



Kazakh Female Graduates' Perspectives on Contested Gender Norms amid Global Change

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received: 01 July 2025

Received in revised form: 01 November 2025

Accepted: 30 December 2025

DOI: 10.14689/ejer.2026.118.01

Keywords

Gender, re-traditionalization, Islam, higher education, globalization, Kazakhstan

Purpose The purpose of this study is to investigate Kazakh youth's perspectives on gender roles and the influence of traditions and religious beliefs on these views. Specifically, this study examines how university-educated Kazakh youth negotiate gender norms at the intersection of family traditions, Islamic teachings, higher education, and global influences. **Methodology.** The methodological rigor of this study is derived from

in-depth interviews to arrive at qualitative analysis and demonstrate that retraditionalization in Kazakhstan is not a linear return to the past but a hybrid process combining cultural continuity with modern aspirations. The sample comprised university students and graduates aged 20 to 35 years. The study utilized theoretical underpinnings including Kandiyoti's concept of *patriarchal bargains*, Connell's theory of *hegemonic masculinity*, and Kudaibergenova's work on hybrid retraditionalization. **Results** Findings reveal that family traditions and religious narratives continue to reinforce patriarchal expectations, yet individual agency and exposure to global discourses challenge these norms. Universities and social media act as ambivalent sites, simultaneously reproducing stereotypes and fostering empowerment. The results also highlight the ambiguous standards surrounding the gender equality in the Kazakh society, resulting in divergent perspectives; and how gender roles, ingrained from childhood, reinforce male authority and are shaped by familial and religious contexts. The findings also revealed that university education has the potential to challenge patriarchal values since some faculty members still endorse traditional norms, thereby perpetuating male superiority. **Implication for research and practice.** The study implies that higher education is expected to advance gender equality by empowering women and positioning them as catalysts for societal transformation beyond conventional roles in the Kazakh context. The study also contributes to understanding how gender norms are reproduced and contested in Kazakhstan.

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Introduction

Globalization significantly influences gender equality, creating a dichotomy between global movements toward female empowerment and entrenched traditional norms. Despite notable progress toward gender equality in Kazakhstan and continued advocacy by international human rights organizations for equality within the framework of universal human rights (UN Women, 2024), the country is witnessing a resurgence of traditional and revivalist religious perspectives on gender roles, both within the family and in broader society.

As Kamp (2016) noted, “Kazakhstan’s engagement with globalization, prosperity in the 2000s, and governmental and social attitudes supportive of women’s rights combined to make gender equality something close to a reality” (p.275). However, recent years have witnessed cultural shifts marked by the resurgence of traditional norms, particularly those concerning gendered expectations and moral conduct (Kabatova, 2022; Kabylova, 2022; Kudaibergenova, 2018; Thibault & Caron, 2022; Zhussipbek et al., 2020) as well as the revival of religious perspectives on gender relations. These changes have become more pronounced compared to the first 15–20 years of the country’s independence, when progress was primarily driven by economic recovery and development.

Issues of equality are increasingly becoming subjects of debate, as traditions and family values begin to favor the rights of men, thereby entrenching inequality through familial and religious ties. Patriarchal norms are starting to shape a socially acceptable image of women, deemed necessary to sustain a traditional society. Despite the strengthening of religious identity among youth, particularly in the context of the growing influence of Islam (Beisenbayev et al., 2024; Junisbai et al., 2017; Malik, 2019), the intersection of traditional norms and religious views on gender relations in Kazakhstan remains underexplored. Gender relations in Kazakhstan are shaped by a complex interplay of tradition, religion, education, and globalization. While the Soviet period expanded women’s access to education and employment, the post-Soviet era has seen processes of retraditionalization, in which state and societal actors revive “authentic” norms that emphasize women’s domestic and familial roles (Kudaibergenova, 2020). Rather than representing a simple return to the past, such retraditionalization is often hybrid, combining references to tradition with contemporary cultural and political agendas (Thibault & Caron, 2022).

Theoretical frameworks such as Kandiyoti (2007) concept of patriarchal bargains and Connell (2009) theory of hegemonic masculinity provide important analytical tools for examining how men and women negotiate, reproduce, or resist gender norms. These frameworks highlight that gender norms are not static but are continuously renegotiated through institutions such as family and university, as well as through global cultural flows, including digital media and transnational discourses.

