Women in Kazakhstan in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras

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1. Introduction

This paper traces the evolution of women’s roles in Kazakh society from the Soviet period to the present day. In nearly two decades of independence, Kazakhstan has become a leader among the post-Soviet states of Central Asia in promoting the rights of women. However, as has been the case with other post-Soviet countries, independence has allowed a resurgence of traditional societal mores that present a new set of obstacles to feminist movements in Kazakhstan. A growing body of scholarship investigates the changes in gender expectations, the visibility of women, and their roles in post-socialist societies.¹ These works, though, tend to focus on European cultures, thus neglecting the experience of millions of women in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and providing an incomplete account of women’s experiences of the end of the Soviet system. This paper argues that the current status of Kazakh women is a result of the complex interaction between the early Soviet efforts to enforce gender equality and the persistence of traditional attitudes toward gender roles from the pre-revolutionary nomadic way of life. The tension between legal guarantees and traditional prejudices remains unresolved to this day.

2. Kazakh Women in the Soviet Union

The liberation of women and transformation of the family were central preoccupations of the early Bolshevik regime. In the years immediately following the revolution, the new Soviet government established laws in accordance with the radical new thinking on gender equality and

¹ See, for example: Bridger, Funk and Mueller, Haukanes.
the so-called “woman question.” One of the first pieces of legislation, the Family Code of 1918, promoted equality for women, giving them equal rights regarding marriage, divorce, child custody, alimony, and marital property inheritance.\(^2\) The Soviet government sought to liberate women from their domestic duties as wives and mothers, allowing them the right to work and to lead independent lives. These laws were particularly important in the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, where the traditional Islamic customs and social hierarchy were considered a significant barrier to establishing Soviet rule. The Kazakhs’ nomadic pastoral economy was also incompatible with the Soviet vision of a modern, industrialized state. The Soviet government thus implemented a number of measures to “reshape Kazakh practices and fashion a new, pan-Soviet culture.”\(^3\)

In the absence of a true proletariat, indigenous women in the new Soviet republics in Central Asia functioned as a “surrogate proletariat” that would be the main target of Soviet efforts to subvert the social and political hierarchies of traditional nomadic society.\(^4\) The Soviet government in Kazakhstan took additional legislative measures, considering the emancipation of women a key strategy in forming a new society. In 1920, the Kazakh government issued a decree criminalizing bride price, and in 1921, it outlawed polygamy and levirate marriage.\(^5\) To ensure that these laws were properly enforced, the government created the Zhenotdel, or Women’s Department of the Central Secretariat. The government established local branches of the Zhenotdel in various regions of Kazakhstan to set up women’s schools, promote literacy, and support women’s participation in the Soviet political project.\(^6\) These local branches were often

\(^2\) Ubiria, 190. 
\(^3\) Michaels, 311. 
\(^4\) Massell, xxiii. 
\(^5\) Ubiria, 190. 
\(^6\) Corcoran-Nantes, 50.
“literally the *sole foci* of political contact and influence that the party had in the Central Asian hinterland.”

In the case of Kazakhstan, the Zhenotdel was instrumental in breaking up patriarchal traditions by encouraging women to move to cities for education or work. These measures were effectively the first step toward settling the traditionally nomadic Kazakh people.

In the 1920s, the Soviet government implemented a broad social program known as *korenizatsiia* (often translated as “nativization”), an official affirmative action policy in the non-Russian republics that established quotas for party membership among the indigenous populations. In Kazakhstan, this gave women the opportunity to participate in state structures, albeit in relatively modest numbers. The government also provided free, universal secondary education for women. In the 1930s, a conservative shift in state policy under Stalin led to restrictions on some of the freedoms granted in the years immediately following the revolution. The Soviet government’s statewide ban on abortion in 1936 heralded the start of a pro-natalist campaign in Kazakhstan, where abortion was not a widespread practice. As in the rest of the country, the government offered financial support for mothers of large families and gave incentives for mothers to have more children. The government also established preschools and childcare facilities throughout Kazakhstan. The efforts of the Zhenotdel in the 1920s were evident in the relatively large proportion (in comparison to other Soviet republics in Central Asia) of Kazakh women in the workforce during the collectivization drives in the 1930s.

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7 Massell, 378.
8 Corcoran-Nantes, 52.
9 Ubiria, 190.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 193.
12 Michaels, 309.
13 Ibid., 321.
14 Ubiria, 190.
15 Ibid., 193.
Nevertheless, as a result of the propaganda and social policies of the late 1930s, Kazakh women’s “primary political, social, and economic function in society became reduced to producing and rearing children.”\textsuperscript{16} Despite being the main targets of the Soviet efforts to modernize Kazakh society, the state needed women as mothers and wives first, workers second.

