



Social norms and the educational needs of women in Central Asia

Nuria R. Ismagilova

Summary

This paper examines the generally restrictive social norms for women in Central Asia and shows how they pose problems for women seeking participation in the public sphere of governance. According to a survey that looks at the violation of the rights of women, a majority of women do not study because they cannot leave home; there is no school or university nearby; there is not enough money or time for education; and because women do not find education interesting or compelling. Girls and women who start their higher education are often unable to complete their studies, often because of marriage and opposition from the husband and family. Further, the least educated women face the highest incidence of various forms of violence, with 96% of women with no high or primary education experiencing physical violence followed by psychological violence (99%), and even sexual violence (46%).

The paper argues that because women are less literate than men, they are marginalised in the public sphere. Although there are non-formal educational programmes available, household duties and a lack of awareness about such programmes prevent women's greater participation. The number of girls and women attending school and special development programmes is often less than half that of boys and men. In many regions, girls and women must travel with chaperones or risk violating social norms. Sexual harassment of girls and women travelling independently reinforces such gender norms. Distance and the fears associated with it are issues of greatest concern.

The paper points out that educational costs also include both education fees and costs resulting from the loss of the child's labour. Additional labour

provided by the child, especially a female child, is missed at home and contributes directly to low female student enrollment. Families will support the education of girls if the education is affordable, there are no bribes for education, and if books and stationary are subsidised, with lower admission fees, distribution of food (breakfast and lunch) in schools, and the proximity of educational institutions.

In the context of the new (market) economy, many more parents seek future security and independence for their children. Families may educate their daughters, but rarely is a daughter educated in preference over her brother. Many families' reluctance to educate their girls has to do with allowing girls to venture into public spaces where they may encounter boys who are not their relatives. Girls can gain a bad reputation as a result or education can encourage daughters to reject their parents' choice of a (possibly illiterate) relative for a husband. Many believe that girls who go to school are more likely to become pregnant before marriage. In some instances, especially in rural areas, children themselves prefer work and earning a livelihood to studying. Additionally, the resistance to educating girls and young women is due to patrilocal customs that place the daughter in the care of the husband's family after marriage. Thus, parents regard female education as investing in someone else's family.

The fear of girls and parents of abuse and sexual harassment by male teachers and students is another factor, especially since educational institutions generally do not have any or adequate responses to this problem. In the event of teachers or staff abusing students, communities are often unable to take action against offenders. Apart from the issue of sexual harassment, the role of wife and mother is so inflexible that women who fall outside this category are ostracised by individuals and discriminated against. The lack of female teachers in rural areas also keeps girls away.

In many Central Asian societies, women have little or no access to the institutions of power. The attempt to access such places of power may result in women being ostracised by society. Widespread lawlessness and corruption, fear of humiliation, intimidation, and insults by government officials and government structures significantly affect women's participation in government elections. In rural areas, traditional ideas about women's roles and the scepticism and disdain of local officials limit women's involvement in political activities and governance.

Although educational programmes are important, cultural traditions should also be taken into account when looking at the participation rates of women in these programmes. Ways must be found to overcome cultural obstacles such as securing the approval of community (usually male) leaders (for non-formal courses), creating an educational environment sensitive to cultural norms, and employing female staff as teachers and trainers.



While all Central Asian states formally declare the equality of men and women, social and personal relationships pose obstacles to the realisation of educational opportunities for women. Individual and personal actions are crucial in the cause of bettering women's rights as ways can be found to subvert outdated obstacles to women's aspirations for education even though such actions are often unnoticed or unpublicised.

Conclusion

According to the author, illiteracy reduction programmes raise awareness and provide psychological support to both men and women, together and separately, to navigate the difficult path of change. As has often been pointed out: *"Women and men should sit at a round table to discuss their rights. Unless men are included, these things will not be understood..."*

The author believes that education is a key factor in enhancing women's ability to support themselves during economic hardships as well as in allowing them to contribute positively to the community. She believes that women should participate actively in the assessment, planning, and implementation of educational programmes that must be culturally appropriate and in accordance with women's needs. Further, educational programmes for women must take into account women's future needs and contribute to the process of social change. Schooling should be adapted to girls' lives to allow them equal access to educational opportunities. Pregnancy and marriage should not be regarded as insurmountable obstacles to education.

Her specific recommendations are as follow.

- Specially designed courses responsive to women's needs should be available to those women who have been unable to finish their education. Literacy should be a high priority.
- In designing training programmes for women, existing skills as well as employment opportunities should be studied.
- Ongoing evaluation of educational programmes should be carried out in close co-operation with women.
- Counselling including career guidance should be made available to all women in both rural and urban areas. Women should be actively informed of the availability of such resources through active outreach programmes.
- Non-formal education programmes are particularly important for women where access to formal education is limited or non-existent. Programmes should be aimed at promoting women's economic independence and teaching skills that are related to small business and marketing.
- Non-formal education programmes should provide a document (note, paper, or certificate) verifying the course taken and perhaps the number of hours attended.
- Governments and NGOs should set up a special fund to identify the educational opportunities available to women.

