Chapter 15
Women's Political Empowerment in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

Elena Maltseva

Abstract This chapter examines the factors that contributed to women's political mobilization in Kazakhstan in recent years and assesses the implications of this trend for the country's political and social institutions. Using the framework of social grievances and political opportunities, the chapter argues that changing socioeconomic conditions, coupled with the growing frustration among women over their inability to influence the policy-making process due to the closed structure of Kazakhstan's political institutions, as well as the renewed interest in the feminist ideas among the younger generation of Kazakhstani women and the rise of social media are the factors that best explain the recent wave of women's activism in Kazakhstan. The implications of women's collective action for the country's social and political institutions are significant. If sustained, it has the potential to reshape the state of gender relations in modern Kazakhstan and liberalize the country's political institutions. The study is based on extensive research conducted by the author in Kazakhstan between 2014 and 2019, including interviews with female activists, as well as a comprehensive review of primary and secondary literature on the topic.

Keywords Kazakhstan · Central Asia · Social movements · Women's empowerment · Democratization · Feminism

15.1 Introduction

A quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has made impressive strides in state- and nation-building. The country was able to successfully overcome the challenges of the transitional period during the 1990s and emerge as one of the fastest-growing economies in the post-Soviet region, also demonstrating a steady increase in the human development index (HDI) from 0.690 in 1990 to 0.817 in 2018 (UNDP 2019). The Kazakhstani gender inequality indicators (GII) also look good: as shown in Fig. 15.1, more than 98% of Kazakhstan's female population have

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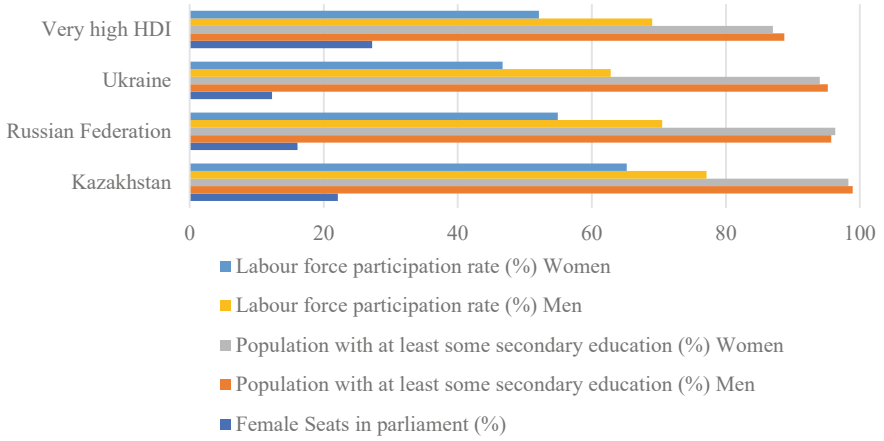

Fig. 15.1 Kazakhstan's GII for 2018 relative to selected countries and groups (*Source* Compiled by the author based on UNDP [2018] data)

at least some secondary education, nearly 65% of women are in the labour market, and 22.1% of seats in parliament are occupied by women (UNDP 2018; Abugaliyeva 2018). As a result, in 2018, Kazakhstan ranked 60th on the Global Gender Gap Index and 32nd in terms of female economic participation, according to a World Economic Forum (WEF) report (WEF 2018).

Despite such positive achievements, several structural problems in the economic and political realms remain. Women still face a substantial gender wage gap, earning on average only 57% of what men earn (ADB 2018). In addition, many women continue to work informally or are employed in low-paid sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, retail, education and health care, as well as food and hospitality services (ADB 2018; Alshanskaya 2020; Mynbayeva, n.d.). Likewise, according to data presented in the WEF's Global Gender Gap Reports from 2013–2018, the level of women's political empowerment in Kazakhstan remains low, with women being significantly underrepresented in senior decision-making positions (Figs. 15.2 and 15.3). As evident from Fig. 15.2, where 1 denotes a full parity score, women in Kazakhstan achieved gender parity on educational attainment (assessed based on literacy and education rates) and health and survival scores (assessed in terms of equal access to health care and life expectancy). At the same time, the country's scores for economic participation and political empowerment clearly show the need for significant improvement in these areas. In addition, Kazakhstani women struggle to overcome deep-seated cultural norms and traditional perceptions limiting their role to family and child care (Kuzhabekova et al. 2018). In conclusion, although the government of Kazakhstan officially declared the advancement of women's rights and the expansion of political and economic opportunities for women as one of its public

