

Status of Women in Central Asian Countries Vis-À-Vis Western Countries- A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Asia is frequently referred to as the growth engine of today's global economy and has experienced rapid economic, social, and political development over the past few decades. These developments have also brought about significant changes in the status of women in Asian societies. In general, women's circumstances have improved as a result of economic growth and social and political change that supports superior living conditions and individual rights. The improved condition has come in terms of improving education level with growing percentage of women attending higher education and increased proportion of women taking up paid employment.

In spite of above developments, the women status in central asian region still lag behind in terms of status enjoyed by western countries women. Women in Central Asia still lacks good legal protection and fewer opportunities for education and employment compared to those in western countries. In some Central Asian countries, women also face more social and cultural barriers to achieving equality and autonomy whereas women in Western countries have more legal protections and opportunities for education and employment, and may be more likely to hold leadership position.

Moreover, women in Central Asia are more likely to experience gender-based violence, discrimination, and restrictions on their rights and freedoms in comparison to western world women's. They are also underrepresented in leadership and decision-making positions, and may face challenges in accessing education and employment.

This paper shall review the status of women in central Asian (CA) countries vis-à-vis western countries in detail and a comparative study shall be made to present the facts and identify the challenges and work to be done to address gender inequality and encourage the human rights and improve status of women in the central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, education, employment, gender gaps, health & nutrition, enrolment, violence, equality, literacy

Introduction

In recent decades, the CA countries of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan have experienced varied levels of economic and social development. The economies of Central Asia have undergone a social and economic transformation that was previously unheard of. Their experience has demonstrated that the gender imbalance shifts brought on by shifts in the economy are far from obvious. The improvement in women status and their wellbeing was drastically reduced during post-independence from Soviet Union.

This was caused in part by the economic changes that the region's nations went through, such as the expansion of the private sector and sizable migration flows, as well as in part by the strengthening of patriarchal traditions.

In Kazakhstan, for example, women have made significant strides in education and the workforce, and there are laws in place to safeguard women from domestic abuse and discrimination in workplace. However, women still face significant barriers in reaching leadership positions and there is a persistent gender pay gap.

In Uzbekistan, the government has made efforts to encourage gender equality and help to improve the condition of women, but there are still significant barriers to women's participation in the workforce and in politics. Additionally, there are reports of widespread domestic violence and discrimination against women.

In Turkmenistan, the government has made some efforts to encourage gender equality, but there are significant restrictions on women's rights and opportunities, and the country has a poor human rights record overall.

In Kyrgyzstan, the government has made efforts to promote gender equality, but the country still faces significant cultural and societal barriers to women's rights and opportunities, and there are high rates of domestic violence and bride kidnapping.

In Tajikistan, the government has made some efforts to promote gender equality, but the country still faces significant cultural and societal barriers to women's rights and opportunities, and there are high rates of domestic violence

If we see on larger front, while some progress has been made in promoting gender equality in Central Asia, significant challenges remain and women continue to face barriers in accessing education, employment, and political representation, as well as experiencing high rates of domestic violence and discrimination.

Normally, there are a number of challenges that can prove to be detrimental when it comes to elevate the status of women in a society and can further increase/decrease gender gaps. Central Asia, like many regions, continues to face many challenges in promoting gender equality and the development of women.

As it is evident from **figure-1**, in terms of gender gap ranking, Central Asian(CA) countries score very low in comparison to western countries.

Figure-1- Global Gender Gap Index rankings by region, 2022

Central Asia			
Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Moldova	1	16	0.788
Belarus	2	36	0.750
Georgia	3	55	0.731
Kazakhstan	4	65	0.719
Ukraine	5	81	0.707
Kyrgyz Republic	6	86	0.700
Armenia	7	89	0.698
Azerbaijan	8	101	0.687
Tajikistan	9	114	0.663
Turkey	10	124	0.639

Europe			
Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Iceland	1	1	0.908
Finland	2	2	0.860
Norway	3	3	0.845
Sweden	4	5	0.822
Ireland	5	9	0.804
Germany	6	10	0.801
Lithuania	7	11	0.799
Switzerland	8	13	0.795
Belgium	9	14	0.793
France	10	15	0.791
Spain	11	17	0.788

