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GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN KAZAKHSTAN: COMPARING INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT. This research assesses how the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) conceptualise and measure gender equality and women's access to economic opportunities through the case of Kazakhstan. Methodology. The study conducts a comparative institutional and indicator analysis of the Women, Business and the Law 2026 report, the Social Institutions and Gender Index 2023, UNDP's Gender Inequality Index and Gender Development Index, ILO labour statistics, and the official labour market statistics of Kazakhstan. The comparison is organised into four analytical levels, including formal rights and implementation mechanisms; discrimination based on social institutions; gender-based human development outcomes; and realised labour market outcomes. Originality/value. Rather than treating international gender indices as equivalent measures, this research treats each index as an instrument designed to address a particular aspect of gender equality. This allows researchers to discern gaps between formal legal conditions, institutional restrictions, human development achievements, and actual economic outcomes. Findings. Kazakhstan's WBL 2026 Legal Frameworks Index was reported at 73.0 out of 100, while its Supportive Frameworks Index was reported at 57.43; an aggregate Enforcement Perceptions score is unavailable. Kazakhstan scored 20.9 out of 100 in SIGI 2023, falling into the low-discrimination category, with restricted physical integrity remaining its weakest dimension. UNDP reported a 2023 GII of 0.182 and a rank of 50 out of 172 economies; the GDI was reported at 1.004, indicating near parity in overall human development. However, women's estimated gross national income per capita and labour force participation continue to be lower than those of men. Additionally, national statistics continue to document a significant difference in wages between men and women. The research indicates that legal equality, institutional conditions, human development parity, and actual economic outcomes are related, yet analytically separate. Therefore, a layered assessment of equality and economic opportunity in Kazakhstan, incorporating legal, institutional and labour market evidence, is more informative than relying solely on individual international rankings.

KEYWORDS: gender equality; women's economic opportunities; gender indices; Kazakhstan; WBL; SIGI; labour market.

Қазақстандағы гендерлік теңдік және әйелдердің экономикалық мүмкіндіктері: халықаралық тәсілдерді салыстыру

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АҢДАТПА. Бұл зерттеу Дүниежүзілік банктің, Экономикалық ынтымақтастық және даму ұйымының (ЭЫДҰ), Біріккен Ұлттар Ұйымының Даму бағдарламасының (БҰҰДБ) және Халықаралық еңбек ұйымының (ХЕҰ) Қазақстан жағдайында гендерлік теңдік пен әйелдердің экономикалық мүмкіндіктерге қол жеткізуін қалай тұжырымдайтынын және өлшейтінін бағалайды. Әдістеме. Зерттеуде «Әйелдер, бизнес және құқық 2026» есебінің, Әлеуметтік институттар және гендерлік индекс 2023, БҰҰДБ Гендерлік теңсіздік индексі мен Гендерлік даму индексінің, ХЕҰ еңбек статистикасының және Қазақстанның ресми еңбек нарығы статистикасының салыстырмалы институционалдық және индикаторлық талдауы жүргізіледі. Салыстыру төрт аналитикалық деңгейге бөлінген, оның ішінде ресми құқықтар мен іске асыру тетіктері; әлеуметтік институттарға негізделген кемсітушілік; гендерлік негіздегі адам дамуының нәтижелері; және еңбек нарығындағы нақты нәтижелер. Түпнұсқалық/құндылық. Халықаралық гендерлік индекстерді баламалы өлшемдер ретінде қарастырудың орнына, бұл зерттеу әрбір индексті гендерлік теңдіктің белгілі бір аспектісін бағалауға арналған құрал ретінде қарастырады. Бұл зерттеушілерге ресми құқықтық шарттар, институционалдық шектеулер, адам дамуының жетістіктері және нақты экономикалық нәтижелер арасындағы алшақтықтарды анықтауға мүмкіндік береді. Зерттеу нәтижелері. Қазақстанның WBL 2026 құқықтық негіздері индексі 100-ден 73,0 балл алды, ал қолдаушы негіздер индексі 57,43 балл алды; Enforcement Perceptions бойынша жалпы балл қолжетімді емес. Қазақстан SIGI 2023-те 100-ден 20,9 балл алды, бұл кемсітушіліктің төмен санатына жатады, ал физикалық тұтастықтың шектеулілігі оның ең әлсіз өлшемі болып қала береді. БҰҰДБ 2023 жылғы GII көрсеткіші 0,182 болғанын және Қазақстанның 172 экономиканың ішінде 50-орын алғанын хабарлады; GDI 1,004 болды, бұл жалпы адам дамуындағы теңдікке жақын екенін көрсетеді. Дегенмен, әйелдердің жан басына шаққандағы жалпы ұлттық табысы мен еңбек күшіне қатысуы ерлерге қарағанда төмен болып қала береді. Сонымен қатар, ұлттық статистика ерлер мен әйелдер арасындағы жалақы айырмашылығының сақталып отырғанын көрсетеді. Зерттеу құқықтық теңдік, институционалдық жағдайлар, адам дамуындағы теңдік және нақты экономикалық нәтижелер өзара байланысты, бірақ аналитикалық тұрғыдан бөлек екенін көрсетеді. Сондықтан Қазақстандағы теңдік пен экономикалық мүмкіндіктерді құқықтық, институционалдық және еңбек нарығы деректерін ескере отырып көп деңгейлі бағалау тек жеке халықаралық рейтингтерге сүйенуден гөрі ақпараттырақ болып табылады.

ТҮЙІН СӨЗДЕР: гендерлік теңдік; әйелдердің экономикалық мүмкіндіктері; гендерлік индекстер; Қазақстан; WBL; SIGI; еңбек нарығы.

