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BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING: EMPOWERING FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA'S MINING SECTOR

Ainur Orazbayeva

Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan,
orazbayeva.ainur@gmail.com

Abstract

In the context of corporate law in Central Asia's mineral resources mining sector, there is an increasing debate on the inclusion of female leaders. This article will investigate this topic, focusing on how women are navigating leadership roles in a traditionally male-dominated business. The study offers light on the opportunities and challenges that female leaders confront in mining. It focuses on the challenges they face, including gender biases and a lack of supportive laws, while also highlighting their contributions to innovation and good business practices. By making strategic recommendations, the article hopes to foster a more inclusive atmosphere for female leadership in the Central Asian mining industry. Hence, the mining sector can unlock a wealth of talent and expertise, and foster sustainable development by empowering female leadership in the region.

Keywords

Senior Management, Female in Mining, Leadership, Gender Equality, Corporate Gender Imbalance

1. Introduction

The Central Asian countries represent a diversified group that includes energy-exporting countries (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan); agriculture-dependent small economies (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan); and the more industrialised economy of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have the largest populations, at over 35 and 20 million, followed by Tajikistan with over 10 million, and Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan with almost seven million each. Kazakhstan is the most affluent Central Asian country with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of \$27,080, and Tajikistan the poorest with GNI per capita of \$5,680 (recent data from Population Reference Bureau). And in the context of Central Asia's economic environment, we can note that mining is a significant part since it contributes greatly to the GDP from the value of natural resources, such as oil, natural gas, and minerals.

The mining industry has attracted much foreign direct investment, while at the top management levels, it still remains dominated by men. And if women do venture into the industry, it is usually for the lowest positions. According to the Gender Data Portal of the World Bank, the presence of females at the top-management in 2019 averaged at 19,5% (Kazakhstan 26%, Kyrgyz Republic 32,9%, Tajikistan 6,6%, Turkmenistan n/a, Uzbekistan 12,4%), with the mining sector being worse.

Generally, women who have leadership positions in Central Asia's mining sector face gender biases and a lack of supporting laws that hinder them from being successful in their chosen profession. Such biases include exclusions from decision-making processes, unequal pay compared to men, and cultural stereotypes that go against their authority. For example, female leaders are likely to be resisted by male colleagues or subordinates because they are considered not to be competent enough due to their gender.

This is a situation that hinders the growth of talented women but also deprives the industry of such valuable resources. A recent study by White&Case LLP underscores the positive impact of female leadership in mining. Women have been driving innovation, following sustainable practices, and better business performance.

Therefore, such gender-based challenges should be addressed by recognizing the valuable contributions that the female leaders provide. Women are known to drive innovation, sustainable practices, and improve the general business performance within the mining industry.

Companies can leverage the advantage of diverse perspectives and experiences by creating a more inclusive environment that values diversity and gender inclusion.

It is true that in the past, women have faced considerable obstacles to entry and advancement in the mining business, specifically. Because the industry's culture and practices, such as long working hours, remote work locations, and physical demands, can be difficult for women to negotiate. Furthermore, a lack of supportive policies and regulations promoting gender equality in the workplace might compound women's underrepresentation in leadership roles.

Unlike first-generation gender bias, which is overt and intentional, second-generation gender bias involves practices that appear neutral but hinder women's progress. This bias is deeply embedded in organisational cultures and practices. Hence, the article's main idea is to examine and understand the leadership styles of Central Asian female managers in the mining sector by contributing to the current research on female leadership in the region. It also seeks to inspire and motivate working females, contributing to their professional development and supporting the implementation of diversity and inclusion policies in organisations.

2. The Glass Ceiling in Central Asian Mining

Women in leadership roles in Central Asia's mining sector face significant challenges, often encountering a metaphorical barrier known as the glass ceiling. Researchers have overwhelmingly found that the glass ceiling effect does indeed exist in all the nations at the top level of the organisation.