North America			
Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Canada	1	25	0.772
United States	2	27	0.769

Latin America and the Caribbean			
Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Nicaragua	1	7	0.810
Costa Rica	2	12	0.796
Barbados	3	30	0.765
Mexico	4	31	0.764
Argentina	5	33	0.756
Guyana	6	35	0.752
Peru	7	37	0.749
Jamaica	8	38	0.749
Panama	9	40	0.743
Ecuador	10	41	0.743

Source : Global Gender Gap Report 2022- World Economic Forum

Challenges faced by women in Central Asian Countries

Education:

For decades prior to independence nearly everyone in CA nations had access to education, and the quality was typically high at all levels; instructors had the necessary credentials, and physical buildings were generally kept in good shape, with only a tiny gap between urban and rural schools. The new CA governments were compelled to enact austerity measures and reduce spending, especially in the areas of social services and education, when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991. There were considerable pressures to adjust to shifting social and economic requirements as the economy transitioned to a market-based one, and a fall in teachers' actual earnings made the economic downturn worse.

The quality of education has drastically decreased as a result of the dramatic decline in educational systems. Governments introduced a number of reforms in the middle of the 1990s that were intended to decentralize the administration of education, diversify funding, create cutting-edge institutions and curricula, raise teacher salaries, and increase spending in the social sector.

Despite this, all CA education systems face a number of challenges, which vary slightly from country to country but are all serious concerns. There are a number of issues with the education system, including the fact that identical and universal access to education is not fully guaranteed; school attendance has decreased, especially for girls; there is a lack of qualified teachers and textbooks; inadequate funding from the government; a lack of school facilities; and an increase in corruption at all levels of the system.

In CA, the enrolment and completion rates of girls in primary and secondary education are generally high, but there are still disparities in access to education for girls, particularly in rural and remote areas. Additionally, while girls often perform as well as or better than boys in primary and secondary school, they are underrepresented in higher education and in certain fields of study.

For example, in Kazakhstan & Uzbekistan, the enrolment rate for girls in primary education is almost equal to that of boys, but the enrolment rate for girls in secondary education is slightly lower. Women continue to be underrepresented in fields like science and engineering in higher learning compared to Western countries, where women have made significant strides in these fields. Additionally, the percentage of women in higher education is lower in Central Asian countries than in many Western countries.

In terms of literacy rates, Central Asian countries have relatively high literacy rates for women, which is similar to many Western countries. However, women in Central Asia may still face barriers to accessing education and achieving literacy, particularly in rural areas.

Overall, while Central Asian countries have made progress in increasing access to education for girls, they still face challenges in terms of disparities in access to education, particularly in rural and remote areas, and underrepresentation of women in certain fields of study and in higher education, which is not as prevalent in Western countries

Employment

It is worth to note that the representation of women in the workforce varies widely between Western countries and also between Central Asian countries and a number of variables, including societal and cultural norms, the state of the economy, and governmental policies, can have an impact on the women representation in workforce.

In CA, while women have made strides in gaining access to education, they still face significant barriers to entering and advancing in the workforce. Women are underrepresented in leadership positions and in certain fields of work, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Additionally, there is a persistent gender pay gap, and women are often concentrated in lower-paying and lower-skilled jobs.

In contrast, in many Western countries, women have made significant strides in entering and advancing in the workforce. Women are increasingly represented in leadership positions and in traditionally male-dominated fields such as STEM. However, there are still disparities in representation and pay between men and women, particularly in leadership positions and high-paying fields.

In terms of employment, women in Central Asia face significant barriers to entering and advancing in the workforce, including underrepresentation in leadership positions and in certain fields of work, such as STEM(science, technology, engineering and math) fields, and a persistent gender pay gap. While in Western countries, women have made significant strides in entering and advancing in the workforce, but there are still disparities in representation and pay between men and women, particularly in leadership positions and high-paying fields

Overall, while both Central Asia and Western countries have made progress in promoting gender equality in the workforce, significant challenges remain, particularly in terms of representation of women in leadership positions and in certain fields of work, and addressing the gender pay gap.