The concept of retraditionalization is further employed to understand how post-Soviet transformations reintroduce patriarchal norms under the guise of cultural authenticity (Kudaibergenova, 2020). At the same time, theories of higher education as sites of both cultural reproduction and contestation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Marginson, 2008) allow us to interrogate whether Kazakhstani universities serve primarily to reinforce

dominant gender ideologies or whether they can function as arenas for social transformation.

This triangulated framework linking patriarchal bargains, hegemonic masculinity, retraditionalization, and the role of higher education enables a critical analysis of how hybrid gender norms emerge at the intersection of tradition, Islam, global influences, and institutional settings. By situating empirical findings within these conceptual lenses, the study underscores the dynamic and contested processes shaping youth gender identities in contemporary Kazakhstan. This study focuses on analyzing the perspectives of university-educated young people on gender relations within the unique socio-cultural environment of Kazakhstan, where traditions, Islam, global influences and higher education intersect and often lead to conflicts.

Literature review, Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Although modernization and globalization have broadened opportunities for women, they have not uniformly led to gender equality (Kabeer & Natali, 2013; Niimi, 2024; Seguno & Grown, 2006). The impact of globalization on gender norms is mediated by differences in cultural heritage and institutional structures (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2016). Research indicates that women's labor force participation increases in more developed countries, with structural transformations, such as shifts to service economies, shaping gender attitudes more than traditions (Boehnke, 2011; Chesley, 2016). Nevertheless, traditional gender stereotypes, often rooted in patriarchal norms, persist even in globalized societies, impeding social change (Dutta et al., 2021; Smith, 2014; Therborn, 2014). In post-Soviet contexts, these patriarchal norms interact with modernization processes to produce hybrid gender orders rather than linear progress toward equality (Gerling et al., 2019). This global perspective lays the groundwork for a closer examination of how patriarchal and religious norms intersect to shape gender ideologies, particularly within the context of Kazakhstan.

Patriarchy is deeply embedded in family structures, religious ideologies, and state discourses, restricting women's political and public participation and shaping institutional frameworks that perpetuate structural violence against women (Applin et al., 2022; Dougé-Prosper, 2018; Joseph, 1996; Montesanti, 2015). Recent research highlights a growing discourse on retraditionalization in post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, where these processes are increasingly framed within a patriarchal and traditionalist agenda (Thibault & Caron, 2022). In this context, retraditionalization functions not merely as a form of cultural continuity but as a politically and institutionally embedded strategy for reasserting normative gender roles under the guise of authenticity (Kay, 2006).

Thibault and Caron (2022) note that the state (Kazakhstan) has succeeded in promoting a moderate and patriotic Islam that aligns with its national identity project. This form of Islam tends to reinforce conservative gender norms, particularly by emphasizing women's roles as mothers and preservers of cultural values" (p. 167). Further, discussed how appeals to "Kazakh values" and patriotic Islam disproportionately regulate women's dress, behavior, and sexuality. Kandiyoti (2007) concept of "patriarchal bargains" explains women's strategic negotiation of these norms as a means to gain social legitimacy. Kabatova (2022) further demonstrate how the culture of *uyat* (shame) disciplines women's conduct in educational and professional spheres. These mechanisms of control operate in

tandem with broader institutional forces and serve as instruments of social regulation, particularly amid identity crises intensified by globalization.

Global research highlights how universities can both contest and reproduce dominant ideologies (Marginson, 2008; Morley, 2012). As noted by Durrani et al. (2022), in Central Asia, education is closely linked to nationalist and moral narratives that shape socially acceptable models of femininity. In Kazakhstan where universities simultaneously function as spaces of empowerment and social control pedagogical practices often reinforce conservative gender roles (Christensen & Massey, 1989; Kane, 1995; Mollaeva, 2017). It is not rare, when women in universities are positioned as carriers of tradition and morality, balancing professionalization with normative gendered expectations.

Complementing this framework, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) provides a lens to understand how gender intersects with religion, class, generation, and urban-rural status in shaping subjectivities. Postcolonial feminist critiques (Mohanty, 1988) are also indispensable to interrogate how Western liberal gender frameworks are selectively integrated into authoritarian or patriarchal contexts, often reinforcing rather than challenging hegemonic structures. These interrelated theories together form the conceptual core of this study.

