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SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN KAZAKHSTAN: SUBJECTIVE ASSESSMENTS OF THE POPULATION AND MODELING OF INFLUENCING FACTORS

This article examines social inequality in Kazakhstan as one of the most pressing socioeconomic challenges facing modern society. Key factors influencing social inequality, including education, population migration, income, standard of living, and government regulation, are identified and analyzed. The aim of the study is to identify the population's subjective assessments of social inequality and to model the factors driving this phenomenon in Kazakhstan. The research was conducted using an online survey of over 2,000 respondents aged 16 to 75. PLS-SEM, a structural least squares modeling approach using SmartPLS software, was used to process and model the data. Five hypotheses regarding the influence of these factors on social inequality are proposed and tested. It was shown that four out of five hypotheses were confirmed: a significant impact of migration (β=0.307), population income (β=−0.271), standard of living (β=0.156) and government regulation (β=0.375) on social inequality was revealed. It was found that the hypothesis about the reducing impact of education on social inequality was not confirmed, which indicates structural problems in the education system of Kazakhstan. It was determined that government regulation is the most significant factor, and a direct link was found between government regulation and social inequality, which indicates the insufficient effectiveness of the current social policy. The coefficient of determination of the model was R^2=0.451, which indicates a high level of explained variance. The obtained results can be used in the development of government measures to reduce social inequality, improve social support programs and reform the education system in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: *social inequality, sociological research, education, migration, population income, quality of life, poverty, state regulation.*

Кілт сөздер: *әлеуметтік теңсіздік, социологиялық зерттеулер, білім, көші-қон, табыс, өмір сапасы, кедейлік, мемлекеттік реттеу.*

Ключевые слова: *социальное неравенство, социологические исследования, образование, миграция, доходы населения, качество жизни, бедность, государственное регулирование.*

Introduction. Social inequality is one of the most significant challenges for modern society. Significantly, this phenomenon is not limited geographically as it is a global concern. Processes such as globalization, digitalization, and the development of technologies have further promoted the growth of social inequality across the world [1].

A high level of social inequality may lead to serious social consequences, including a higher incidence of poverty and an increase in wealth in small groups of people that further increases the gap between the rich and the poor. Social inequality may lead to human rights violations as certain population groups may suffer limited social rights, discrimination, and unfair working conditions [2]. Differences in wages, income, and access to resources may result in poverty and unemployment. In addition, economic crises and structural changes in economy may negatively impact the quality of life for various social groups [3].

Corrupt practices and a lack of transparency in public administration are important causes of social inequality, to name a few. This leads to an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, and it also restricts access to education, health care, and other important services for poor and vulnerable social groups. Corruption remains one of the most problematic areas for Kazakhstan. The country ranked 101st out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perception Index [4]. A survey of ordinary citizens as part of this study indicates a high level of corruption in Kazakhstan's public institutions.

Social inequality can lead to a poverty gap in society, an increase in the number of crimes and

disorderly conduct [5], as well as deterioration of health and education. Therefore, social inequality is a serious problem for Kazakhstan, and its elimination requires coordinated efforts on the part of the state, businesses, and the public, all aimed at improving the living conditions of citizens in the country.

The relevance of this study is determined by the fact that, despite economic growth in recent decades, Kazakhstan continues to face significant social stratification. According to the Statistics Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Gini coefficient in the country is approximately 0.27–0.29 [6], however, subjective assessments of the population indicate a significantly higher level of inequality. The gap between official statistics and citizen perceptions requires specialized scientific study.

The aim of the study is to identify subjective assessments of social inequality in Kazakhstan and determine the significance of factors influencing this phenomenon, based on empirical data.

To achieve this goal, the following objectives were set: 1) conduct a systematic review of theoretical and empirical studies of social inequality with an emphasis on the Kazakhstani context; 2) develop tools for collecting data on subjective assessments of social inequality among the population of Kazakhstan; 3) construct and verify a structural model of the factors of social inequality using the PLS-SEM method; 4) interpret the obtained results and formulate recommendations for public policy. The methodological basis of the study is the partial least squares structural modeling (PLS-SEM) method implemented in SmartPLS software. An online survey of over 2,000 residents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, conducted from January to April 2024, served as the empirical basis. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and the Fornell-Larcker test were used to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement models. The statistical significance of path coefficients was determined using Bootstrapping.

