties, they only teach” (Joy from Turkestan who works as a lecturer at a local university, mother of five children).*

*“I did not feel any discrimination or pressure towards me when I was pregnant at work. Neither I asked discriminatory questions at job interviews. I explain it my cultural uniqueness of our nation when we see joy not burden in children. Children have a special role in our country” (Brave from Almaty, works as a lecturer at university, mother of three children).*

### ***Part-time work and unpaid work***

Part-time forms of employment was not considered as a realistic way of participating in the labour market and source of income sufficient for basic needs. It might be explained by employers' reluctance to hire part-time workers and higher preferences for candidates who could contribute on full-time basis. Besides that, the government do not oblige companies to provide part-time work contracts to its employees. The women in the focus group discussions worked part-time at workplaces that belonged and managed by their family and relatives. It might signify of nepotism, where part-time work was provided as a support and safety net due to blood and close ties, rather than hiring on objective grounds for professional skills. Moreover, for the women in this study, who were on maternity leave taking care of young children, being employed on part-time basis at family's company was work allowing much flexibility, deprived of stress and high expectations from them as they relied on loyalty of a family member and relative.

*“I work at my husband's private firm as his assistance. It gives me flexibility to go to work when I have free time and prioritise my children. Also, I am paid income and money transferred to my pensions savings” (Star from Almaty, housewife registered on a part-time work at husband's company, mother of three children).*

Apart from part-time work ceasing to be an official form employment and not commonly welcomed by employers in favour of full-time employees in Kazakhstan, it is also quite likely to be challenging for women to undertake part-time work contracts due to high volume of unpaid workload at home. As the responses of the women in the focus group discussions showed, the majority of them lived in patriarchal families with values based on traditional gender roles. The women bore the primary responsibility for unpaid domestic work and childcare whereas their husbands were expected to be breadwinners and decision-makers in their families. Women, particularly those whose husband earn sufficiently to provide for their families, expected to bear double shift of paid and unpaid work were hesitant to be employed both full-time and part-time.

*“I cannot afford working full-time because my husband would expect me to keep up with both domestic work and childcare, instead of helping me” (Star from Almaty, housewife registered on a part-time work at husband’s company, mother of three children).*

*“My friends says thats why foreign men marry Kazakh women, because they have children and “labour as horses”, and look after themselves. For example, my friend has four children, takes them to clubs, works, and goes to gym, she is multitasking, on top of everything. In that sense, it is very hard for women in Kazakhstan. I think women are forced to do all of it, to multitask, to achieve professionally. We easily adapt to difficulties, have capability to bear this burden” (Brave from Almaty, works as a lecturer at university, mother of three children)*

### **Social Class**

Financial need provides strong incentive for mothers from working class to enter the labour market in early stages of maternity leave and gain financial independence. As the current study showed, double-breadwinner households are more common among working class families and women from less affluent background are more likely to progress in their career.

*“I am the type of a person, woman who does not work just for “plus sign”, but I try to fulfil my potential though work. In Kazakhstan, me being on maternity leave is more financially damaging to our family budget. Hence, during my maturity leave, I tried to earn extra money and increase our family income” (Brave from Almaty, works as a lecturer at university, mother of three children).*

In contrast, women in the focus groups, who had more opportunity to do paid work due to their partners financing certain comfort in their lives such as personal drivers and private schools that allowed more free time, were not in full-time paid work and did not demonstrate willingness to change it.

*“I have to drive kids to school, after-school activities and I do not have ambitious career plans because my husband provides for us sufficiently” (Nur from Almaty who is full-time stay at home wife).*

### **Family Institution**

Although traditional gender roles and patriarchal values prevailed in most of the marriages of women from the focus groups, which was evident in unequal share of unpaid work and perception of husbands as head of families, Turkestan focus group participants demonstrated stronger belief in and practice of conservative values in their daily lives.

### **Overburden as a norm**

Although women from both Almaty and Turkestan focus groups were predominantly responsible for unpaid work at home, the participants from Turkestan seemed to have more workload. This partly might be explained by the widespread of houses with own land and livestock in Turkestan, being less urbanised and more agricultural than Almaty, which requires more physical work and more than half of Turkestani participants living with mothers-in-law, who need care.

*“I get up at 5-6 am, start the fire and prepare breakfast, lunch and dinner for the day. I ask my mother-in-law to turn off fire and store hot meal into the fridge. While I am at work, mother-in-law would warm up food for children and herself. She does not cook although she is at home all day and I do not expect it form her. I have always been cooking myself. Thanks Allah, I am healthy and able to do that” (Blossom from Turkestan, a mother of 5 children and teacher at school).*

*“Although my parents-in-law helped me with childcare, I was still expected to do housework as a daughter-in-law. I am not against this tradition of daughters-in-law performing family care and serving in-*

*laws, it is part of Kazakh culture. We, adult children, do not allow our parents (in-laws) to do difficult home tasks because of their old age (they were 55 and 51 when I married into their family). I cook for them, do housework” (Moon from Turkestan, a mother of 4 children and lecturer at a local university).*

Due to the higher income level in Almaty and less stigma about hiring domestic worker at home, more women in Almaty reported to pay somebody else to do unpaid work. Moreover, more women from Almaty also expressed their objection to live with parents-in-law.