This literature review reveals the need for a conceptual framework that connects retraditionalization, institutional reproduction, and hybrid gender subjectivities. Importantly, several studies highlight how the revival of religious beliefs – particularly in Islamic contexts – intersects with nationalist discourses and moral regulation to reinforce conservative gender norms (Zhussipbek et al., 2020). These religious discourses contribute to re-legitimizing patriarchal authority in both public and private spheres, including education. While global and regional literature identify relevant patterns, there remains insufficient engagement with how these forces interact specifically in Kazakhstani higher education. By situating university-educated youth within these intersecting regimes, the present study addresses a critical gap in gender scholarship in Kazakhstan.

Gender situation in Kazakhstan

Historically, Kazakh women played significant roles in family decision-making. Islam, introduced in the Middle Ages, reinforced patriarchal norms, though women retained respect within the family sphere. Soviet-era Marxist policies from the 1920s promoted gender equality, integrating Kazakh women into the workforce, education, science, and, to a limited extent, politics. Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has made strides in gender equality. It's ranking in the Global Gender Gap Index reflects substantial advancements in education and health, along with positive trends in women's economic participation and opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2024). Although young people in Kazakhstan are increasingly open to gender equality, their values remain largely influenced by traditional societal attitudes and stereotypes (UN Women, 2024; UNDP, 2024).

Today, “among Kazakhstan's youth it is common to find mixed cultural repertoires among individuals and groups, rather than diametrically opposing worldviews. Such findings are hardly unprecedented” (Blum, 2015). As corroborated by other Kazakh researchers, Kuzhabekova et al. (2017) argue that female leaders encounter a clash between

Western values and traditional expectations of women's roles. Both studies highlight that while traditional expectations persist, women are increasingly active in public service, leadership, and the economy. However, they continue to struggle with balancing family roles, career aspirations and economic pressures. This is evident as women are more likely than men to face gender discrimination and are more inclined to address gender inequalities.

Supporting this complexity, studies have documented a revival of traditional practices in post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, accompanied by a rise in gender inequality (Kandiyoti, 2007; Kuehnast & Nechemias, 2004). This shift has been marked by the legitimization of hierarchical gender roles through appeals to "tradition" (Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016), signaling a broader move toward greater patriarchy in post-Soviet Central Asia (Werner, 2009).

Religion and gender policy intersect in ways that warrant closer analysis. The state has consistently managed Islam as a controlled domain, framing it at times as a moral resource and at times as a potential challenge to national identity (Thibault, 2019). This management influences the position of religious education in schools and shapes public discourse on acceptable femininity. Since 2011, the share of the population identifying as religious has risen sharply, alongside state-endorsed retraditionalization policies that emphasize "Kazakh values" and family roles for women. While the 2024 criminalization of domestic violence marked legislative progress, human rights groups cautioned that the law's emphasis on "traditional family values" risks diluting its protective intent (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Educational participation remains a key arena for these dynamics. Kazakhstan records some of the highest female enrolment and completion rates in Central Asia across all levels of education: in 2022-23, women comprised 53% of university students and 55% of graduates (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). Female completion rates at the upper secondary level reach 98.3%, and women's gross graduation ratio from Bachelor's and Master's programmes was 71.6% in 2020 - the highest in the region (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). Based on data from The Gendered Educational Landscape, women constitute a majority of researchers (52.8%), an exceptional figure in global comparison. However, strong horizontal segregation persists: women are overrepresented in education (66-87% of graduates) and in health and welfare (74-77%), but remain underrepresented in engineering, manufacturing, and construction (17.7-28.5%) as well as in ICT (30.4%). Aggregated STEM data show that women account for only 32.9% of graduates, despite forming a majority in natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics (67%). These patterns reveal how institutions both reproduce and challenge dominant gender ideologies. Curriculum content, teacher attitudes, and institutional cultures often reinforce normative expectations, steering women toward "feminized" professions with lower economic returns. Societal attitudes mirror this divide: 54.3% of respondents in a 2024 UNDP survey viewed STEM fields as unsuitable for women (UN Women, 2024; UNDP, 2024). The gender pay gap persists, with women earning on average 77% of men's wages (UN Women, 2024). While Kazakhstan has lifted Soviet-era restrictions on women's employment in certain occupations, cultural norms in families and workplaces continue to constrain women's career trajectories.