Literature review. There are many different theoretical concepts of social inequality that help explain the mechanisms and consequences of this phenomenon. Let us highlight three key theoretical concepts of social inequality.

Marxist theory. This theory argues that social inequality is caused by the economic structure of society. Property relations and production relations play an important role, where one group controls the means of production, and the other sells their labor for wages. This results in exploitation and unequal distribution of wealth [7].

The functionalist theory of social inequality allows society to efficiently distribute labor and resources, promotes specialization and cooperation, and ensures the maintenance of various social institutions and hierarchical structures [8].

Human capital theory links social inequality with differences in education, skills, and experience that each individual has. Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz made a great contribution to the formation and development of human capital theory. Becker introduced an economic approach to the analysis of education and the labor market, emphasizing the role of education and skills in increasing labor productivity and income. In his works, Theodore Schultz emphasized the importance of education and health for the economic development of society and the elimination of poverty [9].

A critical analysis of existing approaches reveals a number of limitations and research gaps. Marxist theory, with its emphasis on economic property relations, underestimates the role of institutional and political factors in the reproduction of inequality, which is particularly relevant for post-Soviet societies, including Kazakhstan. The functionalist approach, which views inequality as a functionally necessary element of the social system, has been justifiably criticized for normalizing inequality and ignoring issues of social justice. Human capital theory, despite its usefulness in explaining the relationship between education and income, fails to fully account for the institutional barriers that limit the returns to education in underdeveloped labor markets.

In the Kazakhstani context, the issue of social inequality has been studied significantly less thoroughly than in the foreign scientific literature. A number of domestic researchers have analyzed individual aspects of the country's socio-economic problems. Thus, Nurlanova N.K., Dnishev F.M., Alzhanova F.G. and Saparbek N.K. studied wage differentiation in the regions of Kazakhstan, identifying persistent differences between economically developed territories and peripheral areas, as well as large cities and other regions. The authors identified key factors of inequality, including the sectoral structure of the economy, the level of employment and skills of the workforce, and emphasized the need to improve regional policy to reduce disparities [10]. Esbergen R.A., Sherimova N.M. and Azimkhan A. studied the problem of poverty in the country, identifying its main causes and assessing the effectiveness of public policy measures to reduce it [11]. Bastykov D.Kh., Yeralieva Ya.A. and Aitkazina M.A. We examined the impact of state social policy on unemployment, determining the role of state employment and social support programs in regulating the

labor market [12].

However, a number of significant gaps have been identified in the existing literature. First, most Kazakhstani studies rely exclusively on official statistical data, while subjective assessments of the population remain virtually unexplored. Second, there are no comprehensive studies that simultaneously analyze the demographic, social, economic, and institutional factors of inequality using modern structural modeling methods. Third, the relative significance of individual factors of inequality from the perspective of citizens themselves has not been established. This study aims to fill these gaps by applying the PLS-SEM method to data from a representative online survey of Kazakhstani citizens.

Main part. An online survey of the population of Kazakhstan, conducted between January and April 2024, collected information from individuals aged 16 to 75. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed via online platforms (social media, instant messengers, email) in order to cover various socio-demographic groups of the population. The survey covered more than 2,000 respondents from almost all regions of the country, which provided a broad picture of public opinion. Among the survey participants: 48.3% were men and 51.7% were women; 62.4% lived in urban areas and 37.6% in rural areas; by level of education: secondary - 18.2%, secondary vocational - 24.5%, higher - 57.3%. The questionnaire included 28 questions grouped into 6 thematic blocks corresponding to the latent variables of the model. All responses were coded on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 - "completely disagree" to 5 - "completely agree").

The primary goal of the study was to identify public opinion on social inequality in Kazakhstan and determine the main trends in this phenomenon.

To achieve this goal, the following hypotheses were formulated:

(H1) - There is a strong inverse relationship between social inequality and educational level;

(H2) - There is a strong relationship between social inequality and population migration;

(H3) - There is a strong inverse relationship between social inequality and population income;

(H4) - There is a strong relationship between social inequality and quality of life;

(H5) - There is a significant direct relationship between government regulation and social inequality.

