

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES IN KAZAKHSTAN

Gender equality is a fundamental indicator of democratic development and inclusive governance. Women's participation in politics reflects not only their access to decision-making power but also the inclusivity of political institutions for other marginalized groups. In most developed democracies, gender quotas have been introduced to ensure the representation of women, youth, and other underrepresented communities.

Looking back at the historical context, in Kazakhstan women's right to vote and to stand for election was first formally guaranteed in 1924 under Soviet administration ([Equal Future Eurasia](#)). During the Soviet period, women were widely portrayed as symbols of equality, benefiting from universal access to education and, in many cases, demonstrating strong leadership potential (Shakirova, 2015, p. 222). However, the existence of these rights and opportunities did not translate into genuine political participation or equitable representation. Soviet elections were neither competitive nor democratic, as political positions were largely predetermined within the Communist Party hierarchy. As a result, even highly educated and professionally accomplished women were rarely appointed to senior decision-making roles, and they seldom competed on equal footing with their male counterparts. This disparity was reinforced by entrenched gender norms and the perception of political leadership as a predominantly male domain, which limited women's influence despite formal legal equality.

Post-Soviet Kazakhstan also strived to achieve gender equality in politics and joined several important international commitments. One of the earliest was the participation in the **Fourth World Conference on Women** and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, which was a landmark global agreement aimed at advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality ([UN Women](#)). The declaration identified twelve critical areas for action, including increasing women's participation in decision-making, eliminating gender-based violence, and ensuring equal access to education and economic opportunities. By signing this document, Kazakhstan committed to integrating gender perspectives into all stages of policy-making and to periodically reviewing its progress.

As a direct outcome of these commitments, Kazakhstan established the **National Commission for Women's Affairs, Family and Demographic Policy** in 1998. This institution was tasked with advising the President, coordinating government action on gender equality, and developing strategies to promote women's rights across all sectors of society.

In the same year, 1998, Kazakhstan ratified the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** ([OHCHR](#)), which is often described as the "international bill of rights for women." Ratification obligated Kazakhstan to remove discriminatory laws and practices, introduce temporary special measures such as gender quotas, and ensure equal access for women to political, economic, and social life. Under CEDAW, Kazakhstan is required to submit reports every four years to the CEDAW Committee in Geneva, outlining measures taken to fulfill the convention's provisions.

Recent feedback from the CEDAW Committee has urged Kazakhstan to:

- Strengthen the enforcement of quotas.
- Address low female representation in senior political positions.
- Close the gender pay gap.
- Provide better support for rural women, particularly regarding access to resources and services.

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In 2015, Kazakhstan adopted the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, committing itself to **Goal 5: Gender Equality** (UN SDGs). This commitment requires the country to ensure women's full and effective participation in leadership, end all forms of discrimination, and recognize unpaid care work. Kazakhstan's actions in this regard include:

- Inclusion of gender indicators in the National Development Strategy.
- Submission of periodic Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) to the UN High-Level Political Forum, the latest being in 2022.
- Integration of gender equality metrics into government performance monitoring systems.

All of these commitments — from the Beijing Declaration to CEDAW and the SDGs — have been officially signed by Kazakhstan, creating a formal legal and political framework for advancing women's rights.

The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "[On State guarantees of equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women](#)" deserves special attention, which is a key regulatory legal act that institutionalizes state policy in the field of gender equality. The law establishes the basic concepts governing equal rights and opportunities, defines the goals and principles of state policy (art. 3), and explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender (art. 4) and establishes the competence of the Government, central and local authorities to implement these provisions (Articles 6-8). An important component of the document is guarantees of equal access to public service (art. 9), regulation of employers' obligations to ensure equality in labor relations (art. 10), as well as provisions aimed at achieving equality in marriage and family relations, education, healthcare and culture (art. 11-12). The law also provides for mechanisms of state control, supervision and responsibility for violations of legislation in this area (art. 13–15). Together, these norms create a comprehensive legal framework that ensures the implementation of Kazakhstan's international obligations, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Goal 5 of the SDGs, and create institutional conditions for the advancement of women in public and political life in the country.

