

TRAPPED BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: A STUDY OF HEGEMONIC FEMININITY IN KAZAKHSTAN'S ONLINE AND STATE DISCOURSES

By Aizada Arystanbek

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in

Women's and Gender Studies (GEMMA)

Main Supervisor: Nadia Jones-Gailani (Central European University)

Second Supervisor: Irene Perez Fernandez (University of Oviedo)

Budapest, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how standards of hegemonic femininity are established for modern Kazakh women, and how these standards are enforced upon women in different spaces, specifically on social media platforms and via official state discourse. This study investigates how standards of hegemonic femininity are utilized by the state to police women's bodies, glorify national culture, and normalize violence against women who do not conform to these standards. Building upon the legitimacy established through state discourses, online discussions further reinforce the normalization of violence. Drawing upon discourse analysis as the primary method for examining available comments on Facebook and Instagram and Nursultan Nazarbayev's speeches, among other sources, this thesis is one of the first studies of modern Kazakh nationalism from a critical gendered perspective that situates discourses about Kazakh women in the context of sexual violence. The main significance of this work is uncovering how colonial and Soviet heritage affect the notion of Kazakhness today and the way these ideas, as an amalgamation of postcolonial and nationalist politics, perpetuate harmful standards of behavior for Kazakh women. By studying the discourse, I aim to demonstrate the narrow liminal space between the East and the West in which Kazakh women are being placed today for the sake of preserving the uniqueness of national culture that leads to 'weaponization' of women's bodies and naturalization of violence against them.

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Last, but not least, I would like to thank my sisters in solidarity – all Kazakhstani women who raise awareness, protect each other, and fight sexism and misogyny day by day in however small ways.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Amina Kenzhebayeva.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 25,130 words

Entire manuscript: 28,624 words

Signed **Aizada Arystanbek**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aizada Arystanbek', with a long, sweeping underline.

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List of Abbreviations

GBV – gender-based violence

SSR – Soviet Social Republic

SMW – Society of Muslim Women

VAW – violence against women

Introduction

Introduction

Over the past few years there has been an increase in the volume of content being generated that pertains to the topic of how to be a modern Kazakh woman.¹ A few examples include a series of lectures on the moral education of young women in local universities and books aimed at teaching women how to be perfect Kazakh wives (all created and implemented with a support of a local government), an emergence of *uyatmen* who threaten Kazakh women for sharing revealing pictures of themselves online with physical abuse, and a viral short film Zhezekshe about the moral lesson on how young Kazakh women should dress modestly in order to avoid harassment and violence.² In times of global interconnectivity and constant exposure of personal lives on the internet, Kazakh women and men are facing new dimensions of policing of their bodies and behavior that places a heavy burden on their shoulders of representing the nation and adhering to Kazakh standards of hegemonic masculinity and femininity.

The focus of this thesis is the burden of national representation that falls on Kazakh women. The concept of femininity represents a multifaceted process where women participate as active agents and represent different understandings of the concept. Mimi Schippers and Erin Grayson Sapp conceptualize femininity through the years. According to the authors, the second wave of feminism saw femininity as strictly deleterious characteristics assigned to

¹ In my work, I use word 'Kazakh' to refer to ethnically Kazakh people and word "Kazakhstani" to refer to citizens of Kazakhstan, who could be of different ethnicities.

² "Встреча, Направленная На Нравственное Воспитание Девушек," *KazATU*, 2017, <http://kazatu.kz/ru/news/Vstrecha-napravlennaya-na-nravstvennoe-vospitanie-devushek-6819.html>; Aisulu Toyshibekova, "Рецензия на книгу «Ты – казашка. Гордись!»," *Vlast*, December 18, 2019, <https://vlast.kz/books/36405-recenzia-na-knigu-ty-kazaska-gordis.html>; «Это позорище на всю страну» - как в Казахстане наказывают за вызов уяту," *Caravan*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.caravan.kz/news/ehito-pozorishhe-na-vsyu-stranu-kak-v-kazakhstane-nakazyvayut-za-vyzov-uyatu-509617/>; TALAS FILM, "Жезөкше / Өте Мағыналы Кино 2020 / Жаңа Қазақша Кино," *Youtube*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljsMOEnDCIE&feature=youtu.be>.

women under patriarchy that should be completely eradicated for the emancipation of women. Third wave feminists, on the other hand, see femininity as something that could be embodied by anyone and be used as a “source of power.”³ In my research, I concentrate on the way femininity is deployed by the state and the public as an inferior counterpart to masculinity to be controlled by men. However, I do recognize the way many feminist scholars and activists today reimagine femininity outside of its hegemonic standards. This thesis draws attention to the social construction of femininity by the Kazakhstani government, and how the government ‘weaponizes’ the construction of gender roles potentially legitimizing a culture of misogyny and victim-blaming in the country. It is important to state that Kazakh people and Kazakh women are not monolith categories with uniform beliefs and expressions of their masculinity/femininity. There is no simple juxtaposition between Kazakh men and women, as Kazakh men also suffer and are starting to speak out against unachievable standards of hegemonic masculinity.

A study of online discourse surrounding nationalist expectations from Kazakh women analyzes the ways through which national identities in Kazakhstan are being shaped and enforced in daily interactions. An analysis of the official state discourse in this thesis recognizes the power of the state in the nationalist processes of an undemocratic society of Kazakhstan. I define official state discourse as a discourse produced by members of the government. Official state discourse warrants a separate chapter in this thesis, since Kazakhstan has an authoritarian political regime with tight control over media and continuous crackdowns on the freedom of speech. A complete control over the narrative of national culture leads to what Partha Chatterjee describes as a top-down model of nationalism when there is an “imposition of

³ M. Schippers and E. G. Sapp, “Reading Pulp Fiction: Femininity and Power in Second and Third Wave Feminist Theory,” *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 1 (April 1, 2012): 31.

cultural homogeneity from the top, through state action.”⁴ Kazakhstan fits the top-down model of Chatterjee by being an authoritarian state with considerably limited civil liberties where the state plays the key role in defining the nation-building model, and what ethno-cultural traditions and practices are preserved as parts of the national cultural heritage.

The main research question of the study is how nationalism in Kazakhstan, as constructed in online spaces and through state rhetoric, reinforces standards of hegemonic femininity and, thus, exacerbates the normalization of violence against women in the country. I define the normalization of violence as acceptance of at least some levels and forms of violence against women as normal and culturally appropriate. I operationalize normalization of violence by looking at the prevalence of victim-blaming and sexist and misogynistic explanations behind gender-based violence in the online discourse. I base my understanding of hegemonic femininity on Mimi Schippers’ definition of it as a set of standards for womanly behavior that puts them in the inferior position to men.⁵ As I discuss further in the Literature Review, violence against women (VAW) is chosen since it is one of the most illustrative indicators of gender inequality in a given society. The United Nation’s Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines VAW as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women.”⁶ VAW, therefore, is multifaceted and all its forms are interconnected with each other. This thesis focuses on two specific forms of violence against women: rape by a stranger, and domestic abuse by a husband, as forms of VAW that attract the most media and state attention and, therefore, generate the most discourse around it online.

⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “Nationalism as a Problem,” in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Taylor & Francis 2003), 165.

⁵ Mimi Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony,” *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (March 9, 2007): 85–102.

⁶ “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,” *United Nations*, December 20, 1993, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/violenceagainstwomen.aspx>.

My thesis is a study of nationalism in Kazakhstan from a critical feminist perspective and from the positionality of being a Kazakh woman. Kazakhstan is a case study of a newly independent state with colonial and socialist pasts that is actively building a national identity via reimagination and re-traditionalization.⁷ The main argument of the research is that contemporary Kazakh women are put by both the state and the society in a liminal space between the East and the West where they are forced to constantly perform according to the standards of hegemonic femininity, and to represent nation's honor even in situations of sexual violence. Traditions and cultural mores are continuously enforced onto Kazakh women in different spaces and contexts. After discussing the processes of how such traditions come about based on the historical context of the country, I demonstrate how hegemonic femininity is enforced onto Kazakh woman in online discussions on violence against women, especially on Instagram and Facebook, and in a broader official state rhetoric as well.

Background context

Before becoming a part of the USSR after the October Revolution of 1917, Kazakh tribes had already had a history of colonization by the Russian Empire.⁸ The country has been independent since 1991 with Nursultan Nazarbayev leading an authoritarian government and being the first and only president with unilateral power until March 2019. The country's nation-building process is set up to create a separate identity for Kazakhstani people based primarily on Kazakh ethno-cultural traditions.

The majority of Kazakhs are Sunni Muslims, which has over time led to a creation of a unique Muslim culture in the country. Islam has been a fundamental part of national identity of Kazakh people. G.M. Yemelianova recalls history of the spread of Islam in present-day

⁷ Diana T. Kudaibergenova, "The Use and Abuse of Postcolonial Discourses in Post-Independent Kazakhstan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 5 (May 27, 2016): 917–35.

⁸ Gani Aldashev and Catherine Guirking, "Colonization and Changing Social Structure: Evidence from Kazakhstan," *Journal of Development Economics* 127 (July 2017): 415.

Kazakhstan. “From the fifteenth century Islam became the official religion of the Kazakh Khanate which marked the beginning of the Kazakh nation. Since then Islam has steadily proliferated across various strata of Kazakh society.”⁹ Thus, Islam was accepted as the major religion among Kazakh around the same time when the Kazakh Khanate, the first political grouping of the Kazakh ethnic group, was established meaning that Islam has been at the roots of Kazakh ethnic identity.

During the Soviet era, the policies of forced secularism differed across Central Asia with Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) as the primary target. Douglas Northrop outlines the remake of gender practices in Soviet Uzbekistan by the Soviet authorities, which mainly focused on unveiling of Uzbek Muslim women. Northrop’s work demonstrates the way women’s bodies have been used as a ground for power struggles between Soviet authorities and native communities in the processes of Sovietization and *korenizatsiia*. While the author does not account for in detail what was the issue of resistance in Kazakhstan, his text highlights the fact that gender relations were a focal point in changing and assimilating Central Asia into the Soviet Union.¹⁰

Anuradha M. Chenoy argues that in the process of de-Islamization and general integration, Central Asian women were used by the Soviet authorities as “agents for Soviet policies in the region.”¹¹ Chenoy describe the way women in Central Asia were transformed into a working class, while some specific traditional practices like *kalym* (bride price paid to her family) were outlawed. As a socialist state, the government propagated the belief that “women’s oppression had been eradicated because of female participation in labour” which

⁹ G.M. Yemelianova, “Islam, National Identity and Politics in Contemporary Kazakhstan,” *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 287.

¹⁰ Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 345.

¹¹ Anuradha M. Chenoy, “Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 9 (March 2, 1996): 516.

had resulted in a newfound women empowerment that did not exist before in the region where social relations were of feudal nature with women holding little to no power. However, as women were still expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers, this meant that they carried the double burden of paid and domestic work.¹²

Methodology

In my thesis, I use discourse analysis to trace how casual interactions in digital settings perpetuate standards of hegemonic femininity and normalize victim-blaming and stigmatization of survivors of gender-based violence. Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method that analyzes language and what power it holds for our understanding of the world. Teun A. van Dijk defines critical discourse analysis as an analytical research method that “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.”¹³ According to the author, analyzing discourse entails questioning the way “specific discourse structures” are used for the reinforcement of social dominance on various levels of lingual communication and in different contexts. Van Dijk also argues that discourse analysis serves as an appropriate research tool for studying cultural hegemony, the way powerful forces stay in power not through abusive tactics but through mundane actions. Therefore, discourse analysis allows for the necessary space to step back and take in a fuller picture of how nationalist rhetoric finds its way into every level of modern everyday socialization. Nationalism is a force present in the political development of most modern states, and yet it is also inextricably linked with the everyday lives of people. Nationalism manifests itself in the ways people interact with each other, and observing and analyzing the way people interact on a daily basis in such active and

¹² Chenoy, “Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia,” 517.

¹³ Teun A. van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2008), 349.

accessible space as social networks give access to these interactions in their most unembellished form.

Language is a powerful tool of oppression that carries distinctive power to uniform, censor, and stigmatize. Michel Foucault defines discourse as a space where “power and knowledge are joined together” and it being a “series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable.”¹⁴ I choose discourse analysis as the main method for this study due to an understudied power of language and social interactions in the perpetuation of nationalist sexist rhetoric in Kazakhstan. Discourse analysis is a method that shows the weight and consequences of elements of our socialization that we might consider mundane and of little consequence. Myra Macdonald (2003) defines discourse as “a system of communicative practices that are integrally related to wider social and cultural practices, and that help to construct specific frameworks of thinking.”¹⁵ Moreover, according to Foucault, discourse manifests itself in different forms and spaces. Thus, discourse analysis warrants a study of various levels where discourse is produced and what power each of this level has, which is what I aim to achieve by studying both digital media interactions and official state rhetoric. Macdonald makes a strong case for discourse analysis as a preferable method of studying media due to its distinctive ability to evade the narrowness of a semiotic analysis and still being more precise than an ideological analysis that tends to overgeneralize. Macdonald argues that media makes up a significant part of “the fabric of our social world” and serves as an “inventor of values and ideas.”¹⁶ This attests the cultural power of social media today validating the necessity of its analysis from various perspectives.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Chapter 2 Method, Part IV The Deployment of Sexuality,” in *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

¹⁵ Myra Macdonald, *Exploring Media Discourse* (London: Arnold, 2003), 10.

¹⁶ Macdonald, *Exploring Media Discourse*, 2.

Social media in the form of social networks today allows for a new unprecedented level of connection between individuals, and exposure to view of all segments of the public. I chose to focus primarily on Facebook and Instagram, as these are among the top three most used social networks in the country.¹⁷ Instagram and Facebook have been rapidly growing their user-base in the last several years. Reportedly, the most common way to engage in discussions with others on these platforms is through commenting on the posts of others.¹⁸ Therefore, the comments sections under public posts of popular users on these networks is the primary focus of this discourse analysis. Social networks like Facebook and Instagram represent a contemporary space where everyone can ‘meet’ and share their views. The experience is intensified because of the erasure of class, sex, and ethnic borders that the internet provides. Anyone can comment on a public post or start a new conversation. Moreover, social networks grant anonymity and a level of protection and distance to the commenter allowing for a certain level of boldness of statements that may not have come about in personal interactions or during an observation or an interview. The barrier that the internet creates between the users tends to dehumanize people to each other, which elicits a more confident self-expression. This makes Facebook and Instagram virtual spaces that offer diverse, uncensored perspectives of almost any segment of the society with access to the internet.

On both of these platforms I looked for posts that attracted significant level of attention and generated polemic among the users resulting in at least 100 comments under a post. All of the posts and comments are either in Russian or Kazakh and the posts are published on accounts of Kazakhstani news outlets or local Kazakh bloggers/activists. I translate comments into English myself and alter grammar and sentence structure for the sake of clarity. In order to legitimize my examples, I provide original text with the author’s grammar, spelling, and

¹⁷ Владимир Никитин, “Самые популярные социальные сети в Казахстане,” *Комсомольская правда*, August 26, 2019, <https://www.kp.kz/online/news/3585076/>.

¹⁸ Никитин, “Самые популярные социальные сети в Казахстане.”

punctuation of each comment I analyze in the footnotes in italics followed by a reference to the source. If one footnote is used for more than one comment, I number each of the original comment in the footnote for clarity.

I base my choice of method on feminist studies that demonstrate the importance of media discourse for the normalization of gender-based violence. Floretta Boonzaier studies racialized and gendered discourse of gender-based violence in news coverage in South Africa that is rooted in colonial, gendered, and racial undertones.¹⁹ Her argument about how the victim has to adhere to standards of a ‘ideal’ victim in order to be perceived as non-deserving of violence that has befallen her by the news, and hence the public as well, is applicable to an observable tendency in Kazakhstan’s social media to prioritize both in the news coverage and policy action the issue of sexual violence against children over sexual violence against other vulnerable groups, such as women and non-heterosexual and non-binary individuals. Children fall in the category of victims that, as Shannon O’Hara argues, are harder to portray sexually and therefore “it is harder for reporters to blame [children] for the rape.”²⁰ O’Hara also argues that “these [media] portrayals also reinforce stereotypes, which find their way into public opinion, policy, and the legal system,”²¹ proving that different levels of discourse interact and affect each other, as I also argue in my analysis of online and state discourses.

Another study that informs my methodology is Diana T. Kudaibergenova’s research about a mobile application named *Kelin*²² that looks through viral content on Instagram and Facebook and observes women’s messages to each other on the *Kelin* app’s forum.²³ In her

¹⁹ Floretta Boonzaier, “The Life and Death of Anene Booysen: Colonial Discourse, Gender-Based Violence and Media Representations,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 47, no. 4 (December 2017): 470–81.

²⁰ Shannon O’Hara, “Monsters, Playboys, Virgins and Whores: Rape Myths in the News Media’s Coverage of Sexual Violence,” *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 21, no. 3 (August 2012): 255.

