

On the Way to Democracy: Women's Activism in Kazakhstan

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Over the last few years, much has been written about the status of women in Kazakhstan, or to be more precise, about how that status has worsened because of the economic crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet system.

I remember well when women had such privileges as paid maternity leave for up to one year, or up to three years unpaid, during which time it was illegal to dismiss a woman from her job (the time also counted as working time for the calculation of her pension). Women took for granted the state's health care system of obstetric clinics, gynecological institutions, sanatoriums, and delivery centers that cared for women free of charge. There were also a low-cost child-care system (free for disabled or sick children); free public education; government allowances for families with children; and state support for families with many children, including additional allowances, inexpensive children's clothing, housing privileges, and so on.

Allocation of a certain number of seats for women in the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and union republics created an outward show of equal participation in state government. The activity of women leaders in district committees and city committees of the Communist Party, as well as in executive committees, was quite noticeable. Although they did not have the top positions in the Party's ranks, women worked with children and the elderly in social protection and education spheres. And to me, still a child then, it seemed that all the authority was in the hands of these tirelessly active women workers.

Much has changed since those days. Now I look back and wonder if we really were equal or if we simply were satisfied with our status. I also wonder how much we have lost by sacrificing our status to men without a struggle. So the question is, should we strive for equality or should we cry about the loss of social protection?

Now women and men face common difficulties in the new market economy,

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but women can often cope with the conditions better than men can. When the government removed the child-care system and the right to a free education, women stood up to protect their children from illiteracy and poverty by going to work in the new marketplace economy. Former teachers, scientists, doctors, and engineers now go to the markets of cities and villages with cheap goods procured in Poland, China, Turkey, South Korea, and India. By selling imported goods, women not only support their families but also pay for their children's education, which has become rather expensive under the present conditions. Statistics from the *Report on the Status of Women in Kazakhstan, 1997*, a government publication, indicate that women compose up to 80 percent of the vendors in the markets of Kazakhstan. Among these businesswomen, 36 percent have the highest educational background.

Women have assimilated into the new field of entrepreneurship very quickly. However, entrepreneurship, although relatively simple, requires large amounts of time and thus becomes an all-absorbing activity. Women with a good education know how to battle on two fronts every day—in and out of the home. But without significant financial means and access to cheap credit, women are limited to acting as small business entrepreneurs, which leaves no time for their professional and cultural development, for leisure, or for hobbies.

All these problems are well described in the modern feminist literature of countries with transition economies. Serious researchers have published numerous scientific articles and monographs evaluating the impact of economic reforms on women. In Kazakhstan, perhaps the greatest number of publications on gender themes are devoted to the problem of female unemployment and its causes.

The chairman of the Association of the Sociologists and Politologists of Almaty, Dr. Bahytzhamal Bekturganova, comes to the following conclusions in her manuscript "Sociology of Women: Kazakhstan 1995–1998":

Under conditions of recession, gender differences have not been taken into account. It is difficult for all of us to have to face the problem of how to survive. Not only is the life of women similar to the life of men, their civil status has been equalized. "Equality" of genders has become a new, secret form of discrimination against women, which clearly is exhibited in the labor market. The men of Kazakhstan, following the example of their brothers who conquered the Wild West, make haste to occupy the new advantageous positions, leaving for women less advantageous positions. In the labor market and in the political realm, women have had to let men get ahead and be content with auxiliary spheres of activity. This means that the political equality of men and women receives democratic treatment only in words. In fact, the archaic principles from the times of *batyrs* and *barynty*¹ have been used to legalize "the right of the strong." The fruits of female emancipation turned out to be beyond the power of women. What they opposed in the past—violence and oppression—they are now subjected to. The difference is only that if earlier they were compelled to obey men, now they voluntarily surrender to fate and circumstances.