*“I do not like being in a role of a classic housewife, spending a lot of time doing housework and cooking” (Trust from Almaty, works in consultancy and mother of two).*

*“I told my husband before marriage that I am not an obedient woman who is willing to live with his parents and serve them as a daughter-in-law. Although few times per year his parents pay visits to us and I serve them and take care fo them, its temporary” (Gold from Almaty, who works at a private company and mother of three).*

*“From the beginning, mother-in-law did not approve me hiring a babysitter, but later they understood that it is beneficial for them as well in terms of freeing them from baby care. In our society, it is judged to had a babysitter and cleaner, that wives do not work themselves. Especially in the South of Kazakhstan, women look at me like at a rich person for hiring helpers, whereas in Almaty it is becoming normalised” (Green from Almaty, who works as a marketing manager and mother of two).*

#### ***Division of housework according to sex among children***

Another important difference in responses between women from Almaty and Turkestan is the decision on allocating duties around the house among their children according to sex. More women from Turkestan than Almaty replied that there are certain tasks around the house that can be done by daughters only. For example, Peace said that her daughters share duties among each other such as dusting, wiping floor and vacuuming:

*“They only do housework, but they are not allowed to do men’s heavy work. It is done by their father.”*

Participant named Wise stated that her son, who is the eldest child, does household chores when daughters are not around. However, as soon they come back from school, he stops helping around the house:

*“If my daughter are around, I do not ask my son to do housework. He goes outside.”*

Similarly, Spirit burdens her son with outside work such as feeding chicken and watering garden, while daughter is allocated takes inside the kitchen:

*“In exceptional situations when my daughter is absent, I would ask my son to wash dishes”.*

On the other hand, not only most of the respondents from Almaty excluded any division of household work according to sex among children, but demonstrated open-mindedness by stressing virtue of sons’ involvement in housework and awareness of gender equality values.

*“My son cook delicious meals! My daughter is engaged in art activities outside of home and do not come near kitchen”.*

*“I think it would be discrimination (to divide work according to sex)”.*

*“My three sons wash dishes, buy grocery products, vacuum”.*

*“Both my daughter and son do jointly the same work in the house”.*

## Discussion

The findings in the current research demonstrate that women's paid work in the labour market and unpaid work at home do not prove the degenderisation, but rather confirm genderisation process. Women bear costs of emotional, social and time resources as a result of motherhood, which results in their realising less of their potential in professional sphere [1]. What is more, there is also a strong influence of cultural factor that causes women to prevent the degenderisation in unpaid work and reinforce genderisation.

The majority of the women in the study saw the reason of discrimination they experienced at workplaces to be their status of mothers of young children. They were treated as less desirable workers and they were stripped of career opportunities by their employers once it had been known of their pregnancy or children's young age. However, it can be argued that the core cause of women experiencing gender-based discrimination is not motherhood, but inefficient mechanisms of social policy put in place by the state that would protect mothers' employment rights and normalise motherhood in the labour market.

High degree of genderisation of women's labour in motherhood led to their reluctance to take on part-time job contracts but rather use it as a way of earning source of supplementary income through nepotism at workplaces belonging to family. Moreover, although part-time convention was ratified by Kazakhstan in 1994 that granted official status to part-time work, protects the rights and acknowledges economic importance of part-time employees, unconventional modes of work such as part-time contracts and flexible work schemes are not commonly practiced in Kazakhstan companies [22; 23; 24]. This is a lost opportunity for mothers who would have benefited from entering into the labour market on functioning flexible terms if part-time work had more serious status and monitored by the state. The survey among the companies in Kazakhstan show that the companies are ready to increase super flexibility as it allows to survive in unstable global economic, political and technological conditions [25].

Factor of social class plays an important role in determining degree of degenderisation among women in the labour market in Kazakhstan. As the findings in the current research suggests, women from working class background achieved higher level of degenderisation as they were more incentivised to bring second income to family and shifted unpaid childcare to grandparents and childcare institutions. At the same time, women's unpaid work remained genderised at home due to cultural factor.

The results from the focus groups discussions showed that the majority of the women from Turkestan and some of the women from Almaty are preventing the degenderisation of unpaid work by normalising and accepting unpaid work to be primary responsibility of women. Overburdened by double shift of paid and unpaid work and not expecting help from their husbands and other adult members of extended family was considered as acceptable by women particularly from Turkestan. Not only the women reinforced genderisation in their own families by complying with patriarchal division of labour, but they passed on this culture preventing the degenderisation to next generations by dividing unpaid housework among their children according to gender.

