Navigating, Carving, Bargaining:

Women's Political Subjectivities in Neopatrimonial Kazakhstan

by

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Abstract

The growing scope of research on a high level of women's political participation in non-democracies does not particularly cover the Central Asian region. However, the results show quite similar patterns of authoritarian regimes voluntarily adopting gender quota to mobilize more voters for regime support (Donno and Kreft 2019) or establish an accepted international image in exchange for international benefits (Bush 2016). These characteristics are also relevant to Kazakhstan, with 27,1 percent of women in Parliament (IPU 2021), yet with a persistent neopatrimonial regime (Tutumlu 2019). Nevertheless, in 2019 when the long-ruling first president Nazarbayev resigned, the demands for a change were voiced predominantly by female political activists. My research focuses on those leaders during 2019-2021 whom I define as 'women with political agendas' and the 'women in official politics' such as parliament members. In my discursive analysis based on interviews, I examine what strategies they establish within the context of re-traditionalization and neopatrimonialism. My findings show that both groups of women do not politicize their gender identity and engage in political struggle on equal positions with men. I argue that this is due to the state appropriation of the gender equality agenda endorsed by international organization. Also, the agenda tends to be more neoliberal and pro-natalist in the neopatrimonial context. Thus, 'professionalism' rather than gender is valued more in political careers, which excludes political activists. However, women's political subjectivities still manage to navigate through the given context and employ in more complex strategies.

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Introduction

In 2019, after thirty years in power, the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, resigned. Shortly after, the new presidential elections were run by seven candidates; one of them was Dania Yespaeva—the first female *candidate*[1] in Central Asia's modern history. Almost all candidates, including Yespaeva, were previously unknown to the public, which resulted in the victory of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Despite other contenders, Tokayev was an established politician[2] who was part of Nazarbayev's team for decades and was endorsed by him to the presidency (Vaal and Gordeeva 2019).

The transitional 2019 year, however, highlighted a particular paradox and at the same time opened a window of political opportunity for new actors. The unknown but' first female candidate' represents the specific paradoxical strategy for women's political empowerment in the political regime of Kazakhstan, which many scholars define as neopatrimonial (Peyrouse 2012; Tutumlu 2019). The male-dominated political elites handpick the 'deserving' professional women-politicians and bring them to the front of the gender agenda. However, only loyal women politicians can obtain this access; thus, they are *de facto* deprived of political competition. In parallel, the newly emerged wave of female political activists as a reaction to the pseudo-democratic transition of power still demonstrates that women in Kazakhstan can contest the political status quo.

[1] In Central Asia, the first female president was Roza Otunbayeva in Kyrgyzstan, the interim president who resigned after the republic changed from presidential to parliamentary.

[2]Former Prime-minister, Minister of Foreign affairs, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, and Chair of the Senate https://www.akorda.kz/en/republic_of_kazakhstan/president

Both groups, the official women in politics and the female political activists, illustrate women's political empowerment in the neopatrimonial regime in Kazakhstan. Considering the diversity of identified actors, I define two specific categories of women that I will focus on: 'women in (official) politics' and 'women with political agendas'. By 'women with political agendas[3]' I indicate women who have their political understanding of the country's current economic and socio-political state and who have a political vision and a list of issues on their agenda; however, they are not officially recognized by the state as a political force. Whereas 'women in official politics' are legitimized as politicians by membership in registered political parties, parliament and other political institutions.

Considering these distinctions related to the political regime, this study investigates how and why women in neopatrimonial regimes access the political sphere, formulate their political agenda, what benefits and obstacles they encounter due to their gender, and what strategies they choose to realize their political subjectivities.

As a common background, the study provides a historical overview of women's 'emancipation in the Soviet era and the 'gender mainstreaming policies' as part of the 'democratization process' initiated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In my analysis, I emphasize the external top-down character of both historical processes facilitated either by the Soviet government in Moscow or international agencies such as UNDP. I argue that this approach created the special status of women in politics (in a Western context, they would be called 'state feminists'). At the same time, it alienated the grassroots activists from the gender agenda in recent years.

[3] I will use the definition of political agenda that was developed by Frank R. Baumgartner: "The political agenda is the set of issues that are the subject of decision making and debate within a given political system at any one time" (International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2015)

Methodologically, I employ the discourse analysis approach to pay attention to the vocabularies used by my respondents and the official gender mainstreaming documents. I trace those 'UN definitions' such as "women's interests', 'women's empowerment', 'human capital', and 'entrepreneurship' back to official narratives from the developmental programs of international organizations. I take into account these definitions as they emphasize particular values. Most of them are built on individualistic, liberal, free-market Eurocentric conceptualizations that influence women's political subjectivities.

For the theoretical framework, I use several strands of research to identify the specific context and focus of my inquiry. The first study scope investigates the relationship between the high level of women's political representation and persistent authoritarian regimes (Tripp et al. 2013; Stockemer 2018; Nisotskaya and Stensota 2018; Donno and Kreft 2019). Although that body of work does not cover the Central Asian region, I see the common patterns of instrumentalization of gender agenda by the regime in Kazakhstan. However, I also use the critique of developmental gender policies promoted by international organizations emphasizing their homogeneous approach and the tendency to depoliticize women's empowerment (Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2015).

Another direction of theorization is focused on political regime studies in Kazakhstan (Schatz 2008; Peyrouse 2012; Kudaibergenova 2020; Tutumlu 2019). Due to the close relation between patriarchy and neopatrimonialism (Ugur-Cinar 2017), I focus on the latter (Tutumlu 2019) with the definition of the regime as a 'ruling minority of elite' (Kudaibergenova 2020) which is predominantly male.

By identifying this framework, I am trying to nuance the existing studies of women in politics in Kazakhstan that, unfortunately, are not many. Interestingly, this

topic was mostly investigated in the early 2000s—the initial stage of the gender-mainstreaming campaign in Central Asia. Such scholars as Svetlana Shakirova and Galiya Khassanova focused on the political participation of women and women parties (Khassanova 2000; 2001; Khassanova and Shakirova 2004). However, these studies were mostly promoted and supported by international organizations such as the UNDP and Open Society Foundation, which heavily influenced that field of studies, as Shakirova later acknowledged in her interview (Udod 2018). Also, Susann Zimmermann (2009), in her analysis of the institutionalization of gender studies in post-socialist countries, emphasizes the fundamental role of US organizations in the establishment of this field of studies in Central Asia. Nevertheless, after the established limitations on the work of international organizations in the late 2000-s, the research on women's political participation has diminished. This temporal emphasis adds to the gap in research on women in politics in Kazakhstan and the relevance of my study.

The study also contributes to the existing research with its qualitative methodology focused on empirical data derived from interviews with the defined groups of women. In addition, I interviewed different experts and NGO directors involved in either feminist/gender or democracy-related issues. In my analytical approach, I use the intersectional framework (Crenshaw 1989) employing three main categories of women's identities and their inter-relations: *ethnicity* due to political deprivation of non-'titular' nations, for example, Russians (Kudaibergenova 2020); *the class* with all the consequent privileges or their absence; and *age* as a factor of a generation gap between official politicians and experts and oppositional groups.

Further, for my comparative discourse analysis of the interviews, I am focusing on the texts of the official gender policy strategies and concepts. By tracing the 'UN

vocabulary' from international documents to policy papers and the actual rhetoric of the respondents, I deconstruct the meanings and interpretations that they are employing in their political claims. Thus, I focus on the respondents' language, the terminology, and its context and meaning. In this analysis, I am guided by Chris Weedon's interpretation of the Foucauldian definition of discourse as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon 1987: 108).

Due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions, my research is limited to remote interviews with the participants. In addition, the time limitations did not let me access a bigger number of respondents, specifically the parliament members. Furthermore, because of my lack of knowledge of the Kazakh language, I conducted my interviews only in Russian, which is also reflected in the specificity of my sample[4].

The thesis is built on the following structure: Chapter 1 discusses the theoretical framework on the intersection of liberal feminist theory of women's political representation and its post-structuralist critique; theorization on neopatrimonialism in Kazakhstan; and gender studies within neopatrimonialism. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of gender policies from Soviet emancipation in the 1920-s till

[4] In Kazakhstan, there are two official languages, Kazakh and Russian; both languages are used in parliamentary sessions and official documents. However, the context of Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking populations can be very different due to the historical development of the society (Dave 2007). Thus, the Russian-speaking population can be more economically and socially advanced with better access to high-paid employment, whereas Kazakh speaking population, although growing at a fast pace, can still face obstacles in social mobility. Thus, I could not talk to Kazakh-speaking leaders of political or social movements; however, I also must admit that I did not detect a female leader among them.

gender equality promotion in the 2000-s. The chapter concludes with the content analysis of the two strategic documents on family and gender policies. Chapter 3 contextualizes the political regime in Kazakhstan on an example of civil society's development and its recent politicization. Further, I introduce the analysis of the interviews with women in politics and women with political agendas, emphasizing their subjectivities in the given political context. In Conclusion, I list the main findings and the perspectives for further research.

