**The Gender Gap Among Internet Users in Central Asia: A Comparative Analysis**

**Talgat Sholpan**

**Ibrayeva Galiya**

**Journalism Department, Al-Farabi Kazakh National university**

**Author Note**

**Sholpan Talgat** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0236-4313>

**Galiya Ibrayeva ** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5694-9459>

Sholpan Talgat, PhD student

Galiya Ibrayeva, Professor, Doctor of Political Science

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Correspondence concerning this article should be adressed to Talgat Sholpan, 71 Al-Farabi ave, Almaty, Kazakhstan. Email: talgatsholpan@mail.ru

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**Abstract**

Nowadays, all over the world there is a significant gender gap between Internet users and their access to it. This is evidenced by many international studies, for example, as The Inclusive Internet Index 2019 shows that in 84 countries out of 100, access to the Internet is higher for men than for women. In developing countries, this indicator is even more contrast. Using the example of the countries of Central Asia, researchers with the support of IWPR are trying to show that the gender gap in information provision of digital media is explained by economic, technological, social, ethno-traditional, cultural-historical reasons. The authors conclude that there are many factors that negatively affect Internet access for women and girls in Central Asia. The main one is its price threshold. Another barrier is the lack of education and skills to use mobile devices and other gadgets to access the Internet. In addition, the lack of the necessary thematic content, the presence of online harassment and other aggressive actions from other Internet users - all this reduces the possibility of free using the Internet for Central Asian women.

**Keywords: gender, internet, social networks**

**Methodology and collection of information.** The study covered four Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The research was carried out with the support of IWPR (Institute for WarandPeace Reporting). The main research method was an online survey based on a semi-structured, self-filled online questionnaire and the results of in-depth interviews with 20 experts in the field of new media. The total number of respondents interviewed in the online survey was 4,130 people. In Kyrgyzstan, the share of respondents was 31.5%, in Kazakhstan - 24.3%, in Uzbekistan - 23.5%, in Tajikistan - 20.7%.

In total, 1,572 women and 2,558 men were interviewed, that is, the proportion of women in the entire sample was 38%. The share of women interviewed in Kazakhstan is the highest - 57%. In Kyrgyzstan, it was 40%. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the number of women surveyed was almost three times less than men - their shares of the total number of respondents were 24% and 28%, respectively. Field stage from May to June 2019.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU World Telecommunication, 2018), in Kazakhstan, 80% of men and 77.9% of women are Internet users - albeit a small one, there is still a gap. A 2009 World Bank study on Tajikistan (Sarosh Sattar.Opportunities, 2009) found “significant and statistically significant differences in Internet and email access between male entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs”.

According to the digital diary (Digitalin. Wearesocial, 2019) of the We Are Social portal, the advertising audience of women using Facebook is estimated at 54% in Kazakhstan, 49% in Kyrgyzstan. A large gap in the female audience is observed in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan - 33% and 27% respectively. Another indirect indicator of women's Internet use is the GlobalFindex indicators.

Analysis of data for 2018 suggests that there are significant gender differences in the level of Internet use for performing various online transactions in Central Asia. While we do not undertake to interpret the GlobalFindex indicators themselves, we are more interested in the difference between the male audience and the female audience.

Indeed, according to indicators on online payments, in 2017, men and women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had equal access to the Internet to make payments. At the same time, a gender gap is visible in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On average, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, by 5.5% fewer women use the Internet to shop online, pay and pay bills It is of course important to remember that these indicators reflect inequality not only in Internet access, but in general gender barriers in accessing financial accounts, managing money, etc. Nevertheless, the result is the same - the use of the Internet has its own gender differences in the countries of the Central Asian region, which is partly reflected in the distribution of respondents in this survey.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it is also typical for respondents to read comments under a publication. Almost no one uses special applications for checking facts and information in all four countries (only 4%). The same small proportion of those who rely on their own expertise, or send a request to organizations that check news materials for reliability.

A significant part of the respondents is intolerant to fake news. On average, more than 40% of respondents consider it important to indicate this in a comment on social networks or block / unsubscribe from the source page if they find false information.

For example, in the dissemination of disinformation, a significant role is played by publics on social networks, which do not justify the source of the published information, and the users of social networks themselves, taking information out of context, complemented by news agencies that relay speeches or opinions without checking and analyzing the transmitted information.

The third participants in disinformation, according to experts, are foreign media outlets that are outside the region, while within the region they are already Russian media that have a great influence on the population of post-Soviet countries. Given these trends, it is worth paying more attention to the high degree of trust in the information on the official websites.

Most news media are in the business of relaying someone's opinion. Many do not check the information and take the word of the speaker, who, in turn, can cite any statistics as an example. Even invented. And journalists often do not check information before broadcasting it.

Don't forget about religious recruiters and destructive organizations. Social media is their main tool, and they master the techniques of spreading fakes and rumors. The degree of trust in information from social networks is higher among women.

Media literacy among news consumers is very low. They don't know how to distinguish fake news and rumors from proven facts, which is why it is necessary to develop critical thinking, especially among young people. Fake news is primarily promoted by the panic headlines created just to get people to go to the site. In social networks, it is not uncommon for information taken out of context to spread as truth. Both journalists and the public fall for fake news, not to mention manipulation.

The researchers asked the respondents to answer whether they are familiar with such phenomena as “hate speech” and “hate speech” in the media.

The survey revealed that only one third of the respondents are familiar with such phenomena as “hate speech” or “hate speech” in the media. 7 out of 10 respondents are not familiar or found it difficult to answer this question.