²¹ O’Hara, “Monsters, Playboys, Virgins and Whores,” 248.

²² Kazakh word for daughter-in-law

²³ Diana T Kudaibergenova, “Marriage, Women, and Re-Traditionalization in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan,” *Women of Asia: Globalization, Development, and Gender Equity*, 2018, 379–89.

digital ethnography analysis, the author demonstrates how Kazakh women are diminished to one-dimensional characters and poked fun at, while still being held to impossibly high standards of being ‘good’ daughters-in-law. The misogyny rooted in these standards is a manifestation of standards of hegemonic femininity that essentializes women as mothers and wives. The popularity that these standards enjoy among the public demonstrates a resurgence of "traditional" Kazakh values in the new, post-independence Kazakh identity. Kudaibergenova's work highlights a gendered aspect of the newfound re-traditionalization of the Kazakh identity that is being socialized and validated through digital media, all of which warrants relevance to my study of these tendencies in Kazakh society from a different angle of discourse analysis.

Social networks are a place for self-expression where, at the same time, this expression is subjected to constant judgement and policing. A different study of Kudaibergenova on body image highlights the role social networks as the sites of both freedom and control.²⁴ Kudaibergenova argues that re-traditionalization that she sees on social media today has more of a bottom-up nature rather than coming from the elites due to the fact that many social phenomena are being facilitated by actions of ordinary users of the Internet, similar to 2016 *uyatman* incident.²⁵ By analyzing several cases of highly popular public figures on Instagram who challenge 're-traditionalization', Kudaibergenova confirms the importance of social media in both cultural and political dimensions of social life and the way they can intertwine under one post, comment or hashtag.

²⁴ Diana T. Kudaibergenova, "The Body Global and the Body Traditional: A Digital Ethnography of Instagram and Nationalism in Kazakhstan and Russia," *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 3 (September 2019): 363–80.

²⁵ The word means a man who shames, an amalgamation of a Kazakh word for shame and an English word for man. Kudaibergenova describes 2016 case when a Kazakh man decided to cover up breasts of a Kazakh woman statue, as he deemed it inappropriate.

Limitations for this kind of social media discourse analysis include assumptions that I must make about certain characteristics related to a person's online profile, such as sex, gender, age, location. The research is conducted with an assumption that the comments found on the internet for everyone to see are representative of the views of the commenter. There is always a possibility of the fraudulent commentary generated by bots. There also now exists a group of users widely known as "nurbots" (merging of the root Nur, a part of Nursultan Nazarbayev's first name, and the word bot), which are known to generate pro-government or anti-opposition content on social networks. Therefore, there is a possibility that not all views encountered online on social networks are authentic and that some are even generated with an explicit political agenda. However, the idea that certain users are paid to disseminate a particular message on social networks also proves how important social networks have become in shaping our political and social views, the argument reiterated by constant blocking of social media in Kazakhstan by the government.²⁶

Lastly, my study of gendered nationalism in Kazakhstan is informed by postcolonial feminist texts that re-imagine the agency of the "Third World" woman and non-Western feminism/s. The study of gender theory and histories of feminism(s) have largely been critiqued for alienating non-Western and non-white audiences, as well as exoticizing 'other' subjects of research. I place special importance on my identity as a Kazakh woman who was born and raised in Kazakhstan, as I believe that being a "Third World" woman myself and writing about my "Third World" country is a part of decolonization of the knowledge production process. My work represents my contribution to the process of decolonization by being, as Kirin Narayan phrases it, a native anthropologist who challenges ideas of objectivity in social science

²⁶ Diana Baidildayeva, "Internet Censorship in Kazakhstan: More Pervasive than You May Think," *openDemocracy*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/internet-censorship-in-kazakhstan/>.

research.²⁷ With my work, I place myself among other “Third World” female scholars while acknowledging both my class and education privileges and highlighting the importance of my background for my research. I seek to carve out a space for Central Asian women in the category of the “Third World” feminist studies with my research.

In the first analytical chapter of the thesis, I provide an in-depth historical context with an analysis of the way postcolonial and post-Soviet contexts inform modern understandings of Kazakhness by the society. This chapter helps to account for how certain standards of hegemonic femininity become safeguarded in the modern day. The next chapter focuses on the analysis of the online discourse and discussions of Kazakh femininity in connection with incidents of gender-based violence, rape by a stranger and domestic abuse by a husband. The study of online discourse demonstrates the prevalence of Kazakh Muslim practices in discussions of rape and domestic violence, as well as the tendency among online users to reduce women to their male relations and remain wary of the Western influence on women, which entails emancipation and rampant non-heterosexual relationships. The last chapter provides an examination of the official state and Nazarbayev’s discourse on gender equality and the way the state also participates in reproducing the reductive ideas about Kazakh womanhood. By basing the analysis of the last chapter on three of Nazarbayev’s speeches, it becomes clear how the state’s insistence on connecting matters of gender equality and family affairs can legitimize nationalistic trends found among the public in online discourses. Nazarbayev’s imaginary of Kazakh woman abides by Kazakh Muslim standards of behavior and represents the uniqueness of Kazakh identity by keeping the distance from the Middle Eastern Islamic practices. The

²⁷ Kirin Narayan, “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?,” in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 285–306.

conclusion to the thesis offers final thoughts on how prevalent hegemonic femininity is in Kazakh society today, when a woman's value is calculated according to her male relatives, which hinders gender equality and normalizes victim-blaming and stigmatization of survivors of rape and domestic abuse in Kazakhstan's society.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter reviews literature pertaining to the topic of hegemonic femininity in Kazakh national culture perpetuated in digital media and state responses. The aim of the literature review is to combine different theoretical approaches, such as gendered nationalism and postcolonial feminism, in order to account for Kazakhstan's colonial past. I also point out a gap in the existing studies of gendered nationalism studies done on Kazakhstan and Central Asia. I begin this chapter by expanding upon the concepts of hegemony and hegemonic femininity introduced previously, and use these definitions to examine gendered nationalism and postcolonialism in the Central Asian context.

Hegemony, femininity, and hegemonic femininity

The concept of hegemony in the context of culture and nation was developed by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the early twentieth century. With the term 'cultural hegemony' Gramsci sought to outline the way dominant classes exercise continuous power over subordinate classes not through coercion and blunt force, but rather via an ideological persuasion. As Gramsci explains, "hegemony is a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership."¹ The powerless, therefore, do not rebel and overthrow the capitalist elite because the working class is confined to the codes of respectability that are designed to preserve its subordination to the elite. The "moral leadership" of the government, according to Gramsci, must be continuously framed by the powerful as 'leading' the people to ensure dominance. Hegemony dictates ideological modes of behavior that are practiced daily.² The concept of cultural hegemony led to further explorations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. The idea that people's consent is given

¹ Roger Simon and Stuart Hall, *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Lawrence & Wishart, 2002), 22.

² Simon and Hall, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, 59.

freely to the authority of the ruling class who are recognized as ideological leaders who establish valid cultural norms is key for my analytical framework. I look into what kind of moralistic leadership Kazakhstani government represents in matters of gender equality and how people enforce ideas about ‘morally correct’ behavior onto Kazakh women online.

Gramsci’s cultural hegemony is a potent term for feminist academia as it has been employed for the terms of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. The connection between state ideology and a set of expectations about the behavior of its members based on their gender was first discussed by Raewyn Connell. Connell conceptualizes hegemonic masculinity as “the pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue.”³ According to Connell, although only a small minority of men were assumed to possess hegemonic masculinity, it was defined as a normative concept and applied to all men in general. Essentially, the concept of hegemonic masculinity incorporates all the norms that make a man into the most honorable version of himself, as deemed by the society, and positions all men in relation to this standard, while also legitimizing “the global subordination of women to men.”⁴

Mimi Schippers builds upon Connell’s work to arrive at the following term that I use as the main definition of hegemonic femininity in my thesis: “Hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”⁵ Hegemonic femininity, therefore, surmises men in the dominant position in the society and women as inferior to them. While

³ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 829–59.

⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity.”

⁵ Mimi Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony,” *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (March 9, 2007): 94.

Schippers states that most expressive features of hegemonic masculinity and femininity might be ubiquitous, their peculiarities and daily manifestation depend on the empirical context which warrants an exploration of how standards of hegemonic femininity look like in Kazakhstan today.

As Michel Foucault writes in *History of Sexuality*, even such domains as sex and familial affairs that we think of as private are largely dominated by the power relations that are multifaceted and more complex than simple acts of governing and prohibition. If we accept Foucault's statement that "the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole"⁶ as true, then we understand that power relations that are being perpetuated in individual groups, such as families, affect larger understandings of power roles in the society and vice versa. Power comes from below, too, and people have a capacity to affect their rulers, as well as be affected by the rulers. After looking at the gendered nationalistic discourse on social media and its roots in traditions and histories, it is important to look at the discourse of the top level, the rulers, to see how Nazarbayev, a figure that is often thought of as having the most power and autonomy in the country, may be affected by the traditions and norms perpetuated by the public and the way common themes of the public discourse are echoed in the discourse of the single most powerful figure in Kazakhstan.

Gendered nationalism, postcolonialism and gender-based violence

Nationalism as a scholarly discipline has an extensive body of literature, including noted works by Hans Kohn, Benedict Anderson, and John Hutchinson. While works of these authors have paved the way for the study of nationalism as a social and political phenomenon,

⁶ Michel Foucault, "Chapter 2 Method, Part IV The Deployment of Sexuality," in *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 94.

in this literature review I choose to focus on more recent works of scholars who study nationalism specifically in its connection to postcolonialism. By including works that are simultaneously informed by some fundamental nationalism studies and postcolonial context, I construct a more relevant theoretical framework for my research that allows for a more complex view on modern nationalism that is inherently gendered and tethered to colonial pasts.⁷ This framework challenges politics of citation, a term I borrow from Sara Ahmed and with which she conceptualizes the overwhelming tendency in academia to explain any social phenomenon by citing white male scholars rather than indigenous, female, and non-white scholars.

Juan R.I. Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti define nationalism as:

The subjective counterpart of the nation, a space of interiority in which the nation is conceived of as an aspect of Self, as well as an ideology wherein the nation is given a cobbled-together (and often purloined) history, a distinctive cultural heritage, and a commonality of interest that all stop at the borders of the nation-state. Nationalism implies the ability to identify with a large group of other people, but it also always involves the constitution of those outside the nation as Other in a powerful manner.⁸

This is an exhaustive definition of the term that captures both the social construction of nationalism, its ideological foundation, and the constant process of 'other'-ing that it implies. I use this as a working definition of nationalism for this research. National cultures are often based on the premise of common ancestry and destiny that implies homogeneity of the nation's people. Franz Fanon argues that national culture entails a perpetual effort of re-imagining and upholding it. According to Fanon, national cultures have two distinct roles of "rehabilitating the nation" and providing a "hope for the future," both tasks that have been taken on by the Kazakhstani government in its attempt to solidify a new independent state.⁹ Kazakhstan-2050,

⁷ Sara Ahmed, "Making Feminist Points," *Feministkilljoys* (blog), September 11, 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>.

⁸ Juan R. I. Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti, "Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia: Introduction," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 189–203.

⁹ Franz Fanon, "National Culture," in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Taylor & Francis 2003), 154.

a state address by Nursultan Nazarbayev included in the third-chapter analysis, outlines both hopes for the economic and social future of the country and an insistence on increasing the nation as part of rehabilitation from the history of political oppression.

Gendered nationalism is a separate branch of scholarship that studies the social phenomena of nationalism from a critical feminist perspective combining both nationalism and feminist studies. Nationalism, as a social phenomenon, is inherently gendered because it is a product of a social construction done in the patriarchal setting. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty argue that nations are “largely premised within normative parameters of masculinity and heterosexuality,”¹⁰ which automatically labels women as pariahs, the ‘other,’ and puts them in a subordinate position. Alexander and Mohanty posit that nation-states discipline and mobilize women’s bodies in order to consolidate “patriarchal and colonizing processes.”¹¹ Therefore, according to feminist scholars, nation-states represent masculine institutions rooted in sexism and misogyny and informed by colonial processes. I also employ George L. Mosse’s ideas about the role of respectability and morally right behavior in nationalist processes. Mosse defines respectability as “a term indicating “decent and correct” manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality”¹² and argues that the respectabilities we now accept as a given have nationalistic origin. Mosse’s analysis is focused on the history of Europe, Germany and England, while I put it into the perspective of independent Kazakhstan. Mosse calls hegemonic standards of masculinity, “ideals of manliness,” and their “effect on the place of women” some of the most important norms of modern societies.

¹⁰ M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 2012), xiv.

¹¹ Alexander and Mohanty, “Introduction,” xxiii.

¹² George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 1.

Reina Lewis and Sara Mills define postcolonial feminist scholarship as follows. “Feminist postcolonial theory has engaged in a two-fold project: to racialize mainstream feminist theory and to insert feminist concerns into conceptualizations of colonialism and postcolonialism.”¹³ Leela Gandhi also raises an important tendency among postcolonial societies to attempt to forget its violent past and re-invent themselves again on their own terms,¹⁴ which is what Kazakhstan’s government has been actively doing for the past three decades by coming up with different strategies of nation-building. The tactic of burying colonial pasts and inventing new ones is present in the government’s consistent avoidance of the colonial heritage. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the authoritarian leader of the country, initiates various economic and social programs aimed at re-defining Kazakhstani identity, such as *Ruhani Zhangyru* and Kazakhstan 2050.¹⁵

From the recognition of the state as a masculine and sexist institution follows a large body of academic work that examines hegemonic masculinity and femininity in the context of nationalism. Feminist scholars investigate the way different burdens fall on men and women in the nation-building process and how this division continues to affect mundane lives of people. Some of the first works to critique nationalism from a feminist perspective were that of Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias and Jill Vickers.¹⁶ According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis, women participate in national processes in different ubiquitous ways, including as

¹³ Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

¹⁴ Leela Gandhi, “Introduction,” in *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Leela Gandhi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁵ Kazakhstan 2050 is a strategy aimed to achieve economic and social prosperity of the country by the year 2050. *Ruhani Zhangyru* is a separate program dedicated to cultural development and that is a part of Kazakhstan 2050. Both programs were invented and proposed by the Nazarbayev and are parts of his vision of how Kazakhstan should develop over time, which consists of preserving cultural heritage of the Kazakh nation, while having a steadily developing economy.

¹⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, *Women-Nation-State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989); Jill McCalla Vickers, “At His Mother’s Knee: Sex/Gender and the Construction of National Identities,” in *Women and Men: Interdisciplinary Readings on Gender*, ed. Greta Hoffmann Nemiroff (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990), 478–492.

biological reproducers by giving birth to the nation's members, as markers of ethnic/national differences between the nation and 'others', and as transmitters of ideology and culture by educating and nurturing children of the nation.¹⁷ In the following chapters, I focus on these three key categories being reproduced in digital spaces and official state narrative.

After Yuval-Davis, in the late 1990s Joan Nagel and V. Spike Peterson shift focus toward the study of hegemonic masculinity in gendered nationalism. Nagel, for instance, analyzes why men are willing to die for their country and studies hegemonic masculinity in times of 'hot' nationalism.¹⁸ Peterson, on the other hand, expands the argument to analyze institutionalized heterosexism.¹⁹ Her arguments about unachievable standards of masculinity and recognition of women as active agents in perpetuating these standards are relevant for any analysis of hegemonic femininity. Examples of gendered nationalism and gender-based violence studies that expand feminist critique arguments to non-Western settings include Veena Das and Nayanika Mookherjee's texts on the use of women as the embodiment of a nation's honor in time of interethnic/international conflict.²⁰ As both authors argue, nation-states tend to serve as protectors of victims of violence, such as kidnapping, rape, and forced marriage, only when it becomes a question of national honor and there exists an outside threat that precipitates this violence. This protection is always based on essentializing women as mothers, daughter, and wives rather than positioning them as equal members of the society deserving of respect and protection on their own.

¹⁷ Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Introduction," in *Women-Nation-State*, by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 7.

¹⁸ Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (March 1998): 242–69.

¹⁹ V Spike Peterson, "Sexing Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (June 1999): 34–65.

²⁰ Veena Das, "National Honor and Practical Kinship: Unwanted Women and Children," in *Conceiving the New World Order*, ed. Fraye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 212–33; Nayanika Mookherjee, "Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh," *Feminist Review*, no. 88, (2008): 36–53.

Central Asia: 'Third-World' Women, Islam and Nationalism

Nationalism and its connection to the perpetuation of violence against women from a critical feminist perspective remains considerably understudied in Central Asia – a gap my thesis aims to fill. I employ the following studies to emphasize the agency of Central Asian and Kazakhstani women in nationalist processes, as well as to point out regional peculiarities of these processes that challenge some arguments of the field of gendered nationalism.