Overall, the study highlights women's role as political actors in both official and oppositional spheres as their agency and subjectivities are either neglected or instrumentalized. In contrast, I believe that they play a significant role in building contemporary society within an inherently difficult patriarchal context of politics.

Chapter 1. Women's political representation: from liberal theory to neopatrimonial practice

The liberal theory of women's representation in politics

The concept of women's political representation and participation in Western democracies is rooted in the so-called 'liberal feminism'. Starting from the suffrage movement in the early 20th century, liberal feminism sees as its tools of fighting gender inequality the participation of women in the public sphere and labor market (Ackerly 2001). Thus, for that objective, the involvement of women in politics, decision-making, and institutions is a fundamental condition. By attaining the right to vote, women could voice their political preferences and represent the 'women's interests' (Paxton and Hughes 2015). It is believed that the specificity of women in political decision-making is historically embedded in their different socialization and life experience. Thus, according to Anne Phillips (1995), "women bring to politics a different set of values, experiences, and expertise" (as cited in Paxton and Hughes 2015).

According to Hannah Pitkin (1967), there are three types of women political representation: formal, providing women legal rights to participate in politics equally with men; descriptive, representing different groups of women according to race, ethnicity, or residence; and substantive political representation, when politicians voice and act in women's interests. This categorization, however, has several pitfalls, one of which is a definition of 'women's interests', which Maxine Molyneux (1985) argued as a homogenizing universalist view on women as a common entity. She theorizes in her seminal work *Mobilization without emancipation (1985)* that the general conception of interests should be contextualized due to the 'multicausal nature' of women's oppression. Thus, she proposes the use of 'gender interests' as "those that women (or

men, for that matter) may develop by virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes" (ibid.). She further divides them into 'strategic' and 'practical', where the former derive from strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination such as the "abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of freedom of childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women" (ibid.). As for the practical gender interests, she targets the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor that should be addressed by women themselves who are in these positions. Practical gender interests usually represent a response to immediate perceived need and cannot align with the strategic gender interest. For example, due to women's position under the sexual division of labor within the household, they would be interested in domestic provision and public welfare (ibid.: 23). That indicates the strong connection between gender and class—it was historically low-income class women who readily mobilize in demand for basic economic needs (for example, bread rioters). However, these interests can be influenced by political discourses and can be instrumentalized by political claims.

Regarding the unity of women on gender and women's interests, Molyneux concludes that it can be constructed but never 'natural' due to the significant influence of class on gender (ibid). Thus, by extrapolating from the case of women's participation in the Nicaraguan Revolution, Molyneux points out that the states may gain women's support by satisfying their immediate needs or class interests, or both, but can never advance their emancipation (ibid.: 24).

Post-structuralist critique on liberal feminist state theorizing

The earlier feminist theories of the state were contested by a more post-structural approach. If ‘gender’ in the 1960-s has been defined as a social construct and distinct from biological sex, in the 1990-s the influential work of Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (1999) challenged that definition by arguing that gender, being a product of social construct itself, derives from the “apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (ibid.: 11). As Johanna Kantola (2006) points out, “sex is an effect of discourse of gender”; thus, it is also constructed (29). In addition, according to Butler (1999), gender unity is the effect of regulatory practices that ‘uniform’ gender identity through ‘compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 1993 as cited in Kantola 2006). This argument is necessary for problematizing women as subjects and feminist understanding of how “the category of ‘women’ is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (Butler 1999 in Kantola 2006; 29).

At the same time, the homogenizing effect of ‘unified’ women’s voices was also evident in the history of Black feminist theorizing (Hill Collins 1991; Lorde 2007; hooks 1982 as cited in Wilson 2015) and the post-colonial feminism (Mohanty 1986; Abu Lughod 2002 as cited in Wilson 2015) that made visible and heard the identities of women of different race, class, and ethnicity. This evidence shows that using a unified women's identity can assist different forms of domination, whether it is patriarchy, capitalism, or autocracy. Finally, these distinctions became evident in implementing quota systems for women’s representation in national parliaments that were globally facilitated by the international organizations.

Women in non-democratic states became subjects of politics in the 1990-s as part of the democratization process that promoted gender equality in all spheres.

However, Bush (2016) argues that non-democracies adopt women quotas because of political incentives such as additional funding or access to international trade associations, and Donno and Kreft (2019) show that a high level of women participation in one-party regimes helps for international recognition; however, women voters are still used in mobilization and cooptation to legitimize the ruling party.

Furthermore, women in high political positions get aligned with the undemocratic pro-regime ideologies, which is evident in case of Russia (Johnson 2016). As Janet Johnson (2016) points out that: “women are “boxed” in roles that suit the needs of the regime and, more importantly, are tightly controlled in those “boxes” by the informal—virtually all-male—elite, whose purposeful push for “traditional values” of narrow heteronormative roles for women and men” (p.152).

Neopatrimonial regime and its gender politics

The instrumentalization of women’s political participation, consequently, should be understood through the political regime of the state that adopts those quotas. Although there is sufficient scope of research on Kazakhstani political regime defining it as soft authoritarian (Schatz 2008), or rentier state (Franke, Gawrich, and Alakbarov 2009), or patronal presidential (Marlene Laruelle 2012), I focus on the neopatrimonialism (Peyrouse 2012; Tutumlu 2019) due to its relevancy to the ‘re-traditionalization’ trend in the social discourse affecting the gender relations.

The effect of neopatrimonialism on gender politics was explored by Ugur-Cinar (2017) in the Turkish case of patriarchal discourses of the single-ruling leader. She uses neopatrimonialism through Guliyev and Hartlyn’s (2011) definition as a “material exchange in which the ruled traded loyalty and political support for economic benefits provided by the rulers” (in Ugur-Cinar 2017: 327). She further argues that

neopatrimonialism is based not only on material exchange but also can be ‘culturally framed’ and legitimized by part of society (ibid). This process is based on a patriarchal discursive framework that employs the Weberian concept of relations between patrimonialism and patriarchy. Respectively, although Weber’s theory was gender blind, Ugur-Cinar refers to feminists’ studies on how ‘paternal’ clientelist and patronaging discourses of the ruling leaders legitimized the ‘state’ (ibid.: 329).

The tendency of male political elites patronaging women’s political participation was discussed in the studies of Uganda’s women in politics. Regardless of the seeming success of the women's political representation in Parliament and legislature within the National Resistant Movement in Uganda, Anne Marie Goetz (2002) argues that the patronaging approach to women’s participation in elections employed only their gender attributes yet delegitimized them as politicians.

However, the given cases and theorizations are only partially applicable to the Kazakhstani context of gender politics. Due to historical development, Kazakhstan experienced the Soviet policies of women’s emancipation in contrast with a more independent history of Turkish nation-building and never experienced internal national revolutions as in the case of Uganda. In this regard, Assel Tutumlu’s (2019) theorization on governmentality and neopatrimonial capitalism provides more nuanced insights on Kazakhstani society and its relations with the ruling regime. Tutumlu (2019) builds her analysis on Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and the study of its practices, strategies, and technologies of governing, and his methods of archeology and genealogy of ideas. Through this theorization, she defines neopatrimonialism in Central Asia as “a political authority that relies on formal and informal mechanisms to manage interests of various stakeholders," where “the resulting political economy can be called neopatrimonial capitalism not only because such capitalist order is plugged

into international markets supplying raw materials and agricultural goods, but also because by connecting the domestic market into an international one, rulers obtain bigger opportunities to create and distribute wealth by both formal and informal mechanisms." (ibid.: 44). Through the archeology and genealogy of ideas such as Soviet political economy's focus on 'equality of outcome' and the transition to the free-market economy's focus on 'efficiency' and the implications of such transition on informal relations between the new economic and ruling elites as well as between individuals, she points out that this form of governmentalization produced neopatrimonial capitalism. She further argues that "although the political regime in Kazakhstan embraced governmentality, it also actively procured material welfare in an environment of extreme risk and vulnerability through formal and informal networks." (58-59) That became essential for the population in Kazakhstan, which is aware and partially normalizes the corrupt mechanisms within the projects on 'efficiency'.