Based on the findings from both focus group discussions in Almaty and Turkestan, it might be concluded that conservative values and traditional gender roles prevail in family institution which prevents women's unpaid work to be degenderised. At the same time, women from working class background are forced to be degenderised in the labour market due to financial necessity. "Women in Kazakhstan have to juggle their responsibilities of a mother/wife and a leader while being underappreciated, undersupported, and overburdened" [23].

## Conclusion

The current research shows low degree of degenderisation of women's paid work in the labour market and unpaid work at home in Kazakhstan. The results from the focus group discussions in Almaty and Turkestan showed that women experience gender-based discrimination in the labour market, mainly caused by women's unequal share of emotional, social and time resources spent on motherhood and a role of a primary carer in a family. Nevertheless, the research argues that the state is not undertaking efficient social policy measures on involving more mothers into the labour market through part-time and flexible work options. The official status of part-time paid work is not reinforced by the state and employers are reluctant to hire part-time workers. Another crucial factor preventing women's labour to be degenderised is women



supporting and contributing to the patriarchal culture of unequal division of labour at home. Although women from working class background demonstrated higher level of degenderisation in the labour market driven by the financial need, they still contributed to genderisation in unpaid work at home due to their beliefs in traditional gender norms in a family.

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### Қазақстандағы ақылы және ақысыз жұмысты дегендерлендіру?

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#### Аннотация

Ағымдағы мақала дегендеризацияның теориялық негізін қолданады және Қазақстандағы еңбек нарығындағы және ақысыз жұмыстағы мемлекеттік саясат әйелдердің қаншалықты дәрежеде дегендерсізденгенін зерттеуге бағытталған. Дегендеризация ерлер мен әйелдер арасында жұмыспен қамту және ақысыз үй жұмыстарының үлесін бөлу тұрғысынан жеке тұлғаның жынысына қарай сараланбау жағдайларын сипаттайды. Зерттеуде Алматы және Түркістан қалаларынан 30 әйел арасында жартылай құрылымдық фокус-топтық талқылаудың сапалы зерттеу әдісі қолданылды. Ағымдағы зерттеулердің нәтижелері әйелдердің еңбек нарығындағы ақылы жұмысы және үйде ақысыз жұмысы дегендеризацияны дәлелдемейтінін, керісінше гендерлендіру процесін растайтынын көрсетеді. Әйелдер ана болу нәтижесінде эмоционалдық, әлеуметтік және уақыт ресурстарының шығындарын көтереді, бұл олардың кәсіби саладағы әлеуетін азырақ іске асыруға әкеледі. Сондай-ақ әйелдердің отбасындағы дәстүрлі гендерлік рөлдерге және еңбек бөлінісіне деген сенімдеріне байланысты ақы төленбейтін жұмыста дегендеризацияның алдын алуға және гендерлендіруді күшейтуге себеп болатын мәдени фактордың күшті әсері бар. Зерттеу Батыс авторлары әзірлеген теорияны, дегендеризацияны Қазақстан жағдайында қолдану арқылы теориялық маңыздылыққа ықпал етеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** дегендеризация, еңбек нарығы, әйелдерді жұмыспен қамту, декреттік демалыс, Қазақстан

### Дегендеризация оплачиваемой и неоплачиваемой работы в Казахстане?

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#### **Аннотация**

Статья применяет теоретические основы дегендеризации и направлена на изучение степени дегендеризации женщин в результате государственной политики на рынке труда и неоплачиваемой работы в Казахстане. Дегендеризация описывает случаи, когда индивидум не дифференцируется по половому признаку с точки зрения распределения доли занятости и неоплачиваемого домашнего труда между мужчинами и женщинами. В исследовании применялся качественный метод исследования полуструктурированного обсуждения в фокус-группах среди 30 женщин из Алматы и Туркестана. Результаты текущего исследования показывают, что оплачиваемая работа женщин на рынке труда и неоплачиваемая работа дома не доказывают дегендеризацию, а скорее подтверждают процесс гендеризации. Женщины несут затраты эмоциональных, социальных и временных ресурсов в результате материнства, что приводит к тому, что они меньше реализуют свой потенциал в профессиональной сфере. Существует также сильное влияние культурного фактора, который заставляет женщин предотвращать дегендеризацию и усиливать гендеризацию на неоплачиваемой работе из-за их убеждений в традиционных гендерных ролях и разделении труда в семье. Исследование способствует теоретической значимости, применяя теорию дегендеризации, разработанную западными авторами, к случаю Казахстана.

**Ключевые слова:** дегендеризация, рынок труда, женская занятость, декретный отпуск, Казахстан.

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