The definition of the “Third World” woman is multifaceted. In her works “Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses” and *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*, Chandra Mohanty highlights the urgency to acknowledge that “Third World” woman is not a uniform category and should not be used as an umbrella term by scholars.²¹ For Mohanty, there exists a form of solidarity between “Third World” women based on some ubiquitous experiences, even though she does not include Central Asia in her list of the “Third World” countries.²² The exclusion of Central Asia in this category highlights the importance of a research such as my own which can incorporate intersectional feminist perspectives in uncovering postcolonial pasts, which would allow for a reevaluation of the place of Central Asian women and their histories in the “Third World” academic discourse. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s book delineates experiences and struggles of “Third World” women. One of which entails an ambiguous position toward feminism as a foreign Western movement that does not accurately depict experiences and culture of the “Third World” women and, at the same time, as something that should not be easily dismissed and used as an excuse for perpetuating sexist traditional practices. Kazakhstani women have their

²¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 53.

²² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 47.

own extensive history of fighting for their rights, even if this fight falls outside of conventional perceptions of feminist struggle. As Minh-Ha points out, it then becomes a process of simultaneous adoption and self-interpretation. Minh-ha's discussion of the struggle of non-Western feminists is germane to Kazakhstan's case where the society is still wary of feminists and many believe the movement to be irrelevant to the country's context. Minh-Ha denounces connecting "Third World women's oppression with notions and terms made to reflect or fit into Euro-American women's criteria of equality."²³ Nonetheless, simply dismissing feminism as a "whitewashed notion and a betrayal of roots values" shows nothing but "fear and insecurity" on the part of the denouncers.²⁴ The concept of "betrayal of roots" is especially relevant to my analysis of the reinforcement of Kazakhness in digital media, when women who do not uphold hegemonic femininity are often accused of betraying the nation. Thus, Kazakh women do partake in similar struggles with other "Third World" women that are exacerbated by colonial heritage.

My study aims to prove that nationalist discourses that marginalize women are still in place in Kazakhstan, even if there exists a narrative of women empowerment. My study looks at nationalism and violence against women in times when a country is not going through an international violent conflict. I rely on Michael Billig's prominent work on banal and hot nationalisms.²⁵ Billig's argument that nationalism does not always have to be 'hot' in times of war or other conflicts when a nation is fighting for its political interests for it to be an integral part of a society is useful for my analysis because it demonstrates the way even mundane practices and interactions are informed by nationalist rhetoric and constitute an expression of nationalism in themselves. The banal, taken-for-granted nationalism is a part of everyday

²³ Trinh T Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Woman Issue,'" in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), 106.

²⁴ Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Woman Issue,'" 106.

²⁵ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

practices in any nation-state and I aim to demonstrate how these banal practices in Kazakhstan have long-lasting consequences for women's safety. One of the recent studies by Fabio Belafatti researches the connection between political regimes in Central Asia and its restrictive gender roles.²⁶ The study confirms two important points for my research: (1) the governments of Central Asia construct parts of their nationalist rhetoric by going back to Turkic roots; and (2) that there are security and economic incentives for these states to pose on the international arena as countries striving for gender equality, which results in rather shallow campaigns such as, for instance, Kazakhstani government compiling a photo essay of women in the military.

The works of Cynthia Werner and Edward Snajdr demonstrate that the topic of violence against women is often “defended in the name of the culture” where struggle for change becomes a struggle between cultural values and human rights.²⁷ Werner demonstrates that some Kazakh women oppose certain sexist nationalist traditions, like bride kidnapping, while not willing to denounce the national culture altogether.²⁸ Building upon on Werner's earlier work, Snajdr also points out Kazakhstani women's complacency in upholding sexist cultural norms, such as wife beating. According to Snajdr, local NGOs and activists have to resort to framing the issue of domestic violence as a non-human rights issue in order to avoid being pigeonholed as Western agents by colleagues and authorities.²⁹ Diana T. Kudaibergenova's text on the representation of femininity and masculinity by local women artists demonstrates self-awareness of women, and specifically women artists, about the rigid role assigned to them by nationalist standards.³⁰ However, while the artists contest state-sponsored rigid nationalist

²⁶ Fabio Belafatti, “Gendered Nationalism, Neo-Nomadism, and Ethnic-Based Exclusivity in Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Uzbek Nationalist Discourses,” *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 7 (April 2, 2019): 66–81.

²⁷ Cynthia Werner, “Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 2 (June 2009): 329.

²⁸ Werner, “Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia.”

²⁹ Edward Snajdr, “Ethnicizing the Subject: Domestic Violence and the Politics of Primordialism in Kazakhstan,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 3 (September 2007): 615.

³⁰ Diana T. Kudaibergenova, “Between the State and the Artist: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in the Formation of Ideas of the Nation in Central Asia,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (March 2016): 225–46.

discourses, they still largely uphold normative standards of femininity in their art. Studies of Werner, Snajdr, and Kudaibergenova, draw attention to the fact that Kazakh women do not always actively protest gendered nationalist norms and can also support them.

Similar to the works of Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod, Snajdr's other study explores the way Muslim women express their agency in pre-dominantly patriarchal practices of Islam.³¹ As a US specialist, Snajdr comments on the unconventional ways in which women of Society of Muslim Women (SMW) help victims of domestic abuse. Their work is largely situated outside of the dominant Western model of human rights protection mechanisms. Women of SMW emphasize a woman's primary role as a nurturer and caregiver of the family and the organization's goal is to prevent a couple from getting a divorce, if possible. Women of SMW express their own version of nationalistic and postcolonial thinking that places Russian colonization at the root of modern problem of Kazakh men, such as excessive drinking.³² Snajdr demonstrates how Muslim women can also be active agents within the societies on their own terms instead of being painted as an oversimplified subjugated group. When discussing the role of Islam in normalization of VAW my thesis also draws from the arguments of Mona Eltahawy who has repeatedly called for a sexual revolution for women in the Middle East on all levels of socialization, state, family, and public, due to the way each of these levels is deeply entrenched in the patriarchal culture.³³ There are a number of important similarities between Central Asia and the Middle East in the processes of self-invention of the

³¹ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–36; Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 783–90; Edward Snajdr, "Gender, Power, and the Performance of Justice: Muslim Women's Responses to Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan," *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 2 (May 2005): 294–311.

³² Snajdr, "Gender, Power, and the Performance of Justice."

³³ Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

nation and negotiating Islamic identity with national identity³⁴ that render relevance of Eltahawy's arguments to the context of Kazakhstan.

Lastly, Kudaibergenova offers important insights into the nationalist groupings in Kazakhstan in her other work by demonstrating that the nationalist movement is not monolith and that, while Nazarbayev and his regime are responsible for the main nationalist and postcolonial rhetoric disseminated within the society, there exist other nationalist views. Kudaibergenova neatly weaves together three different directions of Kazakhstan's nationalism and reminds about the danger of essentialization of all Kazakh nationalists as Nazarbayev supporters. According to her research, some of the most aggressive and radical Kazakh nationalist oppositions are not in support of Nazarbayev's government and, instead, critique it and demand harsher treatment of the 'other' by the state by "condemning every political action."³⁵ However, Kudaibergenova states that Kazakh nationalists do not explicitly oppose the regime itself, except when it comes to the matters of "importance of the Kazakh language and culture superiority in nation-building policies."³⁶ An argument could be made that even though Kazakh nationalists differ in their views on some political aspects, the fact that they do not oppose the regime overtly means that they could still be susceptible to the state-led nationalist discourse on other matters, including gender roles and gender-based violence. Furthermore, while many groups within the political landscape of the country may differ in their political views, majority of them seem to be complicit in the perpetuation of the role of women as cultural and biological carriers of the nation, thus conforming to the Gramsci's cultural hegemony. This argument is reinforced with Snajdr and Werner's findings among

³⁴ Ladan Rahbari, Chia Longman, and Gily Coene, "The Female Body as the Bearer of National Identity in Iran: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Women's Bodies in Official Online Outlets," *Gender, Place & Culture* 26, no. 10 (October 3, 2019): 1417–37.

³⁵ Diana T. Kudaibergenova, "The Use and Abuse of Postcolonial Discourses in Post-Independent Kazakhstan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 5 (May 27, 2016): 927.

³⁶ Kudaibergenova, "The Use and Abuse of Postcolonial Discourses in Post-Independent Kazakhstan," 928.

many women in their attitudes towards domestic abuse and bride kidnapping. At the end of the day, very few activist groups outwardly critique the state's tunnel vision of Kazakh women as mothers, daughters, and wives.

As this literature review has demonstrated, I draw upon a number of relevant and interconnected fields of study in order to examine the intersections of gendered nationalism, hegemonic femininity, and violence perpetuated against women. By placing Kazakh history and women's experiences in a postcolonial perspective that is attentive to the formation of the modern nation-state, I draw attention to the gap that continues to exist across multiple fields of study that connects gendered nationalism and violence against women in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

Chapter One: Kazakh Women and the Nation

This chapter analyzes relevant historical background of Kazakhstan in order to understand the main pillars of the nation-building process and the historical and religious contexts of gender relations in Kazakhstani society. In this chapter, I engage with how and why Kazakhness as an identity is formed around the norms and traditions that so many politicians and citizens stand on guard over today. While Nursultan Nazarbayev's regime plays a key role in moderating and fortifying identity of a modern Kazakh woman, the ideas and beliefs that this identity is based upon are not solely a product of this regime, but rather an amalgamation of various factors such as Soviet heritage, Islamic influence, and general patriarchal culture. This chapter investigates what stands behind the idea of Kazakhness in the identity of a modern Kazakh woman. The second section of this chapter outlines the borders of respectability and intersecting roles of labor, religion, and sexuality in determining women's worth to the nation. In so doing, my analysis will inform an explanation of how modern standards of hegemonic femininity for Kazakh women create a liminal position of Kazakh women as in-between the West and the East. This chapter interrogates how Kazakh historical past seems to prevail in constructing post-independence Kazakhness and, thus, presents a contextualized history for explaining the motivations that inform Kazakh online public and state discourses. This is essential for understanding the unspoken parts in comments and speeches of digital and state discourses.

Historical context

Kazakhstan's modern-day borders have been mostly preserved from its days as the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), which was formed in 1936 as a result of the dissolution of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the People's Soviet

Republic of Khorezm.¹ Jonathan Levin reflects on the nation-building process in Central Asia by highlighting its artificial construction by the Soviet authorities. “While other nations have created narratives and ideologies through self-determination, the people of Central Asia have had their histories and identities crafted largely by foreign actors.”² According to Levin, foreign actors mainly include the Kremlin and other Soviet authorities that contributed to the identity politics that still defines all of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. There are other historians and scholars who challenge this rather simplistic view on the national formations of Central Asia. Diana T. Kudaibergenova, for instance, while still admitting the weight of the Soviet Union in the national borders’ construction in Central Asia, makes an argument that Kazakh SSR is a “semi-colonial” Soviet product rather than a simple imposition of national and ethnic identity from the Soviet authorities.³

Central Asian states have been countering the claims of complete artificiality of their national borders. In the same study, Kudaibergenova argues that the period of 1960-1970, a post-Stalin era of the Soviet Union, was marked by liberalization, intellectual transformation, and a surge of the nationalistic discourse. She describes the way Kazakh intellectuals engaged in writing historical poems and novels mostly focused on “the golden age of Kazakhs – pre-Russian, pre-colonial period and described their heroic, glorious past as an independent “nation.”⁴ Similarly, according to Marlene Laruelle, “the Kazakh Khanate from the fifteenth century is often invoked as the main political entity confirming the Kazakhness of the contemporary state.”⁵ Looking into the past both by Kazakh and Soviet writers, such as Olzhas

¹ Jonathan Levin, “From Nomad to Nation: On the Construction of National Identity through Contested Cultural Heritage in the Former Soviet Republics of Central Asia,” *NYUJ Int’l L. & Pol.* 50, no. 1 (2017): 270.

² Levin, “From Nomad to Nation,” 271.

³ Diana T. Kudaibergenova, “‘Imagining Community’ in Soviet Kazakhstan. An Historical Analysis of Narrative on Nationalism in Kazakh-Soviet Literature,” *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 5 (2013): 842.

⁴ Kudaibergenova, “‘Imagining Community’ in Soviet Kazakhstan,” 841.

⁵ Marlene Laruelle, “The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan,” in *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions*, ed. Maria Omelicheva (Langham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 3.

Suleimenov and Mukhtar Ayezov, has allowed to challenge the dominant colonial discourse of Kazakhs as a backward region that “had to be wrested out of its timeless past and thrown headlong into the modern (Soviet) era”⁶ by, instead, painting them as “glorious and ancient.”⁷ Therefore, it is impossible not to recognize the role of the Soviet authorities in the process of drawing out ethno-national borders of Central Asia. However, the paramount role of the Soviets should not eclipse the dedication of Central Asian people in building their national identities to both validate their histories and take back their agency from the colonizers.⁸

Laruelle points out the uniqueness of Kazakhstan in being a newly independent post-Soviet Republic that had its titular nationality as an numeral minority of the population and the largest Russian minority population after Ukraine, as well as scattered low-density population throughout the country.⁹ Laruelle presents an important context to understand a place of insecurity and instability from which Kazakhstan has started its independence journey. A phobia of being outnumbered on ‘their own’ land is present among the population to a certain extent even today. Therefore, while members of every nationality are usually protective of its borders and markers of given borders, Kazakh people have had additional reasons to feel more vulnerable about their nation given its low population and the history of colonialism with a more powerful neighbor.

⁶ Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 19.

⁷ Kudaibergenova, “‘Imagining Community’ in Soviet Kazakhstan,” 842.

⁸ The discourse we learned in school during Kazakhstan’s history and Kazakh literature classes certainly supported the idea that Kazakhs have always lived in the Great Steppe, long before Russians came to rule over them in the eighteenth century. In fact, I personally do not recall ever discussing the question of whether or not Kazakh identity was invented in the early twentieth century by the Soviet authorities. The main message of the history books has always been clear, Kazakh people have overcome a lot of hardship and persecution, including famines, Dzhungars, Mongols, Russians, before finally arriving to what seems like the final destination, an independent peaceful country. Noticeably, however, the discourse of colonization was also absent from the school history classes. While the juxtaposition between Kazakhs and everyone else who came to their land seemed obvious, the words like colonizers and colonization were never invoked, most likely because Russian Federation has remained a strong ally of Kazakhstan warranting a more benign discourse about its domination over Central Asia to be created.

⁹ Laruelle, “The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan,” 1.

Aziz Burkhanov and Dina Sharipova briefly outline Soviet state-building policies. The process of *korenizatsiia*, “development of local languages and cultures, including creation of dictionaries, written histories, and often speaking the local language was considered more beneficial than Russian,”¹⁰ was briefly implemented in the beginning of the 20th century. *Korenizatsiia* was followed by a *russification*, a process that established Russian language as the standard language of communication and emphasized the superiority of the Russian culture.¹¹ Burkhanov and Sharipova describe that the later policy of the “Soviet People,” Sovietization, did not offer much modification from the dominance of the Russian culture and language. Overall, Burkhanov and Sharipova argue that the Soviet power over Kazakh SSR, as well as the Central Asian region in general, was one of the strongest compared to, for instance, the Balkan countries, while Central Asian nationalist movements were the “weakest link in the chain” of the late Soviet-era protests.¹² The most significant episode of national protesting in the history of Kazakh SSR was the 1986 December protests in Almaty when people, the majority of whom were young university students, were protesting an appointment of Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian with no previous connection to the region as a new Kazakh SSR First Secretary, as a replacement for Dinmukhammed Konayev. The protests were violently suppressed.

Therefore, the new identity of independent Kazakhstan comes after a significant, and successful, period of political and cultural repressions, which results in the rapid postcolonial national reimagination.¹³ By looking at Kazakhstan’s colonial past and narratives that have been doubting its authenticity as a self-determined national group, it becomes clearer what kind

¹⁰ Aziz Burkhanov and Dana Sharipova, “Kazakhstan’s Civic-National Identity,” in *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions*, ed. Maria Omelicheva (Langham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 22.

¹¹ Burkhanov and Sharipova, “Kazakhstan’s Civic-National Identity,” 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³ Leela Gandhi, “Introduction,” in *In Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Leela Gandhi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 1-22.

of insecurities could be hounding modern-day nationalists and patriots. A vulnerable position after more than a century of colonization also accounts for the intense essentialization of women's bodies as the nation's scarce resource for overcoming colonial past.

Returning to the contemporary era of independent Kazakhstan, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have declared secularism in their constitutions and disowned communism as a political regime in the early 1990s. However, Islam has stayed the main religion of the majority of local native groups.¹⁴ The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan starts with "We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historical fate, building statehood on the native Kazakh land"¹⁵ presenting a new category of Kazakhstani people who are living on a native *Kazakh* land. The importance of Kazakhness that underlies the notion of Kazakhstan's citizenry is apparent in the speeches of Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's first president and long-time dictator. Laruelle analyzes Nazarbayev's discourse from his early post-independence speeches on Kazakh and Kazakhstani identities. For instance, she quotes him from Nazarbayev's 1999 work *V Potoke Istarii*, "the culture of the Kazakhs must be seriously assimilated by the representatives of other *ethnoi*, just as the Kazakhs, in their own time earnestly studied Russian culture" and "the formation of Kazakhstani citizenry [...] is impossible without the transition to a higher level of spiritual development of the Kazakh nation."¹⁶ Laruelle describes the way Kazakhness is being manifested through various ways in today's policies, such as renaming the streets and cities to more Kazakh names and adapting new architecture style. For instance, all of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin streets in Kazakhstan have been renamed after Kazakh intellectuals and

¹⁴ Anuradha M. Chenoy, "Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 9 (March 2, 1996): 518.