Also, researchers and policymakers can learn a lot about women's social status from their participation in the labor market, especially in low-income and transitional countries, such as those affected by violent conflict. While gender dynamics have varied, central asia has not witnessed any significant change in participation of overall labor force in the last 25 years. The gender gap was narrowed in Kazakhstan during 1994 to 2013(**Figure-2**) as the female labor force participation rate increased significantly, while the male labor force participation rate didn't increase significantly. However, it was already the highest in the region and has continued to rise, still the rise in the female employment rate is especially remarkable.

In contrast, it appears that the gap has grown in other countries in the region. This occurred, albeit marginally, in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan because the male participation rate increased slightly without the female participation rate. According to the World Bank Gender Statistics Database, Kyrgyzstan's women's participation rate decreased from 63.28 percent in 1995 to 47.34% in 2019, whereas men's employment participation rate has also slightly decreased to 77.7% from 79.1% during the same time period. This led to a much wider gap in Kyrgyzstan.

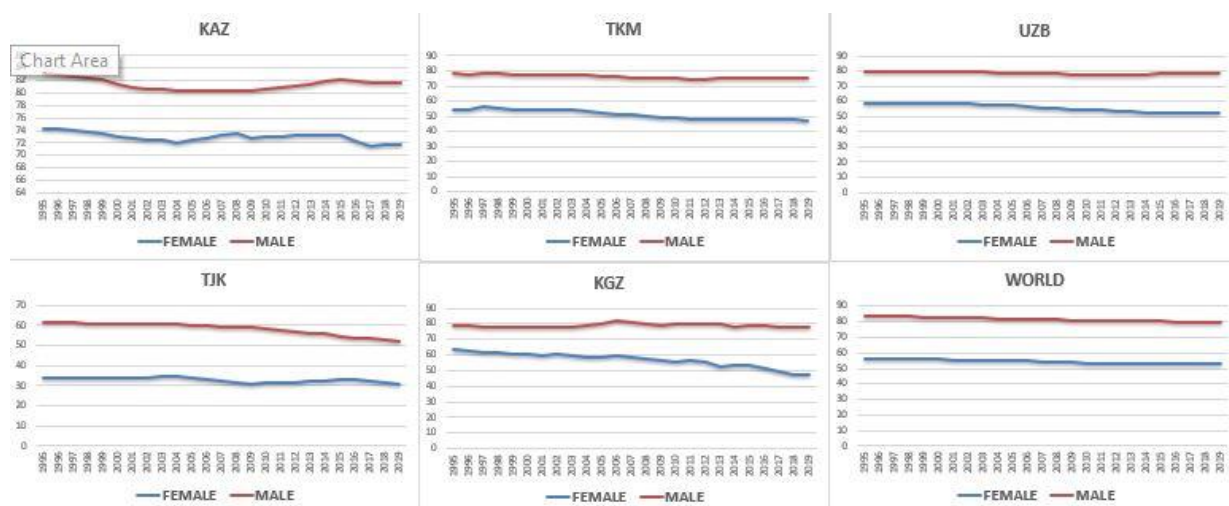
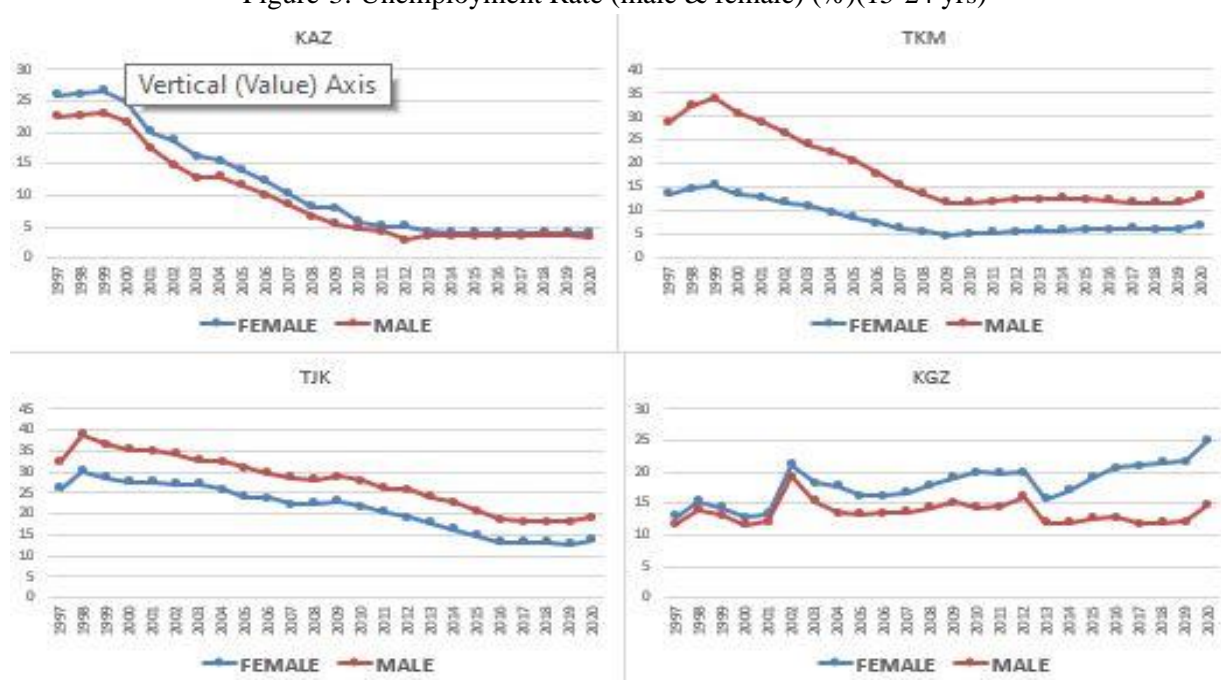