In the context of gender relations and politics, the neopatrimonial patriarchal pattern can be traced within the process of re-traditionalization of the gender norms and women's role in nation-building. According to Cleuziou and Direnberger (2016), three pivotal elements accentuate women's subordination within nationalist construction of gender: 1) fixed spatial division between private (feminine) and public (masculine); 2) continuous attempts of the state to control women's bodies through the construction of maternity as a national duty; 3) restrictions on women's political participation in the name of traditions, authenticity, or nature (196). Although the official nationalizing regime does not explicitly support these nationalist views due to the risk of ethnic cleavages and the image construction of Kazakhstan as a multiethnic state (Kudaibergenova 2020), yet they are still widespread in the society and translated through popular culture, technologies, and public debates (Kudaibergenova 2016;

2019). In addition, in Kandiyoti's (2007) questioning of the ‘re-traditionalization’ trend as a more form of a) building of national solidarities and legitimizing the new ruling elite through returning or reinventing the tradition; b) the survival strategy of economically insecure women who find social stability in familial ties.

Within the above-mentioned context, I argue that the neopatrimonial regime in Kazakhstan situates itself between the international image of a progressive, modernized, economically developing state, whose approach to women’s political empowerment is still permeated by inherently patriarchal view on gender roles.

Chapter 2. Gender politics in neopatrimonial Kazakhstan

The context of Western feminist and democracy theorization regarding women's political participation cannot be fully relevant to the socio-political conditions in which women operate in Kazakhstan. Therefore, socialist, post-socialist contexts should be separately addressed in understanding of gender in relation to the state apparatus. The major historical concern in this question is the often imposed top-down approach to women's emancipation in Soviet times doubled by Eurocentric, progressivist, 'colonial' view on non-European/non-Slavic societies in Central Asia. In addition, the further development of independent Kazakhstan and its gender relations did not have much choice rather than complying with the international organizations' policies to gain legitimacy and overcome the devastating economic decline after the collapse of the Soviet system. This chapter argues that these top-down approaches to gender policies used for once 'backward' and then 'developing' countries resulted in a specific formality of those practices due to hierarchical 'obligatory' reporting on the results. In addition, by analyzing the official documents such as Strategy of Gender Development 2006-2016 and Concept of Family and Gender Policy till 2030, I trace the neoliberal and, at the same time, pro-natalist priorities and values that these documents adopted from the Soviet past and contemporary international discourse.

Non-feminist Soviet emancipation of women in the 1920-s

The project of Soviet emancipation of women is based on the Marxist conceptualization of 'women's question' which explicitly opposed the Western feminism (Meyer 1977). However, I argue that the Marxist consideration of the category of 'women's question' conceptually has little difference from the 'unifying' idea of 'women's interests' discussed above. As class theorists, Karl Marx and

Friedrich Engels opposed the feminist ideas of emancipation due to its bourgeois individualistic nature that would not solve the general economic oppression by the ruling class (ibid). However, they emphasized the women's role in social production and their subordinate position within it. Thus, the 'women's question', although theorized separately, was in sync with the overarching idea about the economic and material oppression of the exploited class in the capitalist society. According to Marx, Engels, and August Bebel's further elaboration, the women's oppression was rooted in predominantly male property ownership. Therefore, in order to erase the unequal gender relationship, women had to be economically emancipated. Hence, the socialist revolution as a radical solution to all forms of capitalist oppression would (in theory) also solve the 'women's question' (Meyer 1977; Buckley 1989). Nevertheless, despite the inherently equal positionality of women *with* men, not *against* men as in Western feminism, Marxist theorization still homogenized women and could not address the constructed nature of it as an analytical category.

Additionally, the main pitfall of Marxist' women's question' theory was its limited elaboration that resulted in major contradictions during practical implementation (Buckley 1989; Krylova 2017). Many ideas related to the 'liberation of women from domestic drudgery with the provision of social care infrastructures and other social services did not meet the reality. Post WWI economy of a newly emerging state could not provide enough welfare for the growing numbers of the 'emancipated' working class (ibid).

Another important feature of the Marxist theory on 'women's question' was the political empowerment of women. As Bebel and later Lenin repeated in their conceptualizations, women had to take power, lead the process of emancipation, join the labor forces, and build the future socialist society on equal positions with men

(Buckley 1989: 25). These claims were met by female leaders Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai, who focused not only on legislature change but on its practical implementation. In 1919 a special state organization Zhenotdel, the Women's Department of the Central Committee Secretariat, was established to promote all the above-mentioned claims. Hence, Zhenotdel and smaller local zhenotdels focused on organizational-instructional work related to policymaking, 'agitation propaganda within the political education, and establishment of women's newspaper and magazines (Ibid.: 66-67).

The Zhenotdel policies also considered the question of liberation of women of the 'East', i.e., in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The Eurocentric modernist assumption homogenized local women into obedient group oppressed by local Muslim customs such as arranged marriages, *kalym* (bride-price), or polygyny that were conceived as 'backward' (Edgar 2006). This gender focus was also in line with the overall agenda of elimination of all forms of tradition for the establishment of a 'new' 'modernized' Soviet nation (Edgar 2004; Kamp 2006). Such aspects as family and private sphere were of major importance for Bolsheviks' rule as those practices contradicted the ideologic vision of communal socialist society (Kamp 2006). However, the propagating work of zhenotdels faced language obstacles as the early zheotdels' activists were Russian speaking; lack of access to the (female) private sphere; volatile nomadic lifestyles in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; and the backlash waves of violence toward local women by local male population (Buckley 1989; Kamp 2006).

Nevertheless, the Soviet policies resulted in the impressive achievements in high levels of education, access to healthcare, labor, and public sphere. Yet simultaneously as Kandiyoti (2007) argues the later Soviet pro-natalist policies fostered the image of a woman as 'mothers' of the laboring nation. That was

additionally facilitated by a complex family support system that eventually put a ‘double burden’ on a women. This was evident in the massive presence of women in precarious part-time low-level jobs that provided shorter hours, longer holidays used for dealing with domestic chores (ibid.: 608-609). As Maltseva (2021)adds: “… although the Soviet ideology stressed gender equality in labor and education, Soviet women lacked a voice in the upper echelons of power, faced wage gaps, and lived under the heavy burden of work and family obligations (341).

The Soviet women’s emancipation project might be considered a historical learning of the top-down approach to ‘women’s question’ when the homogenized conceptualization of ‘women’s question’ did not account for the diversity of women’s identities. However, the same critique goes to the ‘Eurocentric’ conceptualization of women of the ‘East’ that was marginalizing local women. Secondly, as Edgar (2006) suggests, the interference of Soviet policies into the private sphere resulted in a serious backlash of the local male population and the overall rise of nationalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This reactionary trend of re-traditionalization with an economic implication for women’s survival strategies during the break-up of the Soviet welfare system brought women back to the private sphere and normalized them as mothers and wives.

Woman, mother, entrepreneur: institutionalization of gender equality in the 2000-s

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the question of the 'democratization’ of the newly emerged states became prevalent in the international organization policies. According to Shakirova (2017), gender-mainstreaming policies were seen as a tool for establishing security in the Central Asian region, preventing “religious

fundamentalism, the thread of international terrorism, social unrest, and military conflict" (214). Furthermore, 'gender equality was promoted as a framework for a higher quality of 'human capital', profitable for national and transnational businesses, it multiplied the labor resources, created 'competitiveness', and established better business ethics (ibid).

In this framework, Kazakhstan ratified and signed a number of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1998, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW), and the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (CNMW) in 2002 ("Gender Equality | UNDP in Kazakhstan" n.d.). In 1998, president Nazarbayev established the National Commission on Family and Women's Affairs (National Commission). Further, the government developed a legal framework that maintained equal rights and participation of women in different spheres of life. The Strategy for Gender Equality for 2006-2016 (Strategy 2005) followed by Conception of Family and Gender Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan till 2030 (*Conception* 2016) became its fundamental documents.

This *de-jure* commitment to gender equality resulted in entering several international ranking projects. Thus, today Kazakhstan's international rating shows steady development: in 2020, it ranked 51th out of 189 countries in the Human Development Report with 0,980[5] in Gender Development Index 2020 ("Human Development Reports" n.d.). Moreover, the country managed to reduce the Gender Inequality Index from 0,212 in 2015 to 0,190 in 2019, which is lower than the average

[5] The indicator ranges from 1 to 5, where 1 is closest to gender parity, and 5 is furthest from gender parity http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020_technical_notes.pdf

score in Europe and Central Asia ("Gender Inequality Index | Human Development Reports" n.d.).

