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GENDER, MULTILINGUALISM, AND CAREER CHOICE IN KAZAKHSTAN: AN INTERSECTIONAL VIEW OF UNDERGRADUATE ASPIRATIONS

This article synthesizes qualitative findings on how gender and multilingualism intersect to shape the career aspirations of first-year undergraduates in Kazakhstan. Drawing on Feminist Theory [1], Sociocultural Theory [2, 3], and Intersectionality [4], the analysis situates student narratives within Kazakhstan's trilingual policy context—Kazakh, Russian, and English [5]—and wider sociolinguistic hierarchies. Interviews with ten students (five women, five men) reveal persistent gendered steering (e.g., “STEM for men, humanities for women”), the uneven valuing of language skills across fields and genders, and the differential translation of multilingual competence into leadership capital. While multilingualism is widely perceived as an asset, women report its recognition mainly in “supportive” roles (e.g., teaching, translation), whereas men describe language as leverage for mobility in high-status domains (e.g., IT, engineering, international business). Some women strategically select women-dominated fields for psychological safety, even at an income trade-off. The article concludes with implications for policy and practice: gender-responsive career guidance; equitable recognition of multilingual competencies; targeted mentorship for women aiming at multilingual leadership; and curricular/organizational reforms that address the gendered distribution of linguistic capital.

Keywords: Gender studies, Multilingualism, Career choice, Career aspirations, Intersectionality, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

Global discourses often frame multilingualism as a pathway to cognitive flexibility, intercultural competence, and expanded career options [6, 7]. Yet language resources never operate in a social vacuum: which languages “count,” how they are recognized, and who benefits from them are patterned by power, ideology, and identity. Gender, in particular, shapes access to opportunity and the valuation of skills across labor markets [8]. In multilingual, post-Soviet Kazakhstan—where a state-led trilingual project promotes Kazakh, Russian, and English [5]—these dynamics converge in distinctive ways.

The thesis on which this article is based explores how gender and multilingual repertoires jointly inform undergraduates' early career choices. It focuses on first-year students at a large urban university—an ideal vantage point because students have chosen majors but are still consolidating identities and aspirations. The article's contribution is threefold. First, it traces how gendered expectations continue to steer choices despite officially inclusive policies [9]. Second, it shows how multilingual competence is stratified by language ideology—Kazakh for identity and civic belonging, Russian for interethnic and bureaucratic practicality, English for elite global mobility [10]. Third, it demonstrates that the returns to multilingualism are gendered: similar linguistic assets accrue different symbolic and economic value to women and men [11].

Guided by three questions—(1) the role of gender, (2) the role of multilingual repertoire, and (3) their intersection—this article integrates relevant scholarship and the study's qualitative findings to illuminate how students interpret, embrace, or resist the overlapping pressures of language hierarchies and gender norms.

Materials and Research Methods

The research employed an instrumental qualitative case study [12] at a multilingual urban university. Using purposeful maximum-variation sampling [13], ten first-year students (five women, five men) from varied majors participated in 60–90-minute semi-structured interviews [14] conducted in Kazakh, Russian, or English. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed [15]. Ethical approval followed institutional protocols; pseudonyms protected identities.

Results and discussion

Conceptual and Policy Background

Multilingualism as Resource and Hierarchy

Contemporary sociolinguistics defines multilingualism not simply as a count of languages but as a dynamic repertoire of situated resources [16, 17, 18]. Individuals deploy languages unevenly across domains; competence is fluid and context-bound. In Kazakhstan, this fluidity is institutionalized through the trilingual policy: Kazakh (state), Russian (interethnic communication), and English (global integration) [5]. These languages carry stratified symbolic value—Kazakh as national identity, Russian as practical capital, English as global prestige [10]. Access to high-level proficiency remains uneven across urban–rural, class, and schooling lines, with implications for competitive careers [19].

Gender as Social Structure and Performance

Gender is socially constructed and continually enacted through norms and institutional practices [1, 20]. In post-Soviet contexts, women remain overrepresented in care-oriented fields (education, social work) while men dominate high-status technical sectors (engineering, IT, economics) [21, 9]. Self-assessment biases reinforce segregation: even with equal performance, men are more likely to rate themselves competent in STEM, while women underrate their abilities [22, 23].

Intersectionality and Linguistic Capital

Intersectionality [4] highlights how gender, language, class, and ethnicity interlock to produce compounded advantage or constraint. Language skills function as cultural capital [24], but their conversion into status depends on who wields them, where, and for what purpose [25]. In Kazakhstan, women’s strong language skills may be recognized in “support” roles; the same skills in men are read as leadership readiness, intensifying unequal career trajectories [26].