Гендерное равенство и экономические возможности женщин в Казахстане: сравнение международных подходов

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АННОТАЦИЯ. В данном исследовании оценивается, как Всемирный банк, Организация экономического сотрудничества и развития (ОЭСР), Программа развития ООН (ПРООН) и Международная организация труда (МОТ) концептуализируют и измеряют гендерное равенство и доступ женщин к экономическим возможностям на примере Казахстана. Методология. В исследовании проводится сравнительный институциональный и индикаторный анализ доклада «Женщины, бизнес и право 2026», Индекса социальных институтов и гендерного равенства 2023, Индекса гендерного неравенства и Индекса гендерного развития ПРООН, статистики труда МОТ и официальной статистики рынка труда Казахстана. Сравнение организовано по четырем аналитическим уровням, включая формальные права и механизмы их осуществления; дискриминацию на основе социальных институтов; гендерные результаты развития человеческого потенциала;

и фактические результаты на рынке труда. Оригинальность/ценность. Вместо того чтобы рассматривать международные гендерные индексы как эквивалентные показатели, в данном исследовании каждый индекс рассматривается как инструмент, предназначенный для оценки конкретного аспекта гендерного равенства. Это позволяет выявлять разрывы между формальными правовыми условиями, институциональными ограничениями, достижениями в области развития человеческого потенциала и фактическими экономическими результатами. Результаты. Индекс правовых рамок WBL 2026 для Казахстана составил 73,0 из 100, а индекс поддерживающих рамок — 57,43; совокупный показатель восприятия правоприменения недоступен. Казахстан набрал 20,9 из 100 баллов в индексе SIGI 2023, попав в категорию низкого уровня дискриминации, при этом ограничение физической неприкосновенности остается его самым слабым измерением. ПРООН сообщила о показателе GII 2023 года в 0,182 и 50-м месте из 172 стран; показатель GDI составил 1,004, что указывает на близость к равенству в общем развитии человеческого потенциала. Однако оценочный валовой национальный доход на душу населения и участие женщин в рабочей силе по-прежнему ниже, чем у мужчин. Кроме того, национальная статистика продолжает фиксировать значительную разницу в заработной плате между мужчинами и женщинами. Исследование показывает, что правовое равенство, институциональные условия, равенство в развитии человеческого потенциала и фактические экономические результаты взаимосвязаны, но аналитически различны. Таким образом, многоуровневая оценка равенства и экономических возможностей в Казахстане, включающая правовые, институциональные и рыночные данные, является более информативной, чем использование отдельных международных рейтингов.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: гендерное равенство; экономические возможности женщин; гендерные индексы; Казахстан; WBL; SIGI; рынок труда.

INTRODUCTION. In terms of gender equality, there are many different aspects involved in assessing this multidimensional concept. Therefore, when measuring gender equality, there will always be difficult choices about what is measured, what quantitative measures are used for each aspect, and ultimately how the various aspects of gender equality should be considered collectively. Alfama, Cruells and de la Fuente point out that social indicators are never completely neutral representations of reality. Rather, they represent reality through the lens of the researcher's perspective on the social issue under examination [1]. The researchers identify two types of social indicators: outcome indicators (those that reflect observable outcomes such as status and achievement) and institutional indicators (which focus upon the policy framework, laws, customs and practices that create or maintain inequality [1]).

The multidimensional nature of gender equality is also illustrated by Dilli et al., who constructed a Historical Gender Equality Index to examine historical developments over time, rather than only to rank countries at a single point in time [2]. Dilli et al. identified indicators for four areas of gender equality: health, autonomy in the home environment, political influence and economic well-being [2]. The researchers highlight that improvements in an overall index score do not necessarily mean that all of the individual sub-dimensions included in that index have improved. Thus, it is possible for a country to improve substantially in one area and yet still experience gender inequality in other areas.

The study of gender inequality indicators is particularly significant in this context. As noted previously, Barnat, MacFeely, and Peltola have identified significant differences among three commonly used international gender indicators (the Global Gender Gap Index, the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, and the OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index) that measure different facets of gender inequality [3]. These researchers found that gender inequality comprised multiple dimensions, including economic and labour force participation, education and social conditions, political rights, and health. Furthermore, the authors indicated that differences among the various international indices were due to the methodology employed by each index, the relative weights assigned to each variable, and, most importantly, the specific variables included in each index [3].

Barnat et al. indicate further that although differences exist between international indices, these differences do not necessarily imply contradictions in the results. Rather, these differences suggest that variations in international assessments may arise from differences in the nature of the objects being assessed.

Vaughan and Longlands provide additional insight into the consequences of choosing an appropriate indicator to assess gender inequality. According to Vaughan and Longlands, the increasing reliance on quantitative indicators for assessing gender inequality in international education policy influences accountability, establishes policy priorities, and defines the gender inequalities that institutions address through policy [4]. Although Vaughan and Longlands conducted their research using girls' education, the issue of selecting appropriate indicators for a complex social issue is much broader. The process of translating a complex social phenomenon into a few measurable comparisons creates visibility for certain dimensions of a social phenomenon while excluding other dimensions from the measurement framework. Thus, an indicator that provides a consistent technical basis for comparative purposes does not inherently provide a comprehensive view of substantive gender equity issues [4].

Cascella, Williams, and Pampaka address the same topic from the point of view of indicator construction and geographic scale [5]. Cascella, Williams and Pampaka's review and extension of a regional gender gap index illustrate that while indicators of gender equality may be useful in one particular social and economic environment, they are not automatically applicable in other contexts. In addition to illustrating how national averages can obscure significant differences at the sub-national level, Cascella, Williams and Pampaka argue that considerable caution should be applied when using nationally aggregated gender indicators directly as a basis for making policy decisions [5].

This consideration is especially pertinent to Kazakhstan given that the economy, employment opportunities, and access to these opportunities vary significantly across its various regions and thus could potentially be masked by a single national value.

The most recent research on gender inequality provides additional evidence that the choice of gender equality measure can impact findings. Singh and Chaudhry analyse information on 159 countries utilizing multiple alternative measures of gender equality [6]. Singh and Chaudhry found that the strength of the relationship between democracy and gender equality varies depending upon which gender measure is used. Furthermore, although the Singh and Chaudhry study did find that all three gender equality measures were positively correlated with each other, none of the correlations were equal to 1.0, indicating that the three gender equality measures are not perfectly equivalent.