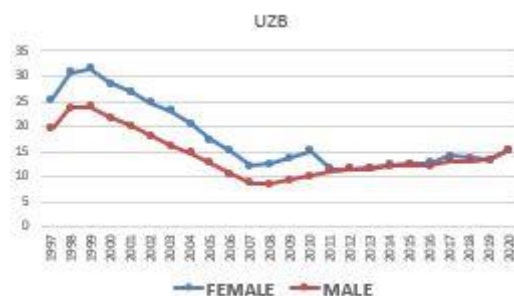
Figure-2: Labor force participation rate, Male & female (% of male & female population ages 15-64) (modeled ILO estimate)

Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/gender-statistics>

The unemployment rate tends to be lower in nations with higher labor force participation rates. In addition, there are significant gender disparities in the unemployment rates that favor men in these nations, in contrast to the relatively small disparities in labor force participation rates. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are two examples of this (**Figure-3**). On the other hand, in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the gender disparity in unemployment is less than 1% point, where female labor force participation rates are extremely low. Eventually, we can say that possibility of women and men to be out of work is very less in labor markets that are stronger, whereas in labor markets that are weaker, men and women are equally likely to be out of work.

Figure-3: Unemployment Rate (male & female) (%) (15-24 yrs)





Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/gender-statistics>

Power & Decision Making/ Political Involvement

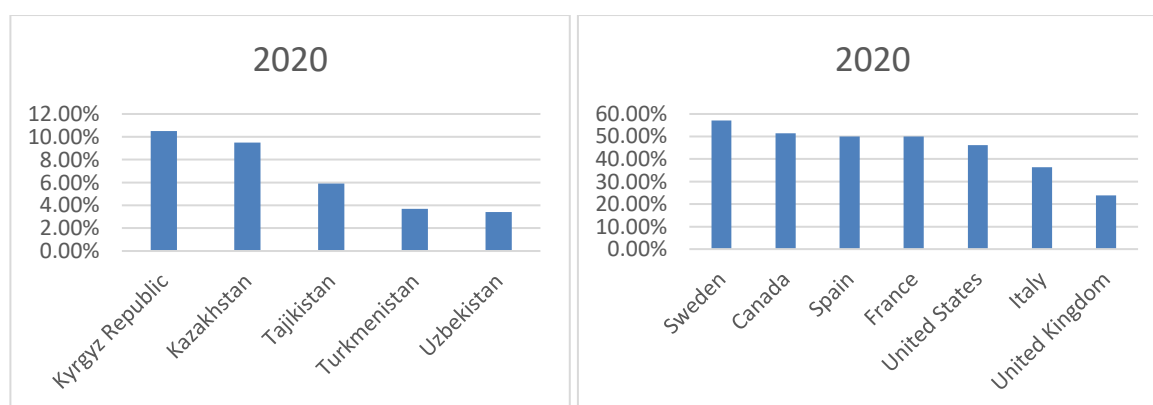
The women political representation in politics and government in Central Asia is not significant, and they face significant barriers when it comes to participation in political life. In contrast, in Western countries, women have made strides in increasing their representation in politics and government, but they are still underrepresented in leadership positions.