¹⁵ "Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan," n.d., *Akorda.kz*, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitution.

¹⁶ Laruelle, "The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan," 3.

historical figures such as Abay Kunanbayev and Kenesary Kasymov.¹⁷ Bayterek, a tower constructed to imitate a tree with a golden nest, was the first ambitious project in the capital city in the early 2000s. The idea of Bayterek comes from “(ethnic) Kazakh mythology as traces of this nomadic legend were translated into the built environment.”¹⁸ Thus, it is evident that in Kazakhstan the process of nation-building post-independence, as navigated by Nazarbayev and his regime, relies heavily on the Kazakh ethnic culture for constructing an idea of Kazakhstani citizenship. Ethno-traditional basis of the identity of Kazakh women is discernible in the third chapter analysis of Nazarbayev’s discourse on gender equality.

However, while Kazakh culture may be the pillar of the Kazakhstani identity, the government has also made it a point to construct a popular discourse of a multi-ethnic country. One of the facts learned every year in school is that in Kazakhstan, there are representatives of more than 130 nationalities, all of whom live peacefully in perfect harmony. From institutionalized recognition of ethnic diversity to recurring organization and hosting of Congress of World and Traditional Religions,¹⁹ Nazarbayev and his regime make clear efforts to propagate Kazakhstan’s image as a secular and peaceful country that is free of interethnic and interreligious conflicts and tensions, despite recent news that may beg to differ.²⁰ These efforts contribute to the modern image of Kazakhstani identity as tolerant and diverse with implied supremacy of Kazakh culture.

¹⁷ “История переименования улиц Астаны,” *Dixinews*, November 22, 2016, <https://dixinews.kz/articles/zhizn/25525/>.

¹⁸ Bernhard Köppen, “The Production of a New Eurasian Capital on the Kazakh Steppe: Architecture, Urban Design, and Identity in Astana,” *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 4 (2013): 599.

¹⁹ Laruelle, “The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan,” 8.

²⁰ “Dozens Injured When Brawl Erupts During Worker Protest At Kazakh Oil Field,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/dozens-injured-when-brawl-erupts-during-worker-protest-at-kazakh-oil-field/30027649.html>; Tamila Varshalomidze, “Ethnic Violence Blows Hole in Kazakhstan’s Narrative of Tolerance,” *Al Jazeera*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/ethnic-violence-blows-hole-kazakhstan-narrative-tolerance-200210091600580.html>.

Turning to a current state of gender equality in the country, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, women and men are equal. According to Anuradha M. Chenoy, the Sovietization of women has helped to establish a more secured position for them in the newly independent Central Asian states, which is evident from high percentage of literacy rate and school enrolment ratio of women at the time when the text was published in 1996.²¹ The law today also prohibits such traditional Kazakh practices as *kalym* and bride kidnapping; the latter is punishable by up to ten years of imprisonment. Since 1997 the percentage of women in the parliament of Kazakhstan has grown from 13.4% to 27.1% of the present day.²² Kazakhstan has also accessed the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1996.²³ Thus, the government of the state have been supporting gender parity both at international cooperation sites and in legal provisions. However, Kazakhstan's ruling powers have been criticized for the inefficacy of the gender equality legislation and failure to actively champion women's rights in the country. For example, in 2019, Dinara Smailova, the founder of the civil movement NeMolchi Kazakhstan,²⁴ addressed a letter to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) outlining the actual precarious state of the victims of gender-based violence in the country.²⁵ As a leader of the Kazakhstan's prominent feminist movement who has been working with victims of sexual violence for years, Smailova's demand for recognition

²¹ Chenoy, "Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia," 517.

²² "Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%)" - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic," *World Bank*, n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=KZ-UZ-TM-TJ-KG>.

²³ https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en

²⁴ A movement similar to the MeToo movement of the West that had started in Kazakhstan in 2016.

²⁵ Dinara Smailova, Jacqui Hunt, and Evgeniya Kozyreva, "Re: Information on Kazakhstan for Consideration by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women at Its 74th Session (21 October - 8 November 2019)" (*Equality Now*, September 30, 2019), https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/equalitynow/pages/2048/attachments/original/1570011594/Kazakhstan_CEDAW.pdf?1570011594.

of how systemic the violence is in Kazakhstan reinforces factual lack of positive change in alleviating the epidemic of VAW in the country.

The difference between the position of Kazakhstani women according to official documents and statements, versus the everyday reality is stark for any woman who lives in Kazakhstan. Smailova rightfully criticizes the lack of action and support from the government towards women who became victims of sexual violence. In Chapter Two, I demonstrate the harsh treatment these victims receive in online discussion on social networks. Although things are rapidly changing with the grassroots feminist movement expanding and occupying more public space, the government continues to practice myopic discussion and solutions when it comes to the issues of gender inequality, mostly ignoring the pervasiveness of the local patriarchal culture.

The Meaning of “Kazakhness”

As George L. Mosse’s *Nationalism and Sexuality* argued in 1984, there is a clear connection between nationalist values and the notions of respectability and morality. I revive in this chapter Mosse’s argument on the role of a “history of respectability” that has been slow to receive attention from the scholars and the public.²⁶ In order to better understand how standards of hegemonic femininity are rooted in the ethno-cultural customs of Kazakh people, I break down the way Islamic identity became an integral part of being Kazakh and the way it dictates mores of Kazakh women’s behavior today.

As demonstrated in the previous section, a continuous emphasis on the traditional Kazakh culture stems out of both an insecurity about the position of Kazakh ethnic population at the time of independence, and also a retrospective reaction to the process of colonization and

²⁶ Regina Kim, “400 казахстанок в год погибают от домашнего насилия – комментарий эксперта,” *Ktk*, March 5, 2018, <https://www.ktk.kz/ru/news/video/2018/03/05/91473/>.

Russification. I argue that in the context of Kazakhstan, traditions that seem to pre-date the colonization period acquire an importance of tying the validity of Kazakhstan's statehood to historic events that discredit the influence of the colonizer. The ideas of respectability, including women's respectability, are rooted in the mystic past from which rigid standards of hegemonic femininity are derived. Therefore, in the context of Kazakhstan, the process of postcolonial "creative euphoria of self-invention"²⁷ coincides with the use of women as markers of ethnic borders and biological and cultural reproducers. The Kazakh uniqueness is maintained both by reverting to pre-colonial traditional values and by actively distancing from values of the 'Other', i.e. the West, such as active and overt feminist movement, a foreign phenomenon that is seen as a threat to the distinctive Kazakh culture. For example, as I will demonstrate in the second chapter, several online comments denounce feminism and blame it and the West for corrupting Kazakh women and exacerbating the level of sexual violence in the country.

Islamic identity plays a key role in reinvention and discrediting of the colonizer in Kazakhstan and, therefore, serves as a guide for ideas of femininity and respectability. T. Jeremy Gunn describes the way Islamic knowledge was carefully controlled by the Soviet authorities which resulted in Central Asian Muslims possessing a "rudimentary" level of knowledge of Islamic teachings.²⁸ Gunn argues that the majority of Central Asian Muslim population is not tied to Islam per se but to the identity of being a Muslim, as opposed to being an Orthodox Christian, the predominant religion of Russia and other Eastern European countries of the Soviet bloc. The Muslim identity, therefore, has a special importance to Central Asian people but not primarily due to the general piousness of the population. Martha Olcott

²⁷ Leela Gandhi, "Introduction," in *In Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Leela Gandhi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5.

²⁸ T. Jeremy Gunn, "Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism, and the State in Central Asia," *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 390.

called Islam an “integral part of Kazakh identity”²⁹ and Gunn compared the way Kazakh perceive their Muslim identity to the way “how they conceive of their ethnicity, family, and mother tongue.”³⁰ This echoes Mosse’s discussion of the way respectable behavior became to signify “an expression of inward piety – that moderation and control over the passions which religious revival proclaimed and which fitted so well the lifestyle of the middle class.”³¹

Therefore, modern Kazakh women are largely subjected to the standards of hegemonic femininity that could be found across Muslim societies with specific regional modifications. For instance, veiling is largely considered to be a non-essential part of Kazakh Islamic practices. Gunn attributes less radical practices in Central Asia to the influence of Sunni Muslims’ Hanafi School of interpretation that focuses on spiritual beliefs rather than on strict adherence to practices. According to Gunn, the Hanafi school also emphasizes a community consensus on certain issues over upholding the *sunnah*, which means that, for example, a president’s decision to speak out against women veiling would not be taken as a betrayal of the Islamic customs and necessarily undermine the power of the faith. Central Asian Islam is also described as “less discriminatory toward women.”³² This description of peculiarities of regional Islam could account for the lack of contradiction between the importance of Islamic identity and existing level of women empowerment in the country, such as considerable presence of women in the workforce.

At the same time, the distinctive Islamic practices make it easier to set a custom glass ceiling on women empowerment and also helps to legitimize a rejection of Western feminist movement. Shaban Darakchi calls this notion “religious selectivity, which involves [the use of]

²⁹ Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* (Carnegie Endowment, 2002), 209.

³⁰ Gunn, “Shaping an Islamic Identity,” 391.

³¹ Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 5.

³² Gunn, “Shaping an Islamic Identity,” 396.

religious arguments predominantly for justification of certain beliefs.”³³ According to Darakchi, religious selectivity involves “sins ranking,” a belief that some religious sins are “more sinful” and significant than others.”³⁴ Sins ranking and double standards are observed in online discourses in the following chapter on the example of the victim of the viral rape case who was subjected to heavy criticism for allegedly drinking alcohol before the attack. Many comments made by Kazakh men aggressively state that women drinking alcohol should not be tolerated. I argue that this constitutes religious and gender selectivity: religious because a lot of Kazakh men do not consider alcohol-drinking a contradiction to their own Muslim identity and gender because a consumption of alcohol by Kazakh women is still frowned upon by many. A lot of users in the following chapter focus their victim-blaming specifically on Kazakh women’s drinking and partying. In Kazakhstan, men are often excused for breaking away from Islamic practices, whereas the same attitude is usually withheld for women, especially for the victims of sexual violence. Therefore, Kazakh women are held to a higher double standard compared to Kazakh men even though both groups assume Muslim identity. Sexism, misogyny, and homophobia are justified from a moral standpoint that considers betrayal of the national culture as a worse sin than sexism, misogyny, and homophobia themselves. Kazakh women, thus, are placed in a liminal space between foreign practices of the West, where the mores for women’s behavior are considered to be more lewd, and more radical movements of the East that differ in their religious practices.

Kazakhness is defined by traditional practices that stem from colonial past and inform contemporary standards of hegemonic femininity of Kazakh women. This context allows us to understand better exactly what kind of culture is being discussed, attacked, and protected by

³³ Shaban Darakchi, “‘The Western Feminists Want to Make Us Gay’: Nationalism, Heteronormativity, and Violence Against Women in Bulgaria in Times of ‘Anti-Gender Campaigns,’” *Sexuality & Culture* 23, no. 4 (December 2019): 1222.

³⁴ Darakchi, “‘The Western Feminists Want to Make Us Gay,’” 1222.

people on social media. By looking at texts that directly touch upon colonial and Soviet heritage in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the fundamental role of Islamic identity for the post-independence Kazakh identity becomes more conspicuous, as well as the ways in which the ideas of morally correct and incorrect behavior for Kazakh women stem from the colonial heritage. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates that the avid contemporary discourse on the ‘morally correct’ behavior of Kazakh women exists in specific historical, political, and religious contexts that amalgamate together to inform nationalistic views on the position of women in Kazakhstani society.

Chapter Two: Violence, Rape and Sexism in Online Discourses

The focus of this chapter is the representation of Kazakh women in nationalist discourses on social media that expose how Kazakh womanhood is constructed, imposed and policed in online spaces. The online discourses I analyze here are mainly comments made by users on publicly available websites and social media networks, including viral posts on Instagram and Facebook concerning incidents of violence against women. Private forums, chat rooms, and private Facebook and Instagram accounts are not included in the analysis. It is my contention that the online discussions demonstrate the prevalence of gendering notions of Kazakhness in casual interactions, and how these collective understandings reinforce preconceived ideas about women's bodily autonomy. The selected comments I examine in this chapter represent different ways through which nationalist standards of hegemonic femininity are enforced online in the context of gender-based violence. Hegemonic femininity presupposes that all women are inferior to men by nature, in which their worth is primarily determined by how well they perform their duties as mothers, wives, and daughters.¹ I look at the overall impact of misogyny and sexism as tools for reinforcing stereotypes of how Kazakh women should represent themselves in different spaces and situations, including at home with their husbands and in public spaces.

Representations of Kazakh women in digital media is a broad terrain for analysis that I narrow down to the discussions of rape by a stranger and physical domestic violence by a husband. While different forms of violence against women do not exist in isolation from each

¹ Mimi Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (March 9, 2007): 85–102.

other and are often interconnected with one type of violence against women begetting another,² there is an opportunity to clearly articulate through a discourse on violence how gendered nationalist norms are imposed on women by fleshing out how Kazakh womanhood is represented through narrower discourses. My choice to concentrate on these two specific forms of VAW is due to the fact that these are the most avidly discussed issues on social media in Kazakhstan that continue to be sensationalized and scandalized both by the media and by members of the public generating an extensive discourse on women's bodily autonomy. The laws and policies on domestic violence have been undergoing constant alterations, even becoming a primary target for feminist campaigns in Kazakhstan.³ Other forms of VAW, such as sexual harassment, for instance, are not yet attracting the same level of controversy. Moreover, it could be argued that rape by a stranger and physical domestic abuse by a husband both constitute the most overt and, therefore, controversial forms of violence. Marital rape, although outlawed in the country, does not make the news headlines and neither do other forms of domestic abuse such as emotional and economic violence, although they are outlawed as well. In contrast, rape by a stranger and physical domestic abuse⁴ have been gaining momentum in the news and among the public for the past couple of years and are, thus, the primary subjects of analysis in this chapter.

Speaking broadly, the level of violence against women and public responses to it serve as conspicuous signs of how protected women are in any given nation-state. Physical safety is one of the basic human rights, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and

² Claudia Garcia-Moreno and World Health Organization, *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes and Women's Responses* (Genebra: World Health Organization, 2005), 32.

³ Aery Duisenova, "In Kazakhstan, Women March for Their Rights - and against Violence," *openDemocracy*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kazakhstan-women-march-their-rights-and-against-violence/>.

⁴ For brevity, I refer to both forms of violence as rape and domestic abuse from here on.

VAW continues to remain a shadow pandemic of the modern world.⁵ The roots of such systemic violence lie in ubiquitous patriarchal structure yielding imbalance of power between genders. However, these roots are most often obscured by victim-blaming, stigmatization of survivors, and absolving perpetrators of violence from responsibility. Moreover, all these processes, while universal, do not exist in a vacuum and become tethered to local norms and culture. The sacredness of women's bodies and their importance as birthers and nurturers of the nation put the question of women's bodily autonomy up for a debate and women themselves at the frontlines of the nation-building processes.⁶

Considering that national identities are “gendered through fundamental human relationships founded in socialization and gender relations” and that women are mainly perceived through their “relational statuses of wife, daughter and sister,”⁷ this chapter aims to uncover the way representation of Kazakh women in online discourses in settings of rape and domestic violence is reductive to their humanity and continues to reinforce sexist norms and stereotypes. The victims of sexual violence are victims of gaslighting and held to impossible high standards of femininity primarily based on Kazakh Muslim identity, while their agency is undermined by tying their honor to male relations. First, I explore the phenomenon of gaslighting and the rigid moral standards of behavior that are so pervasive in the discourse on victims of rape. Second, I look at how domestic abuse is continuously naturalized as part of

⁵ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *United Nations*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>; Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, “Violence against Women and Girls: The Shadow Pandemic,” *UN Women*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>.

⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, *Women-Nation-State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); Jill McCalla Vickers, “At His Mother's Knee: Sex/Gender and the Construction of National Identities,” in *Women and Men: Interdisciplinary Readings on Gender*, ed. Greta Hoffmann Nemiroff (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990), 478–492.

⁷ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “Sex, Violence and Nationalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 9 (July 15, 2017): 1439, 1441.

Kazakh traditions and the way even critical responses to it are also rooted in reductive view of Kazakh women as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives.