Findings

Gendered Career Perceptions and Practices

“STEM for men, humanities for women.” Across accounts, STEM was widely identified with masculine traits—logic, toughness, competitiveness—mirroring the gender performativity that normalizes segregation [1]. Several male participants described STEM as a default choice because it promises prestige and a good salary. Several women recounted tacit discouragement from STEM by peers, teachers, or family, and described fatigue at the prospect of constantly having to “prove” belonging in male-dominated spaces. Even when women acknowledged increased salary in engineering or IT, some prioritized psychological safety, opting for professions with supportive peer cultures (e.g., education, linguistics). These patterns echo evidence of stereotype-based self-efficacy gaps and “chilly climate” dynamics that sap persistence in STEM [8, 21, 22, 23].

The parental script. Students repeatedly cited parental expectations—often framed as “secure, respectable” gender-appropriate careers. Male students described explicit nudges toward engineering or economics; women described advice to pursue linguistics, pedagogy, or biology, aligned with caregiving and communication. Such domestic socialization, backed by curricular images of gendered roles [9], perpetuates occupational channeling [27].

Anticipatory discrimination. Women anticipated stricter performance scrutiny and lower recognition in male-dominated fields, steering choices even before labor-market entry. This anticipatory calculus illustrates how gender regimes operate through expectation and emotion as much as through formal exclusion [28].

Multilingual Repertoires as Career Capital

Language as strategic asset. Students framed multilingualism as essential for diplomacy, education, international business, and selective public-sector roles. English was consistently perceived as high-leverage capital for mobility and status; Russian as indispensable for interethnic pragmatics; Kazakh as a marker of belonging and civic duty, increasingly important in public institutions. These valuations reflect Kazakhstan's language ideology and the sociopolitical stratification of repertoires [5, 10].

Gendered orientations to language learning. Many women described intrinsic motivation and relational affordances in language study (communication, empathy, intercultural sensitivity), while several men articulated instrumental rationales (salary, leadership prospects, international placement). In classrooms, gendered discourse norms and teacher expectations can subtly reinforce these orientations [29, 30].

Identity work. Students used languages to perform career-aligned identities—projecting cosmopolitan professionalism via English, institutional credibility via Kazakh, and network fluency via Russian. Such “identity positioning” aligns with sociocultural views of language as a mediational means that shapes cognition and affiliation [2, 3, 31].

The Intersection: Who Gets Credit for the Same Skill?

Women's multilingualism - visible but undervalued. Women frequently reported that strong language skills were acknowledged yet channeled toward support functions: teaching, translation, client service—fields with lower pay and limited pathways to leadership. Their multilingualism was treated as expected rather than exceptional, consistent with research on the gendered devaluation of feminized skills [25].

Men's multilingualism - read as leadership. In contrast, men described language competence as a distinctive advantage signaling readiness for international teamwork and managerial tracks in engineering, finance, or tech. This differential interpretation transforms similar competence into uneven symbolic capital—a classic case of intersectional stratification [4, 24, 26].

Strategic compliance and resistance. Some women deliberately selected women-dominated programs to avoid hostile climates. Others resisted channeling and pursued law, diplomacy, or international business, leveraging multilingualism to claim visibility in male-dominated arenas. These resistant narratives echo poststructural feminist accounts of identity negotiation and agency [25].

Discussion: Mapping Findings to Theory

Feminist Theory: Performing “Appropriate” Futures

The normalization of “STEM for men, humanities for women” illustrates gender performativity [1]: repeated social cues define what futures feel natural. Women's anticipatory self-exclusion from male-dominated fields to avoid “proving oneself” reflects the affective labor of navigating gendered gaze and doubt [8]. Feminist analysis thus exposes how institutional climates, home discourses, and curricular images [9] align to narrow the horizon of legitimate ambition.

Sociocultural Theory: Language as Mediation of Identity and Opportunity

Language is not merely a skill but a mediational tool that structures thought, affiliation, and learning [2, 3]. Students' identity positioning via English, Kazakh, and Russian demonstrates how repertoires enable membership in particular communities of practice and opportunity structures [30]. Where high-quality trilingual instruction is uneven, repertoires—and thus career affordances—are unequally distributed [10].

Intersectionality: Converting Linguistic Capital into Status—For Whom?