In 2020, the President of Kazakhstan took the initiative to introduce a mandatory 30% quota for women, youth (up to 29 years old) and people with disabilities in the electoral lists of political parties. This measure was officially presented as an important step towards strengthening gender equality and political diversity ([The Astana Times, 2020](#)). Subsequently, the necessary amendments were adopted to the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan" and the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Political Parties", and such a quota was adopted and became a reality.

To assess the real impact of this policy, it is necessary to analyze political participation before and after the introduction of quotas. According to the [UNDP Human Development Report 2025](#) on human development between 2016 and 2021, approximately 27% of deputies of the Mazhilis (lower house of parliament) were women. However, after the introduction of quotas, their number decreased to 18.4%, and out of 98 deputies, only 18 were women ([IPU Data on Kazakhstan](#)). This unexpected decrease raises serious concerns about compliance and the real effect of gender quotas in Kazakhstan.

At the regional level, the representation of women in leadership positions was also minimal. On March 28, 2020, Gulshara Abdykalikova was appointed akim of the Kyzylorda region, becoming the first and only woman to hold such a position in the country (Khabar 24).

According to the World Economic Forum Report on the Global Gender gap for 2024, Kazakhstan ranks 76th out of 146 countries, compared with 62nd in 2023. and 65th in 2022, indicating stagnation or even regression in the field of gender equality at the national level.

The Republic of Kazakhstan has established State guarantees of equal rights and freedoms for women and men. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 1995 (with subsequent amendments), all citizens are equal before the law and the court, and the State undertakes to ensure equal opportunities for the exercise of rights and freedoms. This provision forms the legal basis for women's participation in the political and public life of the country.

The Parliament of Kazakhstan. The country's representative government consists of two chambers — the Senate and the Mazhilis. Despite the State guarantees of equal rights, the real representation of women in Parliament remains limited. As of 2024, 29 women deputies are working in the Mazhilis, which is about 27% of the total number (Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). Although this figure is higher than in the 1990s, when the female presence did not exceed 10%, it is still far from a real gender balance. In the Senate, the situation is even more revealing: out of 50 members of the Chamber, only 10 are women, which is only 20% ([Equal Future Eurasia](#)). Thus, at the legislative level, women remain in the minority and do not have sufficient influence to fully defend their interests and promote the gender agenda.

Conclusion: there is a female political representation in the Parliament of Kazakhstan, but it is rather symbolic in nature, without providing a systemic influence on the lawmaking process.

The executive branch. At the executive level, the gender imbalance is even more pronounced. In Kazakhstan, only three women hold the posts of ministers, while key sectors of the economy, finance and infrastructure are traditionally headed by men (Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Civil Service Affairs, 2025). At the same time, there are no women at all among the akims of regions and cities of republican significance, which demonstrates the almost complete absence of female representation at the regional government level. Women are also extremely rarely appointed to the positions of first deputy ministers and heads of national agencies. Thus, the actual participation of women in the processes of strategic public administration remains extremely low.

Conclusion: despite formal guarantees of equal rights, women are practically excluded from key decision-makers in the executive branch of government.

The Diplomatic service. There is a similar trend in the field of foreign policy. As of 2025, Kazakhstan has only three women who hold the positions of Ambassadors Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). Given the strategic importance of the diplomatic service, such a low figure indicates that women are practically not involved in shaping the state's foreign

policy. At the same time, in the structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, most women are employed in auxiliary and administrative positions, rather than at the decision-making level.

Conclusion: the diplomatic service remains one of the most closed areas for women's professional development, which limits the ability of women to influence the international agenda of Kazakhstan.

