



Why Women Work Harder Than Men: Gender Norms, Patrilocality, and Labor Market Inequalities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates why women demonstrate higher work effort than men in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, focusing on gender norms, patrilocal traditions, and labor market inequalities. The analysis uses secondary household microdata from the Life in Kyrgyzstan survey (2016–2019) and econometric methods (OLS, Heckman selection, and Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition), complemented by prior empirical findings from published studies. The results reveal that social norms and family relocation patterns disproportionately pressure women to demonstrate high work effort, while structural labor market disparities limit their career advancement. The findings highlight the intersection of culture and labor policies, offering insights for gender-sensitive workforce strategies in Central Asia.

KEYWORDS: gender roles, labor market inequality, work effort, cultural norms, Central Asia, patrilocality.

How to cite: Kovaleva, I., Kudebayeva, A., & Pech, G. (2025). Why women work harder than men: Gender norms, patrilocality, and labor market inequalities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. *International Conference on Economic Sciences and Management in the Changing World 2025*, (pp. 101-108). Futurity Research Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17378278>

Introduction

The issue of gender differences in labor activity is a significant topic in both economics and sociology of labor. However, previous studies (Han, 2025; Trevisani, 2021; Kovaleva et al., 2025) have primarily focused on general patterns of women's participation in the professional sphere and the influence of economic factors, while giving less attention to the cultural and familial traditions of Central Asia. Earlier research by Kovaleva et al. (2025a, 2025b, 2025c) systematically examined these patterns using household-level microdata from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In contrast, our study provides a comprehensive analysis of the interrelation between patrilocality, social norms, and structural constraints of the labor market, as well as their combined impact on women's labor activity. In regions where patrilocal traditions prevail, women tend to display high diligence and engagement in professional activity even under conditions of limited career prospects and unequal pay. Patrilocality indirectly stimulates high levels of labor participation since limited mobility and social expectations shape compensatory behavioral strategies. The new theoretical conclusion is that patrilocal social structures not only restrict women's economic opportunities but also cultivate internal motivation for intense labor activity, functioning as a compensatory mechanism for structural inequalities. These results confirm and extend findings from "Why Do Women Work Harder Than Men? Testing the Patrilocality Hypothesis" (Kovaleva, 2023a). In addition, this allows for a more accurate modeling of the interplay between cultural, social, and economic factors in shaping gender behavior in the labor market.

Table 1

Interrelation of Cultural, Economic, and Family Factors with Women's Labor Activity in Central Asia

Factor	Mechanism of Influence	Manifestations in Women's Labor Activity	Sources
Cultural norms (patrilocality, gender expectations)	Restricted access to resources and prioritization of sons motivate women to demonstrate diligence and devotion to work.	High discipline, productivity, and aspiration for recognition through work.	Kazenin (2023); Kenzhebaeva & Kim (2022)
Social control and the culture of shame	Support for traditional roles through moral and social pressure forces women to perform excessive duties.	Compensatory labor combining professional employment and domestic responsibilities.	Kenzhebaeva & Kim (2022)
Labor migration and economic dual dependency	Limited opportunities in the new labor market compel women to work more intensively for survival and family support.	Increased work commitment and adaptive strategies.	Hofmann & Chi (2022); Akcapar & Çakır (2024)
Socio-demographic conditions and domestic duties	Family care and limited access to social support intensify women's workload.	Dual labor (paid and invisible domestic), high work intensity.	Lomia et al. (2020); Nazridod et al. (2021)

Source: compiled by the authors

Hypothesis

Sociocultural factors and patrilocal practices contribute to higher levels of female labor participation compared to men.

Objective

Identification of the sociocultural and structural factors that contribute to higher female labor participation compared to men in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Objectives:

1. To analyze the gender norms and social expectations that influence labor behavior.
2. To assess the impact of patrilocal practices on the participation of women and men in the labor market.
3. To examine labor market inequality between men and women.