In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, there is a tendency related to age. Thus, in Tajikistan, the share of respondents familiar with the phenomenon of “hate speech” in the age group 43+ is 65% and above, and in Kyrgyzstan - from 50%. At the same time, women are more inclined to trust government sources.

The authors conducted a small study of comments on social networks under one of the posts in the @kaznews news account. The number of comments from the male half of the audience is identical to the number of comments from the female half of the audience. However, women tend to be more sensitive to news. This is expressed in the form of more extensive comments, as well as the use of emotional cues and verbs describing an excited state.

Experts believe that if on a global scale conflict-sensitive journalism has been practiced for a long time and is an integral part of journalism standards, then in the Central Asian region it is just emerging. And even though some countries survived civil war (Tajikistan in the 90s) and interethnic conflicts (Kyrgyzstan in 2010), a culture of excluding hate speech or avoiding emphasis on ethnicity in both the media and in social networks.

Experts from Tajikistan are divided in their opinions. While some say that journalists have become more careful in the use of hate terms, as they can be prosecuted for defamation of honor and dignity, others notice the opposite. In Kazakhstan, there is a law that can be maneuvered (Gulmira Birzhanova, 2018), as a result of which the media are afraid to write on conflict topics, “take preventive measures ahead of the curve.” And the law is most often used to put pressure on human rights defenders and journalists. Experts note that, in general, there is no research on content in the field of hate speech, but more often disputes on this topic are observed on social networks than in the media.

As for hate speech, Central Asian media describe news very smoothly, but when it comes to propaganda, that's when hate speech appears. Women generally do not seem to notice hate speech, while men are sensitive to negative statements. This is due to cultural and ethnic traditions, as well as to the low level of involvement of women in the consumption of information from the Internet (Myssayeva, 2019).

Hate speech has been used much more frequently in recent years, especially on social media. And all this is accompanied by a transition to personalities and swearing. Also, there are a lot of fictitious accounts and their comments on social networks under fake news.

The rhetoric of hate often catches the eye in the texts of bloggers and even on some news sites. (Il’ia Bykov, 2018) Some conflicts in social networks and disputes are related precisely to hate speech.

If we proceed from the ethical norms of journalism and obey them, then the news will not be interesting, it will become clerical. Therefore, in cases where the rhetoric of hatred is used in the speech of the speaker, and we ask ourselves whether to publish the material or not, in the end we say: "We need to broadcast".

The fact is that under this article (256 and 174 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan) the number of cases in recent years has grown significantly, but there is little sense from this. And political scientists are involved in the examination, while the assessment of linguists and philologists is necessary.

A significant part of the respondents do not notice any proposed gender biases and stereotypes in the news in the media. And experts note that the media continue to publish materials with provocative headlines and texts interpreted taking into account the traditional, family and social way of life or in cases of coverage of negative events. More often than not, gender sensitivity towards women is not respected in news stories. The experts say that the main reason for this is the lack of knowledge about the very concept of gender sensitivity.

So, if you look at the results of the survey, the highest share of respondents who do not notice any of the proposed markers - prejudices and stereotypes towards women and men in news materials - is in Uzbekistan and is 35%. In Tajikistan, this indicator is 25%, in Kazakhstan - 21%, the lowest in Kyrgyzstan - 18% (Table 1).



*Table 1. Respondents who do not notice gender insensitive language in the news Source: IWPRCA, 2019*

Among those who do not notice any markers, there are interesting differences between men and women. For example, in Kazakhstan, the share of women and men who do not notice gender bias and stereotypes in the news is approximately the same - 22% of men and 21% of women.

In Uzbekistan, the part of men who do not notice gender biases and stereotypes is slightly higher than the share of women - 37% versus 32%. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the share of men who do not see gender biases and stereotypes is higher than the share of women, on average by 10 %.

It turns out that women are more likely to notice gender biases and stereotypes in news stories, although not much, but this trend is present in all countries. Women are more likely than men to notice news stories about women's rights.

The most frequent gender biases and stereotypes that are noticed by respondents are stereotypes in relation to the natural purpose of women and men in society - on average from 15 to 20% of respondents, which partially confirms the observations of experts. The share of those who notice all the proposed markers does not exceed 10% on average, with the highest indicator in Kyrgyzstan.

Most news stories are directed primarily at men, with women in second place, although the audience is equally divided by gender.

“As users of social networks say, this is not so bad. But what kind of vocabulary and expressions are used by public figures, representatives of the authorities, the expert community and the media (because any media and journalist is also a public person) - this is all bad with us, - an expert from Kyrgyzstan believes. - Gender problems are not only problems of journalism, they belong to our entire society. Therefore, this topic should be a red thread in the training of journalists. "

Another expert from Uzbekistan notes: "We often come across materials that seem to talk about traditions, but thereby encourage violence against women. Or these texts practically give instructions on what a woman should be."

Researchers believe that users have not yet realized the meaning of the word "gender", there is no very understanding of this issue, respectively, the level of coverage of this issue is low. In most cases, in the news, women’s faces are present only when negative events are described.

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**Conclusion**

There are many factors that negatively affect Internet access for women and girls in Central Asia. The main one is its price threshold. The income gap between men and women means that women have fewer opportunities to pay for Internet access. It is also important that even if a woman gets access to the Internet, on average her expenses for using it are 17% lower (The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019) (especially on mobile devices).

Another barrier is the lack of education and skills to use mobile devices and other gadgets to access the Internet. Some women simply do not understand the importance of using the Internet for self-education, and that is why cultural, gender stereotypes and norms prevail in society. In addition, the lack of the necessary thematic content, the presence of online harassment and other aggressive actions on the part of other Internet users - all this limits women in using the Internet.

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