The Talgo Case

The first case study that I analyze here is the Talgo case. The incident happened in 2018 when the victim was taking an intercity train ride and was raped by two train conductors in her compartment at night. The woman turned to a local organization NeMolchiKZ, led by Dinara Smailova, for legal support and filed rape charges against the perpetrators. The case went viral under the name Talgo case a few months after, prompting avid discussions on the Internet.⁸ The details of the case, including whether or not the victim was drunk or engaged in an active fight against the perpetrators, have been debated and commonly used to shame the victim. Casual victim blaming like this is prevalent among comments and posts about sexual violence against women. Users often comment that both parties must be responsible for incidents of rape or domestic violence. This victim-blaming in the comments is infused with other sexist stereotypes, such as women being crazy, hysterical, and whimsical.

The presence of the “hysterical woman” in the discourse on sexuality and familial affairs is analyzed by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality*. According to Foucault, women’s bodies are “thoroughly saturated with sexuality; [...] by a reason of a pathology intrinsic to it,”⁹ which has naturalized emotional instability as an innate trait of every woman that is often invoked by men and women themselves as an explanation of why women deserve some sort of physical and emotional schooling through abuse. The figure of a hysterical woman is especially present in comments by men accusing women of tricking men into sex and then filing fake rape reports to the police. Facebook user Tatyana Fominova has been sharing men’s public

⁸ Talgo is the name of the brand of the train on which the incident has occurred.

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Chapter 3 Domain, Part IV The Deployment of Sexuality,” in *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 104.

comments on the Talgo case. On her page, Fominova captures various comments by men who engage in victim blaming and slut shaming by painting women as conniving and unstable.¹⁰ In these comments, the victim of the Talgo case is presented as a hysterical woman who had desired sexual intercourse at first but then had changed her mind and accused innocent men of rape. One man's Facebook comment says, "If you judge people like this – when at first there is consent and then there is not – you can sentence half of Kazakhstan."¹¹ Another man commented that there are "plenty" of examples when women throw themselves at men and then say it was rape in order to "blackmail or try to get something from a man."¹² Women are represented as vile and unstable, whereas men are absolved from any responsibility for their actions confirming the widespread rape myth that women provoke men to sexually assault them.

Smailova issued a statement on Facebook confirming that no alcohol was found in the victim's blood.¹³ However, according to Smailova, such fallacy has spread quickly and is one of the main reasons behind many people's justification of the short jailtime 2.5 years given to both perpetrators, at that time. Smailova then asks readers to "imagine this woman getting on the train after a hard work week" and goes on to paint a picture where the woman would have been entitled to drink two small bottles (*banochki*) of beer.¹⁴ Smailova, an experienced advocate for survivors of sexual violence, has enough expertise and has shown a clear

¹⁰ Tatyana Fominova, Facebook, July 30, 2019,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2434615289914967&set=pcb.2434607346582428&type=3&theater>

¹¹ Народ... нам неизвестны обстоятельства. Они вину не признают. Говорят, все было по согласию. О данном случае не говорю. Но если так судить людей, когда сперва вроде согласие, а потом не согласие... пол Казахстана можно осудить. У меня почему-то сомнения. Миллионы людей ездили... тысячи проводников. Проводник лицо незащищенное. Боятся лишиться работы. Тут что то не то.

Tatyana Fominova, Facebook, July 30, 2019,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2434629079913588&set=pcb.2434607346582428>.

¹² Да, ладно: Масса примеров, когда женщины сами бросаются под мужчин, а потом заявляют об изнасиловании. Понятное дело для того, что-бы шантажировать или отжать у него что то.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2434643553245474&set=pcb.2434607346582428>.

¹³ AshyqAspan (@ashyq_aspannn), "В Крови Потерпевшей Не Было Обнаружено Алкоголя, Но Для Судьи Нет Разницы, Для Него Если Женщина Пьяная – Можно Насиловать, «сама Виновата».", Instagram, July 28, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0dy4cUnGXf/?igshid=vgdip0k5folk>.

¹⁴ AshyqAspan (@ashyq_aspannn), "В Крови Потерпевшей Не Было Обнаружено Алкоголя."

understanding of the systemic nature of the problem of VAW. Therefore, it is telling that Smailova considered the amount of alcohol consumed by the victim as something that needed to be addressed and that could affect the verdict in court.

Shannon O'Hara's work on rape myths illustrates a widespread presence of victim-blaming and denial of any exercised coercion and humiliation at the hands of the perpetrators could be explained by looking at the factors that make it easier to place the blame on the victim. O'Hara describes a child as the hardest victim to blame for being raped, as child's innocence is almost always undisputed. For instance, another infamous case of sexual violence happened in a small village Abay in the southern region, when a 7-year-old boy was raped by several male high school students.¹⁵ The story quickly went viral and was followed by the media for over a year. Under the Instagram post on a page of the news outlet *Ktk* about the final verdict of the case, an overwhelming majority of 540 comments focus on the perpetrators of the act of violence instead of scrutinizing the victim and speculating whether the crime had taken place.¹⁶ The victim of the Talgo's case, in contrast, is an adult woman whose credibility has been repeatedly questioned and her actions have been meticulously perused.

The comments gathered by Fominova are heavily focused on little details, made up or not, of the victims alleged behavior and are used against her to justify the act of rape. For instance, "why she did not scream?"¹⁷ and "it is very weird that two young men raped a 40-plus-year-old woman."¹⁸ Under another post on Tengrinews' Instagram page, one of the most

¹⁵ Margarita Bocharova, "Дело о Детском Насилии в ЮКО: Факты, Лица, Заявления," *Vlast*, March 15, 2018, <https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/27254-delo-o-detskom-nasilii-v-uko-fakty-lica-zaavlenia.html>.

¹⁶ Телеканал КТК (@ktktv), "В Шымкенте Несколько Часов Назад Поставили Точку в Громком Деле Об Изнасиловании Ребёнка.," *Instagram*, January 11, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BsfEw_UAYph/?igshid=1qk3p8fp5gma1.

¹⁷ *А чего не кричала на весь поезд как Димаи? Горло болело что ли?* Tatyana Fominova, *Facebook*, July 30, 2019,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2434606689915827&set=pcb.2434607346582428>.

¹⁸ *Очень странно что молодые парни изнасиловали женщину 40+ очень странно*

Tatyana Fominova, *Facebook*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2434606833249146&set=pcb.2434607346582428>.

popular Kazakhstani news outlets with 1.6 million followers on Instagram, one user commented that the case seems sketchy by stating that “I do not believe that they raped using force, she is not a girl but a grown woman.”¹⁹ The comment implies that adult women cannot be absolved from their own responsibility for getting sexually assaulted, unlike children who are not expected to fend off a grown adult attacking them. Therefore, even if there is little factual evidence to go on from, victim-blaming can snowball rapidly as long as the victim is a sexualized woman. Fominova’s Facebook post includes comments where men build their critique of the victim of the Talgo case around her character’s failure precisely as a Kazakh woman. One man said that, just as her perpetrators, the victim should be sentenced to jailtime for “alcohol consumption in the public space” and “lechery and raping with her drunk and sexy appearance.”²⁰ A similar comment was left by user named Kenzhebek Omirzhan who stated that “if you punish rape, then also punish women for drinking alcohol. You want to get drunk and, at the same time, not be raped. This is incomprehensible.”²¹

Another potent example of victim-blaming could be found in the comment section under the news about a young woman getting severely beaten by a man for refusing him sex that was published on Instagram page of NUR.kz, another big pro-government news outlet with 762 thousand followers on the platform. The victim was sexually harassed and physically abused after joining her friend at a house party late at night. A large number of comments

¹⁹ В этом дела много странного я не верю что они насильно насильовали и она не девочка а взрослая девушка

TengriNews (@tengrinews.kz), “Подтвержденный Апелляционную Жалобу По Делу Об Изнасиловании Проводниками Пассажиры ‘Тальго’ в Костанайском Областном Суде Рассмотрели Уже Во Второй Раз.,” *Instagram*, February 25, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B8_QGg2gSyH/.

²⁰ Потерпевшую тоже надо посадить, хотя бы по адмстатье за употребление алкоголя на общественном месте. Это в лучшем случае, в худшем за привлечение внимание мужчин, или как то по другому к разврату и изнасилованию своим пьяным сексуальным видом)

Tatyana Fominova, *Facebook*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2434725789903917&set=pcb.2434607346582428>.

²¹ Вы осуждаете изнасилование тогда жестко осудите так же и пьянство женщин. Вы хотите пьянствовать и в тоже время не быть изнасилованным. Это уму не постижимо.

Tatyana Fominova, *Facebook*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2436268819749614&set=pcb.2434607346582428>.

blamed the woman for attending the party in the first place and for possibly provoking the attacker. “They [women] dress provocatively... and then say he harassed or raped them... [Women] should not hang out with friends at night. [...] There is no smoke without a fire.”²² The same narrative of the victim seducing her attacker and then erratically changing her mind is present: “If a bitch does not want it, a dog will not jump at her. She must have flirted herself first but, in the end, became the victim.”²³ These two comments neatly summarize the common sentiment of tens of other comments left under the post. The woman’s dignity is questioned, and she is offered little sympathy due to her breaching the mores of respectability for a Kazakh woman – being at a party with strange men late at night with possible consumption of alcohol taking place. Confirming Shaban Darakchi argument about the harsh ranking of women’s ‘sin’ than that of a man, as the attacker himself is not judged for consuming alcohol and being at the party by the Instagram users.²⁴ In this narrative, women are also assigned the responsibility for larger societal problems: “All of this are consequences of women drinking and smoking like men. [...] They dress like whores. Here is what all of this leads to. To lechery and violence.”²⁵ This comment implies that there exists a normative gender relations balance upon which rests the prosperity of the society and which women should not challenge.

²² *Одеваются вызывающе... потом говорят домагался или изнасиловал... ночью шлятся не нужно по гостям и подругам... я конечно не пытаюсь принять сторону этого мужика который ударил ее... но как сказали нет дыма без огня!!! Если пришел отказ значит нужно тупо взять и уйти время придет.. этой девушке не нужно выебываться*

Казахстанский портал NUR.KZ (@kaznews), “Жительница Костаная по имени Лаура заявила о домогательствах и избиении со стороны малознакомого мужчины.,” *Instagram*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CACkQu-Bzlc/>.

²³ *сучка не захочет кабель не скочит. сама походу глазки строила а вконцевке жертвой стала* Казахстанский портал NUR.KZ (@kaznews), “Жительница Костаная по имени Лаура заявила о домогательствах и избиении со стороны малознакомого мужчины.”

²⁴ Shaban Darakchi, “‘The Western Feminists Want to Make Us Gay’: Nationalism, Heteronormativity, and Violence Against Women in Bulgaria in Times of ‘Anti-Gender Campaigns,’” *Sexuality & Culture* 23, no. 4 (December 2019): 1222.

²⁵ *Это все последствия того что женщины бухают и курят как мужики, снимают на видео свои маты в Рувд. Одеваются как последние шлюшки. Вот к чему это приводит. К развратству и насилиям* Казахстанский портал NUR.KZ (@kaznews), “Жительница Костаная по имени Лаура заявила о домогательствах и избиении со стороны малознакомого мужчины.”

Not all comments on the internet always blame the victims of gender-based violence. However, a lot of comments condemning victim-blaming also end up reinforcing traditional gender roles when defending the victim and rarely denouncing the cultural settings of the violence. For instance, Tengrinews has published news about a 19-year-old female teacher who was raped next to a school where she works at in Maiqaragay, a village in Pavlodar oblast. Most of the 129 comments under the news article denounce the state for its inefficient criminal justice system.²⁶ Users in their comments pick up on the trend of a lot of perpetrators having been either accused of sexual violence crimes before or been sentenced, yet still avoiding jailtime: “The police have failed to act again. And this led to a felony,” “the system is rotten, money and connection decide everything,” “[...] the police do not do anything, per usual! Everyone is corrupt.”²⁷ While this discourse is discerning of the systemic ineffectual punishment of perpetrators, at the same time the question of why so many people feel entitled to perpetrate such violence in the first place is not discussed.

Some users who commented under the same news on Tengrinews’ website engage in particularly aggressive commentary calling for castration of the perpetrators or even death penalty: “Here “deep CASTRATION” is needed, and 25 years behind bars!,” “Lynch him, if the police and the laws are powerless,” “[...] when will they implement death penalty for that?,” “I suggest to publicly execute such freaks!”²⁸ These comments construct a discourse

²⁶ “19-Летнюю Учительницу Изнасиловали Возле Школы в Павлодарской Области,” *Tengrinews*, February 26, 2020, <https://tengrinews.kz/events/19-letnyuyu-uchitelnitsu-iznasilovali-voze-shkolyi-392871/>.

²⁷ (1) *Опять полиция которая бездействовала. И это привела к тяжкому преступлению.*

(2) *Систем сгнила, решают деньги и связи.*

(3) *Гульнара, Вы правы, полиция как всегда бездействует! Продажные все. Бедная девочка, живи и будь счастлива! Пусть Всевышний тебе поможет!!!*

“19-Летнюю Учительницу Изнасиловали Возле Школы в Павлодарской Области.”

²⁸ (1) *Вот тут точно нужна "КАСТРАЦИЯ по корень", и 25 лет за решеткой !! Другое не поможет !! Тенгри просьба держать в курсе событий, очень обидно за девушку !! Теперь точно никто не поедет работать в село !!*

(2) *на самосуд его, раз полиция и законы бессильны*

(3) *Эххх, ну когда смертную казнь за это введут?*

(4) *Предлагаю прелюдно казнить таких уродов! Смысла нет его перевоспитывать, это бесполезно.*

Ibid.

that rapists and abusers are hopeless individuals, i.e. exceptions, who should be eradicated from the society but do not excavate the circumstances that allow this violence against women and children to occur on a constant basis. In this discourse, VAW remains solely an individualistic choice that is encouraged by an ineffective justice system. Interestingly, none of the 129 comments under this news article question the victim's credibility. My argument is that it is because the news article offered no details about the victim besides stating that she is young (19 years-old) and is a schoolteacher. The rape also happened during the day on her way to work. All of this does not indicate any particular way in which the victim could be seen as breaching the standards of hegemonic femininity with her behavior rendering her trust and sympathy from the commenters.

The stress on individual behavior and the responsibility of the criminal justice system begets more violence, which is evident in several comments under an Instagram post of @astanovka98, another Instagram news portal with 262 thousand followers. Under the post about the Talgo case verdict, some users called for an organized vengeance against the male judge who presided over the case. While some wished him to experience on his own skin how parents of the victim must feel, one particularly violent comment made by a man suggested gang raping the daughter of the judge which would be “cheaper than hiring a hooker.”²⁹ These comments once again portray a woman's body as an extension of a man's honor, which is a common concept within Islam that dates back to tribal Bedouin affiliations that would tie together nomadic tribes by blood ties. In the case of honor, it is derived from women and

²⁹ *Завести пару детей и пойти с друзьями ебать дочку судьи, главное очередность соблюдать и выйдет даже дешевле чем шлюху снять*
 A98/Новости Астаны (@astanovka98), “Суд Приговорил Двух Проводников ‘Тальго’, Изнасиловавших Пассажирку в Купе, к 2,5 Годам Лишения Свободы,” *Instagram*, July 26, 2019,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/B0XlWoLl7OE/?igshid=h39ran1zuryn>.

protected by the men of the tribe. To target and defile a woman's honor is to shame the entire tribe.³⁰

Mona Eltahawy also makes a strong argument that exposes the way misogyny breeds gender-based violence in Arab countries as a result of a “trifecta of the state, street, and home”³¹ meaning that issues like sexual violence against women cannot be eradicated by imprisoning individual men, as long as the culture that fosters the misogyny allows such practices to exist on every level: the state, the public, and the family. Eltahawy's argument echoes that of Elizabeth Teather who argues that rape is created through discourse, in which “women are constructed as potential victims with vulnerable bodies.”³² According to Teather, this discourse is reinforced by different modes of representation and has the power to affect people's behavior and opinions. The way this narrative of women as victims and men as protectors is ‘weaponized’ in the official state discourse is shown in Chapter Three.

Domestic Violence as a Cultural Norm

Domestic abuse challenges the division between personal and public and exposes unequal misogynistic power structures inside an ideal Kazakh family. Since domestic violence is seen as a familial matter, a continuous pattern found across the comments and public posts on social media is the emphasis on a woman's fulfillment of her role as a mother/wife. There have been many instances when domestic abuse was normalized using traditions in viral posts and articles. Below, I look at public's reaction to this normalization of domestic abuse. Interestingly, these matters are almost always raised specifically in regard to ethnically Kazakh women and not all women citizens of Kazakhstan who could be of other ethnic identities.

³⁰ Sana Khayyat, *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq* (Saqi Books, 1990).

³¹ Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

³² Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather, “Introduction: Geographies of Personal Discovery,” in *Embodied Geographies*, ed. Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather (Routledge, 2005), 3.