And further:

The majority of Kazakhstan's women live in captivity to false stereotypes, determined by such concepts as "the small world" and "small life," and many women are not even aware of the way their lives are limited. The scale of female interests

in most cases is narrowed to the world of a home kitchen, which removes women from the public sphere. Therefore, women more often appear in the role of indirect observers indifferently contemplating the events of political life from the windows of their kitchens. If those with problems are themselves indifferent to policy, then policy will be indifferent to women's problems. Policy reacts only to the needs of those who publicly declare themselves. Therefore, not accidentally, women in our country are lined up in a long queue of people waiting for solutions to their problems. In order to be heard, however, they must first be given a voice.

In our country, women tentatively began to discuss women's issues after the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, in Beijing. Since then, women have become more vocal and have presented their concerns through various publications. Recently, a strong women's movement has appeared, along with scientific literature on women's issues. Influenced by the Western feminist movement, which has come to the country with international donor agencies, scientists are showing interest in gender research, and they have already defended their first doctoral theses on the theme. Soon it will be possible to speak about the Kazakhstan school of gender studies and its contributions to the theory of women's studies and the development of solutions for women's problems. Meanwhile, Bekturganova asks:

Why is it in Kazakhstan, where it is impossible to call the position of women in any way fair and happy, we have no gender research and gender educational programs, while in developed countries, where the position of women is strong, they have an academic base that studies women's problems?

The Status of Gender Studies

In the developed democratic countries of North America and Central and Eastern Europe, centers of gender studies have existed since the early 1980s. First they opened as independent centers, then they were integrated into universities and colleges as departments or programs. The majority of these centers, which started by conducting women's research gradually, evolved to include many aspects of the social sciences. They defined gender relations as a necessary category in the analysis of social relations, introduced gender in the analysis of problems of development, and worked out strategies of sustainable development.

Central Asian countries have the potential for reaching the scientific standards of Western gender research. At various periods of development, they conducted essential research for various books, magazines, and articles devoted to "women's issues." For example, in 1997 women's nongovernmental agencies (NGOs), in cooperation with a number of independent researchers and the Gender in Development Bureau, published the first *Report on the Status of Women in Kazakhstan*. The Association of the Sociologists and Politologists of Almaty, the Institute of Kazakhstan Development, and the National Statistical Agency have prepared a number of sociological and statistical reviews on specific gender issues, mainly on the subject of women and reform. In summer 1997, the former Council on Family, Women and Demographic Policy, under the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), conducted the first scientific conference in Kazakhstan on gen-

der studies, which highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of gender science in the country.

According to "Perspectives of Gender Research Development in Kazakhstan," by Dr. Alma Abikenova, a professor at Karaganda State University:

The activity of the UN office in Kazakhstan has become an intensifying factor for introduction of gender theory in the sphere of intellectual activity and public consciousness of the republic. The annual reports of the UNDP [United Nations Development Programs] on human development (which since 1995 include the gender factor), the UN conventions on women's rights advocacy, the documents of the international women's movements, and other materials dealing with the ideas of a social-sexual symmetry, have become the property of the intellectual establishment and the public associations of the republic. The issues of the National Human Development Reports have further stimulated a turn to the gender theory implemented under the support of the UN Development Program (since 1995). Scientists from the leading research institutions have used gender analysis for evaluating and studying a wide range of social problems and policy. Establishment of the Gender in Development Bureau in 1996 became a catalytic force for integrating gender into social theory and practice.

To conduct serious scientific research in the area of gender relations, we need to develop practical recommendations for gender sensitivity in national policy. Also, we need to introduce female perspectives in legislation on the elimination of gender inequality and discrimination by preparing experts in the area of gender research. Thus, we need, as Abikenova points out, a scientific base in the form of the Center on Gender Studies.

The time has come for an actual institutional registration of gender research. And it is necessary to begin with preparation of experts in the area of gender methodology. Because of the lack of scientists interested in gender issues, adequate integration of gender theory in the intellectual sphere of Kazakhstan society is impossible.