In terms of methodology, this study is notable since even if the question addressed in the research does not change, varying the operational definition of gender equality can result in varying estimates regarding both the size and significance of relationships between variables. Therefore, selecting an appropriate gender indicator based on international criteria is not simply an academic or technical decision.

There is an additional layer of complexity to this issue, particularly when the focus moves to women's economic opportunities. Legal rights, discriminatory norms, education, productive resources, labour force participation, employment quality, earnings, occupational segregation, and access to leadership all relate to women's status within the economy. However, these variables can be placed at different levels along the spectrum from formal opportunity (the law) to realised economic outcome (the actual experience). Hyland, Djankov and Goldberg demonstrated one aspect of this relationship using the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law dataset in a cross-country analysis [7]. They found that more gender-equal laws were positively correlated with higher rates of female labour force participation and lower wage differences between women and men [7]. Thus, their research provides evidence of the importance of legal institutions in promoting women's economic activity. Additionally, it illustrates why legal equality and labour market equality cannot be considered equivalent. The former captures a set of conditions under which economic participation occurs, while the latter includes possible outcomes based upon other institutional, social, or economic factors.

SIGI addresses a further dimension of this process. Branisa et al. defined the social institutions covered by SIGI as "persistent societal practices and legal norms that shape gender roles" [8]. Unlike many other indices focused on observed gender outcomes, SIGI was designed to measure the institutional dimensions of discrimination against women and to capture the institutional causes of disadvantage. Branisa et al. also demonstrated that institutionalized forms of social discrimination against women remain associated with certain gendered development outcomes even after controlling for socioeconomic and cultural differences [9]. Therefore, there is justification for including informal institutions and social practices alongside statutory rights in assessments of women's economic opportunities. The difference between the institutional focus of SIGI and outcome-based measures is explicitly described in the initial methodology paper [8].

Economic opportunity may seem like an obvious example of how gender equality can be measured through data. However, research by Cortés and Pan shows that gender equality in the labour market cannot be assessed through a single measure [10]. Their study shows that despite decades of convergence in the economic roles of men and women, significant gender gaps remain in labour-force participation, earnings and representation in top jobs. Cortés and Pan also identify the unequal labour-market consequences of parenthood as an important factor behind many of the remaining gender-based disparities [10].

Additionally, Cortés and Pan's study is complemented by a much larger review conducted by Belingheri et al., who reviewed 15,465 studies in business and economics [11]. Their analysis identified education, compensation, occupational roles, decision-making and career development among the most studied topics related to gender equality. Entrepreneurship and leadership have also become increasingly important areas of research [11]. As a result of these studies, it can be concluded that being employed does not necessarily mean that individuals experience full equality at work.

Therefore, while there is considerable information on various aspects of gender equality in the current literature, there is far less discussion of the implications of using multiple measurement systems to assess gender equality at the country level. Thus, rather than asking which international indicator will provide the "right" view of the situation, we should instead ask what each system measures; what types of dimensions are excluded from each system's measurement; and what type of new insights can be gained by examining legally based measures, institutionally based measures and measures of outcomes collectively.

An interesting case with regard to this issue is Kazakhstan. While international assessments of Kazakhstan's gender equality using different indices present a mixed picture, national-level evidence presents a similarly complex picture. For instance, Kazakhstan had a Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) score of 20.9 out of 100 in 2023. Higher scores represent greater levels of discrimination against women due to social institutions. Kazakhstan had the lowest level of social institution-related discrimination in Central Asia and was relatively close to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 15.3 [12]. However, Kazakhstan still faces challenges with regard to female participation in government and senior positions [12]. As such, the relatively favourable results reported in some institutional domains do not necessarily imply the complete elimination of all forms of gender inequality.

A parallel comparison can be made using the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) gender-related metrics. The statistical tables provided as supplementary materials to the 2025 Human Development Report list Kazakhstan's 2023 Gender Inequality Index at 0.182 [13], and Kazakhstan's Gender Development Index at 1.004 [29, 30]. Therefore, even though the overall human development achievements of women and men are very close as indicated by the GDI, this does not necessarily mean equal participation in terms of income, employment and/or economic decision-making. This is significant since the GDI and GII have been developed to analyse different types of gender inequality, and they therefore address different aspects of gender inequality.

National labour statistics provide further clarity regarding how gender development achievements relate to individual economic outcomes. Average monthly salaries for employees in Kazakhstan totalled KZT468,914 for men and KZT344,496 for women in 2024 [14].

Research conducted specifically within Kazakhstan supports this view. Yemelina et al. found that during the period 2011–2019 the gender pay gap for employees in Kazakhstan averaged approximately 30 percent and that growing industrial segregation accounted for much of the identified gender-based wage gap. They also noted statistically significant geographic differences, with larger wage gaps in more industrialized and developed regions of Kazakhstan, and found evidence of vertical segregation in larger cities, particularly Astana and Almaty [15]. Similarly, Nyussupova et al. concluded that increased numbers of employed women did not eliminate gender-based disparities in economic outcomes and pointed to occupational and educational segregation, barriers to leadership, as well as the disproportionate distribution of unpaid family work as factors contributing to the persistence of such disparities [16].

Other studies point to mechanisms that are less visible in conventional labour statistics. Using World Values Survey data, Kemelbayeva and Aituar find that women in Kazakhstan face substantial opportunity costs in labour-market participation and are more susceptible than men to traditional gender-role attitudes; they also conclude that economic and social factors play a particularly important role in labour-supply decisions [17]. Kireyeva, Nurbatsin and Gamidullaeva identify differences between urban and rural settings and find that institutional trust is related to women's economic participation and career opportunities [18]. These findings further support an analytical approach that does not reduce women's economic

opportunities to a single legal, institutional or labour-market indicator.

Against this background, the objective of this study is to compare the conceptual and measurement approaches of the World Bank, the OECD, the UNDP and the ILO and to determine what their indicators jointly reveal about women's economic opportunities in Kazakhstan. To achieve this objective, the study addresses four tasks: to identify the principal dimension of gender equality captured by each organization; to map the latest available indicators for Kazakhstan onto a common analytical framework without merging them into a new composite score; to examine where the assessments converge and where they diverge; and to interpret the identified differences in terms of women's realised economic opportunities and relevant policy priorities.