On November 20th, 2019, Kazakhstani feminist activist Fariza Ospan posted on her Instagram page a video that has since collected 126,000 views and 1318 comments.³³ The video shows a woman who gives a toast at a wedding and says in Kazakh that a woman is not a woman unless she endures beatings from her husband, an opinion that prevails among 15% of Kazakhstani women, according to local news.³⁴ Ospan condemns the woman's statement and has translated what she is saying into Russian and English in the caption of her post. She ended the post by stating that if someone ever asks her about the state of women's rights in Kazakhstan, she would simply show them said video, implying the prevalence of such misogynistic views in the country. This post has earned considerably more attention than other posts on Ospan's Instagram, most likely because, rather than talking about the problem of gender-based violence in general, the post presents Kazakh national culture in an unfavorable light, which was avidly discussed by the commenters from different angles, such as linguistic meaning, regional peculiarities, etc.

While the majority of comments echoed Ospan's sentiment in denouncing such overt normalization of domestic abuse, some were quick to point out that the meaning of some phrases in Kazakh language could have ambiguous translations. The Kazakh phrase *tayaq zheu*³⁵ could be translated as both a physical punishment and a non-violent argument between people, the latter would imply that a wife is not a wife unless she experiences conflicts with her husband. One man in the comments has accused Ospan of showing the "wrong side of our country" by demonstrating "so-called problems."³⁶ This man and others have emphasized the

³³ Fariza Ospan (@ospanfariza), "Я Пожалуй Оставлю Это Здесь," *Instagram*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5Gag5RnmOC/>.

³⁴ "15% Казахстанок Считают, Что Муж Вправе Бить Жену," *Zakon.Kz*, November 1, 2019, <https://www.zakon.kz/4993085-15-kazahstanok-schitayut-cto-muzh.html?fbclid=IwAR3RncmORXrsaCqwUSV9IRWfCghzEdsNuEwZ3L8iJZC0zuSXVwEteLFRphA>.

³⁵ Таяқ жеу – Kazakh.

³⁶ *Фарица, тут стоит мыслить шире) «Таяк жеу» не имеет прямого смысла, и речь идёт не о физическом насилии со стороны мужа, можно и словами наругать жену «Таяк жегизу», это просто укреплённая связка слов и всем казахам она знакома. Ещё и на английском написали, вместо того чтобы нашу страну показывать с правильной стороны, вы показываете так называемые «проблемы». К тому*

joking manner of the toast and the relaxed atmosphere at the wedding that they see as harmless fun rather than disturbing trivialization. Other women commented on the general culture of domestic power structures by stating that women need to be “wise” and have more patience, *sabr*, in order to “outsmart their husbands” in the conflicts, which would warrant physical abuse obsolete.³⁷ Since Ospan has an established group following and audience, there were a lot of people who have agreed with her position by referring to the prevalent culture of violence in the country. However, a lot of comments, at the same time, called for women to leave their abusers and change the culture by starting with themselves, which once again places the emphasis and responsibility on individual women.

Those commenting on Ospan’s video have also insulted the woman in question (“And she gives birth to children and raises daughters, horrific”)³⁸ and/or pointed out in a rather accusatory manner that she herself is likely to be a victim of casual domestic abuse, which prompts her to normalize it for other women (“She must be a masochist, or she has not met real men,” “If she does not respect herself, it is pointless to tell her otherwise”).³⁹ Darakchi outlines what advantages women receive for attaining hegemonic femininity by describing “the admiration and the support of the patriarchal model of masculinities give certain women the power and privilege to position themselves higher than other women.”⁴⁰ As Darakchi argues, this self-positioning of women operates in a manner similar to hegemonic masculinity. This

*же это просто той, где люди хотят весело провести время и ничего больше, и сказано было в шутку!!!
Относитесь ко многим вещам проще и жизнь будет легче!*

Ospan (@ospanfariza), “Я Пожалуй Оставлю Это Здесь.”

³⁷ *Я сама против бытового насилия! Я до замужества мужу сказала, если поднимешь руку, одну минуту не буду рядом стоять. Говорят некоторые женщины сами провоцируют мужчин, лишнее тоже говорить не стоит в адрес мужа. Только сабр и хитро, мудро решать. Әйел адам жамандықтықты тілінен табады.*

Ibid.

³⁸ *Невежество! И такая ещё и детей рожает и дочерей воспитывать будет. Ужас просто!*

Ibid.

³⁹ (1) *Ммм да мазахиска наверное!) или настоящих мужчин не встречала?! мне лично жалко стало эту несчастную женщину!*

(2) *Нашли за кого потеть. Если она себя не уважает, то что ей говорить или втирать, бесполезно*

Ibid.

⁴⁰ Darakchi, “The Western Feminists Want to Make Us Gay,” 1225.

might explain why women partake in normalization of VAW and dissemination of harmful stereotypes about its victims, as they benefit socially from conforming to the standards of a ‘good’ Kazakh woman. Hegemonic femininity helps to keep the focus on individual victims and their actions in the discourse of VAW. In the comments, many women themselves often support sexist stereotypes and myths about domestic abuse and sexual violence. It is unclear whether these women are impacted by domestic violence personally and whether it prompts them to support conservative views on gender-based violence and women’s sexuality.

In late 2019, a Kazakh journalist and poet Myltykbay Yerimbetov stated on national television, in response to a woman who reported being beaten by her husband, that “80% of Kazakh women have always tolerated and continue to tolerate domestic abuse because of family and children. Children are the most wonderful thing on the planet and for them you have to endure being beaten by your husband.”⁴¹ Yerimbetov’s response assigned primary importance to the national culture for the occurrence of domestic violence and the way women should respond to it. It is necessary to notice that Yerimbetov specifically refers to ethnically Kazakh women, not to all women living in Kazakhstan, as the ones who should endure domestic abuse from their husbands. Another distinguishable detail of his statement is the “it has always been this way” argument that aims to naturalize the misogyny via mystic national past. This statement attracted a lot of social media attention. For instance, a Facebook post of a Kazakh blogger Bakhytzhan Kopbayev condemned Yerimbetov’s stance on domestic abuse. With 190 comments under the post, the author concluded his text with “I would like to look at this “public figure” if his own daughter, or granddaughter, was being abused.”⁴² An

⁴¹ ““Казахские Женщины Всегда Терпели и Должны Терпеть”: Слова Еримбетова о Домашнем Насилиии Шокировали,” *Qazweek.Kz*, October 14, 2019, <https://qazweek.kz/ru/2019/10/14/%D0%BA%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%85%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%89%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%8B-%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B8-%D0%B4/>.

⁴² *Хотел бы я посмотреть на этого "общественного деятеля", если бы избивали его родную дочь или внучку. По-другому бы запел.*

overwhelming majority of the users that commented on the post also employed the same narrative in berating Yerimbetov. One particular comment says, “So this [man] is, a priori, in favor of his mother being beaten. Not-enough-of-a-man.”⁴³ Many other comments state that he must not have sisters or daughters to make such statements.

Another example of similar narrative in the comments section is an Instagram post by NUR.kz that quotes a professor of Kazakhstan’s Eurasian National University Yerlan Suleymenov as he comes out as an Islamist, nationalist, and antisemitic and states that “beating women is allowed and necessary.”⁴⁴ An overwhelming majority of 5,129 comments under this post condemn Suleymenov’s stance calling for his resignation from the university. Many used the same narrative of equating the professor’s statement to the state of his relationships with the women in his life: “A woman gave birth to him. He has a mother, maybe a sister and a daughter. He also thinks that they need to be beaten and humiliated?,” “I wish him to have 10 daughters so that he would bite his tongue,” “Does he have the same opinion about his female relatives?,” “What would he say if his daughter was abused, for instance?.”⁴⁵ Other users granted Suleymenov his right to domestic abuse but called him out for promoting his views in public: “Let him beat his mother, wife, sisters, but he should not propagate this,” “If he needs

Bakhytzhan Korbayev, “МОЖНО ЛИ БИТЬ ЖЕНУ, ДА ИЛИ НЕТ?,” *Facebook*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/bk1908/posts/136043977789429/>.

⁴³ Получается, этот Мылтыкбай априори за то, чтобы били его мать. Недомужик. Кorbayev, “МОЖНО ЛИ БИТЬ ЖЕНУ, ДА ИЛИ НЕТ?”

⁴⁴ Казахстанский портал NUR.KZ (@kaznews), “Скандал Разгорелся Вокруг Евразийского Национального Университета — Профессора Вуза Обвинили в Сексизме Из-За Комментариев в Соцсетях.,” *Instagram*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA-KKHshthJ/>.

⁴⁵ (1) *Его родила женщина. У него есть мать, может сестра и дочь, что он тоже считает что из надо бить и унижать. Мне в данный момент жаль его мать.*

(2) *Желаю ему 10 дочерей пусть потом локти себе сгрызет*

(3) *О своих близких женщинах он такого же мнения?*

(4) *Что он скажет если будут бить его дочь, например? Нужно отстранить от должности за такие высказывания!!! Пусть не позорит самый крупный ВУЗ страны!*

Казахстанский портал NUR.KZ (@kaznews), “Скандал Разгорелся Вокруг Евразийского Национального Университета.”

to, let him beat his mother, sister, younger sister. But he should not impose his views on other families.”⁴⁶

Both these examples of public reaction to Yerimbetov and Suleymenov’s statements demonstrate the way women are ultimately tied to their male relations even if they are unknown or unrepresented in the story itself. The discourse of explaining or reasoning with the misogynistic behavior of men by calling out to their empathy for someone else’s or their own mothers and daughters is criticized by Eltahawy who points out that protection of men is conditional and that women are only promised the male protection that comes with being someone’s daughter or mother only as long as they perform these roles up to the standards of hegemonic femininity.

Blaming the ‘Other’

It is important to comment on inner tensions between opinions of users regarding nationalism, traditions, and violence against women. While most of the comments are embedded in the same gendered nationalist culture, they differ significantly in their political and cultural stances. Interior tensions in the nationalist discourse about what aspects of the culture are responsible for the prevalence of gender-based violence in Kazakhstani society are reminiscent of Foucault’s rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourse. Foucault instructs not to assume that there exists only one juxtaposition of the dominant versus dominated discourses but to conceive discourse as “a discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ (1) *Своих пусть бьёт, маму, жену, сестёр, а пропагандировать это не нужно*

(2) *Если нужно пусть он тогда бьёт мать, сестру, сестренку.а в другие семьи пусть не лезет*
Ibid.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, “Chapter 2 Method, Part IV Deployment of Sexuality,” in *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 98.

A noticeable presence in the comments under Ospan's post was branding normalization of domestic abuse as part of either Southern culture or *auyl*⁴⁸ culture by many commenters. Another word that was mentioned is “*mambetism*”, which is slang mostly used by Kazakh people to stereotype other Kazakhs from *auyls* with no education. The word has a strong demeaning connotation to it.⁴⁹ Alima Bissenova defines *mambet* as a derogatory term for ‘the other’, “recent rural migrants.”⁵⁰ The usage of this word and general condemnation of the Southern or *auyl* culture shows inner tensions in the nationalist culture of Kazakhstan between people who are stereotypically categorized as *mambets* and those who do the categorization. This narrative in Ospan's comments demonstrates that some people view the problem of domestic abuse as part of a less refined Kazakh culture that perhaps needs education and enlightenment of some sort.

Kopbayev also writes in his Facebook post that there will be a lot of people supporting justifications of violence against women and children, especially among Kazakh nationalists. This prompted several comments denouncing the nationalistic aspect of the issue. A woman commented that there is no need to accentuate nationalism because “those who mistreat women are animals who have no nation.”⁵¹ Another woman criticized the “craze” of confusing nationalist mentality with “low-intellect thinking.”⁵² Blind disregard of the nationalistic aspect

⁴⁸ Auyl means village, small rural settlements in Kazakh.

⁴⁹ Typically, in Kazakhstan *mambet* means a person who comes from rural areas, only speaks Kazakh, or speaks Russian very badly, lacks proper education, and has bad manners. It is typically used by urban Russian-speaking public as a disparaging label for others.

⁵⁰ Alima Bissenova, “The Fortress and the Frontier: Mobility, Culture, and Class in Almaty and Astana,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 4 (April 21, 2017): 648.

⁵¹ *Вы правильно подняли тему, но не нужно делать акцент на выражении "националистически настроенных казахов", те кто издевается над женщинами -они звери, у них нет нации. И те кто поддерживают таких нелюдей -сами морально слабые людишки, у них или с головой не всё в порядке или комплексы неполноценности, как можно издеваться над матерью своих детей.*

Kopbayev, “МОЖНО ЛИ БИТЬ ЖЕНУ, ДА Или НЕТ?”

⁵² *При чем здесь националистических настроенные?*

Что за мания везде менталитет с худым мышлением путать..

Манкурты как вы надоели, если честно

Kopbayev, “МОЖНО ЛИ БИТЬ ЖЕНУ, ДА Или НЕТ?”

by the commentators makes little sense when we look at the gendered and nationalist language of Yerimbetov.

The examples above involve some type of juxtaposition between “modern” and “uncivilized” parts of Kazakhstan or, as discussed by Richard L. Wolfel (2002), it could be an issue of the north versus the south, only Russian-speaking population versus only Kazakh-speaking population.⁵³ Wolfel argues that there exists a clear division between the northern regions of the country/only Russian-speaking population and Kazakh nationalists/the southern regions that hinders the process of creation of a unified national identity, an argument supported in Bissenova’s work as well.⁵⁴ Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs who live in the south are often thought to be more nationalist in their beliefs and more traditional in their views and values. It is, therefore, important to bear in mind that inner divisions in the discourse are possible and to not resort to oversimplification and assuming bigger political identities based on whether someone criticizes parts of the national culture of Kazakh or not.⁵⁵ For example, some of the men whose comments on the Talgo case Fominova shared on her Facebook page seem to be supporting an oppositional movement in the country, i.e. democratization and ousting of Nazarbayev’s regime. The indicator for this is the presence of a Facebook frame in support of the pro-democratic oppositional movement in their profile pictures. When Omirzhan, one of the commenters mentioned earlier, was criticized for his comment blaming the Talgo case victim, he asked (in Kazakh this time even though his original comment was in Russian) his critics to not “turn into Russians” and expressed relief that “only Russians and metis⁵⁶ people resent my comment, thank God.”⁵⁷ Omirzhan has other political posts on his Facebook page that indicate

⁵³ Richard L. Wolfel, “North to Astana: Nationalistic Motives for the Movement of the Kazakh(Stani) Capital,” *Nationalities Papers* 30, no. 3 (September 2002): 485–506.

⁵⁴ Bissenova, “The Fortress and the Frontier.”

⁵⁵ Diana T. Kudaibergenova, “The Use and Abuse of Postcolonial Discourses in Post-Independent Kazakhstan,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 5 (May 27, 2016): 917–35.

⁵⁶ Metis is a person of mixed ethnic background. In Kazakhstan, metis usually refers to people of mixed Kazakh and any other (most likely, Russian) ethnicities.

⁵⁷ (1) *Орыс болып кеткенсклер*

his condemnation of the current political regime in the country. The difference between the users' political views and their general consensus on the standards of hegemonic femininity with frequent reference to Islamic practices observed in the comments on social media supports Mosse's argument that society's ideas of morally correct and incorrect behavior stem from a national identity and its connection to piousness rather than, for instance, a political identity.

Lastly, I would like to highlight the tendency in many comments to blame rampant violence against women on contemporaneity and Western political influences. For instance, NUR.kz has published a short video reporting that in 2018 cases of domestic abuse have increased by more than 100% and that, according to UN Women, every year approximately 400 Kazakhstani women die from domestic abuse.⁵⁸ The video has 153,000 views and 397 comments on Instagram and, in fact, did mention that cultural and religious practices contribute to the perpetuation of violence. An international organization being the source of the statistics has prompted comments questioning the data's authenticity and relevance for Kazakhstan's context. One comment by a male users states:

Do not be fooled by any statistics they try to sell us from international foundations. [In Kazakhstan] such cases [of domestic abuse] are rare. [...] You have to understand that if women no longer respect men, a family institute will collapse and children will read fairytales about prince and prince, like they do in Europe. [...] Two leaders in one house cannot live together and if a man submits to a woman, it will not be good.⁵⁹

(2) *Одни русские или метисы возмущаются слава Богу.*

Ibid.

⁵⁸ Казахстанский портал NUR.KZ, "Домашнее Насилие в Казахстане На Примере Российского Исследования.," *Instagram*, December 1, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5hhfSQBvP9/>.