In Central Asia, women still have not achieved full and equal participation in political decision-making. Women still remain underrepresented in national politics, even though they have voting rights and hold some important position in CA countries. The women's representation has increased steadily in last few decades, but progress has been slow in comparison to western countries.

In central Asia, low representation of women in top position of political parties and low percentage of participation in election as candidate can be easily interpreted that the representation of women's is limited in parliaments. Candidates for office, as well as those in positions of leadership and governance, are supported by parties in significant ways. However, women's chances of winning elections are generally lower than men's, even when women are among the candidates (United Nations, 2010).

Despite significant progress, in Government cabinets across the globe (United Nations, 2010), the women remain underrepresented in policymaking/ managerial positions. However, some nations have been left behind by progress. In some nations, there are no female ministers. Even though women are still underrepresented at the subminister level, they typically hold more positions than at the minister level. As it can be seen that

Figure- 4- Proportion of women in ministerial level positions (%)



Source :<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/>

According to world bank data, 2020, the position of women in ministerial level positions is worst in Uzbekistan followed by Turkmenistan and Tajikistan and comparatively better in Kazakhstan & Kyrgyzstan (**Figure-4**). However, it can be noticed that the central Asian countries still lags behind with big margin with respect western countries in term women's representation in ministerial position.

In the private sector, in senior level decision-making positions, women still remain underrepresented (United Nations, 2018). In many nations, women's participation in tertiary education and the workforce has increased their opportunities for managerial positions. However, likelihoods of women's promotion to positions with greater accountability, position, and remuneration are hampered by the combination of employment in atypical work settings and household and family responsibilities. Discrimination and gender stereotypes may make it harder for women to get into high level positions. Consequently, women remain underrepresented in top level positions like boards of directors, managers etc.

Health & Nutrition and Maternal Care

It is not very common for girls to be systematically neglected when it comes to nutrition, vaccination, and medicative care in the majority of countries around the world. Nevertheless, as the following paragraphs demonstrate, girls appear to be disadvantaged in terms of nutrition and health care with a likely preference for boys, primarily in South and Central Asia. The disadvantage that girls face in with respect to healthiness and nourishment ought to be evaluated by considering all relevant factors, including infant & child mortality, nourishment, vaccination, and accessibility to medicative care, in addition to the country's or population groups' overall cultural context. Additionally, it is crucial to observe how differences in sexes, particularly those related to health and nourishment, change with respect to time.

In few central & south Asian countries, the girls are at disadvantage because of difference in sexes which lead to their deprived medicative health care facilities. Additionally, these are nations with a high female infant mortality rate. Curative health care is expensive, and in a family with limited resources, investing in sons may be more important for the family's long-term financial well-being.

Maternal Care

Prenatal care is lacking for many pregnant women in developing nations. Regular checkups as part of prenatal care allow for risk assessment as well as the detection and treatment of ailments which may affect their health and her unborn child. For instance, numerous pregnant lady suffer from deficiencies related to nutrition. It is not difficult to treat iron deficiency anaemia, vitamin A and iodine deficiencies, and other deficiencies that have a negative impact on the well-being of the mother and the unborn baby. Another example is the provision of intermittent preventative treatment to pregnant women in malaria-endemic nations. Additionally, HIV-positive women could be provided with assistance in stopping the virus from being passed on to their unborn children.

Infertility, severe anemia, uterine prolapse, and vaginal fistula are among the disabling sequelae that many women in developing nations are at risk of developing because they do not receive adequate care during childbirth. Pregnant women frequently are unable to receive the necessary emergency care because of a combination of inadequate transportation infrastructure and a lack of skilled personnel or health facilities.

The MMR in CA is one of the highest among the world as can be seen from **figure-5**. The major cause of the maternal death is due to abortion and unsafe practice followed during child birth (**Figure-6**).