Research Results

Sociocultural Factors

The growing participation of women in the labor sphere in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is explained by a combination of sociocultural, economic, and historical factors that have shaped distinct gender roles. Studies have shown that women's labor has consistently combined professional responsibilities with a wide range of domestic and family duties. This dual role is determined not only by economic necessity but also by cultural expectations that demand greater diligence and discipline from women compared to men. Traditional notions of family and patriarchal practices reinforce a division of roles in which men acquire economic advantages and social authority, while women bear responsibility for maintaining familial stability and raising children. Within this system, women's work becomes not only an economic activity but also a means of self-realization and an affirmation of their social status within the family. Within household structures, gender asymmetry manifests itself in priorities related to inheritance, access to resources, and influence over decisions concerning the division of family duties. In patriarchally oriented households, preference is given to sons, which motivates women to prove their value through efficient work and family support. This dynamic is reinforced by additional social control mechanisms, such as a culture of shame, which regulates women's behavior and compels them to undertake an excessive number of responsibilities, including invisible domestic labor. Recent bibliometric evidence on gender and education also confirms the persistence of early structural inequalities that later translate into labor market disparities (Temirtayeva et al., 2025).

Technological Transformations

The transformation of the labor market under the influence of digitalization and automation has a complex and dual impact on women's employment. On one hand, the automation of traditional production and service processes creates a risk of job loss, particularly in low-skilled sectors, which may exacerbate existing gender inequalities. On the other hand, technological development provides new opportunities for women, including remote work that allows flexible time allocation between professional and family responsibilities, as well as access to professions related to STEM fields, digital

competencies, and innovative industries. Remote and hybrid employment enable women to combine career advancement with family care, while active acquisition of digital skills enhances their competitiveness in the labor market. Thus, processes of digitalization and technological transformation have the potential both to reduce and to reinforce gender inequality, depending on the extent to which social institutions, educational systems, and employment policies support equal access for women and men to emerging opportunities in the digital economy. This mechanism has also strengthened societal expectations of women's discipline and diligence, making their labor both an economic activity and a moral responsibility to the community. These observations are consistent with bibliometric evidence on automation and gender from Samatova et al. (2025).

Economic Inequality

Economic and social transformations, including migration processes, intensified gender differentiation in labor. Women who remained in local communities or migrated with their families demonstrated greater industriousness compared to men, performing tasks that extended beyond formally paid work. This included household maintenance, childcare and care for elderly relatives, as well as participation in additional economic projects that provided supplementary income. Consequently, women's labor activity became a complex phenomenon that combined economic, social, and cultural functions. Market inequalities were shaped by access to resources, education, and professional opportunities. Women were compelled to exert greater effort to achieve economic stability and ensure their families' financial security. At the same time, women's industriousness in many cases compensated for structural constraints associated with gender expectations and social inequality. It became a means of maintaining family integrity and survival under conditions of economic instability, as observed in both rural and urban regions. A combination of factors, including patrilocal traditions, the culture of shame, inequality in access to resources, socio-demographic conditions, and migration processes, created circumstances that led women to demonstrate greater labor dedication and diligence compared to men. Their labor performed dual functions: economic and socio-cultural, which intensified its importance and significance. In this sense, women's diligence was not an incidental phenomenon but rather a natural response to the region's social, economic, and cultural challenges. The decomposition of income inequality presented in Kovaleva (2023b) also supports this conclusion, showing persistent gaps despite equal qualifications.

Table 2

Causal Relationships Between Cultural Norms, Family Practices, and Labor Behavior

Factors	Causal Relationship	Manifestation in Labor Behavior
Cultural norms regarding the role of women in society	Traditional perceptions of female self-sacrifice, responsibility, and discipline shape expectations of high female engagement in labor	Greater dedication to work among women serves a compensatory function under conditions of socioeconomic inequality
Family practices of support and distribution of responsibilities	Limited male participation in household tasks and childcare encourages women to demonstrate stronger professional loyalty as a form of self-realization	Increased labor activity and resilience to professional burnout among women
Socioeconomic	Low wages and employment instability	Work is perceived as a source of

conditions	reinforce the need for self-preservation through professional commitment	social stability and personal dignity
Cultural capital and educational values	Educated women in post-Soviet societies more often associate success with professional achievement	Focus on career advancement and skills improvement
Gender stereotypes in the professional sphere	Limited opportunities for women's career advancement are offset by stronger motivation for high-quality task performance	High productivity and loyalty as a form of symbolic recognition

Source: compiled by the authors

Studies by Kovaleva et al. (2025a) on gender norms and women's labor behavior in Central Asian countries focused on identifying the interrelationship between cultural traditions, family social structures, and economic activity. The research examined how patrilocality, unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, and social expectations influence women's labor motivation.