Similar language skills were read differently across genders. Women’s multilingualism accrued value in feminized roles; men’s, in leadership tracks—evidence that capital conversion is filtered by gender [24, 25]. Intersectionality [4] helps explain compounded effects for women from rural or less resourced schools who face both limited access to elite English pathways and strong gendered steering.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry important implications for educational policy, institutional practice, and broader social attitudes in Kazakhstan and similar multilingual, post-Soviet contexts. At the level of higher education, the research suggests that career guidance must explicitly address the ways in which gender stereotypes shape students’ perceptions of professional suitability. When female students avoid STEM fields due to anticipated discrimination or discomfort in male-dominated environments, they are not only making individual trade-offs but also reinforcing structural inequalities in the labor market. Accordingly, secondary and tertiary institutions should provide gender-responsive career counseling that encourages students to critically reflect on social norms and recognize a wider range of professional opportunities as accessible to all genders.

Equally significant are the implications for language education. Multilingualism emerged as a highly valued resource, yet its recognition was uneven across gender lines. Whereas male students’ linguistic abilities were often interpreted as markers of leadership potential, female students’ comparable skills were perceived as “expected” or relegated to supportive positions. This discrepancy underscores the need for universities and employers to adopt more equitable frameworks for evaluating multilingual competencies. Language should be recognized as a form of cultural and professional capital across all career domains, not solely in feminized professions such as teaching or translation. Policies that ensure multilingual proficiency is valued in leadership and technical fields could help mitigate gendered disparities in the labor market.

At the societal level, the study also points to the importance of engaging families and communities in the transformation of gendered expectations. Many participants described parental influence as a decisive factor in shaping their career paths. Without efforts to shift such attitudes, institutional reforms alone may have limited effect. This suggests that awareness campaigns, community dialogues, and parental engagement programs should accompany educational initiatives to dismantle entrenched assumptions about gender-appropriate professions.

Finally, the study highlights the need for a more holistic policy approach that integrates gender equity and multilingual education. Current frameworks often treat these priorities in isolation, focusing either on promoting trilingualism or on addressing gender imbalance. Yet this research demonstrates that the two dimensions are deeply intertwined. Effective policy must therefore consider how gendered norms influence the acquisition and valuation of language skills, and how multilingual repertoires can be leveraged to expand—not restrict—career opportunities for all students.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the study offers valuable insights into the intersection of gender and multilingualism in shaping career choices, it is also subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. The first limitation concerns the scope and size of the sample. With ten participants drawn from a single multilingual, urban university, the findings cannot be generalized to all Kazakhstani undergraduates. Students in rural areas, monolingual institutions, or vocational pathways may experience language access and gendered expectations in markedly different ways. Future research would benefit from including a larger and more diverse cohort across multiple universities and regions to provide a more comprehensive picture.

A second limitation relates to the focus on first-year students. While this population was chosen deliberately to capture the early stages of career identity formation, it also means that the study captures aspirations rather than long-term outcomes. Students’ choices may shift significantly as they

gain professional experience, encounter workplace cultures, or reassess their ambitions in light of structural barriers and opportunities. Longitudinal studies are therefore necessary to trace how the dynamics identified here evolve over time and influence actual career trajectories.

Another limitation lies in the reliance on self-reported data through interviews. Although this method is well suited to exploring perceptions and meanings, it is inevitably shaped by participants' willingness to share openly and by the researcher's interpretive lens. Some participants may have downplayed or omitted experiences of gendered or linguistic discrimination due to social desirability or discomfort, while others may have emphasized certain narratives to align with perceived expectations. Although strategies such as member checking and reflexivity were employed to enhance trustworthiness, the findings must still be understood as constructed accounts rather than objective representations of reality.

Finally, the study focuses primarily on the interplay of gender and multilingualism while acknowledging but not systematically analyzing other intersecting identities such as ethnicity, class, or rural–urban background. Intersectionality theory suggests that these dimensions are crucial in shaping compounded advantage or disadvantage. For example, a rural female student with limited access to English instruction may experience constraints that differ markedly from those of an urban male counterpart. Future research should therefore expand the intersectional scope to capture how these additional layers of identity interact with gender and multilingualism in structuring career opportunities.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan's trilingual vision positions language as a lever of modernization, yet the benefits of multilingualism are unevenly realized. This study's narratives show that gender remains a powerful organizer of aspiration, confidence, and recognition. Women's multilingualism is widely visible but too often confined to roles with limited power and pay; men's similar skills are framed as markers of leadership, especially in technical and high-status domains. These differences do not arise from ability but from the social reading of competence at the intersection of gender and language.

The way forward is not merely to expand language teaching or to proclaim gender equality in the abstract. It is to redesign systems—curricula, counseling, hiring, promotion, and everyday pedagogical practice—so that linguistic capital translates equitably into status, pay, and leadership for *all* students. Feminist, sociocultural, and intersectional perspectives together illuminate how this can be done: by transforming climates, leveling access to high-value repertoires, and revaluing multilingualism as strategic capital across every rung of the career ladder.