Due to the efforts of the UNDP Regional Gender Program, women's NGOs, and the Gender in Development Bureau, the Center of Gender Studies was created in 1998. Although the center is still powerless and small, it is gradually becoming the core of the school of gender research that is being organized in Kazakhstan. Thus far, its main achievement has been the development of the interdisciplinary curriculum on gender theory. The course was successfully introduced in 1999 at Almaty State University, one of the largest universities in the country. This year we will see how many other higher education institutions in the republic create such a program and what the public response is to this innovation.

The Institute of Philosophy at the National Academy of Sciences, with the financial support of the UNDP, is developing and publishing a manual for an introductory course on gender theory to be taught at colleges and universities in the country. A set of brochures on various gender themes in Kazakhstan and methods of teaching the course will supplement the manual.

Thus, all conditions for the introduction of research on gender issues in Kazakhstan have been created. Now we must observe how this process will develop further, how it will take root in our cross-cultural country, and what polemics it

will initiate in the scientific circles. Any discussion will be beneficial, as it will show that society is not indifferent to the existing problems of gender issues.

The initiation of the women's movement in Kazakhstan has in many ways helped people to understand the necessity of overcoming gender stereotypes and patriarchal relationships. It is difficult for the older generation to acquire new points of view. We even hear periodic calls for the prohibition of abortion or the reintroduction of polygamy in accordance with archaic customs. But the new generation generally is free from conventional dogmas and is capable of accepting more progressive ideas. Now it is important to prove the necessity of women's rights advocacy for a harmonious, sustainable development of the society.

Forms of Women's Activism

According to the *Report on the Status of Women in Kazakhstan, 1997*:

An upsurge in the activity of women's organizations took place at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s as a result of the proclamation of the Law on Public Associations. The first wave of women's NGOs lacked coordination, with leaders who had begun their activity by drawing attention to women's issues (women's rights, women's status in the transition period, involvement of women in enterprise). This was the period in which independent actions were first strengthened by team building and establishment of contacts with similar organizations in the region, international foundations, and state structures. In 1995–1996, the situation as a whole in the republic called for change in the activity of women's organizations, toward social programs. Joining the women's organizations were groups with a social aim, working in the realms of the family, disabled children, the lonely elderly, and other vulnerable groups. There are not enough of them yet, they are not spread across the large territories, and their financial resources are limited. Though today these organizations play a rather modest role, their appearance is an important factor in women's participation in the social and economic life of the state. The majority of the leaders of the women's NGOs were trained in strengthening their organizations during training courses organized with the help of foreign funds. The main sphere of the activity of the women's NGOs is protection of the socially vulnerable layers of the population, support to women entrepreneurs, promotion of women's problems in the society through mass media, and organization of conferences. Today women's organizations have become an active part of the civil society. They have begun preparatory activities for forming a coalition of women's organizations. The Gender in Development Bureau has started its activity.

The Gender in Development Bureau

Much research has noted the positive role of the Gender in Development Bureau in Kazakhstan. This UNDP project was developed on the basis of the 1990 Copenhagen Declaration and pursuant to the recommendations of the Beijing women's conference. Its purpose is to attract public attention and mobilize the political will and resources to change both the status and the living standard of women and their families. The UNDP's activities are guided by the following principles:

1. Gender equality should be included in the framework of joint activity with governments and of strategic and political documents.

2. The equal participation of men and women should be made a priority during the development, implementation, and monitoring of the programs.
3. Benefits of program implementation should be equally distributed.
4. There should be gender equality at all decision-making levels.

This policy is implemented by the UN system through its employees, coordinators on gender issues (Gender Focal Points), and the network of the Gender in Development Bureau. Using a method developed at UN headquarters, Kazakhstan and other CIS countries have developed their own effective programs to respond to the challenges each country faces.

Despite the wide experience of the UN in dealing with women's issues, ready, formulaic solutions do not exist. The UN still reports that not a single country in the world has actually achieved equal rights in the position of women and men, though the Scandinavian countries are more-or-less close to the ideal that the UN has recommended for the world. Therefore, the Gender in Development Bureau in Kazakhstan has established a good partnership with the women's organizations of Sweden and has successfully implemented a number of joint projects.