Leadership positions in higher education exemplify both progress and limitations. Women make up 26.1% of rectors in Kazakhstan – substantially higher than in neighboring states and above some global averages, yet far from parity. Female representation in political decision-making has increased since the introduction of a 30% gender quota for parliamentary candidates in 2020, but remains between 20–35% in practice.

Additionally, in 2020, Kazakhstan had one of the highest divorce rates globally, with 4.6 divorces per 1,000 people, ranking second worldwide (World Population Review, 2020). This trend aligns with recent findings by Dall'Agnola and Thibault (2021), who document the normalization of divorce in the context of shifting moral boundaries. Jarbussynova (2024), the Principal Advisor to UN Women in Kazakhstan, states that patriarchal attitudes in society and among women themselves pose significant obstacles to achieving gender equality. She argues that to achieve gender equality, legal changes alone are insufficient. Education must instill this value in both girls and boys, moving away from traditional norms that encourage girls to be submissive and enduring. Overall, Kazakhstan's gender situation reflects a hybrid system: high educational attainment and growing female leadership coexist with entrenched occupational segregation, persistent wage disparities, and normative frameworks that privilege women's roles as moral guardians of the nation. Understanding how universities, as both sites of empowerment and social control, mediate these tensions is essential to assessing the prospects for substantive gender equality.

The following research questions were framed for this study: *How do university-educated youth in Kazakhstan negotiate gender roles within the intersecting influences of traditional norms, Islamic values, and global discourses? What specific role do universities play in shaping or transforming these attitudes?* We hypothesize that university-educated youth in Kazakhstan exhibit hybrid gender attitudes resulting from the intersection of traditional, religious, and global influences. Moreover, we expect that universities function as transformative institutions, fostering reflexivity and contestation of conventional gender norms, particularly among female students and social science majors.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which suited the purpose of identification and interpretation of recurring patterns in participants' narratives. Additionally, thematic analysis is flexible in exploring meanings across socio-cultural contexts and is suitable for examining experiences related to gender, religion, and identity in post-Soviet societies. This design is popular in feminist qualitative inquiries, which emphasize the voices and situated knowledge of participants (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Sampling

Participants (N = 26) were recruited through purposive sampling aimed at capturing diversity in gender (18 females, 8 males), aged (21–35 years), marital status (single, married, divorced), and religious identification (secular, moderately religious, practicing). All participants were ethnic Kazakhs and held at least a bachelor's degree from institutions of higher education in Kazakhstan. While we did not aim to include respondents from rural

settlements, participants' birthplaces – whether urban or rural – were recorded as part of their background information. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1

Interview Participants and Their Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Description	N=26
Gender	Male -	8
	Female	18
Age	21-24 years	11
	25-28 years	4
	29-32 years	7
	Above 32 years	4
Marital status	Single	16
	Married	10
Parental status	Two or more children	6
	1 child	3
	None	1
Education	Bachelor's	14
	Master's	10
	Doctorate	2
Employment	Employed	23
	On maternity leave	3
	Unemployed	0
Religion	Islam	15
	Others	11

The sample was designed to reflect a cross-section of ideological orientations on gender roles, but did not explicitly seek religious representation during recruitment. While participants differed in their expressions of religiosity, religious affiliation was not used as a selection criterion. Participants were recruited through university alumni networks and professional contacts, ensuring voluntary and informed participation.

Data collection and instrument

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in Kazakh or Russian, depending on participant preference, between March and July 2024. Interviews were carried out either in person or via secure video conferencing tools and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. A topic guide was developed to explore perceptions of gender roles, experiences in educational and religious environments, family expectations, and views on societal change. The interview protocol included questions on the perceived influence of religion on gender norms. All interviews were conducted with individuals currently residing and working in urban settings. This urban focus reflects the demographic realities of educated youth engaged in professional spheres.