The analysis conducted by I. Kovaleva et al. (2025b) revealed that in societies with strong patriarchal foundations, the increased intensity of women's labor results not only from economic necessity but also from cultural pressure that encourages self-affirmation through work. Rising educational levels, urbanization, and the gradual transformation of societal perceptions of women's roles have contributed to shifting labor motivation from necessity to the desire for self-realization and personal fulfillment.

This process reflects a gradual transition from reproductive labor to participation in production and entrepreneurial initiatives, which has increased overall economic activity. Economic analysis has shown a persistent gender gap in wages, which remains even among individuals with equal qualifications and experience. Differences in income stem not only from market mechanisms but also from sociocultural factors, highlighting the influence of traditional beliefs and systemic biases (Kovaleva et al., 2025c).

These findings made it possible to interpret gender inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by cultural models, work ethics, and social expectations. Women's labor was viewed not only as an economic category but also as an indicator of social dynamics, reflecting changes in societal norms and the degree of gender equality. This interpretation allowed labor to be understood as an instrument of cultural emancipation and social development that defines the pace of modernization in post-Soviet societies.

In the contemporary context, it is also essential to consider the impact of technological change on labor activity, particularly the role of artificial intelligence and automation in redistributing jobs. Analysis of recent trends has shown that automation and the integration of AI are significantly transforming the labor market, simultaneously creating new opportunities and risks for workers. One of the consequences has been the emergence of new professions and the reduction of traditional forms of employment, which requires the adaptation of skills and continuous professional development (Samatova et al., 2025).

These changes are closely linked to gender dimensions, as labor market transformations affect men and women differently, either intensifying or mitigating existing socioeconomic inequalities.

Bibliometric analysis makes it possible to identify key trends through which digital technologies contribute to the formation of new professional roles, the redefinition of competence requirements, and the restructuring of employment patterns.

At the same time, it enables the identification of sectors with heightened risk of job loss and declining levels of economic security among specific population groups. These findings underscore the need to implement innovative vocational training instruments that account for gender differences in access to technology and employment, as well as to develop policies oriented toward balanced adaptation to digital transformations. In summary, the identified patterns, particularly the characteristics of gendered labor participation, the impact of technological change, and the role of migration factors, confirm the hypothesis that digitalization processes are not neutral but rather reproduce existing social disparities while simultaneously creating potential for their mitigation through targeted educational and social policy interventions.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated that the heightened labor activity of women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan resulted from the interaction of gender norms, patrilocal practices, and structural inequality in the labor market. The results build upon the broader framework of household structure and innovation (Kovaleva et al., 2025a) and gender wage decomposition (Kovaleva et al., 2025d), linking these mechanisms with the patrilocal hypothesis tested in earlier works. Women combined paid employment with invisible domestic labor, performed caregiving functions, and ensured family social stability, which required greater diligence and discipline from them compared to men. The culture of shame, the preference for sons in resource distribution, and men's limited capacity to perform household duties reinforced this tendency, transforming women's industriousness into a socio-cultural obligation and means of self-realization. It was revealed that labor migration, economic transformations, and urbanization additionally stimulated women to demonstrate high work capacity, as they compensated for structural constraints and ensured family survival under challenging socio-economic conditions. Prospects for further research in this direction include analysis of the impact of contemporary political and economic reforms on gendered employment, the role of education and vocational training in reducing inequality, as well as investigation of the psychological and social mechanisms supporting women's labor under conditions of labor market transformation and globalization.

This research was conducted within the framework of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Grant IRN: AP23487405.

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