The methodological approach follows from the nature of the problem itself. The study distinguishes four analytical layers: formal rights and implementation mechanisms; discriminatory social institutions; gendered human-development achievements; and realised labour-market outcomes. The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law framework is used primarily to examine the legal and supportive institutional environment; the OECD's SIGI captures discriminatory formal and informal social institutions; the UNDP indices reflect gendered human-development achievements and losses; and ILO and national labour statistics provide evidence on realised labour-market outcomes. This framework is not intended to create another aggregate gender index. Its purpose is to preserve the conceptual differences between the measures and to examine the distance between formal equality, institutional conditions and actual economic outcomes. In this form, the comparative approach is particularly suitable for the Kazakhstan case and provides the basis for the empirical analysis that follows.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. A comparative institutional and indicator-based approach is used. The comparative institutional approach in this study focuses on comparing different institutional and measurement frameworks rather than institutions of the same type across countries. By using the four international measurement systems mentioned above, the study is able to compare different aspects of the institutional environment. The international measurement systems include: the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL); the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index (GII) and Gender Development Index (GDI); and the International Labour Organization (ILO) sex-disaggregated labour-market indicators. The datasets and methodologies used in this study were those available at the time of writing, as of August 15, 2026 [19–27].

World Bank Component — The World Bank is analysed using the 2026 Women, Business and the Law (WBL) database and methodology. WBL 2026 includes 10 domains that affect women's economic opportunities during their working lives in 190 economies. These domains include safety, mobility, work, pay, marriage, parenthood, childcare, entrepreneurship, assets and pension [19, 20]. The WBL is currently structured into three analytically distinct components: Legal Frameworks assesses binding legal frameworks; Supportive Frameworks assesses policies and institutions that implement legally defined rights; and Enforcement Perceptions assesses perceptions of the enforcement of women's legal rights in practice [20]. Therefore, WBL does not directly measure women's employment or earnings. Instead, it analyses the legal and institutional environment in which economic decisions and labour-market outcomes take place.

OECD Component — The OECD was analysed using the fifth edition of SIGI along with its associated methodology. SIGI is a tool developed by the OECD to measure the institutional mechanisms that lead to gender inequality through formal and informal laws, social norms and practices [21, 22]. SIGI provides scores ranging from zero to 100. Zero indicates no discrimination, whereas 100 represents total discrimination. SIGI has four main categories, including discrimination in the family, restricted physical integrity, restricted access to productive and financial resources and restricted civil liberties. The index contains 16 indicators and 25 variables [21]. As such, SIGI is an institutionally focused measure. Unlike an outcome-based measure, SIGI does not focus upon whether women and men eventually attain equivalent labour-market outcomes. Rather, SIGI measures whether discriminatory institutions restrict women's rights, choices and opportunities.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Component — The UNDP component of the study utilizes the methodology and statistical data found in the Human Development Report 2025. The GII assesses gender-related disadvantages in terms of reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market. GII scores range from 0 to 1. Lower values represent less gender inequality [23]. While the index includes labour-force participation, it is only part of a larger set of indicators that also includes maternal mortality rates, adolescent birth rates, parliamentary representation and educational attainment. As such, GII cannot be considered an independent indicator of women's economic opportunities.

GDI — GDI measures a fundamentally different issue than GII. GDI compares female and male achievements in three fundamental areas of human development: health, education and command over economic resources. Command over economic resources is measured through estimates of earned income. A GDI is created by dividing the female HDI by the male HDI. A GDI value of 1 indicates parity in aggregate human-development achievement between males and females [23]. However, a value close to parity does not automatically indicate equal wages, employment conditions or access to economic decision-making processes.

The final analytical layer is built on ILO statistics (ILOSTAT) methodology. Unlike WBL, SIGI and UNDP composite indices, ILOSTAT consists of separate sex-disaggregated labour-market indicators instead of a single score representing gender equality. Indicators can be divided by sex and can encompass employment, unemployment, labour-force participation, economic activity, occupation, status in employment, informality, earnings and working hours [24, 25]. For instance, a specific indicator for labour-force participation represents the proportion of the working-age population that is actually engaged in the labour force. The labour force consists of people who are either employed or unemployed [24]. Thus, the structure of ILO statistics and its focus on outcomes provide a basis for examining whether favourable institutional and/or human development characteristics lead to greater representation of women in the economy.

To evaluate the Kazakhstan case, international comparisons are made using official national statistics from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Labour market statistics in Kazakhstan are derived from national household employment surveys. These surveys are conducted according to methods and standards developed by the International Labour Organization. Additionally, national statistics on salaries and their distribution provide information that cannot be captured by a single

composite gender indicator [27]. Official secondary statistical data were used throughout this research.

The comparative process involves four steps. Step one identifies the conceptual object of each international comparison methodology. Examples of such objects include legal opportunity, institutionally discriminatory practices, achieved human development status and realised outcomes in labour markets. Step two describes the dimensions, indicators, scale directions and aggregation logics in each system. Step three extracts recent data relevant to Kazakhstan from each dataset. All data are presented without being converted to a common quantitative metric. Finally, step four compares the pattern with published research findings regarding the gender wage gap, labour market structure, social attitudes towards work and women's labour market participation in Kazakhstan [15–18].

An important methodological decision was to avoid normalizing, averaging or aggregating any of the headline scores generated by WBL, SIGI, GII and GDI. Each of these systems employs different conceptual frameworks, quantitative metrics and aggregation processes. Therefore, differences in quantitative values across headline scores have no meaningful interpretation unless it can be demonstrated that the theoretical foundations upon which they were derived are equivalent. Barnat et al. provided empirical evidence demonstrating that international gender indices utilize different methodologies, weightings and input variables, thereby generating non-equivalent country-specific evaluations [3]. Further empirical support is found in Singh and Chaudhry, who demonstrate how results may differ depending on whether one gender equality evaluation instrument is utilized rather than another [6]. Consequently, treating these various types of instruments as functionally equivalent would create an artificial equivalency where none exists between different dimensions of gender inequality.

