

Women Executives in Central Asia

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Introduction

Patient, obedient, long-suffering, helpless, fond of children, tender-hearted, responsive, ready to share, agreeable, obliging, hospitable, respectful to elder people, honoring men and as a consequence, voluntarily choosing to always remain in the shadow of men.

These qualities and more reflect the general perception of women in Kazakhstan, according to the study of Svetlana Shakirova of the Center for Gender Studies, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

While this set of qualities might be appealing to some part of population, we can see a big gap between this and the perception of our clients and us on what qualities a modern executive should have. What are the reasons for and consequences of these perceptions? What qualities or circumstances have allowed some women in Central Asia to achieve success in business and social life despite these perceptions? What is the potential for development of women executives in the region? These are the questions we tried to explore in this study, some results of which are reflected in the following article.

Remains of the Past

The times when women were held back from the public life in Central Asia are long gone. The distant past when girls were not admitted to schools, women were refused medical assistance and only men were the breadwinners of the families, has almost been forgotten. Modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyztan and Tajikistan represent a multicultural mix of over 100 ethnicities and almost a full spectrum of religious perspectives. Still the remains of the past are deeply rooted in the societies of Central Asia and they result in a number of serious concerns in relation to empowerment of women and their participation in the labor market.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, women in Central Asia have been exposed to new pressures and uncertainties. The pressure of families to do unpaid labor

(household work, taking care of children, elderly and other) restrict the abilities for achievement in professional life resulting in the following:

- 1) Higher unemployment (difference of about 3 % in each country),
- 2) Lower salaries (wage difference from 35 to even 55 % per country),
- 3) Less power and lower rate in executive positions (below 10 % in some countries).

Assuming women should complete all the house work for free obviously consumes their time and energy – they need to arrive home from work earlier and they are not able to contribute to their paid work with the same level of energy and productivity as men do. From the employer's perspective it is clear that the resource that produces less should receive lower reward and it explains the increasing pressure on women who are trying to achieve some balance between duties at home and at work.

Exclusion from the labor market and lower salaries have resulted in a new trend in Kazakhstan – 40 % of women are entrepreneurs. They have to seek new ways of generating income and participating in social life and they possess the qualities relevant for modern life despite overall perceptions described in sociological studies.

The pressure on women is even higher due to the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union men in Central Asia were not so fast to adapt to the new challenges, which resulted in many broken families, extensive alcoholism and violence. In the situation of uncertainty, exposure to poverty and increasing requirements for new skills and qualities, women in Central Asia and Kazakhstan in particular have shown a stronger ability to survive and take care of their families and children. Their language skills, flexibility, persistence and overall ability to take responsibility made them actual breadwinners in many families.

The studies on women in executive positions based on company surveys show that 9.94% of women in Kyrgyzstan and 30.39% of women in Tajikistan (data of 2003) occupy senior positions in companies. (Source: Enterprise Surveys by International Finance Corporation of the World Bank Group, 2007). Unfortunately the data is missing for Kazakhstan, but it is our assumption that it should be the highest in Central Asia. This can be explained by a lower level of religious influence in Kazakstan and the fact that Kazakhstan has developed faster due to its natural resources. Business is still traditionally male dominated and that is why it is particularly interesting to explore those few examples of successful women executives in Central Asia.

The overall socio-economic situation of women in Central Asia can be characterized best by the UN Human Development Index that is adjusted for gender inequalities (Gender-Related Development Index).

HDI and GDI

Country	GDI	HDI	HDI rank minus GDI rank
Kazakhstan	0.792	0.794	1
Kyrgyzstan	0.692	0.696	0
Tajikistan	0.669	0.673	1

Source: "Human Development Report 2007/2008", UNDP, 2008.

We can see that the Gender-Related Development Index has lower value than the Human Development Index in all these countries with Kazakhstan showing the most positive situation in all aspects of our analysis. Positive value of GDI rank shows that the GDI rank in the global listing of 157 is higher than the HDI rank.

Looking at the dynamics of these statistics, we conclude that the region is developing in the right direction both in terms of general human development and gender empowerment: however the gender development and empowerment statistics in all of Central Asia except Kazakhstan create a ground for serious concerns regarding women's participation in the economic and social life of the analyzed countries.

Hope and Success

Kazakhstan is a clear leader in Central Asia in the area of women's participation in decision-making, female entrepreneurship and women occupying executive positions. There are many successful, independent and enterprising women. The biggest city, Almaty, is awash with fashionable clothes shops. Beauty salons are virtually on every corner, and many bars and clubs have a predominantly female clientele. Those in power are also anxious to promote the role of women, as part of what they see as an enlightened society in Kazakhstan.

While Kazakh history refers to celebrated and influential women throughout the years, there are many stars that have risen recently and during the last decade of the 20th century.

Raushan Sarsembayeva leads the Association of Business Women in Kazakhstan. This non-governmental organization unifies women in politics, management, business, science, education, health and other sectors and currently has 5000 members. Mrs. Sarsembayeva conquered the political elite of Kazakhstan thanks to her activity in non-governmental sectors, which is very unusual in Central Asia. She is a founder of a female party, ready to give a new power to traditionally male dominated government. New thinking, new attitude, intelligence, charm, enormous abilities to work, enthusiasm to implement changes in the country – all these qualities Mrs. Sarsembayeva demonstrates as a new power.

President's Nursultan Nazarbayev's family gives us two very interesting examples of success of Kazakh women. The President's wife Sara Nazarbayeva is often referred to as a mother of the nation, showing a personal example of totally changing her life and bringing a new philosophy of physical, mental and spiritual transformation. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga is an example of a successful and influential political player in the country, promoting the idea of female participation.

Kazakh society has been challenged by Tajtana Kvyatkovskaya, a famous reporter and state official. Founders of companies, professors, well known publishers, owners of media, fashion stores and restaurants, politicians and leaders of non-governmental institutions, the women of Kazakhstan have already proven their influence and contribution to the development of their country and their own welfare. It will take a longer time of transformation of thinking and attitudes in order for the rest of Central Asia to follow this example and use the potential the countries have. This is a real under-explored "natural resource" that may lead these countries to further development and prosperity.

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