This study adhered to ethical standards for qualitative research involving human subjects. Participants were informed about the goals of the research, and written consent was obtained. Anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms and removing

identifying details. Given the sensitivity of themes – such as gender, Islam, and family norms – the researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout data collection and analysis. As a Kazakh-speaking female academic with cultural proximity but professional detachment, the researcher occupied a position that facilitated both rapport and analytical distance (England, 1994).

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using MaxQDA software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six-step approach: familiarization, generation of initial codes, theme searching, theme reviewing, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Initial coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, while subsequent coding engaged with theoretical constructs related to retraditionalization, intersectionality, and institutional *intencia*.

Thus, based on the codes and subcodes compiled for analysis, the following themes were identified: (1) Family traditions, retraditionalization and changes in social norms. This part was dedicated to identifying gender norms and stereotypes typical of Kazakh society, as well as attitudes toward social norms such as age at marriage, childbirth, attitudes toward divorce, and cohabitation before marriage. (2) Islamic teachings on gender roles. Although participants were not identified with their religion, religious beliefs and differing interpretations of gender roles by men and women were frequently mentioned in interviews. (3) Traditional practices in Kazakhstani universities. The impact of university education on gender attitudes and some harmful cultural norms that permit discrimination against women were examined. (4) Global trends and the need for changes. The role of the internet and social media in understanding gender equality and the aspects of modern gender roles they might change are considered.

Findings

The analysis reveals how university-educated young men and women in Kazakhstan negotiate gender roles amid the intersecting influences of family traditions, Islamic values, university environments, and global discourses. The data illustrate hybrid gender attitudes – simultaneously shaped by retraditionalisation and exposure to global equality narratives – embedded in the broader socio-political and institutional context.

Family Traditions, Retraditionalization, and Shifts in Social Norms

Family traditions continue to play a pivotal role in shaping gender attitudes among Kazakhstani youth; however, these norms are undergoing significant transformation under the influence of globalization and broader social change. Interview participants repeatedly emphasized that while the traditional family model remains powerful, it increasingly faces challenges from emerging value orientations. As one participant, Aizhan explained: "Since childhood we were taught that a girl should be modest and obedient. But at university, I saw that women could be independent, and now I look at the family differently." This statement captures the contradiction between deeply rooted familial expectations and new models of gender roles.

The theme of retraditionalization emerges prominently in contemporary Kazakhstan, reflected in attempts by society and the state to revive so-called “authentic” norms. Yet, as [Kudaibergenova \(2018\)](#) argues, such processes are not simply a return to the past; rather, they represent a hybrid combination of traditional and modern orientations. Dana, another participant, highlighted this duality: “Now they say again that a woman should stay at home. But at the same time, many girls strive for careers and education.” Retradditionalization thus operates not as a static reproduction of traditions but as a contested arena of negotiation between generations and social groups.

Despite the persistence of patriarchal expectations, the interviews also revealed emerging practices of resistance. One participant, Asel asserted: “I will decide myself when and whom to marry, not my parents.” Such declarations illustrate how transformation occurs through individual acts of agency, resonating with [Kandiyoti \(2007\)](#)’s concept of “patriarchal bargains.” In this way, family traditions remain a crucial source of gender socialization, yet they are increasingly reinterpreted and transformed under the influence of globalization, education, and new generational attitudes. Incorporating theoretical frameworks on the transmission and contestation of norms ([Connell, 2009](#); [Kandiyoti, 2007](#)) allows retraditionalization to be understood not as a linear or unilateral process but as a dynamic and contradictory field in which new models of identity are being forged.

Islamic Teachings on Gender Roles

Islamic teachings represent another crucial dimension through which gender norms are interpreted and contested in contemporary Kazakhstan. Interview participants revealed three distinct patterns of engagement with religion, each reflecting broader debates on the relationship between tradition, modernity, and gender equality. The first group emphasized that Islam, when properly understood, offers women greater respect than traditional norms suggest. One male participant, Timur asserted: “Religion protects both men and women from harmful global trends coming from the West”. This reflects a belief that Islam can serve as a moral safeguard against external influences while simultaneously affirming dignity and fairness within the family. This interpretation resonates with scholarly arguments that religious revivalism in Central Asia often functions as a resource for re-articulating cultural identity rather than simply reproducing patriarchy ([Thibault & Caron, 2022](#)).