Based on the survey data, a structural model was constructed (Figure 1).

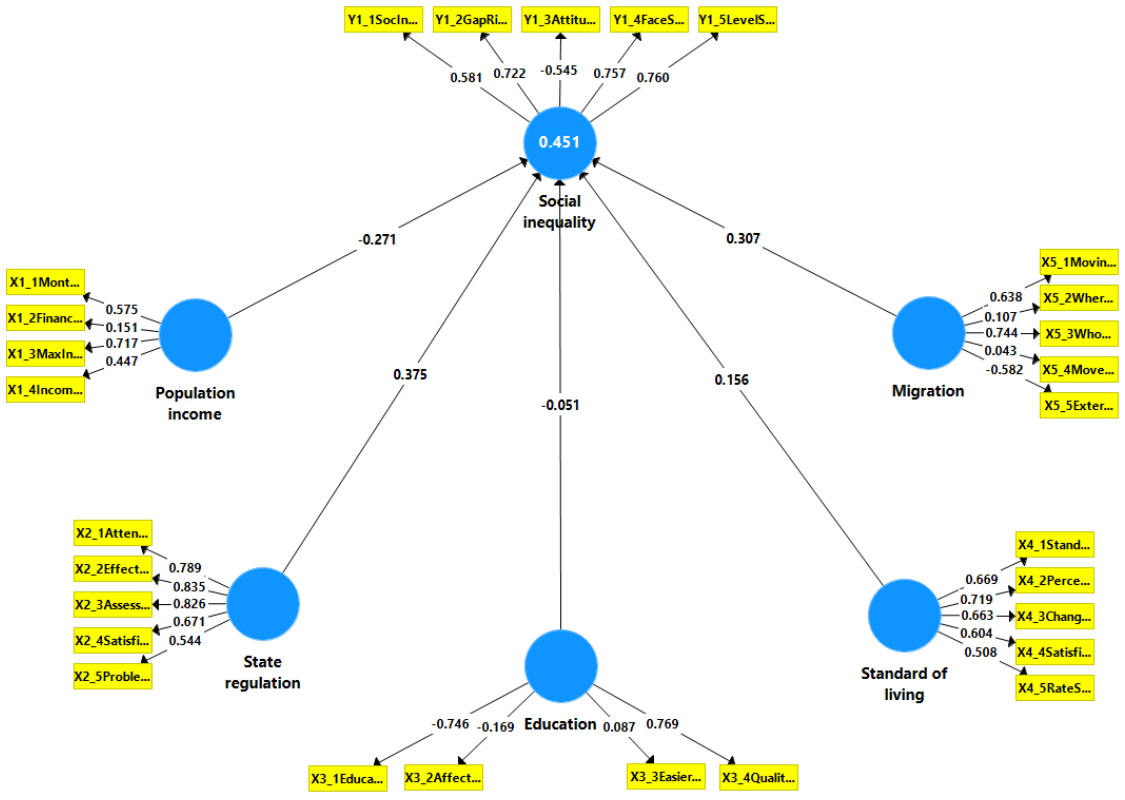

Figure – 1. **Model of social inequality**

**compiled by the authors*

Convergent validity in SmartPLS is tested using partial least squares minimization (PLS-SEM). In the context of SmartPLS, it is tested through the following key indicators: factor loadings, AVE coefficient, and composite reliability. The first step is to check the factor loadings for each indicator. It is generally recommended that the indicator loadings be above 0.70. This indicates that the indicators are sufficiently strongly related to the corresponding latent variables. The second step is to analyze the mean value of the extracted variance AVE, which shows what proportion of the variance explained by the latent variable is accounted for by the indicators. The recommended AVE value should be above 0.50. This means that the latent variable explains more than 50% of the variance of its indicators. The next step is to analyze the composite reliability, which should be above 0.70. Table 1 confirms that the constructs and their indicators have sufficient consistency.