The study is exploratory as well as comparative rather than causal. The study does not presume that any specific WBL or SIGI component will result in the differences in the levels of women's income and labour force participation seen in Kazakhstan. The analytical process explores whether the four measurement layers provide a consistent picture of women's economic opportunities and where the most favourable conditions found in one layer exist alongside less favourable conditions found in another. An exploratory approach is suitable for this research objective due to the fact that the objective of the study is to identify and describe how different measurements affect the way in which Kazakhstan's gender equality is interpreted.

Table 1 – Analytical differences between international measurement systems

Organization and instrument	Primary object measured	Main analytical level	Score interpretation	Economic content
World Bank – WBL 2026	Laws, policies, implementation mechanisms and enforcement perceptions affecting women's economic opportunities	Rights and implementation environment	Higher scores indicate stronger legal equality, supportive frameworks or enforcement; 0–100	Direct and explicit
OECD – SIGI 2023	Discrimination embedded in formal and informal laws, social norms and practices	Social institutions	Lower = less discrimination; 0–100	Productive and Þnancial resources, family institutions, civil liberties and related constraints
UNDP – GII	Gender-based disadvantage and loss in potential human development	Composite human-development disadvantage	Lower = less inequality; 0–1	Labour-force participation is one component
UNDP – GDI	Female-to-male achievement in human development	Human-development parity	1 = gender parity	Estimated earned income is one component
ILO – ILOSTAT	Labour-market participation, employment conditions and outcomes	Realised labour-market outcomes	Indicator-speciÞc; no single composite scale	Direct: employment, unemployment, earnings, occupation, informality, working time and related indicators

Source: compiled from the official methodologies and datasets of the World Bank, OECD, UNDP and ILO [19–25].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION. As indicated by global gender indicator assessments, although the Kazakhstani economy appears to have performed relatively well based on certain indicators, there continue to be considerable economically significant gender disparities. Therefore, the difference in performance is likely due to the differing nature of the indicators used to assess gender disparities, rather than inconsistencies between the different measures.

The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL) 2026 provides a way to evaluate the legal and policy environment relative to women's participation in the workforce. The Legal Frameworks Index for Kazakhstan in the 2026 edition of WBL is 73.00 out of 100, and the Supportive Frameworks Index for Kazakhstan is 57.43 out of 100 [19, 20]. Since no Enforcement Perceptions score is available for Kazakhstan under the WBL methodology, the lack of such a score should not be considered an indication of weak enforcement nor as a value of 0; rather, it indicates that the required response threshold to calculate the Enforcement Perceptions score was not achieved [19].

Thus, as noted previously, the difference between these scores is analytically meaningful. The Legal Frameworks Index assesses how countries' formal legal systems support women's economic opportunities through binding laws and regulations. By contrast, the Supportive Frameworks Index evaluates the policies, institutions, services and mechanisms that create the context within which such laws become operational [20]. Hence, Kazakhstan receives a higher rating for its formal legal structure than for its institutional architecture supporting implementation. Although this difference cannot be directly taken as proof that a specific law is less effective than anticipated, it does demonstrate that formally defined rights and their respective supportive structures are not comparably developed under the WBL methodology.

Topic-specific WBL data must also be viewed cautiously. Low topic scores do not provide conclusive evidence

regarding the absence of laws in that particular domain. Topic scores in WBL 2026 are created using multiple indicators. With respect to methodological revisions made in the 2026 version of WBL, some indicators were given partial values [20]. Thus, instead of being viewed as binary judgments regarding whether or not a country has legal frameworks regulating a particular area, topic results should be seen as diagnostic tools providing insights into how far economies are from meeting all of the WBL criteria.

Hyland et al. [7] empirically found a positive correlation between greater gender equality in laws and improved female labour-market outcomes. However, greater equality in legal rights does not necessarily eliminate wage inequality between women and men, occupational segregation or unequal family obligations. Thus, Hyland et al. [7] show that legal rules establish only one of the environments influencing labour-market outcomes and do not represent the outcomes themselves.

Therefore, the extension of WBL beyond a primarily legal instrument is important to our analytical objectives. WBL currently separates its assessment into three categories – Legal Frameworks, Supportive Frameworks and Enforcement Perceptions – and specifically emphasizes distinctions between the rights provided under law, the institutional context supporting those rights and perceived enforcement in practice [20]. Given that Kazakhstan's Supportive Frameworks score is lower than its Legal Frameworks Index score, this distinction is especially relevant.

Another view exists through UNDP indicators. According to statistics in the 2025 Human Development Report, Kazakhstan's Gender Inequality Index (GII) was 0.182 in 2023, ranking the country 50th among 172 countries and territories for which a GII was provided [13, 30]. The GII assesses reproductive health and empowerment, in addition to labour-market activity. Lower GII values represent less gender-based inequality.

The individual components of the GII explain why the GII should not be considered an isolated indicator of women's economic opportunities. As of 2023, UNDP indicates a female labour-force participation rate of 63.3%, while males have a labour-force participation rate of 74.6%, with a gender difference of approximately 11.3 percentage points [30]. Labour-force participation is only one component of the GII. The other elements included are reproductive health, parliamentary representation, and educational attainment.

SIGI provides a perspective on gender inequality related to the social institutions that affect gender inequality. UNDP human-development indicators offer a second lens for evaluating gender equality by examining gender differences in areas such as health, education, political representation and economic resources. Both SIGI and UNDP human-development indicators provide complementary perspectives that help analyse and understand gender inequality in Kazakhstan.

The combination of SIGI and the human-development indicators provides evidence about how much gender inequality may exist within specific aspects of Kazakhstani society. SIGI measures how social institutions support or restrict women's ability to engage in certain activities that ultimately affect gender equality. The human-development indicators show differences between women and men in educational, political and economic achievements. This information allows for a better understanding of the areas in which women's opportunities within Kazakhstani society remain unequal.