The judicial system and local maslikhats. In the judicial system of Kazakhstan, women are represented mainly at the level of lower and middle-level judges, but in regional courts their number is extremely limited, especially in the positions of chairmen and deputy chairmen. A similar situation is typical for local representative bodies — maslikhats. Women make up only a small part of deputies, and they are especially rarely elected as secretaries or heads of deputy associations. This means that in areas that directly affect the fairness of justice and the development of regional politics, women's participation remains minimal (Equal Future Eurasia),

Conclusion: the weak representation of women in courts and maslikhats reflects a systemic barrier to their participation in key institutions of state power.

Public service. Official reports often emphasize that women make up 55% of all civil servants in Kazakhstan (Agency for Civil Service Affairs, 2025). However, this figure does not reflect the real picture. Most women are employed in niche categories such as administrative, support, human resources, and social services. In reality, there are very few women in leadership positions, and there are practically none among political employees. For example, of the eight departments directly accountable to the President, only one is headed by a woman. Only 12.5% of agency chairmen are women, while only 11% of vice-chairmen are women. The situation is somewhat better at the level of chiefs of staff, where women occupy 25% of positions, but this also reflects limited participation in decision-making (Agency statistics, 2025). Thus, the quantitative indicator of the presence of women in the civil service is rather illusory, since they are almost not involved in political leadership and strategic planning.

Conclusion: statistics on the female presence in the civil service distort the real picture, since most women work in niche areas that are not related to key decision-making.

General conclusion

Despite constitutional guarantees of equal rights and opportunities for men and women, a systemic gender imbalance persists in Kazakhstan. Women remain in the minority in Parliament, especially in the Senate. There is a minimal female presence in the executive branch: only three ministers and not a single akim. There are only three female ambassadors in diplomacy, and their participation in the judicial system and maslikhats is limited. At the same time, the official 55% of women in the civil service are mainly associated with administrative and support positions, and not with management. Thus, formal equality in the laws has not yet turned into a real participation of women in government.

This situation shows a deeper problem: gender equality in Kazakhstan remains unattainable precisely at the decision-making level. Formal presence through quotas and appointments does not resolve the issue if patriarchal norms and institutional barriers persist.

Quotas were considered as a step towards a fair system, but their effect was limited. A comparison before and after their introduction shows that the proportion of women in politics has not increased significantly, and sometimes even decreased. This casts doubt on the effectiveness of the existing model.

The main flaw is that the 30% quota applies only to elections to the Mazhilis and does not apply to the Senate, local bodies and executive authorities, where decision-making is actually concentrated.

Moreover, the very wording of the quota is vague: 30% is reserved simultaneously for women, youth and people with disabilities. As a result, parties are more likely to fill this gap at the expense of young people, and women are the losers.

The quota is valid only at the stage of drawing up lists, but it does not guarantee election. Women are often placed at the bottom of the list, which effectively robs them of their chances for a mandate. As a result, the quota becomes a formal procedure rather than an instrument of equality.

The experience of other countries shows that the effectiveness of quotas depends on their rigidity and transparency. Where the "zip system" is used (alternating men and women in the lists), the proportion of women is higher. In Kazakhstan, the absence of such mechanisms makes the system decorative.

Even with the formal improvement of the quota mechanism, cultural barriers remain. Politics is still perceived as a "men's sphere," and quotas alone cannot destroy this stereotype. Educational programs, mentoring, women's networks, and broader institutional support are required.

Public control is equally important: parties must be accountable for how they form lists and allocate mandates. Independent reports and media coverage can increase pressure on political forces.

Finally, Kazakhstan has international obligations, from the Beijing Declaration to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but the real situation is still at odds with them. Without reforms, quotas risk remaining only a declarative measure that demonstrates compliance with standards, but does not change the position of women in politics.

As a result, the main task is to create a system where the participation of women will not be an exception or a formal requirement, but a natural element of management. Only then will it be possible to talk about the transition from symbolic equality to real gender parity.