Table – 1

Construct reliability and validity

Factors	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Education	0,653	0,661	0,689	0,501
Migration	0,714	0,723	0,727	0,719
Population income	0,730	0,734	0,775	0,737
Social inequality	0,716	0,732	0,823	0,539
Standard of living	0,730	0,733	0,735	0,727
State regulation	0,790	0,816	0,857	0,550

**compiled by the authors*

Rho_A is a reliability coefficient used in SmartPLS to assess the consistency of latent variables. It is used as an improved reliability metric in PLS-SEM, taking into account both factor loadings and indicator covariances. Unlike traditional reliability metrics such as Cronbach's α, rho_A is considered more accurate and reliable for latent variable models. Like other reliability metrics, rho_A should be above 0.70 to demonstrate acceptable reliability. In some cases, values between 0.60 and 0.70 may be acceptable if the model is in the early stages of development. However, for well-developed models, the metric should be above 0.70 and closer to 0.90 is better.

Table 1 shows a fairly high level of reliability and validity of the test questions and their influence on the factors. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion in SmartPLS. For each construct, the number on the diagonal should be greater than all correlations with other constructs in its row (column). If this condition is met, discriminant validity according to Fornell-Larcker is confirmed. The square root AVE values for all constructs exceed the interconstruct correlations, confirming discriminant validity according to Fornell-Larcker. Furthermore, all values were below 0.90, further confirming sufficient distinctiveness of the constructs. Table 2 presents the results of the Fornell-Larcker test.

Table – 2

Fornell–Larcker criterion

Factors	Education	Migration	Population income	Social inequality	Standard of living	State regulation
Education	0,708					
Migration	0,269	0,848				
Population income	-0,237	-0,041	0,858			
Social inequality	0,266	0,362	-0,376	0,734		
Standard of living	0,232	-0,081	-0,073	0,296	0,853	
State regulation	0,357	0,188	-0,247	0,547	0,419	0,742

**compiled by the authors*

According to the Fornell–Larcker criterion, discriminant validity is established if the AVE root for a particular construct is greater than its correlation with all other constructs. This condition is confirmed by the results shown in Table 2.

Hypothesis testing was performed using bootstrapping, which shows the statistical significance of the analysis results (Table 3).

Table – 3

PLS analysis results*

№	Hypotheses	Original Sample	T-statistics	P-values	Hypothesis status
H1	Education -> Social inequality	-0,051	1,497	0,135	Rejected
H2	Migration -> Social inequality	0,307	4,466	0,000	Accepted
H3	Population income -> Social inequality	-0,271	9,287	0,000	Accepted
H4	Standard of living -> Social inequality	0,156	4,455	0,000	Accepted
H5	State regulation -> Social inequality	0,375	11,746	0,000	Accepted

**compiled by the authors*

Table 3 shows that all hypotheses are supported, except H1. The rejected hypothesis confirms the existence of issues in Kazakhstan's education system. People are clearly not happy with the quality of education, high tuition fees, employment problems upon graduation, etc. In this sociological study, the majority of the respondents (30.5%) answered the question, "Are you satisfied with the quality of education in the country?" with "Rather no," and another 21.3% answered, "No." This means that people mostly have negative feedback.

The analysis results show that hypotheses H2, H3, H4, and H5 are supported, thus confirming that migration, population income, quality of life, and state regulation significantly affect social inequality. Let's clarify the interpretation of hypothesis H5. The initial formulation assumed an inverse relationship (more active government regulation → reduced inequality), but the empirical data revealed a positive coefficient (β=0.375), which is interpreted as a direct relationship. This means that respondents perceive increased government involvement in the social sphere as associated with increased, rather than decreased, inequality. This result indicates the low perceived effectiveness of government programs. Thus, hypothesis H5 is confirmed as a significant relationship between government regulation and inequality, but the direction of this relationship is opposite to that expected, necessitating a revision of government policy in the social sphere.

We present the obtained regression coefficients in Figure 2 and the latent variables' indicator values in Table 2.