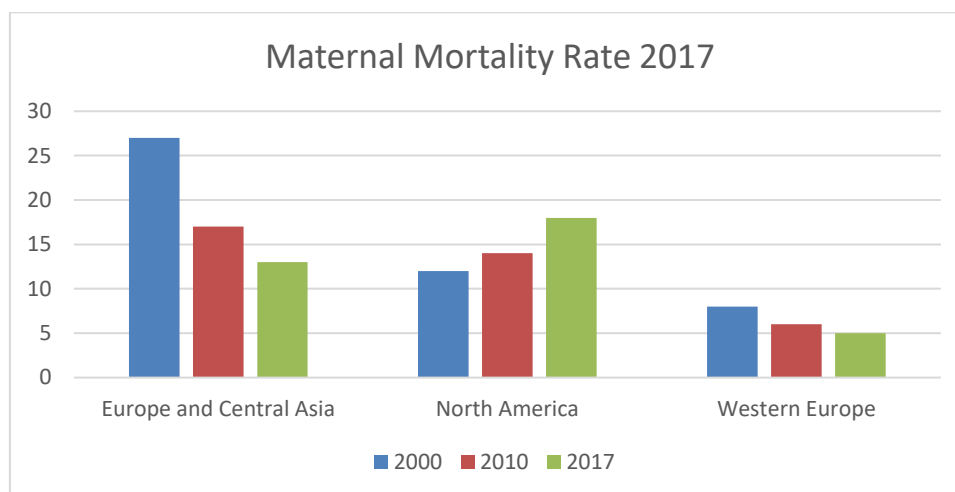


Figure-5

World Health Organization, UNICEF, United Nations Population Fund and The World Bank, Trends in Maternal Mortality: 2000 to 2017

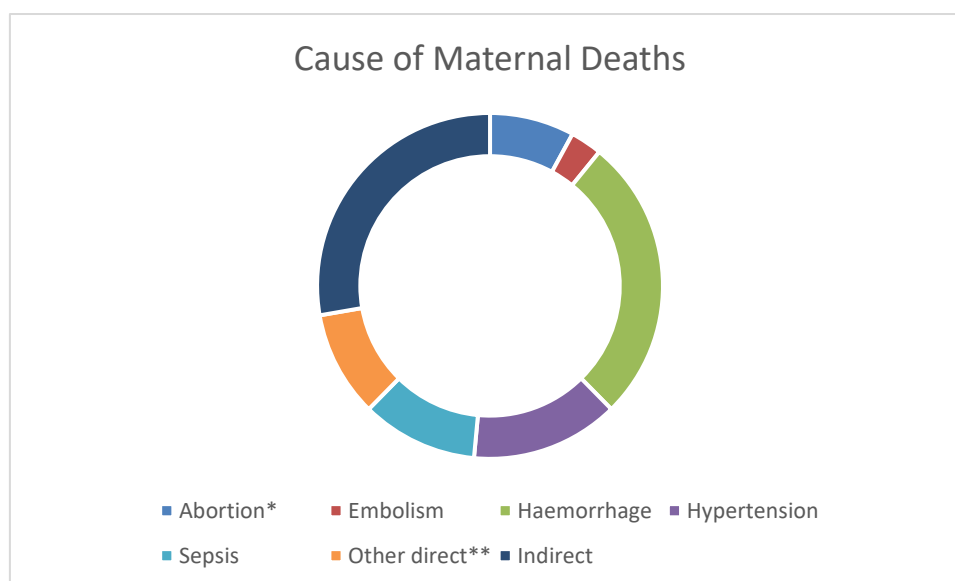


Figure-6

Source: SayLetal., ‘Global causes of maternal death: a WHO systematic analysis’ Lancet Global Health. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(14\)70227-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(14)70227-X), May 6, 2014

Violence Against Women

Before the COVID-19 pandemic made the risk factors for gender-based violence (GBV) worse, Central Asian countries had some of the highest GBV rates in the world. More than 20% of women said they had been the victim of the most common type of GBV normally identified as intimate partner violence

(IPV), at least once in their lives. This is higher than Eastern Europe (17%) and the South Caucasus (11%) and is twice as high as the average rate in OECD countries.

