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The Impact of Women's Education on Identity Formation: Case of Kazakhstan

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Abstract: This article examines the impact of women's education on their role in shaping the identity of the new generation. This issue is relevant due to the increasing proportion of children and youth (30%) in the demographic structure and the multiethnic population of Kazakhstan. Narrative interviews and participant observation were used as the main research methods. A group of researchers conducted 32 interviews with women aged 18 to 74 years living in the city (Shymkent and Turkestan) and rural areas (Iskhan village, Turkestan region). The sample included Uzbek and Tajik women with different levels of education. The results of the study showed that the education and opportunities for self-development of women directly affect the formation of civic and ethnic identity in young people. However, ethnic groups often differ in the level of self-realization available to women in these communities. The results of the study showed that there is a need to study the social portrait of women of different ethnic groups, as well as to strengthen their civic identity.

Keywords: Identity, Ethnic communities, Women, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Kazakhstan is a polyethnic society with representatives of more than 100 ethnic groups. According to the National Population Census of 2021, Kazakhstan retains its ethnic diversity. At the same time, there are significant changes in the quantitative composition of certain ethnic groups. For example, the proportion of Kazakhs increased to 70.4 percent compared to the previous census.

According to the results of the 2021 census, the number of Kazakhs amounted to 13.4 million people, i.e. the increase from 2009 was 33.7% (10 million - in 2009). In the total number, the share of Kazakhs increased from 63.1% to 70.4%. Also among the nationalities with the largest number of representatives were Russians - 2.9 million people, Uzbeks - 614 thousand people, Ukrainians - 387 thousand people and Uighurs - 290 thousand people (<https://stat.gov.kz>). In some regions of Kazakhstan, representatives of ethnic groups live compactly. Such regions include Almaty and Zhambyl Oblast, Zhetysay and Turkestan Oblast, as well as the city of Shymkent.

The city of Shymkent has the status of a city of republican significance and has 1,200 thousand inhabitants. It is located in the south of Kazakhstan, in the border zone with the Republic of Uzbekistan. Since ancient times Shymkent was one of the largest cities in the south of Kazakhstan, located along the Great Silk Road. It was a place of lively trade and rapid development of various crafts. Until 2018, Shymkent was the regional center of South Kazakhstan Oblast. By the Decree of the President on June 19, 2018, Shymkent received the status of a city of republican significance, the administrative center was moved to Turkestan, and South Kazakhstan Oblast was renamed into Turkestan Oblast.

Turkestan region is the most densely populated and polyethnic in comparison with other regions of Kazakhstan. Thus, Tajiks, Russians, Turks, Azerbaijanis, Kurds and others live here. According to the 2021 census, the total number of people living in the region is 2,054,021, 18.2% more than in 2009. Our study took place in Turkestan Oblast and Shymkent city, as they generally reflect the multi-ethnic structure of the population of Kazakhstan.

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Table 1. Ethnic composition (stat.gov.kz, 2024)

	Kazakhstan		Turkestan region		Shymkent city	
	Total quantity	Share in %	Total quantity	Share in %	Total quantity	Share in %
Kazakhs	14 220 321	70,981	1 608976	75,110	869607	71,159
Russians	2 983 317	1,891	29 098	1,358	74 963	6,134
Uzbeks	660 564	3,297	387 767	18,102	193 811	15,859
Kurds	50 264	0,251	6 169	0,288	3 838	0,314
Tajiks	55 873	0,279	39 508	1,844	1 486	0,122
Turks	90 015	0,449	12 137	0,567	6 793	0,556
Koreans	120 262	0,600	2 763	0,129	7 159	0,586
Others	1 853 226	9,252	55 754	2,602	64 409	5,27
Total	20 033 842	100,0	2 142 175	100	1 222 066	100

The ethnic diversity of the country's population poses challenges for Kazakhstan to strengthen civic identity and preserve ethnic identity. The hypothesis of our study is based on the fact that women in ethnic communities remain conductors of values that shape identity, despite the development of new information technologies. They can preserve this opportunity by receiving an education and having opportunities for self-development.