This issue is similar to the problem identified by Barnat, MacFeely and Peltola [3]. Their comparison of international gender indices finds economic and labour participation to be a distinct dimension and argues that the economic component of broad gender indices is incompletely represented. In particular, labour-force participation carries considerable weight, whereas other aspects of women's economic position may fall outside the indices [3]. The GII does not directly incorporate the gender wage gap, occupational segregation, job quality, managerial representation or unpaid care work.

The contrast becomes even clearer when the Gender Development Index is considered. Kazakhstan's GDI for 2023 is 1.004, placing it in GDI group 1. The corresponding female HDI is 0.837, compared with 0.833 for men [29]. In aggregate terms, these figures indicate very close female–male parity in human-development achievement.

However, the economic component of the same table looks substantially different. UNDP estimates gross national income per capita at PPP $25,774 for women and PPP $36,485 for men [29]. Calculated relative to the male estimate, the female value is approximately 29.4% lower. This apparent contrast is not a statistical inconsistency. The GDI combines health, education and income, so relatively favourable results in the first two dimensions can coexist with a sizeable gap in the economic component.

This is one of the clearest results of the comparison: near parity in an aggregate human-development index can coexist with substantial inequality within one of its economic components. The result illustrates why an aggregate gender measure needs to be examined together with its underlying indicators before conclusions are drawn about women's economic opportunities.

Dilli, Carmichael and Rijpma make a similar point in their discussion of composite gender measures [2]. A composite index is useful because it summarizes several dimensions, but aggregation also compresses differences among the indicators from which the final score is constructed. They explicitly warn that considerable variation can remain behind a composite result. Alfama, Cruells and de la Fuente likewise stress that reducing gender equality to a set of quantitative indicators necessarily involves conceptual choices and simplification [1].

The fourth analytical layer moves away from legal and composite measures to observable labour-market results. ILOSTAT does not combine women's labour-market position into a single gender-equality score. Instead, employment, unemployment, labour-force participation, earnings, occupation, working time and related characteristics can be examined separately [24, 25]. This makes the labour-market layer useful for determining whether favourable results at the legal, institutional or human-development levels are also visible in economic outcomes.

The most recent data from Kazakhstan's labour statistics report an overall unemployment rate of 4.5% in Q1 2026 [32]. With regard to gender, however, there exists a 1.0 percentage point differential between men (who experienced an unemployment rate of 4.0%) and women (with an unemployment rate of 5.0%) [32]. While the size of the differential does not alone explain the full situation facing women in the labour market, it provides evidence of why an overall unemployment rate may mask gender differences.

Earnings indicate a greater disparity than unemployment rates. As reported by the Bureau of National Statistics, the average monthly salary for men in 2024 was KZT 468,914, while the average monthly salary for women was KZT 344,496 [14]. Relative to men's salaries, the differential represents approximately 26.5%.

Additional similar data are provided by another official source. According to the Bureau's 2025 Wage-Distribution Survey, average hourly wages for male workers

were KZT 2,637 per hour; for female workers, the average hourly wage was KZT 2,046 [31]. The unadjusted differential between women and men represents approximately 22.4% relative to men's average hourly wages.

These data require careful interpretation. They represent descriptive differentials, which do not control for factors such as occupation, sector, hours worked, education, years of experience, age and/or other variables. Therefore, these data cannot be used as direct estimates of wage discrimination. However, both sets of data show that a significant wage differential continues to exist in Kazakhstan despite the near equality shown in the aggregate Gender Development Index (GDI).

Research published in academic journals further documents the existence of the wage gap. Yemelina, Kemelbayeva and Roshchin studied Kazakhstan during the period 2011–2019 and found that the wage gap between genders remained at nearly thirty percent throughout the period [15]. Decomposition of their results indicated that increasing industrial segregation negatively affected the wage gap; they also note that women's favourable and improving human capital could not counteract those negative effects. The authors also report larger wage gaps in more developed, industrialized and economically successful regions, as well as evidence supporting vertical segregation and discriminatory practices in Kazakhstan's two largest urban centers [15].

This evidence is relevant to the interpretation of current international indicators. A GDI of nearly one does not constitute proof that women have successfully translated improvements in their education and human capital into equivalent economic outcomes. Yemelina et al.'s study illustrates that even though women improved their human capital through education and training, this did not neutralize the negative impacts caused by industrial segregation [15].

Similarly, Nyussupova, Aidarkhanova, Kenespayeva and Kelinbayeva reached a similar conclusion [16]. Their findings demonstrate that although women's access to employment in Kazakhstan has expanded over time, it has not resulted in an equivalent reduction in income and earnings disparities. The authors identified gender-based segregation in vocational education, sector-based differences in employment opportunities and limited access to managerial roles as key elements of the existing structure within Kazakhstan's labour market.

Taken collectively, the results provide a rationale for understanding why female labour-force participation may not be viewed synonymously with equal economic opportunities. Labour-force participation signifies whether a woman enters or remains attached to the labour market; it does not signify whether she obtains equivalent income, works in a similar occupation, reaches upper management, has equivalent job security, or bears an equivalent burden of unpaid labour.

These conclusions are supported by the international body of research on this topic. Cortés and Pan identify many remaining gender-based disparities within labour markets that include labour supply as well as wages and access to higher-level positions [10]. The authors particularly focus on the unequal career outcomes resulting from parenthood. As other gender-based disparities decrease in size, the importance of those based on parental status increases.