The second group expressed that religious and traditional norms complement one another, jointly reinforcing established gender roles. A female participant explained: “*This is also supported by religion... it is also mentioned in Islam.*” Such statements illustrate the fusion of traditional Kazakh customs with Islamic discourse, producing a unified normative framework that legitimizes patriarchal gender relations. This process reflects what [Kandiyoti \(2007\)](#) calls the “reconfiguration of patriarchal bargains,” where women strategically negotiate their roles within overlapping normative regimes.

The third and largest group adopted a more critical stance. These participants argued that Islamic teachings on gender are often selectively interpreted by male authorities in ways that sustain hierarchical structures. They pointed to the growing presence of religious podcasts and informal preaching, often by non-specialists, that reproduce gender stereotypes and restrict women’s autonomy. One female participant noted that such interpretations limit possibilities for equality: “*Religion is often used by men to justify that women should stay at home.*”

This critique aligns with scholarship highlighting the patriarchal instrumentalization of Islam in post-Soviet contexts (Kudaibergenova, 2020; Thibault, 2019).

Thus, Islam emerges as both a source of empowerment and of constraint, depending on its interpretation and institutionalization. On one hand, it offers resources for revaluing women's roles and challenging certain traditional practices. On the other hand, its popularized and politicized forms risk reinforcing gender hierarchies through the institutionalization of "patriotic religion" under soft authoritarianism (Thibault & Caron, 2022). This duality underscores the importance of analyzing religion not as a monolithic determinant but as a dynamic arena of negotiation, where competing interpretations shape gender norms and everyday practices.

Gender Norms in Kazakhstani Universities

Higher education institutions in Kazakhstan occupy a paradoxical position in shaping gender norms. On one hand, universities provide young women with opportunities for professional development, independence, and access to global discourses of equality. On the other hand, they frequently reproduce gender stereotypes through both formal and informal practices. Interviews with students and graduates highlighted that educators often including female lecturers perpetuate traditional hierarchies by displaying preferential attitudes toward male students, particularly in STEM fields. As Aisulu, one participant observed: "Professors often assume that men will perform better in technical subjects, while women are advised to choose social sciences." This indicates how academic environments may unconsciously reinforce gendered divisions of labor.

Although families increasingly view education as equally valuable for sons and daughters, structural imbalances persist in career choices and professional pathways. Women dominate in social sciences and humanities, while men prevail in engineering, IT, and technical fields, despite the overall female majority in Kazakhstani universities (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023; Harden-Wolfson & Shakirova, 2025). This suggests that formal access to education does not automatically translate into equal opportunities across professional domains. Instead, academic institutions themselves become arenas where broader societal stereotypes are reproduced. The persistence of these patterns reflects what Connell (2009) describes as the institutionalization of "hegemonic masculinity," whereby social structures reinforce male dominance not only within the family but also across professional trajectories. Universities in Kazakhstan, rather than challenging patriarchal constraints, often mirror the wider societal tendency to prioritize men as future leaders and women as supportive figures. This institutional reproduction of gender roles undermines the potential of higher education as a transformative force.

At the same time, exposure to diverse peers, new pedagogical practices, and globalized discourses of equality fosters spaces for contestation. Several female participants emphasized that their university experience broadened their horizons. One of them noted: "In my family, it was assumed I would marry young. But in university, I realized I could build a career and live independently." These statements illustrate how universities can serve as sites of resistance and negotiation, even within structures that reproduce traditional norms. Thus, higher education in Kazakhstan embodies both continuity and change. It reproduces gender stereotypes through entrenched academic hierarchies, but it also enables young women to articulate alternative identities and pathways. Framing

universities as ambivalent institutions caught between tradition and transformation, underscores the importance of analyzing them not simply as neutral providers of education but as active participants in the negotiation of gender norms.

Global Trends and Media Influence

Globalization and digitalization have significantly transformed how gender norms are negotiated among Kazakhstani youth. Social media platforms, in particular, emerged in our findings as both a site of empowerment and a vehicle for retraditionalization. Several participants emphasized that online spaces provide access to feminist discourses, international debates on gender equality, and resources on women's rights, which embolden young women to resist domestic violence and assert their independence. As one participant noted: "Through Instagram and podcasts, I learned that women do not have to tolerate aggression. Now I feel more confident defending myself." This highlights the emancipatory potential of digital media, which operates beyond the reach of traditional gatekeepers such as family or university authorities.