The onset of the Second World War created a sudden demand for an expanded labor force. Women in Kazakhstan were given technical training to work in sectors of the economy that were previously considered “unsuitable” for women, such as heavy industry, construction, and mining.\textsuperscript{17} In the decades following the war, Kazakh women slowly became more fully incorporated into the workforce, nearly catching up to the standards of the rest of the Soviet Union by the 1980s.\textsuperscript{18} However, there were steep differences in terms of pay and status. By the late 1970s, despite comprising a slight majority of the workforce, women still occupied a disproportionately small number of positions of power.\textsuperscript{19} Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, women’s salaries were on average two-thirds of what men would earn.\textsuperscript{20}

The paradox presented by the Soviet expectations for women and their legislative rights exploited the idea of gender equality to take advantage of women as workers for the state. Despite the promises of legislation, the status of Soviet women “did not differ in principle from their counterparts in capitalist society.”\textsuperscript{21} The effort to emancipate women by guaranteeing them the right to work did not bring expanded freedoms, but rather gave them a “second shift” after work at home as mothers and wives.\textsuperscript{22} Soviet social scientists discussed the question of gender

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{16} Michaels, 327. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Corcoran-Nantes, 79. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 82. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Schwartz, 67. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Corcoran-Nantes, 82. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Schwartz, 83. \\
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 67. 
\end{flushleft}
equality with the implicit assumption that women were inherently responsible for taking care of children in the family.\textsuperscript{23} There was never any proposal that would have men reciprocate and assume equal responsibility for the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{24} This mentality was justified with appeals to a biological basis for feminine roles, “invoking the inherent qualities of the female condition.”\textsuperscript{25}

These inequalities in gender roles reflected the limited conception of women’s liberation in Soviet ideology.\textsuperscript{26} In Central Asia, in particular, the drive for women’s emancipation went hand-in-hand with the effort to bring women into the labor force. The social tensions produced by the breakdown of the traditional nomadic social hierarchy would remain unresolved throughout the Soviet period.

3. Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused a massive restructuring of the political and economic systems in Kazakhstan. In the newly-established Republic of Kazakhstan, the end of state guarantees and subsidies in agriculture, manufacturing and other sectors of the economy led to massive unemployment.\textsuperscript{27} These changes had a more significant impact on women in the labor force due to the types of positions they traditionally held, making unemployment “essentially a female problem.”\textsuperscript{28} The end of the Soviet political system also brought an end to the Soviet affirmative action policies that had previously guaranteed quotas for the number of women in institutional politics. In the years immediately following independence, the number of female

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{26} Corcoran-Nantes, 77.
\textsuperscript{27} Nezhina and Ibrayeva, 339.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 17.
representatives in the government sharply declined. Moreover, Kazakh women suffered in the domestic sphere, as mothers were forced to cope with the sudden loss of the state-provided subsidies and benefits they had previously received, such as paid maternity leave, a low-cost childcare system, free public education, and government allowances for families with children.

The collapse of the Soviet system produced an ideological vacuum that allowed a resurgence of social conservativism in Kazakhstan with particular consequences for women. As in other countries that experienced the sudden and unexpected transition from socialism to free market capitalism at the end of the Cold War, Kazakh society has experienced a trend that has been named “re-traditionalization”: a “return to traditional values, family life, and religion, which entails, in part, women being moved out of the work force.” In the years since gaining independence, attitudes and customs from the pre-Soviet era have been adopted and “re-imagined” as national traditions in Kazakhstan. These changes include the practice of Islam, now widely accepted as “an important element of Kazakh national identity,” as well as non-Islamic customs such as bride kidnapping. In the last few years, discourses of shame regarding women’s behavior have further placed “male control over female mobility and female sexuality” under the guise of traditional Kazakh values.

This resurgence of conservative attitudes stands in contrast to the Kazakhstani government’s legal guarantees regarding women’s rights. The state government, officially secular, in many ways continues the legacy of Soviet legislative support for gender equality. The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, adopted in 1995, guarantees equal legal rights to all

29 Ibid.
30 Khassanova, 385; Werner, 320.
31 Kligman, 142.
32 Werner, 329.
33 Ibid., 321.
34 Ibid., 329.
citizens and prohibits discrimination based on gender. Kazakhstan has consistently participated in a number of international initiatives dedicated to improving the status of women, including the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 1998 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Kazakhstani government has also taken measures to identify the extent and consequences of gender inequality in the country and develop strategies to address these problems. In 2005, President Nazarbayev announced the Gender Equality Strategy for 2006–2016, which identified patterns of gender inequality in the public and private spheres and laid out specific strategies and goals for addressing these problems in the future. The 2009 Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women “defines basic concepts of gender discrimination and [...] affirms that all state agencies are responsible for implementing gender policies. Kazakhstan’s National Human Rights Action Plans (2009–2012 and 2017–2020) target “gender equality in the labor market, in pension security reform to meet the needs of elderly women, in addressing domestic violence, in preventing human trafficking, and in increasing women's participation in elected positions and in senior levels of government.”