Table 2 – What the selected indicators reveal about Kazakhstan

Measurement layer	Kazakhstan result	Year / edition	Interpretation
WBL Legal Frameworks	73.00 / 100	WBL 2026	Formal legal framework is incomplete under WBL criteria; legal gaps remain
WBL Supportive Frameworks	57.43 / 100	WBL 2026	Supporting policies and institutions score below the legal framework
WBL Enforcement Perceptions	Aggregate score not available	WBL 2026	No overall WBL enforcement assessment should be inferred
OECD SIGI	20.9 / 100	SIGI 2023	Low level of discrimination under OECD classification
SIGI – Discrimination in the family	14.8	2023	One of Kazakhstan's lower-scoring SIGI dimensions
SIGI – Restricted physical integrity	34.4	2023	Highest of Kazakhstan's four dimension scores
SIGI – Restricted access to productive and financial resources	21.4	2023	Institutional constraints remain measurable
SIGI – Restricted civil liberties	11.5	2023	Lowest of Kazakhstan's four dimension scores
UNDP GII	0.182; rank 50/172	2023 data, HDR 2025	Composite inequality across reproductive health, empowerment and labour-market participation
UNDP GDI	1.004	2023 data, HDR 2025	Near parity in aggregate female and male human-development achievement
Labour-force participation	63.3% women; 74.6% men	UNDP GII table, 2023	Female participation is 11.3 percentage points lower
Estimated GNI per capita	PPP $25,774 women; $36,485 men	UNDP GDI table, 2023	Female estimate is approximately 29.4% below male estimate
Average monthly wage	KZT 344,496 women; KZT 468,914 men	Kazakhstan, 2024	Unadjusted female earnings approximately 26.5% below male earnings
Average hourly wage	KZT 2,046 women; KZT 2,637 men	Kazakhstan, 2025	Unadjusted female earnings approximately 22.4% below male earnings
Unemployment rate	5.0% women; 4.0% men	Kazakhstan, Q1 2026	Female unemployment is one percentage point higher

Sources: World Bank WBL 2026 dataset [19, 20]; OECD SIGI 2023 database [28]; UNDP HDR 2025 statistical tables [29, 30]; Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan [14, 31, 32]. Percentage differences in GNI and wages are calculated by the authors from the sex-disaggregated values reported in the corresponding official sources.

In addition to providing evidence of institutional constraints that cannot be captured through typical measures used in statistical analysis of labour markets, the World Values Survey data used by Kemelbayeva and Aituar demonstrate that there are substantial opportunity costs that women bear when participating in the labour market and that women exhibit more susceptibility than men to gender-role expectations [17]. Although Kemelbayeva and Aituar found no significant differences across geographic regions or ethnic groups, they concluded that economic and social factors were more influential upon labour-force supply decision-making than cultural factors [17]. This finding provides some caution in the interpretation of their results.

The study by Kireyeva et al. [18] provides yet another perspective on how institutions impact labour-force participation. Utilizing Latent Class Analysis in conjunction with Change-Point Analysis, Kireyeva et al. identified notable differences between urban and rural residents regarding gender attitudes toward employment and career development. Additionally, Kireyeva et al. reported that lower levels of institutional trust were associated with weaker labour-force participation and career advancement among women. However, Kireyeva et al.'s results establish only an association between institutional trust and women's employment activity, not institutional trust as a sole cause of women's employment.

Viewed collectively, the indicators create somewhat of a mixed impression. A GDI score for Kazakhstan very near parity exists, yet the same UNDP data set indicates that there is a large female-male differential in estimated incomes [29]. Likewise, its favourable SIGI score exists simultaneously with gender-based disparities in labour-force participation and earnings [14, 28, 30, 31]. In like fashion, the WBL Legal Frameworks score exceeds the Supportive Frameworks score, while national labour-market data continue to report a considerable earnings gap [14, 19, 20, 31]. These findings do not have to be mutually exclusive. Rather, they represent differences in the conceptual boundaries of the measurement systems: international gender indices examine or assess various dimensions of gender inequality and therefore cannot be assumed to be directly equivalent [3, 6].

The first tier assesses the formal legal and policy framework. The second tier assesses institutional, normative and practice-based discrimination. The third tier is an aggregate measure of gender differences in overall human development. The fourth tier assesses realised labour-market outcomes. Improvement at one tier does not ensure improvement at subsequent tiers; moreover, the assessments provide no basis for assuming that improvement at earlier layers will lead to equalization at subsequent layers.

This view is supported by the comparative literature. Barnat et al. demonstrate through empirical evidence that economic and labour participation constitute a separate dimension of gender inequality and cannot be captured solely by broad composite indices [3]; Singh and Chaudhry provide additional empirical evidence that using alternative measures of gender equality can yield substantively different results [6]; and Vaughan and Longlands illustrate how the selection of indicators influences which elements of gender equality become most prominent in international policy and accountability processes [4].

Kazakhstan illustrates this issue quite vividly. WBL identifies variations in legal frameworks and implementation mechanisms. SIGI draws attention to discriminatory social institutions. GII captures reproductive health, empowerment and labour-market participation. GDI contrasts the achievements of females and males in terms of broader human development. Labour statistics identify actual participation rates, unemployment levels and earnings. These perspectives complement each other, but once any individual perspective is used as a complete portrayal of women's economic status, it becomes inadequate.

Therefore, aggregating the scores into some form of composite index would offer minimal analytical value. The values provided (i.e., 73.00, 20.9 and 0.182) were developed from different concepts, scales and aggregation methodologies. Standardizing and averaging them would certainly make the resulting values easier to communicate but more difficult to interpret. The more effective approach for this study is to compare them without eliminating their conceptual differences.

The comparisons highlight several areas of concern for assessing future movement toward gender equality in the Kazakhstani context. First, the difference between the WBL Legal Frameworks and Supportive Frameworks scores suggests that an evaluation of future progress should focus upon statutes as well as the institutions and mechanisms supporting implementation [19, 20]. This conclusion follows from the design of the WBL methodology rather than from an assumption that the score itself demonstrates ineffective enforcement of statutes.

Second, the SIGI results indicate that social institutions are not a single source of disadvantage. In fact, there is considerable variation within the four components of the SIGI for Kazakhstan, with restricted physical integrity being the least favourable of the four [28]. Therefore, policies based upon the SIGI should take into consideration the composition of the index (i.e., individual components) as opposed to just the overall number [28].