We have made great progress since we opened the bureau in 1996. Kazakhstan, after having gained its independence in 1991, proclaimed its adherence to the democratic norms of state construction necessary to develop a civil society. In 1996, according to the official reports, only around thirty women's NGOs could be counted.

As Kazakhstan's national mechanism, the Council on Family, Women and Demographic Policy was placed under the president. The council had consultative/deliberative functions without possessing any executive authority. Naturally, its activity was practically imperceptible in society, except for official reports in newspapers about its regular meetings. The council produced annual reports on the position of women in Kazakhstan for the president of the RK, to which the public did not have access. It also developed the Concept of the State Policy on Improving the Position of Women, which was ratified by the president. It conducted some regular meetings, where the circle of invited participants was practically constant and consisted of the members of the council and the Republican Women's Council (successor of Soviet *zhensovet*). The National Platform for Actions on Implementation of the Beijing Conference Resolution was drafted but not approved by the government. Until 1998, not a single international convention in the field of women's rights had been ratified.

On 29 June 1998, however, Kazakhstan joined the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In December 1998, to implement the convention and to strengthen the mechanisms for women, the Council on Family, Women, and Demographic Policy was reformed into the National Commission on Family and Women Affairs under the president. President Nursultan Nazarbaev defined four main priorities for the National Commission: (a) promotion of the health of women and families, (b) active participation by women in the public and political life of the country and their advancement to the decision-making level, (c) economic empowerment of women, and (d)

eradication of violence against women. The National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women in the Republic of Kazakhstan was developed within the framework of the long-term strategy Kazakhstan–2030. The plan was endorsed by decree of the government. Thus we now have a comprehensive action program for the women of our country that ensures implementation of the decisions of the Beijing conference.

Women's Political Leadership

Increasing women's role in society will help solve women's problems in all priority areas indicated in the Beijing platform for action. Therefore, one of the basic directions in the activity of the bureau has become the training of women for political leadership. For Kazakhstan, this is very important because few women occupy management positions. For example, 12 percent of the members of the Parliament are women, and only one woman is a minister—the chairman of the recently formed National Commission on Family and Women's Affairs. In local governmental bodies, the percentage of women's participation is a little bit higher, but nowhere does it exceed 20 percent. Actually, a traditional gender pyramid has developed—the higher the level of authority, the fewer women.

From early 1997 to late 1999, in various regions of the country, the bureau worked with the Association of Business Women of Kazakhstan and donor agencies—the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the U.S. Information Agency, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the British Know How Foundation—to conduct training programs on women's political leadership. Teachers from the United States, Great Britain, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan shared their knowledge with women in the field about the political struggle for their rights, for equal participation in the society, and for positions of power. About two hundred women—representatives of all regions of the country—participated in these seminars and training programs. In summer 1997, a women's camp was conducted where fifty women from all regions of the country simultaneously studied. The bureau also supported a number of women's meetings in other regions of the republic, devoted to the role of international organizations in the solution of women's problems, women's leadership, legislative measures for protecting women's rights, the growth and development of women's NGOs, and similar issues.

Is this enough for a country as large as Kazakhstan? Some have asked whether the short-term studies were necessary, if there would be any results, and if they could be evaluated. People have also wondered what influence they would have on the ratio of women and men occupying the highest official positions. Now we know: they are necessary. After attending the seminars and training programs, women from remote regions of the country, who are well educated and active but who lived in an informational vacuum, felt their own strength for the first time. New branches of the Association of Business Women of Kazakhstan were established, going from six in 1997 to twenty-three in 1999. New women's NGOs have started to appear. Recently, while compiling the list of women's organizations in the republic, we were surprised to find that their number has increased to almost one hundred. Often we hear women talk about the need for a women's political party.