However, the particularity of gender development in Kazakhstan repeats its Soviet pattern in continual growth in economic and educational spheres, but not political empowerment. This is evident in the Gender Gap Reports (World Economic Forum 2018; 2020; 2021) with the traditionally lowest score in Political empowerment[6]. This illustrates the tendency of legitimizing the regime through ratification of international treaties (Sordi 2016) that comes with learning the methodologies of monitoring those commitments to report back to the international community, yet not fully implementing them *de facto*. For example, the profile of the first female candidate for the presidency in 2019, Dania Yespayeva[7] can demonstrate this formality. As a former banker, she is an example of an educated and economically and politically emancipated businesswoman whose profile fit the official picture of gender equality; however, she had no public political visibility among her potential voters.

I argue that the high presence of women in business results from the initial conceptualization of gender equality through values of market economy promoted by international organizations and inscribed in The Strategy For Gender Equality for 2006-2016. The document emphasizes seven priority areas: (1) gender equality in the public and political spheres, (2) gender equality in the economic sphere, (3) gender education, (4) improvement of the reproductive health of men and women, (5) prevention of gender-based violence, (6) strengthening of the family, (7) raising public awareness on gender equality (Strategy 2005). Each chapter of the document starts

[6] The overall position of Kazakhstan has lowered from 60 (out of 149 countries) in 2018 to 80 (out of 156 countries) in 2021.

[7] https://www.parlam.kz/ru/blogs/espaeva/Biography

with a SWOT[8] analysis which is typical for developing business strategies. Moreover, the economic development agenda highlights women's entrepreneurship as an important part of the strategy. Chapter Three establishes an aim of achieving "gender equality in the economic sphere, further the development of women's entrepreneurship, and increase women's competitiveness on the labor market." (Strategy 2005: 17). As one of the strengths, the documents underlines: "The purposeful increase of investment in 'human capital', which is as substantial as investments in the economic development of the country, is the most important precondition for economic modernization and a necessary condition for long-term strategic planning, which is carried out on the basis of gender equality." (18). Further on, the role of NGOs that promote the economic advancement of women and the involvement of international organizations in the substantial building of such facilitative infrastructures of women's economic empowerment is highly appreciated (18-19). The Strategy also acknowledges the widespread NGOization of the social sphere (300 non-governmental organizations in 2005) and its predominantly female leadership (10).

The document was drafted and accepted by the government with the help of feminist NGOs.[9] that were financially and institutionally supported by international organizations, such as UNDP (Shakirova 2017). The international involvement in gender issues in post-socialist states was a widespread practice. Susann Zimmermann (2009) defined in her analysis of gender studies in Eastern Europe and

[8] SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. This analytical tool is widespread in business and organization development http://www.cymeon.com/swot-history

[9] Feminist League of Kazakhstan is one of the leading NGOs in the early 2000s involved in legislation processes

Central Asia that interference was a form of promotion of liberal values and a free-market economy.

The partial narrative of the Strategy continues in the new Concept of Family and Gender Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan till 2030 that was adopted in 2016. As it is seen in the name of the document, it addresses two spheres of policies: family and gender. Thus, it is different from the previous strategy in its focus on family as a priority of 'gender' development that on the one hand includes the male population as the subject for gender policies, however, legitimizes the heteronormative nuclear family as a core aspect of the 'human capital' development (Conception 2016). Additionally, although it is still focused on 'rapid modernization and industrialization' with the objective of entering the OECD countries' level of development, it does not accentuate the 'important' role of international organizations in this process as the Strategy did. The document just acknowledges the UN promoted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where '12 out of 17 goals are gender-sensitive' (ibid).

The re-traditionalization narrative also new in this document. It can be found among the seven major objectives of the family policy. For example, "the formation of a positive way of family life, increasing spiritual and moral values of society, strengthening the upbringing of the younger generation" (ibid.: 21). Simultaneously, the old liberal narrative continues in the gender policy. together with 30% of women's presence in decision-making positions in different spheres of government (executive, representative, and legislature), the Conception emphasized the economic development through promotion of 'mechanisms of development of women's entrepreneurship' (22).

The analysis of these documents demonstrates the double focus on 'entrepreneurship' and 'family values', which I argue repeats the Soviet paradox

(Kandiyoti 2007) of the ‘double burden’ of the neither colonized nor modern women in Central Asia. This social and symbolic evidence of the continuity of the Soviet approach to gender policies has a little shift to the ideological revival of ‘traditional values’ as part of the national ideology and coping mechanism with the economic challenges in neoliberal development imposed by international organizations.

In the next chapter, I will explain how the complexity of the given socio-economic context, which is an evident result of the neopatrimonial regime, is intertwined with the narratives of strategies of the politically active women who either contest or use the given circumstances to accomplish political ambitions.

Chapter 3. 2019: Women in politics and women with political agendas

The cooperative civil society and its new politicization in 2019

Within previous analysis of the framework documents on gender policies, I argue that the promotion of entrepreneurial mentality on the one hand and accessible financial support from international agencies on the other created a special condition for the emergence of a predominantly female civil society in the 2000-s (Shakirova 2017; Ziegler 2010). However, the overall development of civil society in Kazakhstan is characterized by the transition from an open (democratic) political competition between liberal business elites and the ruling regime to the suppression of that competition, de-politicization of the civil society and its eventual cooperation with the state (Ziegler 2010; Nezhina and Ibrayeva 2013; Pierobon 2016). Additionally, as Niyazbekov (2018) argues the 'color revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000-s also influenced the growing conservatism of Kazakhstani regime. During that time many international programs were closed, and the state initiated the financial support of the civil society in exchange for its loyalty (Niyazbekov 2018).

Today, the non-profit sector is regulated through a variety of laws and conceptual documents. Such laws as On Public Associations (1996), On Non-Commercial Organizations (2001), and the Concept of Civil Society Development (2006) reinforced the 'partnership' between the state and the civil society. That resulted in establishing a system of tenders that supported the realization of socially relevant projects (Pierobon 2016).

In this context, the peaceful power transition acted by Nazarbayev in March 2019 resonated with Kazakhstani society. Although it did not fundamentally affect the

political regime, it still showed an opportunity for change. However, the consequent events significantly triggered the public reaction in a negative way. One of them was the renaming of the capital of Kazakhstan Astana by the name of the former president, Nur-Sultan. That resulted in protests in Astana/Nur-Sultan and general public rejection of such a fundamental made without the citizens' participation ("Opponents of Renaming the Capital n.d.).

Further, on April 9, the former Senate head Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev who, according to the constitution, became an interim president, announced the early presidential elections on June 9. This date contradicted the Constitutional procedure that set the elections in the spring of the next year, which led to an exacerbation of public tension. After a long period of conservatism, this period of protests and politicized debates was called 'Kazakh koktemi'—'Kazakh spring'.

The consequent events developed at a quite fast pace. On April 21, two civil activists, Asiya Tulesova and Beibarys Bolymbetov were arrested for a banner calling for fair elections, saying: "You cannot run away from the truth" that they held at the annual Almaty marathon. The activists were jailed for 15 days ("In Alma-Ata, Activists Were Arrested" n.d.).

On April 29, another activist, an artist Roman Zakharov, was arrested for five days for the banner he placed over one of the main roads citing the constitution of Kazakhstan: "The only source of the state power is the people." ("Five Days of Arrest" n.d.).

On May 1 and on May 9 (both are holidays), protests took place in Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Aktobe, Shymkent, and Oral (OSCE 2019).

This overreaction of the regime to the expression of public opinion only facilitated the development of new political movements that consequently announced

their establishment. Most of those movements were led by young activists, which I argue, can be explained by belonging to the middle class and consequent high-level of (predominantly) Western education (Laruelle 2019). Those movements appeared on a quite formal political scene of the official oppositional candidate for the presidency, Amirzhan Kosanov, and a banned party, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, led by Mukhtar Ablyaziv, the former oligarch in exile in France. Within this limited context, the young political force occurred as a fresh phenomenon (Moldabekov 2019).

The political movement Oyan, Kazakhstan![10] announced its establishment on June 5, a few days before the elections. “We announced the creation of a movement to show the *gap between the government and young Kazakhstanis*. We are not affiliated with any active political party, both in the country and abroad. We are not financed by any party. We are different. We are a new generation, a new force. And we ask the authorities to reckon with this force,” a journalist and one of the leaders, Assem Zhapisheva, said at the press conference (Moldabekov 2019). The movement called for political reforms based on the transition to a parliamentary republic, a majoritarian system of elections, rejection of political repressions, etc.