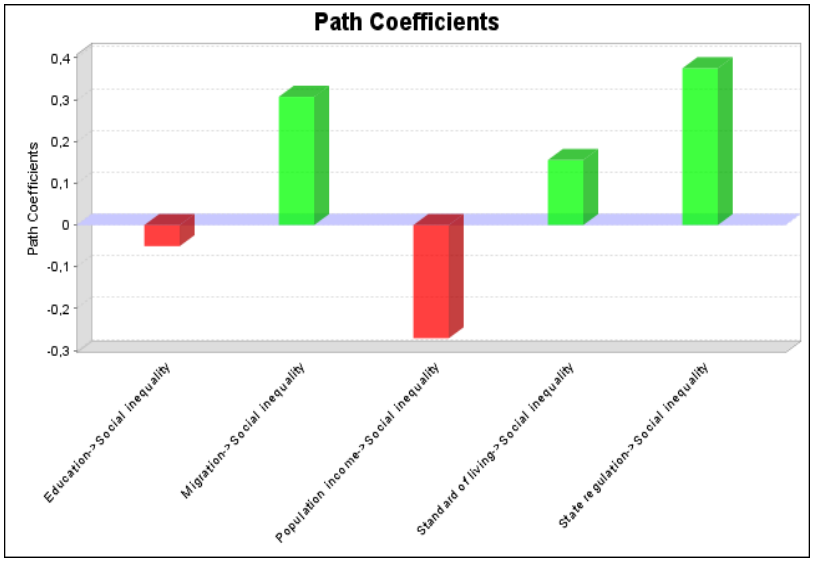

Figure – 2. **Path coefficients**

**compiled by the authors*

As shown in Figure 3, the latent variable state regulation (0.375) has the greatest influence on the Y variable; among its indicators, the most significant ones are social policy performance (X2_2Effectiveness = 0.835) and the assessment of social policy (X2_3Assessment = 0.826). The first indicator has a decisive effect since there is a direct link between social policy performance and social inequality. Hypothesis H5, State regulation −> Social inequality, is supported with a P-value = 0.00.

The second most important factor is migration, whose influence strength is 0.307. As a rule, it is mostly people with high professional capabilities who migrate, while in the vast majority of cases, people who arrive have a low qualification. As a result, the social gap is growing. Hypothesis H2, Migration −> Social inequality, is supported with a P-value = 0.000.

The variable population income has an inverse relationship with the Y variable, since its regression coefficient is (−0.271). That is, with the growth of personal incomes, the level of social inequality decreases. Hypothesis H3, Population income −> Social inequality, is supported with a P-value equal to 0.

The regression coefficient for the variable standard of living (0.156) is statistically significant. Hypothesis H4, Standard of living −> Social inequality, is supported. Overall, 8.6% of the respondents said that they "barely make ends meet, barely make it to the next salary," and another 29% said that they "only have enough for basic necessities." The majority of the respondents (42.5%) assumed that the proportion of the population living below the poverty line in our country is in the range of 41-50%, while the official statistics say it is 5.2%. Thus, people assess the poverty situation much more critically than the state.

The relationship between education and social inequality is represented by a negative coefficient of −0.051. Hypothesis H1 has no statistical significance (P-value = 0.135). The majority of the respondents said that they are not satisfied with the quality of education (X3_4QualityEducation = 0.769), and finding employment is hard, even with a higher education (X3_3EasierFindJob = 0.087), especially for young professionals since they lack the required work experience. Given the current situation, we can conclude that addressing this issue requires constructive state measures.

The Y variable reflects the current social inequality situation. The indicator Y1_1 = 0.581 shows that the respondents agreed that social inequality in Kazakhstan is a real phenomenon. This is confirmed by the answers to the question, "How often do you encounter manifestations of social inequality?", with 23.6% of the respondents said "Constantly", and another 46.6% said "Sometimes" (Y1_4 = 0,757). In assessing the level of social inequality in the current state in Kazakhstan, the respondents gave it priority, as evident by its high value (Y1_5 = 0.760).

Based on the determination coefficient obtained in the model (R Square = 0.451) for the variable social inequality, 45% of the variance of this construct is explained by the factors included in it. This is quite a significantly high level of variance explained, given that there are many other factors unaccounted for by the model. In addition to economic and political factors, other factors such as gender differences, geographical factors, and family status, can cause social inequalities as well.

The results of the analysis demonstrate that the model's estimates are statistically reliable and valid. This allows the obtained results to be used as a basis for further research and the development of government measures to overcome social inequality.

Based on the results of our empirical study, we can highlight some trends of social inequality in Kazakhstan: declining quality of education, increasing "brain drain", declining income and quality of life, ineffective social state regulation, growing social inequality.