Method

Data Collection Method

This article presents data of a field study among women living in Turkestan Oblast and Shymkent city of Kazakhstan. The study was conducted under the grant project “Women of ethnic communities as channels of reproduction and formation of civil and ethnic identity (on the example of Turkestan region and Shymkent city)”, funded by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Narrative interview as a qualitative method of sociological analysis was used as a method of data collection. The choice of this method was conditioned by several factors. First, the limited number of previous studies on the topic of women's influence on the formation of identity in polyethnic and monoethnic space. Second, the subject of the study, i.e. women of ethnic communities represent a special group that is socially vulnerable. The gender sensitivity of the topic also influenced the accessibility of female respondents and the further interpretation and publication of the findings. Third, given the small number of ethnic groups under study, it was necessary to obtain more detailed information about their places of residence, peculiarities of everyday life, history and culture.

Two qualitative methods were used in this project: narrative in-depth interview and participant observation. Narrative can be understood as a story from beginning to end about the informant's experience and the conclusion drawn from it (Titscher et al., 2000). The length of the interview is 1 or 1.5 hours depending on the narrator, their disposition and interest in the end of the interview.

Narrative interviews are characterized by unstructured, in-depth instruments with insightful features derived from the respondent's life stories and cross-analysis of the situational context. This type of interview aims to prompt the interviewer to recount important events in the informant's life and social context. In this method, based on the idea of reconstructing social events from the informants' perspective, the interviewer's influence on the conversation is minimal (Muylaert et al., 2014).

Sampling and Data Processing Method

The sample was determined by quoting informants from each ethnic group living in urban and rural areas. In particular, in Shymkent, areas of the city where representatives of Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups live compactly were identified. In rural areas, settlements with Tajiks and Uzbeks were selected.

In our study, respondents were asked to answer introductory questions, i.e. to determine whether a given person fits the quota. Then, if the respondent consented to the interview, the interview began according to a pre-determined plan. If the respondent agreed, the interview was recorded on a tape recorder for further processing.

To process and analyze qualitative data, a special program for processing text documents - MAXQDA - was used. The processing was conducted in four stages. In the first stage, all audio recordings were converted into text files (transcripts). At the second stage, participants' data were coded. In the third stage, the texts (transcripts) were loaded into the MAXQDA program. In the fourth step, transcripts were labeled with base codes and additional codes reflecting the main themes and concepts of the study using MAXQDA functions. This approach allowed for systematization of the data and simplified their further interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Social factors such as lifestyle, ethnic culture, and education are considered in the study of women's influence on identity formation. Some studies on gender aspects consider women in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the context of the transformation of traditional ideas about women's rights, equality, and the influence of Islam. For example, in "Homeland within homeland: women and the formation of Uzbek national identity," Aishe Saktanber and Alsi Ozatas Baykal argue that gender also affects the origin of the state, access to power, and the distribution of state resources. In nation-building, gender is central to the self-definition of social groups. Women tend to become the source of cultural identity, and hence the object of different political goals. On the one hand, they act as identifying markers of communities; on the other hand, they function as bearers of culture (Saktanber & Ozatas, 1999).

Women in Uzbekistan were the subject of a study by Marianne Kamp in her monograph «The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism» (Kamp, 2006). The paper examines the changing role of women in different historical periods by analyzing various socio-political factors - jadidism, revolution, women's rights, hujum (movement for the liberation of women in the East).

The analysis of scientific literature shows that the issues of women's participation in the process of identity formation have not received proper attention as an independent object of research. However, individual works cover various aspects of the influence of ethnic culture on the upbringing of children, the transformation of women's role in modern society, as well as contradictory interpretations of their place and role in different social contexts.

A study conducted in 2023 in the southern regions of Kazakhstan among Uzbek and Tajik women showed that women's education level and their life views have a significant impact on child-rearing and identity formation. Cultural norms and family relations most often limit women in obtaining the desired education, but modern women try to use other ways of self-development. Thus, they are between tradition and modernity, experiencing certain changes.