At the same time, media also reinforces conservative gender expectations. Participants observed the growing popularity of influencers, coaches, and online "femininity trainers" who promote patriarchal ideals under the guise of modern self-help. These digital figures encourage women to embrace domestic roles, focusing on marriageability and the art of pleasing men. Such contradictory messages illustrate what Anthony Giddens [Hughes \(2015\)](#) describes as the "reflexive project of the self," where individuals actively negotiate between globalized ideals of autonomy and local prescriptions of morality. For Kazakhstani women, this negotiation often results in a hybrid identity that combines aspirations for independence with loyalty to cultural expectations.

This ambivalence reflects the broader global-local dynamic theorized in glocalization studies ([Robertson, 1995](#)). Rather than displacing traditional values, global trends are appropriated and reinterpreted within existing cultural frameworks. Thus, social media becomes a contested space where global discourses of equality coexist with, and sometimes amplify, retraditionalization. This dual role underscores the resilience of patriarchal structures, even as transnational influences expand the discursive space for gender equality.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that media does not operate as a unidirectional force of modernization but as a contradictory field where empowerment and conservatism are simultaneously reproduced. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for understanding how young women in Kazakhstan navigate the intersection of global and local cultural flows.

Discussion

This study examined how young, university-educated Kazakh men and women perceive gender norms in the intersection of family traditions, retraditionalization, Islamic teachings, university practices, and global trends. The findings underscore the contradictory and negotiated character of gender role perceptions, which cannot be fully understood without situating them in broader theoretical frameworks such as patriarchal bargains ([Kandiyoti, 2007](#)), hegemonic masculinity ([Connell, 2009](#)), and processes of retraditionalization as hybrid projects shaped by both state policy and global influences

(Thibault & Caron, 2022). Below, we discuss the findings in relation to these theories and reflect on the implications for gender equality in Kazakhstan.

Family traditions remain central to the reproduction of gender norms. As our participants highlighted, girls are socialized from childhood to prioritize modesty, domestic skills, and obedience, shaping expectations for their roles as wives and mothers. These insights reaffirm Kandiyoti (2007) notion of patriarchal bargains, where women navigate structural constraints by adopting behaviors that secure legitimacy within patriarchal systems. Yet, the interviews also revealed an emerging resistance: some young women claimed agency in deciding when and whom to marry, demonstrating how individual strategies can contest entrenched norms.

Retraditionalization in Kazakhstan operates not as a mere restoration of the past but as a dynamic negotiation between traditional values and modern aspirations. As notes, these processes are hybrid, combining references to “authentic” Kazakh values with adaptations to contemporary realities. Participants’ reflections illustrate this hybridity: while some families expect daughters to embrace homemaking roles, others encourage higher education and professional careers. Connell (2009) framework of hegemonic masculinity helps explain how male breadwinner ideals persist, while female agency is tolerated only within certain boundaries. The findings thus illustrate a tension between continuity and change. Family traditions remain powerful, yet education, urbanization, and global cultural influences destabilize their hegemony. This aligns with earlier observations that domestic spheres, often considered “private,” are in fact sites of political contestation where patriarchal structures are both reproduced and challenged (Gilman, 2021; Schneider, 1991).

The second theme reveals how Islamic teachings on gender are interpreted in plural and often contradictory ways. Three broad interpretive trends emerged: (1) the view that Islam accords respect to women beyond what traditions allow; (2) the perception that religion and tradition reinforce each other; and (3) a critical view that Islamic interpretations in Kazakhstan are patriarchal and male-dominated. These findings resonate with the growing literature on “patriotic Islam” in Central Asia, which highlights how religion becomes aligned with state agendas to promote conservative values and gender hierarchies (Thibault & Caron, 2022). The interviews confirm that religion is often mobilized not merely as faith but as a cultural instrument of retraditionalization, embedded in national identity projects.