The growing tension from both sides: official politics and the opposition, resulted in mass protests on the day of the elections and a day after. The protesters rejected the results and called for recounting the ballots; however, the state severely suppressed the protestors, arresting approximately 500 people with administrative charges and fines (“Kazakhstan Election Condemned - BBC News” n.d.).

[10] Oyan, Kazakh! (Kazakh: Wake up, Kazakh!) was a poem of Myrzhakyp Dulatov published in 1909 as a criticism of Russian colonial policies. The movement transformed the name into Oyan, Kazakhstan!

This somewhat obvious wave of protest that involved many young female leaders can be placed in an overall trend of women protesting in Kazakhstan. Although the 2019 wave of unrest was not gendered, I would still look at it in the general trend of women publicly voicing their claims. Thus, as Maltseva (2021) argues in her analysis of women's protests in 2013 against raise of retirement age and change of indexation of maternity leave support; in 2016 against the land reform; and in 2019's protest of mothers of many children triggered by the death of five girls in a house fire—the long-awaited revival of civic activism will start with women.[11]. In the next section that builds on empirical interviews with some of the activists and women in politics, I will provide a more insightful argumentation for this trend.

Women in politics and women with political agendas

The given analysis of the political context and neopatrimonial regime within which the politically active women navigate influences the complexity of their political subjectivities. The interviews with women leading the new political movements, women in state politics, and leaders of feminist NGOs explain the heterogeneous strategies with which they either carve their political spaces or comply engaging in patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti 1988). However, regardless of their tactics, I argue that those women who find motivation, emotional, and intellectual resources to engage in politics in Kazakhstan are taking active positions and view their missions as political and worthy the political struggle. My further detailed observations of their subjectivities

[11] In 2013 the government decided to increase the women's retirement age from 58 to 63; also, there was a suggestion to change the full indexation of the maternity benefits to women with high salaries (more women earned—more benefits they would get). Furthermore, in 2016 the announced land reform allowed businesses with foreign ownership to leasing agricultural land for 25 years. And in winter 2019, a house fire that resulted in the death of five sisters who stayed at home while their parents were at work led to a massive protest of mothers of many children who demanded better housing conditions and financial support (Maltseva 2021).

showcase those multifaceted attitudes and narratives that help them to voice their political claims.

Methodology of the interviews

During my research, I discovered that several newly emerged political movements consequently announced their parties registrations. Among others, there were women-led movements: Respublika by Bella Orynbetova, HAQ by Togzhan Kozhaliyeva, Our Right by Sanovar Zakirova, and later Progress by Asiya Tulesova and Aliya Zholboldina. I approached three of those women considering the party registration intention as an indicator of political agenda. It is important to notice that the regime has continuously suppressed party registration through harsh bureaucratic requirements. The new party has to recruit 40,000[12] documented members form different regions which makes this process practically impossible—the last time when the new party was registered in Kazakhstan was in 2006 (OSCE 2019: 5)

In addition to the non-registered party leaders, I interviewed the leader of the LGBTQ feminist organization. I also approached several leaders from oppositional political movements such as Oyan, Qazaqstan! and the media; however, due to time limitations and family burdens of one of them, who is a mother of four, the respondents could not participate in my research.

Regarding the women in official politics, I interviewed one of the parliament members from the opposition and a woman in a ministerial position.

In addition, I interviewed and discussed my findings with two representatives of feminist organizations with expertise in gender agenda. Finally, I contextualized my research in conversations with other civil society members working with media, youth, and political activism. All in all, I conducted eleven interviews.

[12] The required number of party members has changed to 20,000 in May 2020 (OSCE 2020)

Women with political agendas

In order to better orient within the narratives of my interlocutors, I coded them as *'woman with political agenda'* (WPA) and numbered respectively: WPA1, WPA2, WPA3, WPA4. The profiles of the four women leaders had several overlapping characteristics. Most of them are urban, Russian-speaking ethic Kazakhs, with higher education (master's and doctoral degrees, three are from international universities), belonging to the same generation of 36-40 years old. This profiling explains their belonging to the middle-class society and the exclusion of non-'titular' (Kazakh) ethnic groups from political claims. However, more details should be provided to nuance their views. Thus, WPA1, 36 y.o., was consistently involved in activism and participated in municipal elections as an independent candidate with environmental agenda. WPA2, 40 y.o., a journalist closely worked with state organizations, mother of two. WPA3, 40 y.o., former corporate manager with extended international professional experience, mother of two. WPA4, 38 y.o., a consistent LGBTQ activist.

Triggers or entry points of political activism

Although the years of the start of political activity for all the respondents were different—some started earlier in 2016, others during the transitional 2019—three of the respondents mentioned that they 'always were interested in politics' or had 'an ambition' in decision making including politics. Nevertheless, the social and economic context and the events of 2019 triggered their activism.

No 'gender identity in political claims and reserved attitudes to a new generation of feminist activists

For almost all of my respondents, the 'woman' gender identity was not crucial in setting their political agendas. Although they acknowledged their female identities and the obstacles and benefits that they encountered while being in politics, that was

not the main narrative in their political claims. Interestingly, the perception of women's identity differed depending on the context. For example, one respondent shared her belief that women have a different style in doing politics, 'more caring, supportive, and responsible'. At the same time, she noticed how she was benefiting from her female identity during the protests: *"We, women, can be emotional; the police treat us less harshly than men*." Another respondent also shared her perception of women in protests:

> *"Men are under pressure in our country; they cannot voice the political claims as they will attract the attention of the security services. Whereas women can be more vocal, they can be hysterical; they won't be treated as hard as men would be" (WPA3).*

There were two mothers among my respondents, both coming from different social backgrounds. The single mother with two children expressed her anxieties about engaging in oppositional politics due to worries about her children: *"My children ask me, mom, why can't we live the way we used to"* (WPA2). These worries are becoming an obstacle for her to be an 'oppositional politician'. Meanwhile, although another interviewee did not mention any concerns regarding her children's safety, she, nevertheless, addressed this part of her identity as a mother within her motivation: *"Sometimes I think, I am a mother of two, why do I need to engage in this politics whatsoever?*" (WPA3)

In addition to the existing 'women' 'mother' narratives, most of my interviewees, except the LGBTQ activist, do not identify as feminists or have any political feminist claims. They specify the importance of the feminist agenda but do not include that in their political statements. Additionally, they acknowledge the rise of a new generation of political and feminist movements. However, their attitude to the feminist discourses is quite moderate. Hence, one respondent believes that feminist claim will limit the scope of potential supporters:

> *"When you say "women's, women's," it scares men, although I'm sure there would be many men who share feminist aspirations. The feminist movement, due to the sometimes very radical views of some members, is rejected by the male part of the population. And I don't want to split up anymore, but to unite, to find common ground." (WPA1)*

Another respondent mentioned that the new feminist claims are so 'radical[13]' because they are driven by their identity:

> *"They are 'hungry'; they came from the regions. They are currently renting a room somewhere in Almaty; they are journalists. Today they received 20-30 thousand (tenge, approx. $50-70), and tomorrow, well, you understand. At this moment, they are 20-30 years old; they are a bit marginalized. But when I was 20, I lived in the 2000-s, there was a lot of money." (WPA3)*

One of the respondents eventually concluded that gender is not important; *'the sense of responsibility, justice is more important than gender' (WPA2).*

More pro-democracy political agenda rather than feminist

In their political agendas, the respondents prioritize the 'democratic agenda' such as political reforms: change of political system from presidential to the parliamentarian, changes in the legislature regarding the elections, and the peaceful gatherings. Only two respondents had a distinct priority in the political agenda: environmental and LGBTQ rights.

Regarding the gender-related political claims, my respondents referred to the negative image of feminism or that more 'expert' NGOs already occupy this 'niche'. Only one LGBTQ activist was very precise and specific in her gender claims: *"Look at our women-deputies in the parliament. None of them are representing me. I need someone who will represent me and other LBQ (lesbian, bisexual, queer) people." (WPA4)*

[13] As an example of 'radicality', the respondent mentioned a feminist media outlet that uses the 'name and shame' approach and 'joins' the cancel culture.

However, despite the absence of feminist claims, those women were mentioning the feminist context—the recent attempt of amending the domestic violence law[14]. The working groups developed the adjustments involving female parliament members, NGO leaders, and gender experts. The discussion of that project attracted a lot of public attention: the new edition of the law was contested by the groups of (also women) activists, lawyers, and parents led by fathers who opposed such potential decisions as taking the child under police custody in case of a severe act of abuse. The protesters came to the parliament building, and eventually, the law was returned for revision (Asautai 2021).