The women's NGOs were especially active in 1998–99 before the presidential elections and the elections for members to the local representative bodies of the government and Parliament. Within a short period, the women's NGOs in Almaty created a coalition called Women's Electoral Initiatives. The coalition developed a program that includes training for women running for elective offices, working with government, and working with mass media to create real equal opportunities for women. In August 1999, the first political women's party, Political Alliance of Women's Organizations, was registered; it has been struggling for positions in representative bodies at all levels of power.

Women and Violence

Violence against women is the second problem to receive broad recognition through the efforts of women's organizations supported by UNDP/Gender in Development Bureau. In 1997, the bureau, jointly with the World Health Organization, conducted a seminar on women and violence, in which the women's NGOs and representatives of state bodies participated. As a result of the seminar, a resolution was adopted that among other measures called for a public awareness week on violence against women and children. The problem of violence, at last, started to be discussed openly, and the main purpose—attracting the attention of the public and politicians to this problem—was achieved. In his annual address to the people of Kazakhstan on 30 September 1998, President Nazarbaev declared that a struggle against manifestations of violence toward women was among the priorities of state policy. He especially noted the role of women's NGOs and the UNDP in bringing this issue to the nation's attention.

The "National Report on Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action on Improving the Status of Women" (2000) stipulates establishment of a new, effective system of combating violence against women, which includes a law on domestic violence; development and implementation of a state reporting system on issues of violence against women; establishment of crisis centers throughout the country; and other measures. A special division on combating violence against women was established within the Ministry of Interior. Professional counseling on issues of violence against women will be developed and introduced into the curriculum of universities and colleges of law-enforcement bodies: police academies, training schools, and the like.

Economic Advancement of Women

As stated in the *Report on the Status of Women in Kazakhstan, 1997*:

Out of the total population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, women comprise around 7.8 million (or 51.8 percent). In 1999 the percentage of women in the total number of employed was 46 percent. Thus, the indexes of women's employment now remain rather low. The restructuring of the economy has resulted in increases of women's share in the private sector, in small and medium business, and in service industries. According to the official data for 1995, 30 percent of the total number of people involved with small businesses are women. But only 2 percent of the managers of small and medium businesses are women. The increase of unemployment is the main reason for poverty. According to official data, women make up 63.2 per-

cent of the unemployed. Thus, we see the "feminization" of unemployment and poverty—a well-known fact. The consequence of such a tendency is a conscious limitation of the birth rate, the worsening of the health of the population, and an increasing crime rate.

We need to help women develop small- and medium-sized businesses that will improve their situation in the labor market and ensure their self-employment, helping to solve the problem of the increasing poverty in Kazakhstan.

In 1997 the UNDP, the International Mercy Corps, and the U.S. Agency for International Development started a new project that, in two pilot regions in Kazakhstan, began to provide microcredits to women's businesses. In 1998–99, the Gender in Development Bureau joined a Swedish partner, Springboard Management Consulting, which received financial support from SIDA, to create a women's network. This network will unite all the NGOs working in the field of women's employment and business. For this purpose, new computers were installed in all branches of the Association of Business Women of Kazakhstan.

In August 1999, the Women's Fair for Trade and Ideas was held in Almaty. In Kazakh language it was called *Kanatty Ayel*, which means "woman on the wing." Over two thousand women entrepreneurs from all regions of the country took part in the fair, which also attracted men to the dialogue. In Sweden, such an event is held every two years, bringing hundreds of thousands of visitors. In Kazakhstan, the fair attracted more than ten thousand visitors, including high government officials, representatives of other Central Asian republics, and guests from the United States, Sweden, and Germany. The fair not only allows women to sell items they have produced, but it also provides seminars, conferences, round table talks, and meetings with politicians of all ranks, highlighting women's entrepreneurship. The success of the *Kanatty Ayel* is one more solution to women's economic problems. One thing is clear: women do not want to struggle against problems alone anymore. The women's network will help them feel the support of friends or business partners.