Third, parity in human development does not translate into parity in the economic returns on women's human capital. Although Kazakhstan has a Gender Development Index (GDI) close to one, the sex-specific income estimates contained in the same UNDP table and national wage data clearly reveal significant differences in income and wages [14, 29, 31].

Fouth, Yemelina, Kemelbayeva and Roshchin found that average values at the national level may obscure sizeable variations at subnational levels, including by sector and region [15]. This finding supports the broader contention of Cascella, Williams and Pampaka that the geographic scale used to measure gender equality can greatly influence how results are interpreted [5]. Reporting gender-related outcomes for regions, industries, occupations and managerial positions could therefore support rather than replace national-level gender indicators.

Finally, labour-force participation must be evaluated along with other factors, including earnings, occupational and vertical segregation, employment quality, entrepreneurial activity, unpaid care responsibilities and representation in decision-making. It is not suggested that the present international indicators need to be replaced. Rather, the analysis demonstrates that each provides information not available through the others.

CONCLUSION. A review of the methodologies of the World Bank, OECD, UNDP, and ILO demonstrates that international gender indicators should not be treated as competing rankings. Instead, these organizations have developed measurement systems that measure various aspects of gender equality and women's economic opportunities.

Although the methodology differs among the organizations, they all assess different aspects of the relative status of women across countries and economies. However, their findings regarding Kazakhstan differ because each organization measures a slightly different aspect of gender equality and women's economic opportunities.

The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL) framework measures legal rights and formal economic opportunities based upon legal frameworks, supportive policies and institutions, as well as perceptions of enforcement of those legal rights throughout a woman's working life [19, 20]. The 2026 WBL scores for Kazakhstan are 73.00 for Legal Frameworks and 57.43 for Supportive Frameworks. Therefore, according to WBL criteria, neither the legal framework nor the institutional mechanisms supporting it are fully developed. The lower Supportive Frameworks score indicates that separate consideration of both formal legal provisions and institutional mechanisms intended to enable implementation is warranted. Because an overall Enforcement Perceptions score was not available for Kazakhstan, WBL cannot serve as a basis for drawing a general conclusion about actual enforcement in Kazakhstan [19, 20].

SIGI adds another layer of analysis to the methodological approach used by the World Bank. SIGI focuses on how discriminatory laws, social norms and practices limit women's opportunities [12, 28]. Kazakhstan has a SIGI 2023 score of 20.9, which places it in the low-discrimination category and compares favorably with other Central Asian countries [12, 28], although the results vary significantly when viewed through the lens of each of the four SIGI dimensions. For example, the SIGI dimension of restricted physical integrity had the highest and least favourable score at 34.4, while the scores for restricted civil liberties and discrimination in the family are significantly lower [28]. As such, even though the overall SIGI result may suggest relatively low levels of institutional discrimination, the same cannot be said for all SIGI dimensions.

The UNDP indicators are broader in scope than either the World Bank or the OECD. They seek to answer questions related to human development. For example, Kazakhstan's Gender Inequality Index (GII), which is 0.182, and its Gender Development Index (GDI), which is 1.004, indicate relatively favourable aggregate gender-development outcomes; however, they do not necessarily reflect equal levels of economic return [29, 30]. The same data sources reveal that female labour-force participation rates are lower in Kazakhstan than male rates; moreover, the estimated GNI per capita for women is approximately 29.4 percent lower than that for men. Therefore, while there may be near parity in terms of human development generally, there is still a substantial disparity in one component of human development – namely, the economic component.

National labour-market data reveal a significant disparity in terms of earnings. Specifically, average monthly wages earned by women in 2024 were approximately 26.5 percent lower than those earned by men, while average hourly wages earned by women in 2025 were approximately 22.4 percent lower [14, 31]. These are unadjusted descriptive differences and thus not direct estimates of discrimination; nevertheless, they demonstrate that a sizable gender earnings gap still persists in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, previous research conducted specifically on the topic of gender inequality in Kazakhstan yields similar conclusions. Yemelina et al., for instance, report persistent wage disparities, industrial segregation and considerable regional disparities [15], while Nyussupova et al. note occupational and educational segregation, barriers to women attaining positions of leadership and unequal burdens associated with unpaid domestic and family responsibilities [16].

In conclusion, the major finding of the study is not that international organizations report conflicting evaluations of Kazakhstan's performance. Instead, organizations evaluate various phases and aspects of the interplay between institutions and their economic consequences. Legal equality does not necessarily imply equality in social institutions; institutional conditions do not equate to equality in human development; and equality in human development does not provide equal labour-market returns.

Therefore, the major analytical contribution of the present study is to place the above-mentioned measurement approaches into a unified analytical model without reducing them to an artificial common score. To achieve this goal, a four-layer approach was developed, distinguishing among formal rights and mechanisms of implementation; discriminatory social institutions and norms; human-development achievements; and realised labour-market outcomes. In contrast to a new composite index, this four-layer structure allows preservation of the original meaning of each separate measure and identification of differences between the layers.

For Kazakhstan, this distinction has important implications. It is quite likely that assessing progress only through international rankings will hide the gap between the human capital and educational achievements of women and the economic returns they realize. On the other hand, emphasizing solely the wage gap would lead to neglect of advancements in legal rights, human development and some components of social institutions. Therefore, a more useful monitoring system should analyse all four layers separately and assess how they evolve over time.

The findings of this study have identified several areas requiring greater focus in national gender policies. These include earnings, sectoral and occupational segregation, access to management and decision-making positions, regional inequalities, access to productive and financial resources, unpaid care activities, safety and institutional mechanisms enabling the implementation of formally established rights. Indicators from these categories should be analysed jointly instead of treating them as interchangeable.

This study uses a comparative-descriptive methodological approach. This methodology does not allow determination of causal relationships between specific legal and institutional features and observed labour-market outcomes. Therefore, future studies should expand upon this study using a longitudinal approach. Furthermore, additional data collection should be carried out based on administrative records, labour-force statistics and data about unpaid work in order to better understand exactly where the significant advantages of women's human development in Kazakhstan fail to generate corresponding economic benefits.

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