Women's Education and Identity

Women have two important roles in the family and society. On the one hand, the traditional prescribed roles of mother and homemaker. On the other hand, public relations and communications, labor and social activity are based on women's participation. In the ethnic groups we surveyed, there are established ideas that a girl will become a spouse, mother and daughter-in-law. Therefore, she is prepared for the ability to live in another family, take care of family members and bring up children. These attitudes have taken root in the educational practices towards girls in ethnic cultures and in some families they still persist today. However, many of the Uzbek women who participated in our study have secondary and higher education. This cannot be said of Tajik women, who most often marry immediately after completing secondary school.

Thus, Uzbek women in their interviews talked about their professional careers, which turned out differently. Women over 50 years old faced difficulties in finding employment during the collapse of the Soviet Union: some of them changed several professions and some were temporarily unemployed. Among the respondents there are also pensioners who after retirement started working in trade or services, whose main motivation was the desire to stay active and support their children and relatives. Younger respondents, as a rule, work by profession, mainly in education and medicine.

Of the respondents, only two women are exclusively engaged in household activities, while the rest have permanent employment. Most of them are employed in skilled positions, including heads of schools and kindergartens, researchers and heads of university departments. Some respondents own their own businesses, such as store or market trading, hairdressing or printing services.

Women with higher education are much less common among Tajik women, more often with secondary or specialized education. Tajik women who participated in the interviews said that they were employed in education, trade, and medicine; there were also representatives of the service sector, and 6 out of 16 informants were housewives. This situation is related to the fact that the Tajik community retains a traditional patriarchal character, especially in rural areas. The main role of a Tajik woman is to arrange the household, bring up the younger generation, respect and create the condition of elders and spouse. In the family/household, men do not help much in “women's” affairs, and women have to manage to do everything themselves. This characterizes a pronounced traditional approach in the upbringing of Tajik girls, i.e. preparation for their future role as daughters-in-law, wife and mother.

It can be assumed that young Tajik girls, having received secondary/higher education, return to their native village, but do not find work there. Moving to another region in order to find employment is not supported by the family, and they have no choice but to stay where the elders are, then they almost immediately get married, have a family and get involved in the household.

Uzbek women, on the contrary, have good positions at work. In our sample there were representatives of science, university and school education, businesswomen. At the same time, receiving education is seen as an opportunity to demonstrate for their children a positive example of education, humanity, and achievement of goals. Some young girls, who have already married and have children, plan to get education with the support of their spouses. This trend clearly shows the increasing role of education in women's lives. One of the reasons is to provide better opportunities for their children.

Women's Language Competencies

Uzbek and Tajik women are bilingual or polylingual. As a rule, almost all informants speak two or three languages - Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik and Russian. In Shymkent and Turkestan, women and their children speak Kazakh, Russian, Uzbek or Tajik. Depending on where they live, women use Kazakh and Russian. In villages, Uzbek, Kazakh and Tajik are spoken more often because of the different ethnic groups. Few people speak Russian, mostly those who studied in Russian schools. In families, more people speak their native languages.

The degree of bilingualism of Uzbeks in Kazakhstan was determined by the 1999 census as follows: 51,637 (13.9%) are monolinguals and 319,026 (86.1%) are bilinguals. According to the 2021 census, 49.2% of the Uzbek ethnic group of Kazakhstan are bilinguals. At the same time, 30.4% speak three languages. The number of monolinguals remained practically unchanged - 13.7% in 2021.

According to observations, the majority of Tajik women are not fluent in Kazakh and required the services of an interpreter during the interview process. The reason is that husbands tend to be more deeply integrated into social life and interact more often with the external environment, including places where knowledge of the Kazakh language is required. Men, having more experience of interacting with social institutions, learn the language more quickly, while women remain more at the level of domestic communication and household management, which limits their language practice. Nevertheless, despite this barrier, women recognize the importance of learning Kazakh for their families and children. Women also note that their children who attend local schools often speak Kazakh.