One of the respondents explained why she self-excluded from the domestic violence discussion groups, reasoning that she 'was not an expert in this field. Further, she expressed an overall lack of confidence and motivation in feminist and political discourse due to personal experience as an 'upper class' citizen:

> *"I keep on questioning myself, what and why do I need this? I have everything; I am not in jail; why should I be disturbed by this? Conversely, I envy the feminists who are very concrete in their claims." (WPA3)*

I interpret this absence of gender thematic in their political agenda due to their lack of personal 'gendered' experience as they mostly come from the educated middle-class urban society that is more 'gender equal' and the gender/women-related injustices are not that salient there. Thus, their political agendas are coming from personal experiences during the transition and values they are trying to transmit to the public and policymaking. Most of those *personal experiences* included arrests, surveillance, and pressure from the state security services.

[14] The current law on domestic violence was developed in 2009 and decriminalized physical violence in a domestic context. CEDAW consistently recommends changing the law (to an administrative infraction (OHCHR 2019))

The reactionary political agenda and search for strategy

The overall perception and critique about the political regime was a *reaction* to the violence and oppressive politics the security services used to suppress the protests and political activity in 2019. In terms of social issues, many of the respondents mentioned the education system, particularly schools division into public, private, and 'presidential', which leads to 'social and economic inequality[15].

Another point of discussion was the strategies of engaging with politics. The main debate in this sphere is divided between two attitudes. The Oyan, Kazakhstan movement, for example, deliberately refused to establish the party as this would institutionalize their political participation and normalize the existing regime, which must be completely changed (from presidential to a parliamentary republic). My interviewees, on the contrary, decided to engage with the current system by announcing the party establishment as they believe that only by *'using the given tools we can gradually change something' (WPA1)*. However, the pandemic restrictions for mass gatherings undermined their plans. Today, my interlocutors are waiting for a '*political opportunity'* to continue their activities. Some are monitoring the situation in the region: *'I'm checking now what is happening with Navalny in Russia, what is happening in Belarus, Ukraine, that will mean a lot for our region*" *(WPA1*); some are using this time for political education; some are recovering from the oppressions'.

[15] There are three types of schools in Kazakhstan: public schools financed by the state budget, private schools, and so-called Nazarbayev Intellectual schools (NIS) that have sufficient governmental support, which helps to make education free for the children. However, entering those schools requires the children and their parents to undergo substantial intellectual training for the entry exams. Thus, the NIS schools are based on the value of meritocracy, which is considered to be a case of inequality for some of my interviewees. They argued that those resources should be accessible for all the children with no regard to their merit.

New generation as a hope for change

Many interviewees acknowledged the rise of a new generation of political and feminist activism and saw the difference between them and the current 'aged' political elite. If some expressed hope for change only in the next generation '*because they are more open-minded and freer*' (WPA2), another respondent depicted the political activity of her generation as a 'bridge' between the 'generation Z' and 'boomers'. The 'radicality' or 'boldness' of 'new generation' in media makes the respondents conscious, but in general inspiring:

> *"It seems to me little by little, when a younger audience comes, when they make important decisions, then everything will change. But the older generation should also leave with their old views altogether." (WPA2)*

Women in official politics

I managed to talk to two women in official politics from different political spheres and who do not directly work with gender policies. For better clarification and orientation, I will code them as 'woman in official politics 1' (WOP1) and 'woman in official politics 2' (WOP2).

The WOP1, 60 y.o., Russian, a member of the communist party working for her second term as a member of Parliament since 2016. She is quite a popular politician who was recommended by several activists who share oppositional views.

The WOP2, 46 y.o. is a member of the ruling party Nur Otan, occupying a ministerial position. Although both narratives were different due to their political positions, they had some overlapping claims that I emphasize further.

The accidental entry point to politics

Both women recalled how 'accidentally' they entered politics. In the case of the oppositional deputy, her 'activist' career started when she was a school principal and

openly criticized the educational policies. She later entered the field of NGOs, then the local level of administration; further, she joined the communist party and was elected to Parliament. The minister woman substantially built her career after entering 'civil service' at the end of the 1990-s. She remembers that it was an 'opportunity when she 'had no choice due to high level of unemployment:

> *"When I joined the civil service, it was a very difficult period for the country. That was the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the period of the formation of independence. And when I came to civil service, I already had a child. At that time there was massive unemployment, it was very difficult to choose anything. And I literally worked to provide for my family feel good. I did not choose a job. If you look at my biography, I started working in a supermarket; it was an even more or less decent job."*

The consequent development in her career she explained by 'being noticed' and promoted as a 'professional'.

Professionalism in politics is more than gender.

The woman minister was more affirmative about the support of women in politics and highly appreciated the help that she received from women colleagues and her own family. She also acknowledged that despite the fact that the ruling party has 60% of women-politicians, however, on "*the 'political' level of decision, there are only two of us in the government"* (referring to a second female minister). Nevertheless, my interviewee did not agree with the 'glass ceiling effect and argued for the 'high level of qualification' first, and then the gender identity:

> *"I don't think you need to promote a woman just because she is a woman. Still, there are qualification requirements; there is life baggage, experience - all this must be taken into account. Just for the sake of fulfilling some kind of gender promotion plan, well, I think this is wrong. Any area (political sphere) is of strategic importance. Naturally, it is very important that a person is experienced, a professional in his field and regardless of his gender. This is my purely personal and principled opinion. […] I came from the bottom, I started as a leading specialist, I know what the work of a leading specialist is, I know, the work of a department head. Understanding responsibility*

at every stage is very important for a leader. […] Because it is not easy to be able to work in a team, to manage the process, so when women are hired without experience and work experience, I think it is not right." (WOP2)

The oppositional politician was mostly claiming the formality of the gender question in official politics: *"Some women were sent to Austria to share the experiences and bring European best practices to Kazakhstan, but nothing actually changed."* She explains the high level of women's presence in the ruling party by 'mandatory' party membership from the 'state sector' of teachers and medical workers who do not reach the decision-making level due to the glass ceiling effect.

However, she also agrees with the 'professionalism' argument believing that qualifications and quality of a woman's work are more important rather than her gender:

"However, I don't see that there will be 50% of women and everything will be fine, everyone will immediately remember gender, remember that there are men and women, girls, boys—nothing like this. We know, for instance, an interesting example, when in Rwanda 50% of women in Parliament, it does not change anything at all. The reason for the change is that there are qualified specialists who are decent, honest so that they are human beings in the first place. Even if there were 90% of women (in Parliament), it wouldn't change anything." (WOP1)

Women and family as objects of re-traditionalization

While discussing the women's role and active position, the minister underlined the importance of personal development through *'all the resources available today for the young generation of women*'. At the same time, despite the negative views on the re-traditionalization of gender roles *('still some people in villages kidnap the brides'*), she claimed that still the '*balance should be found*':

"It is very important to remember about the preservation of the cultural code because, in order to preserve the nation, it is very important that women, girls have traditional values. It is vital that a woman understands her role in preserving the nation because language,

culture, traditions start with the family. If in a democratic society this notion is not significant, precisely traditional upbringing is a factor in preserving the cultural code, and here it is important to maintain this balance." (WOP2)

At the same time, the deputy of the oppositional party was criticizing the re-traditionalization trend:

"They (members of the ruling party) live by their own ideas; they do not know gender equality. There have some stereotypes and myths that a woman should know her place; she should perform some function, that we are now destroying the family. But the fact that this family is unacceptable for life, for children, for women, and for the same man even, no one thinks about it. Everyone wants to preserve some kind of status that was once. But the world is changing. Everyone wants an iPhone, everyone wants to drive a Mercedes or Maybach, they don't want to ride a cart, a donkey, but they want to keep these archaic things. It's all about such contradictions, and people (in Parliament) stand to death for these old habits and ideas." (WOP1)

Political agendas within the given political regime

Regarding the political agendas, both respondents were quite short and vague in their responses. The oppositional politician repeated the official claim that the current political regime with its lack of political plurality in Kazakhstan is 'a historical moment'. Additionally, the minister named her political priorities the 'stability and constructive development of the society'—the mainstream official narrative of the ruling party.

Leaders of the feminist NGOs

The interviews with the feminist NGO leaders helped to enhance the understanding of the gender agenda in Kazakhstan and added more layers in mapping women's political subjectivities. Their opinions were important as they professionally interact with women officials involved in state gender policies. They are often invited to the development and monitoring of the gender-related policies from both sides: the

state and the international organizations. Through sharing their reflections about these interactions with women politicians, the experts of the National Commission on Family and Women's Affairs (National Commission) and UN Women, they expressed their dissatisfaction with their 'formal' work that does not 'change anything.