Education opens the door to highly paid and prestigious professions. However, tuition fees are very high, which effectively makes education inaccessible to some segments of the population. This may lead to the fact that young people from low-income families will not be able to obtain higher education, thereby hindering their personal and professional development [13].

Migration of qualified, educated specialists can lead to a shortage of such personnel in the country, thereby hindering social and economic development. This, in turn, can increase social inequality and limit access to quality services and work. Of particular concern is the migration of young people in search of better opportunities for education, professional career and personal growth. This may be due to limited access to higher education and employment, low wages, youth unemployment and lack of prospects in Kazakhstan.

Personal income can also determine social status and prestige, which in turn affects social interactions and opportunities for self-realization. Low income can be a factor in social exclusion and limitations in opportunities to participate in cultural and social life [14].

The effectiveness of social protection measures may depend on their conceptualization and

implementation. Poorly designed programs can lead to “poverty traps,” i.e. social benefits that are not economically beneficial. Selectivity may also be a problem, with social protection not reaching those who really need it.

Hypothesis (H5) regarding a strong relationship between social inequality and government regulation was confirmed. Furthermore, the relationship between these factors was found to be direct, meaning that as government regulation increases, so does social inequality. According to respondents, government policy priorities are focused on other areas, while insufficient attention is paid to issues of social support for the population and poverty reduction. This situation requires attention to current government measures in the social sphere. It is possible to revise social policy and population support programs to improve the effectiveness of addressing pressing social issues.

Growing social inequality has negative consequences. For example, social conflicts between people, reduced economic growth, distrust of the government, and other factors can arise in society. Therefore, urgent government measures are essential for addressing the negative consequences of social inequality. These include the allocation of funds for social programs and the transparency and competence of government agencies.

Conclusion. In summing up the results of the conducted study, it is necessary to record its specific empirical results in accordance with the put forward hypotheses. Hypothesis H1 (inverse relationship between education and social inequality) is rejected ($\beta=-0.051$, $p=0.135$). Education does not have a statistically significant reducing effect on inequality in the perception of Kazakhstanis, which reflects the structural problems of the labor market and the higher education system in the country. Hypothesis H2 (migration increases inequality) is confirmed ($\beta=0.307$, $p<0.001$). The outflow of skilled personnel and the influx of low-skilled labor create additional social stratification. Hypothesis H3 (income growth reduces inequality) is confirmed ($\beta=-0.271$, $p<0.001$). An increase in the population's income is associated with a decrease in subjectively perceived inequality. Hypothesis H4 (standard of living is associated with inequality) was confirmed ($\beta=0.156$, $p<0.001$). Hypothesis H5 was revised and confirmed in a more precise formulation: a significant direct relationship was found between government regulation and social inequality ($\beta=0.375$, $p<0.001$), which means that, in the perception of citizens, government policy is accompanied not by a decrease, but by an increase in inequality due to its insufficient effectiveness.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that for the first time in Kazakhstan, the PLS-SEM method was applied to data from a representative online survey to simultaneously test several factors of social inequality; the relative importance of factors was established (government regulation → migration → income → standard of living); a contradiction was revealed between official and subjective assessments of the poverty level (official statistics - 5.2%, median assessment of citizens - 41-50%). A paradoxical positive impact of government regulation on inequality was documented, indicating the low perceived effectiveness of social policy.

The practical significance of this study lies in the potential use of the findings in developing public policy to reduce social inequality. Specifically, priority areas should include reforming the social protection system with an emphasis on targeting and transparency, improving the quality of higher education and its alignment with labor market needs, regulating migration flows, and policies to increase incomes for low-income groups.