The national action plan envisages improvement of women's economic, legal, and professional literacy. Unemployed women will continue to be trained in marketable skills, and training centers will be opened. It also envisages simplifying credit mechanisms and establishing a special division within the Temir Bank to provide credit for projects of women entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

Because gender studies were poorly developed in Kazakhstan, and because there was insufficient literature, both domestic and foreign, gender research in Kazakhstan on the position of women and the condition of gender relations in society is mainly conducted with statistical data and standard analytical methods used by developed countries. Scientific and sociological societies and research institutes use qualitative and quantitative methods of research based on sociological inquiries. However, solely using statistical and sociological methods of analysis is insufficient, because many examples of discrimination against women remain beyond the scope of such methods of research. In the annual human development

reports created by the UNDP, gender indicators are not used for the evaluation of a human development index in Kazakhstan.

UNDP experts Maira Amirhanova and Rosa Dzhalmibetovna, in "The Report on the Contemporary Status of the Gender Statistics" (UNDP, 1998), state the following conclusion:

The limited resources and the absence of the necessary information about women are obstacles to the development of research on women's problems and cause them to have a rather academic, abstract character. Gender research should be the basis for evaluating the influence of reforms on women's position and should serve as a source for proposals on carrying out reform.

The same group of experts compared the techniques of statistical analysis recommended by the European Union and the techniques used in Kazakhstan. They gave recommendations for improving the collection and analysis of statistical data in Kazakhstan. The UNDP is going to conduct further work in this direction.

To begin to solve women's problems, an expert of the Kazakhstan Development Institute, Gulnara Ahmedzhanova, made recommendations to the country's politicians in "The National Report on the Effect of the Process of Restructuring and Gender Relations," a survey for the UN Subregional Conference on Poverty (Almaty, 1998):

1. We should develop scientific understanding of women's issues in Kazakhstan.
2. We should implement and encourage gender research investigating the problems of women's socialization and how they adapt to the changing conditions of social-economic development.
3. We should conduct regular events and campaigns for the general population on women's issues.
4. We should popularize women's concerns through the mass media and by making special courses on gender issues an obligatory part of general education.
5. We should adopt, at the state level, special acts that increase the status of women. Acts providing economic incentives and privileges should increase the interest of employers in hiring citizens who have family responsibilities.
6. We should create a network of psychological and rehabilitation services for women requiring such help.
7. We should create an infrastructure that allows for the self-realization of women by providing pre-school establishments, a network of consumer services, and other services that give women a chance to work effectively full-time.
8. We should create mechanisms that provide soft credits for women's businesses.
9. We should establish a women's movement in Kazakhstan that defends not only the social but the political rights of women.

On 30 September 1999, President Nazarbaev reiterated in his annual address the high priority in the state policy of women's issues. At the Second Forum for the Women of Kazakhstan, the president confirmed his commitment to these issues. The establishment of the National Commission on the Family and Women's Affairs inspires hope for a real elevation of women's status in Kazakhstan.

Thus, the activity of women's organizations, the UNDP, and other interna-

tional organizations in Kazakhstan has not gone unnoticed. Such progress confirms the effectiveness of the selected strategies and tactics of the women's movement activists, who have achieved the main goal of attracting national attention to women's problems. During a short period of time, the National Action Plan on Increasing the Status of Women was developed and has been approved by the prime minister of Kazakhstan. In 1998–99, the Parliament of Kazakhstan adopted three UN women's rights conventions: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on Political Rights of Women, and the Convention on Nationality of Married Women. In compliance with these directives, the next objective is to make these abstract plans work on a practical level for a wide range of the populace.

NOTE

1. *Batyr*s are heroes of historical battles that Kazakh tribes had with conquerors, who came mainly from the territory of modern China (the so-called Dzhungar tribes, no longer extant). *Barymta* are attacks of hostile Kazakh tribes against each other, with the purpose of stealing cattle.