The second important take out from these interviews that those two women represented the 'first' and the 'second' generations of feminists. For the reasons of better orientation, I will code them as 'feminist activist 1' (FA1) and 'feminist activist 2' (FA2). The FA1 is an NGO director, around 50-55 y.o. She developed her career in the times when international organizations supported the feminist NGOs; however, she was not an active part of that group, yet she closely observed and participated in some of the processes. She is critical towards the general gender policy officials, however, appreciates some of their personal characteristics; she understands how gender and class are interrelated and sees the root of the problem in economic dependency. Her work and experience also empower her as a gender expert and head of the shelter for the victims of domestic violence. The FA2, 28 y.o., belongs to that 'young', 'new' generation of feminists; her critique of the gender politicians focuses on their inability to understand the gender issues 'structurally'; she was the only one who expressed critical attitude about capitalist/neoliberal development of gender policies, and she tends towards more inclusive rhetoric about the low-income or marginalized groups of women.

My interviews followed up my empirical findings, which I shared with these feminist activists, trying to understand their analysis of the patterns I discovered about the politically active women. However, interestingly, my respondents also expressed their political position and mission as feminist activists. Although, they do not intend to form a party or political organization and, in general, accept the regime:

> *"You see, I have a feminist position. Feminists do not care (about the regime); they work in any conditions, they work in any democracies and dictatorships. Yes, and I always say, well, what's the difference, another male president will come." (FA1.)*

They mention how their activities are streamlined towards social change and how all the aspects of their work and agenda are political:

> *"I am for solving the problems of micro-politics of everyday life, and I see more results here. I think, even with my shelter, I do more than if I were sitting there in parliament." (FA1)*

> *"For me, this is all one thing - for me, this is a manifestation of capitalism and patriarchy, nothing pleases the eye, to be honest. For me, activism is about the fact that I am now in my community, and we are trying to improve our lives in the existing political, state, institutional realities. This is what I do. […] I think we are politicians. We are all activists; we are engaged in politics, we go out to political marches, make political statements, we inform about the political situation, we influence it, our work is all about changing this political reality." (FA2)*

'Women in gender politics are not doing enough'

Both activists observed and explained how women in gender politics, mostly the members and leaders of the National Commission, are not 'doing enough' or 'not effective' and just 'formal' in their work. One respondent explained it with the 'status' that they gain by taking political positions, yet still, they lack agency:

> *"I understand that they have high status (in National Commission). They have the status of a consultative and advisory body under the President of Kazakhstan, which means they are part of the presidential apparatus, which means, in fact, they have a good mandate. They don't use it. It's a shame. Having the opportunity, such a good administrative resource, they do not use it, they do not understand, they expect this from us from NGOs, that we will write them what to do. They are, in fact, reactive, but they should be proactive." (FA1)*

At the same time, another activist saw the problem in their fundamental unawareness of gender agenda:

> *"For example, take domestic violence. These women (politicians) have a power position, but they still don't see the structural problem.*

> *They blame abusers who get drunk, or who were abused in childhood, or that women cannot leave, that they are economically dependent. But they don't ask further why they are dependent. […] And I am sure that since they don't see gender or structure even in these problems, they don't see gender in their agency either. Why are they doing this? Over and over again, unlike their male colleagues, they do this work on a volunteer basis, give interviews, and lose their career prospects. Why do they always remain deputies? Why is their work always unpaid? No, they don't seem to see it at all." (FA2)*

The reason for the lack of awareness and agency the interviewees see in the patriarchal style of the state, the 'male politicians' who 'approve', 'give accesses to their political community, and that is considered to be enough for those women—they gained their 'status'.

As examples of gender issues that demanded the National Commission's attention in recent years, both respondents referred to the domestic violence problem as well as to the protests of mothers of many children. They talked about those issues as class problems. However, as one of them is working in a shelter, she saw her position as 'giving an opportunity to the victims, as well as almost representing the state (her shelter is funded by the state):

> *"I had a COVID case among women in the shelter. She was also pregnant, and I told her to go get hospitalized. That is the official procedure for pregnant women. But her family rejected her being scared of infection. So, she said to me: "This is a state institution (respondent's shelter), which means that I am staying." Or another girl recalled that after threats from her abuser, she told him about this shelter: "This is a state organization. I am under the state protection". That means a lot for them. And that means a lot for me." (FA1)*

At the same time, another activist referenced the 'middle class' position of the women in the National Commission who see themselves as 'saviors':

> *"They do not always see themselves as part of the problem; they want to see themselves as experts who are above this problem. That is a very patriarchal approach, of course. They act like they are objective; they are experts; they save these poor drunken husbands and their dying wives. That is their noble task, and it is a comfortable position*

for them to come out perfumed, in the best make-up, with huge hairstyles and sitting in bright offices." (FA2)

These discrepancies of 'gender' and 'feminist' politics were defined by one of the respondents who remembered another leader of the state-affiliated women's organization called herself not a 'feminist' but a 'genderist'. My respondent further clearly defined the distinction in state rhetoric between the 'feminist' and 'gender' agenda. The latter, promoted by international organizations and accepted by the state, seemed for her 'safer' and more 'acceptable':

"The gender agenda is more acceptable; it is more inclusive, it is safe. "Let's give women this and that, let's resolve these issues for women," – say men in power. "Here, have this and that, please," – the men say, and everything is fine, gender problems seem to be solved. But there is no understanding of what else is behind this." (FA1)

In general, this disconnection from the feminist agenda can be seen from the handpicking approach to promoting the women politicians who deal with gender politics. For example, according to one of the respondent's analyses of the profiles of the leaders of the National Commission and some other female political leaders who are 'visible'—they all have business management background. They get 'promoted' to different positions, and the National Commission can be one of those transitional positions in their careers.[16]

Re-traditionalization and Dariga Nazarbayeva as obstacles for 'public' acceptance of the gender agenda

According to my respondents, there can be two reasons why in general, the idea of women's political emancipation is not well accepted by society. First of all, the

[16] For example, Gulshara Abdykalikova, a current and only female governor of the region, between her positions as Minister of Labor and Social Protection and State Secretary, was heading the National Commission.

revival of ‘traditional values’ that refer to women as mothers and wives, exacerbated by the ‘traditional’ low position of the young wife (*kelin*) in the family of the husband.[17].

Another is the potential ‘inheritance’ of the presidential seat by Dariga Nazarbayeva, the eldest of three daughters of the former president who was politically active in the early 2000-s and had a political party that later merged with the ruling party of her father (Ziegler 2010); she later was appointed to high political positions, the last one was the Chair of the Senate. However, she eventually did not ‘inherit’ the presidential seat and unexpectedly left (or was moved from) the Senate. In this context, one of the respondents recalled that as soon as she would start talking about women’s political empowerment, the response would be that she is preparing the ground for the former president’s daughter. Thus, Dariga Nazarbayeva, as a (female) image of the regime power, was also opposed as a ‘woman’, i.e., a daughter of the authoritarian president.

Expertise and professionalism

The notions of expertise and professionalism highlighted as more valuable by several women in politics and civil society were also reflected in the conversations with feminist activists. Generally, ‘professional expertise’ is the most valuable asset for the activist from the earlier generation. In the interview, the respondent referred to several projects related to gender budgeting, the issues of teenage suicides, and later shelter for domestic violence victims and recalled how the ‘government’, National Commission, other officials’ call and invite’ her as an expert. The interviewee also remembered how she was ‘invited to join the ruling party:

> *Yes, I actually had a (socio-political) elevator. I was offered to join the party once. A girl called from Nur Otan did not even understand the*

[17] According to traditional customs in Kazakh society, the status of a woman develops through her age and experience. The younger women usually have a lower status, which changes with the birth of children and then becoming a mother-in-law (Stasevitch 2011)

> *seriousness of the moment. She said: "Go to the akimat (local municipality) and write a registration statement." It was in 2015, I think. I said, I won't go; why do I need this? "Well, I was told to call you, you are such and such, the public fund is such and such? So, go and register." No, no, I won't go, thanks." (FA1)*

At the same time, she expressed her 'pleasant surprise' that she was not invited to another women's organization—Alliance of Women's Forces, affiliated with Dariga Nazarbayeva. Thus, this interviewee felt comfortable staying aside from all the general forces, such as 'first wave' feminists, state genderists, and the young wave of feminists. She is still recognized as an expert from the state and international organizations' sides.