This term, prevalent in corporate leadership, represents the invisible but formidable hurdles that impede women's progress towards top positions in organisations. For instance, recruitment practices, promotion opportunities, and workplace culture all contribute to the glass ceiling. The public case of Uber can serve as an example where a toxic, gender-biased environment has received a demonstrative public criticism. Alternatively, if we look for a non-toxic community for women, Sweden is known to be one of the most gender-equal societies in the world. However, despite Sweden's reputation for gender equality, the labour market remains highly gendered, particularly in the IT sector. Women are significantly underrepresented in tech-oriented careers. In addition, females in Asia face significant resource constraints, including limited access to education, finance, and social networks. Therefore, there are a number of various social practices restricting women's participation in leadership activities not limited to

tech-driven industries. Such limitations dictate the necessity of coping strategies that women can use to develop career resilience, such as emotional labour, proactive personality development, self-reliance, and seeking support from mentors and networks.

According to Maria Lodkina from Polymetal: "Most top managers are men, and when you come to a meeting in a conference room, you need to take a place at the table. Not to sit in a corner, as you might want to, but to 'capture the territory', hold your authority, and emphasise it," she explains. "Because if you don't do it, the first thing they'll think about you is that you'll soon go on maternity leave.". In addition, Vice President for Human Resources Policy at Nornikel Darya Krachkova shares this opinion saying that in the mining industry there are few women who could even consider the idea of leading, for example, a mining and processing plant. Interestingly, women who enter male-dominated sectors tend to perform as well as men and significantly better than women who remain in the female-dominated sectors.

Summing up, in Central Asia mining companies, gender biases are evident in different ways of corporate culture. First and most common is the recruitment process through which women often face discrimination, with many companies preferring male candidates over equally qualified female candidates. This bias is perpetuated by the stamp that women are less capable of handling physically demanding jobs or managing teams. The second and no less important aspect is the difficulties in promotion opportunities. Women considered for promotion are often overlooked, most of them face stereotypical viewpoints about their ability to lead. This preconception is stimulated by the notion that women are not as assertive and vigorous as men. Thirdly, many mining companies often have male-dominated workplace culture where women face harassment, discrimination, and exclusion from key decision-making processes. This position can lead to a lack of role models and mentorship for women, making their way for heading even more challenging.

All above mentioned biases have the cumulative effect that women are hindered from advancing to leadership positions in Central Asian mining companies. The lack of women presence in leadership roles creates the glass ceiling, which makes it even more difficult for women to overcome it.

Strategic recommendations to address glass ceiling challenges include implementing mentorship programs for aspiring women leaders, establishing clear diversity policies at all levels of the organisation, and providing training on unconscious bias awareness. Thereby, the

corporate world of Central Asia has a chance to create a supportive atmosphere specifically tailored for women that can help bridge existing gaps and empower female professionals to thrive in leadership roles within the mining sector by acknowledging the existence of gender biases and taking proactive steps to address them.

3. Navigating the Minefield: Challenges for Female Leaders

Another concept, known as an 'invisible barrier' is a difficult challenge which prevents women from being able to move up to senior roles - especially in male-dominated sectors such as in mining. These obstacles affect women's job satisfaction and general well-being. Dealing with gender bias on a consistent basis can reduce motivation and one's ability to stay strong - this impacts both mental health and on-going personal development within their career. In addition, the mining sector has been slow to operationalise Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles which may have consequences for an individual's professional and personal development, as well as the potential of the sector remaining innovative.

Unfortunately, gender disparities in the mining industry across Central Asia are significant. Women working in STEM in this region often experience overt gender discrimination, illustrated by data which shows almost 80% of women in mining experience different types of gender bias, 60% encounter stereotypes, and 45% are exercised direct discrimination against (Source: Gender Data Portal, World Bank).

Despite a burgeoning acknowledgment of the importance of diversity and inclusion, women in leadership positions in the mining sector continue to confront formidable obstacles to success. For instance, the Scandinavian model, exemplified by Norway's mining sector, highlights the transformative impact of robust gender-equitable policies. Norway, through legislative support and corporate governance, has achieved a notable 40% representation of women in mining leadership, starkly contrasting with the 15% observed in Central Asia.