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Д. Чутенева

ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ГЕНДЕР, КӨПТІЛДІЛІК ЖӘНЕ МАНСАП ТАҢДАУЫ: СТУДЕНТТЕРДІҢ ҰМТЫЛЫСТАРЫНА ИНТЕРСЕКЦИЯЛЫҚ КӨЗҚАРАС

Бұл мақала Қазақстандағы бірінші курс студенттерінің кәсіби армандарына жыныс пен көптілділіктің тоғысуы қалай ықпал ететінін сапалық деректер негізінде талдайды. Гендерлік теорияға [1], социомәдени теорияға [2, 3] және интерсекционалдылық тұжырымдамасына [4] сүйене отырып, талдау студенттердің әңгімелерін Қазақстанның үштілді саясат (қазақ, орыс және ағылшын тілдері) [5] пен кеңірек социолінгвистикалық иерархиялар аясында қарастырады. Он студентпен (бес әйел, бес ер) жүргізілген сұхбаттар гендерлік бағыттаудың сақталып отырғанын көрсетті (мысалы, «STEM – ерлерге, гуманитарлық ғылымдар – әйелдерге» тұжырымдамасы), тілдік дағдылардың әр сала мен жынысқа қарай әртүрлі бағаланатынын, сондай-ақ көптілді құзыреттіліктің лидерлік капиталға айналуының теңсіздігін айқындады. Көптілділік жалпы артықшылық ретінде қабылданғанымен, әйелдер оның мойындалуын көбіне «қолдаушы» рөлдерде көреді (мысалы, оқыту, аударма), ал ерлер тілді жоғары мәртебелі салаларда (мысалы, IT, инженерия, халықаралық бизнес) ілгерілеудің құралы ретінде сипаттайды. Бұл табыс азауымен байланысты болса да, кейбір әйелдер өздерінің психологиялық қауіпсіздігі үшін әйелдер басым салаларды саналы түрде таңдайды. Мақала саясат пен практикаға қатысты ұсыныстармен түйінделеді: гендерлік ерекшелікті ескеретін кәсіби бағдар беру; көптілді құзыреттерді әділ мойындау; көптілді лидерлікке ұмтылған әйелдерге бағытталған тәлімгерлік; сондай-ақ тілдік капиталдың гендерлік бөлінісін ескеретін оқу бағдарламасы мен ұйымдастырушылық реформалар.

Түйін сөздер: гендерлік зерттеулер, көптілділік, мамандық таңдауы, кәсіби ұмтылыстар, интерсекционалдылық, Қазақстан.

Д. Чутенева

ГЕНДЕР, МУЛЬТИЛИНГВИЗМ И ВЫБОР ПРОФЕССИИ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: ИНТЕРСЕКЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ВЗГЛЯД НА УСТРЕМЛЕНИЯ СТУДЕНТОВ

В данной статье обобщаются результаты качественного исследования о том, как гендер и многоязычие взаимодействуют в формировании карьерных устремлений студентов-первокурсников в Казахстане. Опираясь на феминистскую теорию [1], социокультурную теорию [2, 3] и теорию интерсекциональности [4], анализ помещает нарративы студентов в контекст трёхязычной политики Казахстана — казахский, русский и английский языки [5] — и более широких социолінгвистических иерархий. Интервью с десятью студентами (пять женщин, пять мужчин) выявляют устойчивое гендерное направление выбора (например, «STEM для мужчин, гуманитарные науки для женщин»),

неравномерную оценку языковых навыков в различных областях и по гендерному признаку, а также различия в преобразовании многоязычной компетенции в лидерский капитал. Хотя многоязычие в целом воспринимается как преимущество, женщины отмечают, что их языковые навыки признаются преимущественно в «вспомогательных» ролях (например, преподавание, перевод), тогда как мужчины описывают владение языками как рычаг для продвижения в высокостатусных областях (например, ИТ, инженерия, международный бизнес). Некоторые женщины стратегически выбирают сферы с преобладанием женщин ради психологической безопасности, даже ценой снижения дохода. Статья завершается рассмотрением практических рекомендаций: гендерно-ориентированное профориентационное консультирование; справедливое признание многоязычных компетенций; целевое наставничество для женщин, стремящихся к многоязычному лидерству; а также реформы учебных программ и организационных структур, направленные на устранение гендерного неравенства в распределении лингвистического капитала.

Ключевые слова: гендерные исследования, мультилингвизм, выбор профессии, карьерные устремления, интерсекциональность, Казахстан.

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