⁵⁹ *Вы послушайте ведь это Семья единое целое что вы ведётесь на всякие статистики которые вам впикивают международные фонды. У нас такие случаи единичны. Я не поддерживаю мужчин которые позволяют поднимать руку на слабый пол и женщина сама в праве выбирать жить ей с таким придурком или нет. Но вы поймите если у женщин пропадёт уважение к мужчинам институт семьи рухнет и дети будут как в Европе читать сказки про принца и принца. Зачем нам это или вам уважаемые женщины. Мужчина это глава семьи и дети выросшие в семье где это так и где отец*

Another user says, “Violence does not happen for no reason, there must be reasons to think about! [...] Bring up children in the right way who would be against violence in the family. Otherwise, we will lose family values and, like in European countries, have gays and lesbians walking down the street holding hands.”⁶⁰ These comments juxtapose Kazakh culture to European/Western cultures, as these users argue that the only way to preserve the uniqueness of Kazakhs and their ‘morally right’ behavior, such as heterosexuality, is to not disrupt the standards of hegemonic femininity and masculinity. According to Omirzhan, a commenter under Fominova’s Facebook post, emancipation of women and emasculation of men are also the roots of the problem of rampant gender-based violence in the country, which is followed by high divorce rates and declining moral standards due to access to information without restriction. “Feminism will not help but worsen the situation. Spiritual knowledge is needed,”⁶¹

прививает сыновьям то что мать это святое и как у нас принято что он спасая ее от смерти только отплатит за одну каплю ее молока. А вот эти ваши непонятное желание доминировать ни к чему хорошему не приведет. Два лидера в одной тарелке жить не смогут и если прогнетса мужчина то это будет не очень хорошо. Яркие примеры запада у нас есть всякие цветные парады деградация и крах. Потом сами будете говорить где настоящие мужики. А эти выродки которые проявляют агрессию по отношению к женщинам как были так и будут хоть смертную Казнь введём. Так что воспитывайте своих мужчин в семье достойно, деспоты с улицы не берутся, кто то выше писал что мужчина выросший в семье где отец избивал мать тоже так будет делать это враньё он ни когда не поднимет руку. Руку поднимет тот кто балован вами уважаемые женщины и вы сами воспитываете таких, сейчас чаты почитайте школьные где мамы пикут ойбай моему сыну мешает девочка и т.п. про анализируйте что вы говорите своим детям. Эта шалава эта дура у этой родословная не та. Во многих случаях жены получают от своих мужей за не уважение к их родителям, посмотрите статистику сколько в домах престарелых родителей находятся, келинки задают их туда вот и закипают мужики. Не ищите виноватых а воспитывайте из своих сыновей мужчин. Держите своих стариков при себе передавайте традиции и не будет этих Беспалова в помине. А будет уравновешенное общество и целые семьи. В сем терпения и мира.

Казахстанский портал NUR.KZ, “Домашнее Насилие в Казахстане На Примере Российского Исследования.”

⁶⁰ *Добрый вечер люди! Я с мужской точки зрения на этот вопрос хочу сказать насилие тоже не происходит просто так тому есть какие-то причины, задумайтесь! Я против конечно за насилие но ситуации бывают разные. Учить детей надо с детства, самое большое количество насилие происходит над женщинами. В семьях мужчины и женщины объединяйтесь и воспитывайте правильных детей которые будут против насилия в Семье. Мы так теряем Семейные ценности как европейские страны, будут потом по улицам за ручку ходить разные гей и лезбиянки*
Ibid.

⁶¹ *Дело в том что мужчины слабеют и женщины эмансипируют. Этот процесс идет одновременно. У мужчин слабеют морально-волевые качества. Женщины же теряют свою женскую тонкую силу. Одной из причин процесса деградации происходит из-за разрушения института семьи. В стране 40-50% разводов. В итоге мальчики не получают мужское воспитание и воспитываются матерями. Еще одна причина это падение нравов из за доступности информации без ограничений. Родители не*

states Omirzhan. According to him, with emancipation women lose their soft power that preserves marriages. These comments imply that it is a woman's duty to endure gender inequality and, therefore, to maintain harmony within a family.

Preservations of traditions is seen as a radical matter of life or death of the nation, where death means assimilating to the Western norms of conduct. If Nazarbayev, as discussed in the next chapter, warns the public about safeguarding Kazakh women from the Middle Eastern Islamic practices, many Kazakhstani users online are more concerned with women falling for the Western culture by becoming too emancipated, not raising 'real men,' and not being good wives, all of which, according to the them, is what precipitates violence against women in Kazakhstan.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored how Kazakh women are represented in online discourses on rape and domestic abuse, and the way this representation underpins sexist and moralistic norms of hegemonic femininity. By looking at online comments of various users across multiple platforms, it becomes evident that Kazakh women's bodies and behavior are subjected to constant policing by others, as they are expected to act according to the standards of hegemonic femininity to preserve their respectability and the right for protection. The standards of hegemonic femininity are attached to women even when they suffer from gendered violence like rape and domestic abuse, which is perceptible in the way online users fuse common rape myths and sexist stereotypes about victims of domestic violence with the national culture and the ideas of Kazakhness. According to the online discourse, the Kazakhness of

уследили и не ограничили детям доступ к информации. Интернет кишит всякого рода порно сайтами которые формируют у детей мнение что отношения между мужчиной и женщиной должны быть такими. Феминизм тут не поможет, а усугубит ситуацию. Нужны духовные знания.

Tatyana Fominova, Facebook, July 31, 2019,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2436268819749614&set=pcb.2434607346582428>.

Kazakh women entails a strong Kazakh Muslim identity and adherence to traditional Kazakh gender roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, all of which aims to differentiate Kazakh nation from the ‘other,’ specifically the West that is portrayed as a place of declining morals. Kazakh women are put on a tightrope between the East and the West, as they have to abide by traditions while being handed a limited amount of agency and power in the public discourse. Overall, conversations about rape and domestic abuse of Kazakh women online continue to place the burden of blame for the violence on women as they come under constant scrutiny in their daily actions and are reduced to their relations with men.

Chapter Three: Official State Responses: Nazarbayev in Context

This chapter focuses on the discourse of the man who is currently the most powerful figure in Kazakhstan: Nursultan Nazarbayev, the ex-President. This chapter demonstrates the deeply gendered nature of the official state discourse in Kazakhstan by situating Nazarbayev's rhetoric about women's place in the society in the political context using his Kazakhstan 2050 strategy speech from 2012 and International Women's Day (IWD) celebratory speeches from 2018 and 2019 as main primary sources of the analysis. My main argument is that Nazarbayev with his speeches and policies supports an identity of a contemporary Kazakh woman as the mediator between the East and the West with her main duty to the nation and to the family rather than as a fully equal member of the society – a vision largely supported by users on the internet, as seen in the previous chapter. There is a clear space for a certain form of women empowerment in the official discourse that is conditional upon not disrupting established gender relations in the society. This chapter shows the way the discourse found online could be legitimized by Nazarbayev's discourse.

As the head of state, Nazarbayev has been in power for more than three decades and in that time, he has established a loyal power elite. The governing regime is often referred to as authoritarian¹ and kleptocratic² due to undemocratic political institutions, lack of civil liberties, and extensive corruption.³ People in Kazakhstan hold no illusions about the extent of Nazarbayev's individual power over what happens in the country. While Nazarbayev's

¹ Reid Standish, "An Aging Autocrat's Lesson for His Fellow Dictators," *The Atlantic*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/06/kazakhstan-elections-lesson-dictators/591160/>.

² Emanuele Midolo, "Special Report – KAZAKHSTAN: A CORRUPTION HOTSPOT?," *Risk Screen*, December 2016, <https://www.riskscreen.com/kyc360/special-report/special-report-kazakhstan-a-corruption-hotspot/>.

³ David Dawkins, "U.K. Takes Fight To Kazakhstan's Wealthy Elite Over Unexplained 'Billionaires' Row' Mansion," *Forbes*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/daviddawkins/2020/03/11/uk-takes-fight-to-kazakhstans-wealthy-elite-with-mcmafia-wealth-order-over-unexplained-billionaires-row-mansion/>.

popularity has wavered over the years, which can be seen by looking at the recurring civil protests erupting all over Kazakhstan demanding free and fair elections in Spring 2019,⁴ he still remains the most powerful figure in the country overseeing its politics and tightly controlling his successor. As the first president and the holder of the *Elbasy* title,⁵ Nazarbayev's actions and words are constantly covered both by the state-sponsored media and a few independent media resources meaning that his message is most likely to reach the majority of Kazakhstan's public. Nazarbayev and his government have harnessed high levels of soft power over the population that has resulted in continuous tolerance of his regime until his step down from power in March 2019.⁶ Nazarbayev is also the author of development strategies of the country, such as Kazakhstan 2030 and Kazakhstan 2050, encompassing all aspects of social, economic, political progress.

Kazakhstan 2050 strategy could be considered a potent blueprint for gender equality advocacy from Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, as it includes big sweeping statements with little details on how they would come about and lack of acknowledgement of what hinders the achievement of gender equality in Kazakhstan today. During his Kazakhstan 2050 speech in 2012, Nazarbayev details his vision of Kazakhstan's development with clear goals and tasks that are echoed in his IWD speeches from 2018 and 2019.⁷ The topic of women's rights was present in the 2012 address by calling for non-tolerance of "gender-based discrimination in the

⁴ "Kazakhstan Election Marred by Mass Arrests," *BBC News*, June 9, 2019, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48574540>.

⁵ Leader of the Nation (*Elbasy*) title was awarded to Nazarbayev in 2010 and guarantees a set of powerful privileges to Nazarbayev and members of his family for life, including an ability to speak in front of the parliament upon Nazarbayev's wish.

⁶ Marlene Laruelle, "The Power of Soft Power in Kazakhstan," *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/01/the-power-of-soft-power-in-kazakhstan/>.

⁷ In 2019, Nazarbayev had invited a group of women from diverse backgrounds for tea at his presidential residence in Astana, Ak Orda. The event was not live streamed, but it was extensively covered by the news media. In 2018, there was a concert in capital's concert hall celebrating women with women themselves as the main audience.

country and ensuring gender equality and women's parity with men in practice.”⁸ This seeming acknowledgement of the action needed for gender equality amounts to little empirical progress toward gender parity.⁹

Nazarbayev wants women to have a distinctive space in the modern Kazakhstani society but his discourse and lack of actions that follow his loud statements demonstrate the limitations of that space. While calling for the elimination of domestic abuse in 2012 and emphasizing the problem of 20% divorce rates in 2019, Nazarbayev and the policies of his regime do not challenge gender roles within the family nor explore any other potential reason for these two trends. His public speeches during IWD celebration events show evidence that Nazarbayev does not wish to disrupt the standards of hegemonic masculinity and femininity and the division of gender roles between men and women. Private lives are expected to stay behind closed doors. Women are recognized for their importance to the nation as nurturers and reproducers and are warranted a certain level of empowerment, but they are not being thoroughly protected in neither public nor private spheres of their lives.

Motherhood

As seen in previous chapter, women's bodies and behavior are often controlled under the pretense of them being future/ mothers and this is also what is used to demand protection and respect for women. In his discourse, Nazarbayev refers to Kazakh women almost exclusively as mothers reinforcing the connection between them and the nation's honor, which is also used for victim-blaming in the online discourse. During his 2012 speech when he

⁸ “Послание Президента Республики Казахстан - Лидера Нации Нурсултана Назарбаева Народу Казахстана «Стратегия «Казахстан-2050»: Новый Политический Курс Состоявшегося Государства» — Официальный Сайт Президента Республики Казахстан,” *Akorda.kz*, December 14, 2012, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/astana_kazakhstan/participation_in_events/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-lidera-nacii-nursultana-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-strategiya-kazakhstan-2050-novyi-politicheskii-

⁹ “The Global Gender Gap Report 2018” (*World Economic Forum*, December 17, 2018), <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018/>.

unveiled Kazakhstan 2050 strategy, Nazarbayev stated that women are the “pillar of the family and, therefore, of the state.”¹⁰ What follows is a gendered discourse on how the greatness of the country is defined by how the children are raised by their mothers. Nazarbayev allocates special attention to ‘daughters of the nation’. “Above all, it is necessary to pay a lot of attention to the upbringing of our daughters. They are future wives, future mothers, hearth keepers.”¹¹ Thus, Nazarbayev reinforces the idea that the survival of the nation depends on how well women fulfill their task as the reproducers of the nation.¹² Ensuring that “children born are bred in culturally appropriate ways” is a primary concern of the state.¹³ Raising children is constructed as a solitary work of women, whereas the result of this work is seen as something they have to share with the rest of the society. Women are seen as nurturers and educators of children; therefore, their work is important to the whole ethnic group. For instance, during celebrations of IWD at his residence when Nazarbayev invited a group of women from different backgrounds to congratulate them with the holiday, Nazarbayev made a lighthearted speech filled with jokes and a clear-cut message. In his own words, Nazarbayev sees International Women’s day as a day of “worshipping women’s devotion, love, and loyalty to family values,” which immediately sets up women as, first and foremost, hearth keepers. In 2018, Nazarbayev said that on women’s “fragile shoulders” lays the burden of “forming worldview of children” and that women “lay the foundation of the successful future of our country” using their “faith, hope, and love.”¹⁴ Such emphasis on women’s labor of reproduction of the nation enables

¹⁰ “Послание Президента Республики Казахстан - Лидера Нации Нурсултана Назарбаева Народу Казахстана «Стратегия «Казахстан-2050».”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Introduction,” in *Women-Nation-State*, by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 6–11.

¹³ V Spike Peterson, “Sexing Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (June 1999): 45.

¹⁴ Телеканал Хабар 24, “Глава Государства Поздравил Всех Женщин Казахстана с Международным Женским Днем 8 Марта,” *Youtube*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWjD6Fww3I0>.

policing of women bodies by men and a general feeling of entitlement over women's behavior, as they are seen as precious resource needed for the greatness of the nation.

In the same speech Nazarbayev also said that, “birth of new citizens, augmentation of the nation are main strategic goals of our country.”¹⁵ This binds women in a social contract to the nation. Nazarbayev defines the nation as everyone who is a citizen of the country and not just the group of ethnical Kazakhs by using the term Kazakhstani and not Kazakhs. However, as pointed in Chapter One, Kazakhstani citizenship has a strong overtone of Kazakh ethnic identity to it.¹⁶ It could be argued that Nazarbayev giving such weight to childbirth fosters a certain feeling of anxiety about the nation's survival, therefore, validating more extreme nationalistic views among the population such as extreme opposition to Kazakh women marrying non-Kazakh men. A prime example of this is a 2018 incident when a wedding of a Kazakh woman to a Chinese man was sabotaged after the invitation was leaked to social networks and a group of Kazakh men threatened to crash the ceremony in order to prevent the marriage.¹⁷ While the role of the state's nationalist rhetoric in influencing nationalist activist groups empirically unproven, the state does translate a specific message about the importance of Kazakhness for these groups to interpret and internalize.

During the 2019 celebration of IWD, Nazarbayev said that “the world rests on the affection of mothers, and the state itself is based on the family well-being. The stronger is the family, the stronger become the state.”¹⁸ Continuous underscoring of family importance results

¹⁵ Телеканал Хабар 24, “Глава Государства Поздравил Всех Женщин Казахстана с Международным Женским Днем 8 Марта.”

¹⁶ Aziz Burkhanov and Dana Sharipova, “Kazakhstan's Civic-National Identity,” in *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions*, ed. Maria Omelicheva (Langham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 21–39.

¹⁷ “Синофобы сорвали свадьбу казашки с китайцем,” *Zakon.kz*, June 24, 2018, <https://www.zakon.kz/4924992-sinofoby-sorvali-svadbu-kazashki-s.html>.

¹⁸ Мир 24, “Нежный Праздник: Назарбаев Вручил Женщинам Украшения и Цветы в Честь 8 Марта - МИР 24,” *Youtube*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHix7-ESu8c>.

into the regime's desire to control women's bodies,¹⁹ as Kazakhstan engages in self-invention that is aggravated by the history of oppression and colonization. The importance of bio power is also evident from Nazarbayev's choice to transfer the country's capital from the southern city of Almaty to a small town of Aqmola located in the north in 1997 to ensure migration and growth of ethnically Kazakh population in the northern regions. Largely accepted explanation behind the relocation is that it was a strategic move to secure northern regions of the country that have substantial Russian population and where the national Kazakh culture is not nearly as strong as it is in the south of the country. Relocation of the capital implied a surge of migration towards the north, therefore evening out the distribution of Kazakhs across the country's land and indicating stability and control of the land to the neighboring state of Russia. Challenging existing gender roles requires confronting such use of women's bodies and actively fostering societal change toward a perception of women as fully equal members of the society. However, the state is yet to adapt a strategy of gender equality that does not center around women's position as mothers.

