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The Unwomanly Face of Kazakhstan's Qantar

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Kazakhstan's Qandy Qantar or 'Bloody January', which happened one year ago, was gendered as it was dominated by men. Kazakhstan's gender policies, rooted in a top-down approach that laid the basis for the existing gender order, were initially paved by Western donor prescriptions of equality and, more recently, by the global conservative anti-gender backlash. Both, in a paternalistic way, have primarily focused on 'fixing' women while overlooking the role of men in this equation. Bottom-up and grassroots initiatives have been either overlooked or stifled by Kazakh authorities while shown little support by external donors. As outcomes of the top-down gender policies resulting in the male-dominated nature of the January unrest deserves reckoning, it is high time to re-centre them around bottom-up processes and women-led community-based organising that bring the needs, practical knowledge, and leadership of local communities to the forefront.

Kazakhstan's largest mass protests to date started on 2 January 2022 as peaceful protests of oil workers in Zhanaozen over the fuel price spike, but quickly spread across the country with broader demands for social justice, political reforms, and civic freedoms. Protests were hijacked by various organised groups, criminal and alike, and were violently suppressed by police and security forces in a 'counter-terrorism operation' with the help of Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation troops.

A lot has been written about the unrest. Both local and international observers agree on the unprecedented mass scale of the protests, their non-centralised nature, and the non-homogeneity of groups participating and their varying agendas. Commentators also agree that the Akorda's (Kazakhstan's Presidential Palace) response – with claims of an attempted coup, excessive use of force, including the presidential shoot-to-kill order, two-week-long state of emergency, and military intervention – was primarily concerned with a backstage power struggle within the elites in the ongoing transition of power in Kazakhstan that has overshadowed the initial protests.

Some observers, like Erica Marat, associate professor at the National Defence University's College of International Affairs, referred to the protests as 'widespread popular demonstrations [that] transcended class, region, and politics'. And, indeed, they were.

However, what was overlooked by most observers and media was the fact that the protests had little success in transcending the gender line, as the overwhelming majority of protesters were Kazakh men. To understand why, one should look into the gender policies that laid the basis for the existing gender order in Kazakhstan.

The gender policies, along with the national gender machinery and networks of women non-governmental organisations (NGOs), that were set up in the 1990s and early 2000s in post-Soviet Kazakhstan were shaped as part of Western-driven liberal economic and political reform policies. They emerged in response to requests from the post-Soviet Kazakh government and as a result of the activities of foreign donors that started operating in Kazakhstan and which were layered upon the late Soviet paternalistic approach to 'zhenskiy vopros' (women's issue), whereby gender issues were regarded as a depoliticised niche matter with little recognition of women's agency. In short, rooted in a liberal feminist approach, gender policies served as an attribute of liberal democracy and socio-economic modernisation of independent Kazakhstan.

As a result, gender policies and institutions have developed well into today, but, while they have been reformist in their nature, they are still unable to provide a systemic critique of the current status quo or of the distribution of power, wealth, and growing inequalities. An illustration of this could be the existing gap among women-led demonstrations – for example, the feminist marches in Almaty mainly joined by urban educated liberal young women and nationwide grassroots protests of mothers over better social welfare in 2019, which had little to no overlap. The former, which were, to a large extent, buttressed by external donor funding, operate in the environment of financial precarity and dependency from funding sources, have confused constituencies, and are somewhat alienated from the general public. In contrast, the latter, which was picked up by grassroots movements of mothers across the country, resonated well among the broader public.

The top-down gender policies developed in the 1990s have fallen short of becoming self-reliant, and are now being heavily affected by the conservative gender backsliding that started in Europe and the Americas in the 2000s. Today, Kazakhstan's national gender policy is framed in the Concept of Family and Gender Policy-2030, adopted in 2017 and which replaced Kazakhstan's 2006-2016 Gender Equality Strategy. The policy interprets the concept of gender equality narrowly. Improving the status of women is widely regarded as a matter of implementing state commitments toward the provision of social protection to women as mothers and caregivers. With little attention paid to counteracting existing negative stereotypes and discriminatory practices, it falls short of ensuring equal opportunities. Providing support is framed as a humanitarian relief issue, which can be resolved through a protectionist approach akin to the Soviet way of dealing with 'zhenskiy vopros'.

Aligning with the global conservative gender backlash, the 2017 gender strategy is actually more limited than its predecessor, by further combining the gender equality and family portfolios. Rather than establishing a stand-alone gender equality strategy in Kazakhstan, it strengthens and reinforces the traditional link between women and the family institution. This reinforced link has been subject to criticism by United Nations (UN) committees that have expressed concerns over attitudes and stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society. The Kazakh strategy, in other words, constructs women in the private and domestic sphere, leaving the public and political domain to men.

Current top-down policies keep reinforcing traditional gender roles of women as caregivers and of men as breadwinners, while focussing excessively on ‘fixing’ women and overlooking men’s share in this equation. Soaring inequalities, exacerbated by the 2020-21 (post) pandemic crisis, have led to further challenges in Kazakh society, increasingly impoverishing the population. Coupled with public discontent over corruption and state failures in the distribution of resources, they put the male breadwinner and family guardian – a role ascribed by the current gender order – under increased pressure to provide economic security for the family. All this provided a fertile ground for the unaddressed masculine anger of disenfranchised men, which surfaced last January.

As Yevgeny Zhovtis, director of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, suggests, participants of mass scale protests can be roughly contoured in four groups: first, oil workers and their supporters; second, supporters of unregistered political movements like DVK, Democratic Party and Oyan, Kazakhstan!; third, criminal elements infiltrated by loyalists to local elites; and fourth, ‘a large crowd of young people’, later labelled by Tokayev as ‘terrorists and bandits’. Taking it from here, oil workers in Zhanaozen and the Mangystau region who sparked the protests were distinctly male due to the still existing labour segregation in Kazakhstan that gender policies have failed to tackle. Criminal groups with alleged ties to security services were also distinctly male as were the police, military, and security services themselves. Fleshing them out, most of those who joined workers and political movements across the country as ‘terrorists and bandits’ were disenfranchised men, both economically and politically.

Under this context, the Kazakh government should stop approaching gender issues as an apolitical women’s only peripheral question and realise that, in fact, it transcends all areas of life and concerns everyone. Qandy Qantar is intrinsically gendered, and gender policies have direct consequences on the nature of these events. With this understanding, the Kazakh government should move away from treating gender policies as a means to ‘tick boxes’ in securing its externally-motivated goals to grounding them in the needs of local constituencies through a bottom-up approach. Along the same lines, it is time for external actors like the European Union and other international donors to realise that the gender policies promoted in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as their ‘beneficiaries’, have had indirect implications in the nature of the tumultuous January unrest.

Instead of problematising the role of women in society, the Kazakh government and foreign donors should seek to better understand the impact on society of current gender policies that reinforce rigid gender roles and stereotypes. Instead of devising grand strategies and supporting only a handful of civil society actors, they should be centred around bottom-up processes and women-led community-based organising that bring the needs, practical knowledge, and leadership of local communities to the forefront.

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