At the same time, the plurality of views demonstrates the contested nature of religious authority. While some respondents emphasized that “true Islam” values women’s dignity, others criticized popular preachers and online sermons for reproducing patriarchal hierarchies. This tension underscores Connell (2009) point that institutions, including religious institutions, are arenas of gendered power struggles rather than homogeneous carriers of tradition. The moral regulation associated with Islamic revivalism therefore represents both continuity and transformation. It strengthens conservative femininity among youth but also stimulates debates about gender justice, opening the possibility for alternative, more egalitarian interpretations of religion.

The third theme highlights the ambivalent role of universities. On one hand, education has become an equal resource for both genders: parents now invest in sons’ and daughters’ education alike, undermining the older practice of privileging male children (Dollar & Gatti, 1999). On the other hand, participants reported pervasive sexism in universities,

including discriminatory attitudes from instructors and favoritism toward male students, particularly in STEM fields. This paradox reflects [Connell \(2009\)](#) argument that institutions reproduce gender orders even when they appear to promote equality. Universities, instead of being engines of transformation, may inadvertently sustain traditional hierarchies. Our findings show that formal access to education does not automatically translate into gender parity in career aspirations or institutional recognition.

Nevertheless, higher education remains a site of potential resistance. Women students increasingly choose professional paths that challenge traditional expectations, embodying the negotiation between inherited norms and new possibilities. Universities could play a stronger role in dismantling stereotypes by integrating gender-sensitive pedagogy, but the current reality shows their limited transformative capacity.

The fourth theme reveals the dual role of globalization and social media in reshaping gender norms. On the one hand, platforms empower women by providing access to feminist discourses, knowledge on self-defense, and support networks, reinforcing agency and independence. On the other hand, social media also hosts “femininity coaches” who promote conservative ideals of how to attract men and be a “good wife,” echoing retraditionalist messages. This ambivalence exemplifies the concept of glocalization: global cultural flows are appropriated locally, producing hybrid outcomes where empowerment and retraditionalization coexist. As [Robertson \(1995\)](#) argues, globalization does not erase local traditions but interacts with them in complex ways. The Kazakhstani case illustrates how global media can simultaneously challenge and reinforce gender inequalities.

Such hybridity has profound implications for gender identity formation. Young women adopt selective strategies, appropriating global discourses of independence while accommodating traditional expectations. This fluid negotiation reflects the agency of youth as active cultural actors, shaping their identities at the intersection of multiple influences.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings indicate that gender norms among young Kazakh university graduates are shaped by an ongoing negotiation between tradition, religion, institutional practices, and global influences. While patriarchal expectations persist, women increasingly exercise agency in redefining roles, demonstrating that retraditionalization is not a linear return to the past but a contested and hybrid process. Integrating [Connell \(2009\)](#)’s framework of hegemonic masculinity, [Kandiyoti \(2007\)](#) concept of patriarchal bargains, and recent scholarship on retraditionalization ([Kudaibergenova, 2018](#); [Thibault & Caron, 2022](#)), this study contributes to understanding how gender norms are reproduced and contested in Kazakhstan. Ultimately, the Kazakhstani case shows that gender equality cannot be achieved through policy or education alone. It requires addressing the interplay of family traditions, religious narratives, institutional biases, and global cultural flows. The resilience of patriarchal norms highlights the need for multi-level interventions, while the emergence of youth agency offers cautious optimism for the transformation of gender relations in the future.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it demonstrates that family traditions, while still central to gender socialization, are increasingly contested through individual acts of agency, confirming the relevance of patriarchal bargains ([Kandiyoti, 2007](#)) as dynamic rather than static. Second, it reveals how religious interpretations in

Kazakhstan form part of a broader project of cultural retraditionalization, resonating with Thibault and Caron (2022) observations on “patriotic Islam.” Third, it highlights the contradictory role of universities and social media as both vehicles of empowerment and sites of normative reproduction.

The study’s limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was restricted to university-educated Kazakh youth, limiting generalizability to other ethnic and socio-economic groups. Kazakhstan’s multiethnic composition means that future research should examine how gender norms vary across ethnicities and regions. Moreover, the qualitative design provides rich insights but cannot measure the prevalence of these attitudes in the population. Future studies should combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the extent of retraditionalization and resistance across broader demographics. Comparative studies across Central Asia could also illuminate whether similar patterns are observable in neighboring contexts.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Grant number: AP19680642.

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