If we look at the official text of the 2006-2016 Strategy for Gender Equality in Kazakhstan, the importance of national cultural values is coded in the "Achieving gender equality in the family. Strengthening of the family and an increase of parenting in the family" section.²⁰ While the strategy outlines key aspects of national culture in need of critical examination and modification, some parts of it remain reductive to what constitutes gender equality and women empowerment. For instance, the section on gender equality in the family focuses extensively on high divorce rates, increase of single men and women, and tendency to

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "Chapter 3 Domain, Part IV The Deployment of Sexuality," in *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

²⁰ "Стратегия Гендерного Равенства В Республике Казахстан На 2006 - 2016 Годы" (*Akorda.kz*, November 29, 2005), 37, http://www.akorda.kz/upload/nac_komissiya_po_delam_zhenshin/5.2%20%D0%A1%D0%93%D0%A0%20%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81.pdf.

not have more than one child. At the same time, the document brushes past the patriarchal power structures of the family by stating that there has been an “actual reformation” of this structure without quantifying it and providing empirical evidence.²¹ While high divorce rates and low childbirth rates constitute areas for legitimate concern, the classification of these issues in the document as main “threats” for achieving gender equality within family does not seem particularly germane to the cause. Outlining these “threats” and ignoring the recognition of other issues such as unequal division of household work, marital rape, and domestic abuse, paints a picture that the government of Kazakhstan is mostly concerned with preserving families for the sake of the nation. A proper examination of high divorce and single people rates in Kazakhstan today would require analyzing why Kazakhstani women today opt out for divorce or a single life, as these could be symptomatic of larger problem of power imbalance within families.

The importance of preservation of specifically Kazakh national tradition in the family is further evident in the strategy’s tasks of revival of “moral values and the cultivation of a positive image of family and marriage” and revival of “the best familial, ethno-cultural traditions that contribute to the strengthening of spiritual and moral foundations of marriage and family.”²² “Moral values” and “ethno-cultural traditions” confirm supremacy of particular ethnic traditions and norms that are being endorsed by the government as essential features of functional families in Kazakhstan. This insinuates that Kazakh ethnic traditions are to be preserved and protected in their original form, whatever it might be. Insistence of preservation of ethnic tradition and moral standards of family in the gender equality strategy reinforces the state’s rhetoric of women and family matters being inseparable. All this adds up into a message from the state about preeminence of family that could increase stigma on divorce and urge

²¹ “Стратегия Гендерного Равенства,” 41.

²² Ibid., 42.

women to tolerate domestic abuse as it is – as seen in Chapter Two – often framed as part of Kazakh culture.

Islamic identity

As argued in Chapter One, Islam is a fundamental part of Kazakh national identity. In this section, I analyze Nazarbayev's politics in relations to Islam and how it connects to his discourse on Kazakh women. In his Kazakhstan 2050 speech, Nazarbayev constructs an identity of a contemporary Kazakhstani woman as a non-veiled woman. He emphasizes that Kazakhstani young women should not be entrapped by the norms imposed on them from outside that are foreign to "our" traditions and legislation. While Nazarbayev never explicitly states that he is speaking against veiling of Kazakhstani women, an increase of which could be related to the resurgence of Islam in the country,²³ his wording ("do not wrap yourselves in clothes alien to us") and recent emergence of bans of Muslim veiling in public schools across the country make the hidden meaning clear. In the Kazakhstan 2050 address, Nazarbayev wants it to be clear that the Muslim aspect of a Kazakh woman's identity has clear boundaries that should not be crossed. In the process of nation-building, Nazarbayev seems wary of the rise of cultural trends that seemingly do not fit into his vision of Kazakhstani people.

Nazarbayev's outspoken condemnation of women's veiling and "extremist" Islamic movements, does not contradict centuries-old Islamic practices of Kazakhs, since veiling was never a Kazakh custom.²⁴ It could be interpreted not as pivoting away from the Muslim aspect of modern Kazakh identity but rather as a political strategy to construct a separate identity for Kazakhs from other Islamic movements based on Hanbalism, Malikism, and Shafiism.²⁵ G.M.

²³ Edward Snajdr, "Gender, Power, and the Performance of Justice: Muslim Women's Responses to Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan," *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 2 (May 2005): 294–311

²⁴ G.M. Yemelianova, "Islam, National Identity and Politics in Contemporary Kazakhstan," *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 293.

²⁵ M. Cherif Bassiouni, "Schools of Thought in Islam," *Middle East Institute*, January 24, 2012, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/schools-thought-islam>.

Yemelianova argues that Nazarbayev and his power elite are mostly uninterested in Islam as a spiritual source rather seeking control over the religious power in the country. It seems that Nazarbayev and his regime exercise tight control over religious affairs in the country to make sure that ‘extremist’ and potentially detrimental to the legitimacy of the regime views that could mobilizes the masses against the dictator do not become popularized in the society, similarly to what happened to so many other dictators during the Arab Spring. Thus, Nazarbayev’s denouncement of women’s Muslim veiling could be interpreted as another step towards halting more radical Islamization of Kazakhs by utilizing women’s bodies as markers of ethnic/cultural differences.

At the same time, Nazarbayev has not alienated the country completely from the Middle East. The political scene seems to be much more complicated if we take a look at Nazarbayev’s allies and his policies. For instance, Yemelianova points out that since 1991 Kazakhstani government has welcomed establishments of various educational institutions that come from such predominantly Muslim countries as Egypt and Kuwait. In 2001, Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak, which is funded by the Egyptian government, was opened.²⁶ The connection to Islamic countries does not end in the educational sector. Alima Bissenova points out how Nur-Astana mosque, one of the first big mosques in the capital city, was gifted to Kazakhstan by the emir of Qatar.²⁷ When conducting a state visit to Qatar in 2015, Nazarbayev stated that “I want to emphasize that our friendship has been going on for many years. We have a lot in common - historical roots, we adhere to the same religion. This is a great help.”²⁸ While political finesse is necessary when building diplomatic relationships, it is

²⁶ Ibid., 292.

²⁷ Alima Bissenova, “Building a Muslim Nation. Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes,” in *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Langham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 212.

²⁸ “Нурсултан Назарбаев посетил с официальным визитом Катар,” *Total*, November 1, 2015, https://total.kz/ru/news/ekonomika_sobitiya/nursultan_nazarbaev_posetil_s_ofitsialnyim_vizitom_katar.

interesting to pick up on how Nazarbayev is willing to establish political and economic relations with such theocratic states as Qatar and UAE but specifically draws the line on the influence of their Islamic culture when it comes to Kazakh women's bodies.

Therefore, women, as markers of cultural differences,²⁹ are encouraged to preserve the uniqueness of the Kazakh identity instead of blindly adopting "alien" traditions of veiling. In 2018 IWD celebratory speech, Nazarbayev presents Kazakhstani women as a careful and unique balance between "Eastern wisdom and Western ambition,"³⁰ which is the key phrase I use for my argument in this thesis, as with it Nazarbayev clearly delineates a limited space for a separate identity for Kazakh women. This identity entails Kazakh women not being overly emancipated following the stereotype of their Western counterparts, while, at the same time, restraining from indulging in alien to Kazakh culture traditions of the East, such as veiling. Nazarbayev's explicit discouragement of women from adopting foreign clothes coupled with his evident support of Islam as the religion of the majority of Kazakhs demonstrate that the balancing identity of a Kazakh woman is one who respects and abides by the specific Kazakh Islamic practices.

Violence against women

During the Kazakhstan 2050 speech, Nazarbayev commented on his concern regarding increasing levels of domestic abuse against women and children. Nazarbayev is forthright by stating that women should be treated with respect and such violence, as well as trafficking of women's bodies, should be tackled with severity.³¹ While this condemnation of domestic abuse is progressive and valuable on the surface, this discourse still reinforces gender roles in several

²⁹ Anthias and Yuval-Davis, "Introduction."

³⁰ Телеканал Хабар 24, "Глава Государства Поздравил Всех Женщин Казахстана с Международным Женским Днем 8 Марта."

³¹ "Послание Президента Республики Казахстан - Лидера Нации Нурсултана Назарбаева Народу Казахстана «Стратегия «Казахстан-2050»."

ways, which then could be used to justify victim-blaming seen in the previous chapter. First, there is a clear division of gender roles between women who are to be protected and men who should engage in their protection. Second, the fact that this problem is mentioned in passing when discussing motherhood and families strengthen the notion that women deserve to be treated with dignity first and foremost because they are mothers and daughters. This echoes the way the 2006-2016 gender equality strategy tackles gender parity in families. According to Joan Nagel, a nation-state is a masculine institution where men are the norm and women are the ‘other’.³² Nazarbayev confirms the masculine nature of the state by constructing a narrative in which women’s protection as a group is a task of both men and the state. During his 2018 IWD speech, Nazarbayev states: “Our male duty is to support, protect you [women], show [you] reverent attention and comprehensive care.”³³ The problem of domestic violence and violence against women, once again excluding non-heterosexual identities and relations, then becomes a question of honor.

Such narratives continue to reduce women to their relations to men of the nation, who are tasked with safe keeping of women in every domain, both public and private. However, conveying this level of power and authority to men of the society is fraught with danger as such power is often bound to be abused. For instance, Rahbari, Longman, and Coene demonstrate on the case study of Iran the way men extend their assumed duty to protect women to controlling and, often, abusing them for the sake of preserving the nation’s honor.³⁴ Nazarbayev follows the same pattern by tying the issue of domestic violence to women’s importance for the national culture. Similarly, Kazakh men seem to be ready to rescue Kazakh

³² Joan Nagel, “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (March 1998): 242–69.

³³ Телеканал Хабар 24, “Глава Государства Поздравил Всех Женщин Казахстана с Международным Женским Днем 8 Марта.”

³⁴ Ladan Rahbari, Chia Longman, and Gily Coene, “The Female Body as the Bearer of National Identity in Iran: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Women’s Bodies in Official Online Outlets,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 26, no. 10 (October 3, 2019): 1417–37.

women from ‘other’ men³⁵ but, as seen in the prevailing sentiments in online comments on social media, they often stigmatize Kazakh women who fell victims to rape and domestic abuse when the perpetrators are their fellow countrymen. The examples of the online discourse from Chapter Two show the way Nazarbayev’s rhetoric can backfire because there is no such thing as a perfect victims of gender-based violence,³⁶ which means that all women who cannot achieve impossible standards of hegemonic femininity are bound to come under attack for not representing Kazakhness properly and are blamed for the violence perpetrated against them. Instead of treating gender-based violence as a separate problem that deserves a proper solution for the sake of women as equal members of the society, Nazarbayev has allotted it a starkly small space in his official discourse throughout the years.

It is important to notice the absence of men in Nazarbayev discussion of the problem of violence against women. Since domestic violence is an internal issue and not an outside threat for the nation, Nazarbayev noticeably treats it as a faceless crime and does not place the blame on men, typical perpetrators of domestic violence. In 2012 state address, Nazarbayev states that “we should protect our motherhood. I am concerned with the situation of increasing domestic violence against women and children in families. Disrespectful treatment towards women should not exist. I will state outright that this violence should be curtailed intensely.”³⁷ The patriarchal culture and men who uphold it and engage in abusive behavior are not mentioned in the speech. The silence on the causes of the violence allows for the public to assume that the violence is not systemic, that it has little to do with their culture and customs, and that people themselves do not perpetuate this violent culture. This is evident in the previous

³⁵ Asqar Alash, “Почему Казахи Не Едут в Турцию За Женами, На Кавказ За Невестами Или в Америку За Теми Же Афродеями???” *Facebook*, July 27, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2329098347342186&id=100007261309046.

³⁶ Shannon O’Hara, “Monsters, Playboys, Virgins and Whores: Rape Myths in the News Media’s Coverage of Sexual Violence,” *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 21, no. 3 (August 2012): 247–59.

³⁷ “Послание Президента Республики Казахстан - Лидера Нации Нурсултана Назарбаева Народу Казахстана «Стратегия «Казахстан-2050».”

chapter when online users are defensive in their denial of the nationalist culture's role in the perpetuation of domestic abuse in the comments under Bauyrzhan Kopbayev's Facebook post, as well as active finger-pointing under Fariza Ospan's Instagram video.³⁸ The polemic about which Kazakhstan's region is plagued with uncivilized domestic abuse under Ospan's post is particularly telling of the way the public is unable to recognize the pervasiveness of the problem in the country. Framing of the problem plays a key role in the way we look for its solution and the fact that the state is unable to recognize how deleterious some aspects of national culture are for the wellbeing of Kazakh women indicates that the solutions that follow will not tackle systemic causes of the violence.

To conclude, this final chapter provides an analysis of the current state discourse in order to provide more context for the online discourse analyzed in the previous chapter. Taking into account an unprecedented amount of power Nazarbayev possess in the country as a political and cultural leader, his narrative represents an important source for legitimization of nationalistic views in the country that are discussed in Chapter Two. At the same time, Nazarbayev himself is constantly influenced by other forces, such as public discourse itself, postcolonial heritage, and political alliances. After a closer examination, it becomes clear that Nazarbayev in his public speeches and comments propagates a specific identity of a modern Kazakh woman. The aspects that Nazarbayev wants to highlight in his image of Kazakh women differs depending on the platform he uses. For instance, the 2012 official state address to the whole nation practically highlights the danger of divorces and calls for prosecution of domestic abuse as part of protection of motherhood. On the other hand, in Nazarbayev's speeches aimed

³⁸ Bakhytzhan Kopbayev, "МОЖНО ЛИ БИТЬ ЖЕНУ, ДА Или НЕТ?," *Facebook*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/bk1908/posts/136043977789429/>; Fariza Ospan (@ospanfariza), "Я Пожалуй Оставлю Это Здесь," *Instagram*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5Gag5RnmOC/>.

exclusively at Kazakhstani women during IWD celebrations, he focuses more on their roles as cultural transmitters and educators. By looking at three public speeches of Nazarbayev from the past decade in different political contexts, the identity of a modern Kazakh woman as a proliferator of national culture whose distinctiveness from the East and the West is to be guarded by Kazakh men.

Conclusion

This research has analyzed the way Kazakh women are represented in digital media and official state narratives in contemporary Kazakhstan, and the way these representations reinforce certain standards of hegemonic femininity, thus contributing to the normalization of violence against women. National culture places Kazakh women in a precarious position between Eastern and Western cultures, as defined by the Kazakhstan's context, where they are expected to adhere to Kazakh standards of hegemonic femininity even as victims of gender-based violence. By connecting the historical context of the socially constructed concept of Kazakhness to its implementation in daily online interactions and its manifestation in larger state discourse, I argue that ideas about hegemonic femininity of a Kazakh woman play a key role in victim-blaming narratives against survivors of rape and domestic abuse. Neither the public nor the state led by Nazarbayev exist in a vacuum, as they inform each other on what behavior is socially acceptable for a Kazakh woman and from that derive their patterns of victim-blaming and stigmatization.

This research serves as one of the first to extensively examine the mechanisms of gendered nationalism in Kazakhstan and its potentially hazardous consequences of glorification of the national culture, performed by both general public and the state, for the daily lives of Kazakh women. My thesis offers an in-depth analysis of these ideas in the context of Kazakhstan and analyzes the relevance of the gendered nationalism's arguments in a non-Western setting and in the discursive context of social networks, a rapidly evolving form of modern communication. However, this research does not empirically prove the connection between public opinions found online and state rhetoric. Moreover, there are also no similar studies done before with the same methodology and levels of analysis for me to base my

arguments on, which has proven to be the main obstacle in my own research, as there was little guidance found in organizing and merging findings of my primary sources.

The implications of my work include recognizing inherently gendered and socially constructed nature of Kazakh nationalism in order to contest naturalization of gender relations in Kazakhstani society. Further investigation of perpetuation of heterosexism and misogyny for the sake of the nation beyond this research is warranted. Gendered discourse in the country aimed at promoting heterosexual marriage and discouraging divorces continues to expand with new grants and resources being issued by the Kazakhstani government.¹ What is missing from my work and would serve as an excellent move forward with this research topic is the study of heterosexism and phobia of feminism in similar discourses. As shown in Chapter Two, many Kazakh people are fearful of gender equality as, in their understanding, it entails uncontrollable emancipation of women and normalization of non-heterosexual relations, both of which are seen as counterproductive for the growth of the nation. A more in-depth study of what do these fears represent and what do they mean for the future of feminism, LGBTQ+ community, and gender equality in Kazakhstan is needed.

This thesis underscores the need to recognize the paramount role of domestic gender and religious realities for the study of gendered nationalism and gender-based violence. By abandoning one-fits-all approach that assumes perpetual relevance of the Western lenses of understanding, my study confirms the need for adopting perspectives of a decolonial comprehension of gender relations in various non-Western settings. The importance of such perspectives is being affirmed by other feminist scholars today. For example, in her new book Romina Istratii adopts a decolonial approach to studying domestic violence in Ethiopia and argues that Western- and Euro-centric methods are not well-equipped to allow us a proper in-

¹ Aisulu Toyshibekova, “Брак в интересах государства,” *Vlast*, May 26, 2020, <https://vlast.kz/books/39799-brak-v-interesah-gosudarstva.html>.

depth understanding of gender relations in non-Western religious contexts.² Similar to Istratii's approach, my thesis illustrates the need for critically integrating local religious and cultural traditions in the examination of gendered nationalism and gender-based violence. This thesis' approach toward the contextual analysis of local Islamic practices may be relevant beyond Kazakhstan and Central Asia, as it could be adopted to other predominantly Muslim societies to understand the way religion there affects double standards for men and women's behavior and normalization of gender-based violence.

² Romina Istratii, *Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts: A Decolonial Approach to Domestic Violence in Ethiopia* (Routledge, 2021).

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