Although the government is establishing the legal foundation that will eventually allow for women to gain greater traction regarding political representation, there is much work that needs to be done before this vision is achieved. In 2017, Kazakhstan was ranked forty-third in the world according to the Gender Inequality Index of the United Nations Development

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 8–9.
Programme, better than the average for Europe and Central Asia.\textsuperscript{39} Kazakhstan has achieved virtual gender parity in secondary education.\textsuperscript{40} In politics, however, women are still widely underrepresented, and men continue to dominate the top positions in government. In 2016, women comprised 27\% of the members of the lower house of parliament (the Mazhilis), up from 10.4\% in 2006.\textsuperscript{41} In the upper house of parliament, the Senate, women make up only 22\% of the total membership.\textsuperscript{42} In local representative councils (maslikhats), women made up only 12\% of all deputies in 2014; in some regions, such as East Kazakhstan oblast, this figure was as low as 2\%.\textsuperscript{43}

In the business sector, the share of women participating in the labor force (65.4\%) lags not far behind that of men (77.3\%).\textsuperscript{44} However, according to data collected in 2016 by the Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, women comprise only 29.3\% of managerial positions in Kazakhstan overall.\textsuperscript{45} Women’s participation in the labor force is uneven across various sectors of the economy. In fields such as construction and agriculture, women make up less than one-fourth of leadership positions.\textsuperscript{46} Women make up a majority of managers only in the sphere of education, where they comprise 63.8\%.\textsuperscript{47} These inequalities reflect the conservative social trends in post-independence Kazakhstan as well as the end of state quotas for female workers in certain male-dominated professions.

\textsuperscript{39} United Nations Development Programme, 38, 41.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{41} Asian Development Bank, 15.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} United Nations Development Programme, 38.
\textsuperscript{45} Auel’bekova.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
Women have been active participants in both domestic and foreign-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kazakhstan since the country established independence. Women make up a majority of the staff at NGOs as both volunteer workers and as leaders, and their efforts have been instrumental in “developing reports for international agencies” and influencing government policy on issues affecting women.\(^\text{48}\) However, domestic and international NGOs based on Western models have largely failed in their efforts to counter the rise in conservative attitudes toward women. Kazakhs “traditionally rely on government and extended family for help” and generally regard NGOs with suspicion.\(^\text{49}\) Instead, grassroots movements that support women within a conservative Islamic context have gained traction by positioning themselves as alternatives to Western secular feminism.\(^\text{50}\) Groups such as the Society of Muslim Women “assert their own version of the canon of acceptable customs” by providing support for female victims of domestic violence and promoting women’s education and employment based on Islamic teachings.\(^\text{51}\) The proliferation of such movements attests to the unresolved tensions generated by the legacy of Soviet legal guarantees for women in Kazakhstan.

4. Conclusion

The Soviet assimilation of Kazakhstan was predicated on its policies regarding women: by encouraging women to seek education and employment, the Soviet regime undermined the patriarchal nomadic hierarchy and gradually established a new system in its place. However, rather than free women from domestic servitude, the legal guarantees for gender equality saddled them with extra responsibilities as workers in addition to those as mothers and wives. The state

\(^\text{48}\) Kabdiyeva, 300.
\(^\text{49}\) Nezhina and Ibrayeva, 356.
\(^\text{50}\) Snajdr, 303.
\(^\text{51}\) Ibid., 299.
reinforced traditional attitudes on gender roles while enforcing social policies that benefited women both at work and in the home.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, newly-independent Kazakhstan continued to offer legislative support for women’s rights and has consistently participated in international efforts to establish gender equality. However, the country’s tumultuous transition to economic privatization and sudden entrance into the global market have caused a conservative reaction that has reinforced patriarchal attitudes toward women’s roles. Despite some encouraging signs of progress regarding women’s representation in politics and business, it remains clear that legal provisions are not enough to change how women are perceived in Kazakh society. Women who have entered into politics and business have brought a new wave of visibility and empowerment to women unavailable to them prior to the 21st century. With the introduction of these opportunities and the growing number of women entering into these positions of power, there is hope that women will achieve equality in Kazakhstan.
Works Cited