The 'younger feminist activist, on the contrary, expressed her frustration with the notion of expertise. Due to the overall narrative to support 'younger' activists, she always gets invited to the meetings with the international organizations; however, when she is participating in the round tables, and there is a person with a master's degree, "*people say, referring to her 'can we ask an expert?'".* Additionally, she expressed her exclusion from the gender-related discussions within state-facilitated working groups as the official gender politicians are more legitimized by their status 'to do that job' despite their gender unawareness. The same frustration goes towards the different value of expertise between 'international expert' and local, a national expert, who are usually less paid. However, the respondent questioned the 'international expertise':

> *"These international experts ask me basic questions such as what year my organization was registered in. Is this an expertise? And based on these primitive questions, they will make their own high quality, expensive research, the results of which will then be published, and then my work will depend on them here in Kazakhstan or in Central Asia." (FA2)*

Thus, the question of legitimizing local Central Asian expertise through horizontal discussions with the representatives of diverse gender-related organizations and activists became the main objective for her NGO.

Navigating, carving, bargaining–women's political subjectivities in neopatrimonial regime

This overview of the narratives and claims of different politically active women is, of course, not an exhaustive account. However, this inquiry provides a general and still nuanced picture, a snapshot of a particular socio-political and historical context in relation to gender in Kazakhstan in recent years.

It was evident in the interviews how gender agenda is almost not instrumentalized by women-led grass-root political claims for 'democratic change' despite the official endorsement of the international programs such as UN's Beijing Platform of Action. That can be explained by the top-down approach to implementations of gender equality policies and recommendations that implies some level of 'obedience', i.e., compliance with the regime. Thus, the gender equality agenda does not attract female political activists as this sphere is already 'occupied by the government and its female political elite (sometimes including the daughter of the former president) or NGOs that provide gender-related social services.

Moreover, I argue that the general liberal feminist theory on women's political representation is controversial due to its heteronormativity and universalism, as well as I join the critique of socialist and 'third wave' feminists who claim that the transnational developmental organizations appropriated the feminist vocabulary of 'empowerment', 'agency', 'choice' in order to legitimize their neoliberal discourse and agenda (Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2015). Thus, although the

programs of World Bank or UN are focused on the economic development of women in the global South (which is also evident in the Central Asian region), by translating individualistic values of 'entrepreneurial mentality, they depoliticize the feminist claims, take away responsibility from the state, and undermine the collective struggle against social injustices (Ibid).

In addition to controversial theorization and promotion of gender equality strategies, the intrinsically patriarchal, neopatrimonial context of Kazakhstan with neo-traditional values and views becomes an obstacle in politicizing the gender agenda. Thus, although Kazakhstan accepted international recommendations, it still lacks political pluralism, including politicized gender claims such as the structural critique of the male-dominated high-level politics.

However, within the given context and circumstances, women with political agendas still express (and some of them enact) their political subjectivities. Their engagement in political struggle as 'human beings' or 'citizens' rather than 'women' I explain by their to some extent privileged position of economically and socially secure Russian-speaking urbanites—typical characteristics of the Kazakhstani middle class. Most of them did not personally experience gendered injustices; thus, their 'women' identity was not strongly constrained in contrast with, for example, LGBTQ or domestic violence activists (many had abusive experiences). I argue that as far as historically the *socio-economic* gender agenda such as education, child and healthcare, access to labor were 'covered' by the Soviet and then contemporary state, the grass-root female activists do not (or do not know how to) incorporate those into their claims.

Another interesting point that women with political agendas do not represent any evident social group. They are concerned by social and economic inequalities, corruption, violations of human rights; however, they do not voice the claims of some

particular character (again, apart from the LGBTQ and environmental activist). Thus, I question whom those women can represent in the democratic regime? As one of the respondents commented on the political inertia of Almaty citizens: *"I believe that they are not lazy not participating in protests. They need some success story; people believe in victories—that what will motivate them for change." (WPA1)*

In conclusion, I may say that women with political agendas are operating more like charismatic individuals with a particular set of values. They, as 'women' and 'politicians', are using different strategies and tactics to navigate through different constraints of neopatrimonialism. Additionally to protesting, campaigning in the regions, and social media, one activist, told how she and her female colleague persuaded the male colleagues to drop the 'traditional' narrative in their political program. In parallel, they also invited a male colleague to the rally in one of the more 'traditional' cities to gain more 'trust'. Another activist tried to engage in domestic violence agenda but eventually self-excluded due to her perceived 'non-professionalism'. This shows how my interlocutors are searching or waiting for personal and political opportunities to fulfill their political 'calling'.

In parallel, the women in official politics try to gain more influence through achieving a 'high level of professionalism' in long periods of civil service. This is how they become 'noticed' by the male decision-makers who invite them to new levels of political influence, thus endorsing them with political 'statuses. Further, they can exchange their 'expertise' to the opportunity of voicing their critique or maybe political action, which is evident in the narrative of the oppositional politician. However, this 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti 1988) is still limited despite the 'professionalism' as it was evident in the careers of female politicians who founded an oppositional party together with male colleagues and were forced to leave their high-level political

positions.[18]. This regime constraint doubled by the glass ceiling pushes the handpicked women politicians to technocratic administrative careers, turning them into ‘executives’ (as many are coming from the business sphere) who exchange their loyalty for a political status. The wide presence of women politicians who were ‘emancipated’ through business is another evidence of the neoliberal or, better to say, neopatrimonial political realities in Kazakhstani.

In conclusion, I would like to quote one of the respondents who said that even if there were democracy and people were able to choose whom they wanted, women’s political struggle would be even more difficult (without the state's affirmative action) due to lack of resources.

[18] Both Senator Zauresh Battalova and Vice-Minister of Defense Zhannat Yertlesova were removed from the government after founding the oppositional party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan together with other political and business elites (Ostrowski 2009).

Conclusion

In my thesis, I examined the strategies and subjectivities of women who have an active political position either in the sphere of official politics, oppositional, or feminist activism. I defined two groups of women as 'women with political agendas' (new wave of female political activists) and 'women in official politics' (women members of parliament and state institutions). I looked at their subjectivities in relation to the neopatrimonial regime that involves the trend of re-traditionalization of the society and close relationships with international organizations as a form of international legitimization of the regime.

The discourse analysis of eleven interviews with the representatives of the mentioned groups showed that most politically active women do not politicize their gender identity. I explain this by state's appropriation of gender agenda resulting from the historical Soviet process of top-down women's emancipation and later in the early 2000-s by international agencies. Thus, I argue that the gender agenda was depoliticized by the neopatrimonial regime and cannot be employed by a female political activists in their struggle for democracy.

In addition, in those gender policies I observed the continuity of the paradox that Kandiyoti (2007) referred to Soviet. On the one hand, they foster liberal narrative of individualism and entrepreneurial mentality, yet on the other, call for family values preservation and endorse women as mothers of the nation. That repeats the Soviet's double-burden effect, which constructs women as 'successful businesswomen and caring mothers and wives.'

This paradox is also present in the political subjectivities of the respondents. The women with political agendas mostly act as charismatic individuals with an unclear representation of any particular social group with some anxieties about their children.

At the same time, the official politicians value ‘professionalism’ in women as key to success and family as its main support system, yet also attribute to them the national responsibility for family care.

However, I also argue that both groups are able and actually using different strategies (engaging in patriarchal bargains) to propel their political stances, whether its denial of active feminist position in exchange for attracting more (male) supporters or alliance with the regime for further criticism of its socio-economic (but not political) inequalities.

By combining different theoretical strands such as liberal feminist theorization of women’s representation (Pitkin 1967; Phillips 1995; Ackerly 2001; Paxton and Hughes 2015) and its critique by post-structuralist (Butler 1993) and third-wave feminists (Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2015) together with regime studies in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova 2020; Tutumlu 2019) and gender relations within those regimes (Kandiyoti 2007; Ugur-Cinar 2017), I tried to explain the complexity of women’s political subjectivities they enact and strategies they employ.

To some extent, this thesis contributed to closing the research gap in studies of politically active women in neopatrimonial regimes; however, more investigations are needed in this realm. For example, I focused only on urban Russian-speaking middle-class women, whereas the full scope of Kazakh-speaking political activists and not very visible but obviously existent female representatives are left unresearched. The same approach should be applied to studies of women in official politics who translate their politics in the Kazakh language. Additionally, the study on the effects of international organizations and their relations with the regime regarding gender equality and democracy would be an additional interesting direction.

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