There are several avenues for further research. First, it would be useful to expand the model by incorporating factors such as gender inequality, regional differentiation, and the digital divide. Second, qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, focus groups) can complement quantitative data with a richer understanding of the causes of discrepancies between official and subjective assessments of inequality.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ТЕҢСІЗДІК: ХАЛЫҚТЫ СУБЪЕКТИВТІ БАҒАЛАУ ЖӘНЕ ӘСЕР ЕТУШІ ФАКТОРЛАРДЫ МОДЕЛЬДЕУ

Аңдатпа

Бұл мақалада Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік теңсіздік қазіргі қоғам алдында тұрған ең өзекті әлеуметтік-экономикалық қиындықтардың бірі ретінде қарастырылады. Білім беру, халықтың көші-қоны, табыс, өмір сүру деңгейі және мемлекеттік реттеу сияқты әлеуметтік теңсіздікке әсер ететін негізгі факторлар анықталып, талданады. Зерттеудің мақсаты - халықтың әлеуметтік теңсіздікке субъективті баға беруін анықтау және Қазақстандағы бұл құбылысты тудыратын факторларды модельдеу. Зерттеу 16 жастан 75 жасқа дейінгі 2000-нан астам респондент қатысқан онлайн сауалнама арқылы жүргізілді. Деректерді өңдеу және модельдеу үшін SmartPLS бағдарламалық жасақтамасын пайдаланатын құрылымдық ең кіші квадраттар модельдеу тәсілі PLS-SEM қолданылды. Бұл факторлардың әлеуметтік теңсіздікке әсері туралы бес гипотеза ұсынылып, тексерілді. Бес гипотезаның төртеуі расталғаны көрсетілді: миграцияның (β=0,307), халықтың табысының (β=−0,271), өмір сүру деңгейінің (β=0,156) және мемлекеттік реттеудің (β=0,375) әлеуметтік теңсіздікке айтарлықтай әсері анықталды. Білім берудің әлеуметтік теңсіздікке әсерін азайту туралы гипотеза расталмағаны анықталды, бұл Қазақстанның білім беру жүйесіндегі құрылымдық мәселелерді көрсетеді. Мемлекеттік реттеу ең маңызды фактор болып табылатыны анықталды және мемлекеттік реттеу мен әлеуметтік теңсіздік арасында тікелей байланыс табылды, бұл ағымдағы әлеуметтік саясаттың тиімділігінің жеткіліксіздігін көрсетеді. Модельді анықтау коэффициенті R^2=0,451 болды, бұл түсіндірілген дисперсияның жоғары деңгейін көрсетеді. Алынған нәтижелерді әлеуметтік теңсіздікті азайту, әлеуметтік қолдау бағдарламаларын жетілдіру және Қазақстандағы білім беру жүйесін реформалау бойынша үкіметтік шараларды әзірлеуде пайдалануға болады.

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СОЦИАЛЬНОЕ НЕРАВЕНСТВО В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: СУБЪЕКТИВНЫЕ ОЦЕНКИ НАСЕЛЕНИЯ И МОДЕЛИРОВАНИЕ ФАКТОРОВ ВЛИЯНИЯ

Аннотация

В статье рассмотрена проблема социального неравенства в Казахстане как одна из наиболее актуальных социально-экономических проблем современного общества. Определены и проанализированы ключевые факторы, влияющие на уровень социального неравенства: образование, миграция населения, доходы, уровень жизни и государственное регулирование. Целью исследования является выявление субъективных оценок населения относительно социального неравенства и моделирование факторов, обусловливающих данное явление в Казахстане. Исследование проведено на основе онлайн-опроса, охватившего более 2000 респондентов в возрасте от 16 до 75 лет. Для обработки и моделирования данных использован метод структурного моделирования наименьших квадратов (PLS-SEM) с применением программного обеспечения SmartPLS. Выдвинуты и проверены пять гипотез о влиянии указанных факторов на социальное неравенство. Показано, что четыре из пяти гипотез подтверждены: выявлено значимое влияние миграции (β=0,307), доходов населения (β=−0,271), уровня жизни (β=0,156) и государственного регулирования (β=0,375) на социальное неравенство. Установлено, что гипотеза о снижающем влиянии образования на социальное

неравенство не подтверждена, что свидетельствует о структурных проблемах в системе образования Казахстана. Определено, что государственное регулирование является наиболее значимым фактором, при этом обнаружена прямая связь между государственным регулированием и социальным неравенством, что указывает на недостаточную эффективность действующей социальной политики. Коэффициент детерминации модели составил R^2=0,451, что свидетельствует о высоком уровне объясненной дисперсии. Полученные результаты могут быть использованы при разработке государственных мер по сокращению социального неравенства, совершенствованию программ социальной поддержки и реформированию системы образования в Казахстане.