The physical or sexual abuse by their intimate partners is prominent amongst the majority of women. In many cases the violent act of physical or sexual abuse have been normally committed by their own intimate partners. In some CA nations, lifelong experiences of sexual abuse are informed to be less than physical abuse, while in others, they are reported to be higher.

Statistics and reports of sexual harassment, whether it occurs in the workplace or in other public areas, are less common. Similarly, although psychological and economic violence have an impact on the well-being of many women, they are not as frequently reported as physical and sexual violence. For instance, women who have partners who are physically and sexually abusive may exhibit controlling behaviours like limiting their contact with friends and family, insisting that they always know where they are, and restricting their access to medical care

In Central Asian countries, GBV & domestic violence is a pressing issue. There are five countries in the CA: Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are the other countries. According to UNDP (2018), Tajikistan, for instance, is a country where domestic violence being addresses knowing the effect of the same on women. and its detrimental effects on women and children. In general, both gender-based and domestic violence are commonplace in Central Asia and Tajikistan. "The problem is deeply rooted in the perception of women's property in society," according to "the kidnapping of brides" 16 in Kyrgyzstan (UN News-2022), "demands" for the bride's virginity in Uzbekistan (EurasiaNet 2018), and the suicide of women in Tajikistan (EurasiaNet 2018). According to the UN Women's Organization, it is reported that in Kyrgyzstan & Kazakhstan about 30% & 20% of women respectively are primarily abused by their husbands.

GBV & Domestic violence needs to be treated as a main reason behind women's bad condition in society because GBV is a global issue which transcends cultural, class & socioeconomic status. That is why, the issue of women in the Third World is very significant. Various study has been performed and it was found that in most of the cases the domestic violence is committed by the intimate partner. However, some instances has also been reported when the domestic violence committed by other family members is also considerable. For example, in Kazakhstan most of the domestic violence reported has been committed by intimate partner. However, if we consider case of Kyrgyzstan & Tajikistan, the violence committed against women and spousal violence are almost of equal share.

Conclusion

This review of the women status in central Asian countries highlights many challenges which still need to be overcome by women so that they enjoy the same status as men do.

In education sector, equal access to education for girls and boys, implementing policies and programs that remove barriers to education for girls, encouraging and supporting girls to pursue higher education and careers in male-dominated fields, providing safe and inclusive learning environments for girls, free from violence, discrimination, and harassment, providing financial support and scholarships to girls and encouraging girls to take leadership roles in their communities and schools are the few methods which can contribute towards better education for girls. Investing in women's education is crucial for economic growth, gender equality, and social progress, and has a positive impact on the health and well-being of communities and future generations

Women employment status could be raised effectively by ensuring that both men and women have access to the same opportunities for education and training, implementing flexible work arrangements, Encouraging mentorship and sponsorship and by promoting and supporting Women Entrepreneurship and Business ownership. It's important to note that reducing gender gaps is a continuous process and requires a concerted effort by employers, employees, and society as a whole

The issue of violence against women persists throughout the region of central asia. It's important to note that reducing gender-based violence requires a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach, involving the active participation of government, civil society, communities, and individuals. Strengthening laws and policies to prevent and punish gender-based violence, providing support and resources to survivors of gender-based violence, raising awareness and educating the public about the impact and consequences of gender-based violence, and promoting gender equality and respectful relationships, encouraging men and boys to become active allies in the prevention of gender-based violence, and engaging with communities and traditional leaders to promote a culture of non-violence are few ways to save women from gender based violence.

CA countries government has to play a significant role in improving the overall condition of the women in these regions. The following suggestion could be implemented by governments:

- Enacting and enforcing laws and policies to protect women's rights and prevent gender-based violence, including implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- Promoting gender equality in education and employment through affirmative action policies and programs that support women's advancement.
- Providing access to health services, including maternal and reproductive health, and addressing gender disparities in health outcomes
- Encouraging women's participation in political and public life, including through quotas and other measures to increase their representation in decision-making positions.
- Supporting civil society organizations working on women's issues, including those that provide services to survivors of gender-based violence.
- Working with communities and traditional leaders to raise awareness and challenge harmful cultural attitudes and practices that discriminate against women and girls.
- Collaborating with international organizations and governments to share best practices and resources, and to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the region.

By taking these steps, the government can help to create a more equal and just society for women in Central Asia, and contribute to overall economic and social development

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