A critical yet often overlooked factor exacerbating the challenges faced by women in leadership is the dearth of female role models and mentors in the sector. The absence of such figures not only perpetuates the gender bias but also leaves many women to navigate the complex professional landscape unaided, often exacerbating feelings of isolation and impeding professional growth.

Addressing these barriers through systemic and strategic interventions is imperative for actualizing genuine gender parity in the mining sector of Central Asia. By adopting and adapting successful international practices and policies, and fostering an institutional culture that genuinely values diversity and inclusion, the region can harness the full potential of its human capital for enhanced sectoral innovation and competitiveness.

4. Beyond the Stereotypes: the Value of Female Leadership in Mining

The representation of women on corporate boards is not only influenced by individual and firm-level factors but also by the broader environmental context. Indeed, countries with higher representation of women in senior management and more equal male-to-female pay ratios are more likely to have women on corporate boards. This aligns with the barriers faced by women in Central Asia's mining sector, where cultural norms and workplace practices may hinder their advancement. As such, according to social role theory, men are typically associated with agentic traits, while women are associated with communal traits. Such stereotypes reinforce existing gender divisions in labour markets, thereby maintaining gender inequality.

Senior management in general is considered as male territory, with stereotypes underlined on the familiar women's roles (mothers, wives, nurses, etc.) and the characteristics they embody, which are currently inconsistent with those that traditionally define a good business leader. Furthermore, women in senior positions are often held to higher performance standards than men, and they may be more likely to take the blame for failure – so when the stakes are high, as they are now, senior-level women could face sharper criticism and harsher judgement. Another study confirms that women are more likely than men to be promoted to CEO positions during times of organisational crisis or poor performance (so called Glass Cliff Phenomenon). This places them in precarious situations with higher risks of failure from the very beginning. This lends credence to the view that women in male-dominated industries, such as mining, suffer major obstacles to obtaining top leadership positions due to systematic gender prejudices.

Despite claims of transformative gender change, female mine managers often seek to distance themselves from their femininity and adopt a gender-neutral stance, which is still saturated with traditional masculine assumptions and definitions.

Dr. Roshan Ara's article "Breaking the Glass Ceiling in the Corporate World" provides useful insights into the problems women experience in corporate leadership roles, which can be incorporated into the topic of female leadership in Central Asia's mining sector. Dr. Roshan demonstrated how female leadership in the Indian corporate environment has resulted in innovation, better business practices, and fostered long-term development. Similarly, by emphasising the need for leadership diversity, we may campaign for more women to hold positions of leadership in Central Asian mining enterprises.

Promoting diversity entails not only increasing the number of minority leaders, but also fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace atmosphere. Millennial women leaders are encouraged to foster inclusivity and challenge existing exclusive cultures.

The inclusion of women in leadership positions in the mining industry has been related to improved organisational performance, as seen by higher productivity and creativity. This trend is often associated with the different viewpoints and skills that women bring to the table, which leads to a more dynamic and adaptable workplace. Likewise, corporations that encourage gender diversity and inclusivity are prone to recruit and keep talented individuals, as people are likely to favour workplaces that embrace equality and diversity.

Moreover, the inclusion of women in mining project planning and implementation has been linked to more positive development outcomes for local communities, such as improved access to education and healthcare. This can be attributed to women's tendency to prioritise social and environmental considerations, leading to more sustainable and community-focused mining practices.

5. Conclusion

The glass ceiling in the mining sector is still an unexplored area in the field of management studies. Therefore, this study broadens the base of knowledge about the obstacles and difficulties that hinder women's representation on the highest decision-making positions in the organisation: senior management and board of directors.

Across many countries, traditional gender roles and cultural expectations hinder women's advancement into leadership positions. There is a convergence in the experiences of women facing barriers due to societal norms that prioritise their roles as caregivers over professional aspirations.

This article serves as a basis for a number of further studies. Further research can explore the glass ceiling phenomenon in different sectors and comparison between the sectors will be useful in drawing more in-depth insights. Furthermore, the impact of policies and initiatives, as well as their implementations can be cross-validated in future research in order to measure the progress towards breaking the glass ceiling.

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