In Turkestan, many people know Turkish as they work at the Kazakh-Turkish University named after A. Yassawi. Women with higher education speak English, Arabic and Turkish. Under the influence of religion, some women learn Arabic to read the Koran. This has a strong influence on their children, who are also polylingual and try to learn English and Turkish. At the same time, women point out that children necessarily learn English, regardless of the mother's education level. They associate English with plans to study in good universities and to get a specialty.

The bilingualism of women in this region emphasizes their education and desire for new knowledge. Mastering the native language and passing it on to new generations is an important mission of women to preserve their ethnic identity and culture. Communication within the family circle fulfills the function of passing on the accumulated experience of ancestors, and a stable family bond based on tradition is formed. The possibility of receiving secondary education in the Uzbek and Tajik languages in Kazakhstan has made it possible to preserve and develop native languages. The Kazakh language acts as a communicative tool for the formation of civic identity, as it symbolizes Kazakhstan as a homeland for the informants. Kazakh language is associated with

prospects for children, education and career advancement. Thus, women's linguistic competences create a space for identity formation in its two dimensions - ethnic and civil.

Women's Influence on Children's Educational Attainment

The education of children is an important task for their mothers. The experience of the women who participated in the study shows that the older generation of women did not have the opportunity to study. Firstly, this was due to their upbringing and traditions. Girls were raised in strict rules and prepared for marriage. Secondly, the limited labor market for women. These reasons were more common for women over 45 years old. These women are determined to educate their daughters. Their children already have higher education and work in their profession.

According to female respondents, education for girls is currently emphasized. Women's personal experience shows that their parents paid attention to their daughters' educational opportunities, while their brothers did not receive a similar level of education. This approach is similar to traditional Kazakh perceptions, according to which a girl should be given an education so that in the future she can work and be financially independent. An important mission lies on women in choosing the future profession for children. An age-based or generational approach to the choice of children's profession is observed here. Young women with higher education trust their children's choice. In families it is common to discuss such an important issue with fathers, who should approve the choice of their children. At the same time, mothers are guided by their children's preferences, realizing that the modern generation has more opportunities in choosing a profession. Older women with higher education orient their children towards education in the sphere of education and medicine, as these skills are necessary for girls in life. In the system of women's values, knowledge and education are prioritized along with family and children. Formation of good and conscious generation through knowledge and education is an important aspect for self-realization of a mother.

The study has shown that women working in the sphere of education and science see their mission in the formation of an intelligent and conscious generation. In the process of education and transfer of knowledge, women realize their responsibility to the future generation. The issue of educating an intelligent youth is a matter of concern for many women. There is an opinion that the solution of problems faced by young people will determine the future of the country.

The child-raising process of these respondents is based on the principles of mutual respect and desire to support children. There is a rational combination of strictness and freedom, involvement in labor and pursuit of knowledge. Helping children with homework is an essential part of everyday life. The prospect of higher education for children is seen as a key factor in their future success. In this context, mothers are willing to make significant efforts to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

As a result of the study, it can be concluded that women with education have broader views on the possibilities of achieving success in work and social life. They project their views on the world around them, family relations and society onto their children, as child rearing remains the main priority in their lives. Women are oriented towards an active life position and consider their successes as a result of hard work and mutual understanding in the family. However, traditional attitudes in ethnic communities restrict women from getting education, especially young women. Accordingly, the potential of women in the formation of civic identity is not realized.

Recommendations

In order to expand educational opportunities for women from ethnic communities in the south of Kazakhstan, we present the following recommendations.

The high level of family influence on the life and education of women actualizes the need for special information sessions. At these sessions, disclose the opportunities for girls to receive education, familiarize them with the rules for obtaining state educational grants.

In universities and colleges, hold special reception days for women and their family members to introduce them to the life and rules of educational organizations. This will help build an understanding of the organization of the educational process, the lives of women students and their achievements.

In general, the formation of identity for citizens of different ethnic backgrounds is a key factor in the stable development and unity of a nation. The role of women in this process is crucial. The state and society can contribute to unlocking women's potential through education.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The author declares that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS Journal belongs to the author.

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