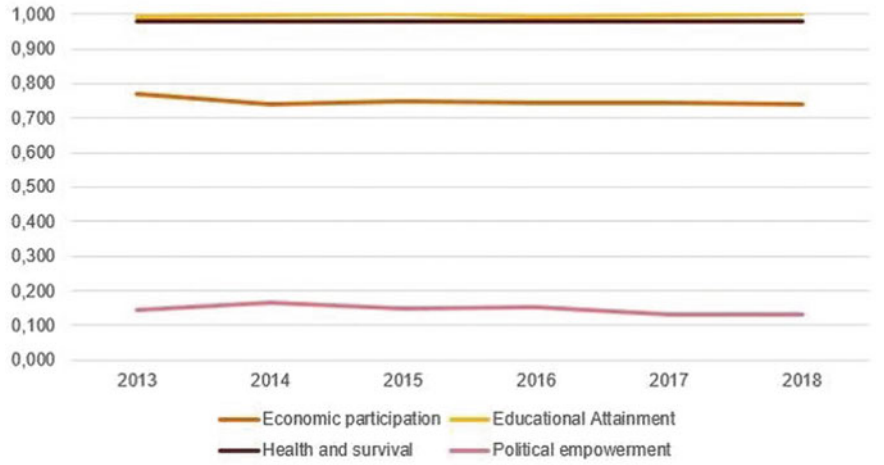

Fig. 15.2 Evolution of gender gap index scores for Kazakhstan, 2013–2018 (*Source* Yap and Szollosi 2019)

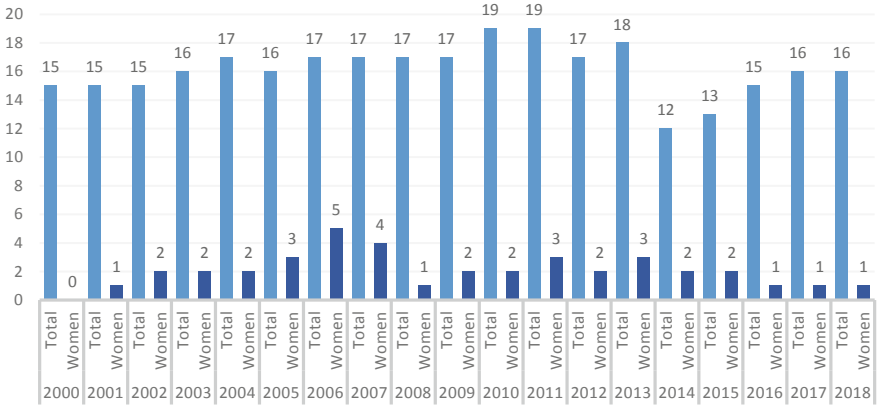

Fig. 15.3 Number of women, holding ministerial positions in the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan between 2000 and 2018 (*Source* Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Statistics committee, n.d.)

policy priorities, the voice of women in politics and women's impact on governance have remained limited (UNDP 2016; Abugaliyeva 2018; Yap and Szollosi 2019).[1]

[1]For an overview of the government's legislative initiatives in the area of women's rights and gender equality, review the *Strategy for Gender Equality in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2006–2016*, approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 1677 on 29 November 2005, available at http://www.akorda.kz/upload/nac_komissiya_po_delam_zhenshin/5.2%20СГР%20англ.pdf; the 2009 *Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women No. 223-IV*, available at https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=30526983;

However, recently, to the surprise of many observers, the existing status quo, particularly with regard to women's participation in social and political affairs, has been challenged on numerous occasions. The intensity of women's collective action picked up in 2013 when Kazakhstan experienced an unprecedented wave of grassroots protests organized by women activists against a new pension law that increased the retirement age for women from 58 to 63 (Nuttall 2013). Since then, Kazakhstani women have demonstrated an unusually high level of political engagement, including their active participation in various social protests, online campaigns against sexual violence and discrimination, and civic initiatives in support of better governance, gender equality and women's empowerment (Gander 2014; Abdurasulov 2018; Seydakhmetova 2018a). The rise in women's political activism suggests that Kazakhstani society is undergoing significant social and political transformation, which has the potential not only to ensure a greater degree of gender equality, but also to challenge old authoritarian institutions, traditions and social attitudes (Zhoyamergen 2018).

Using the concepts of political opportunities and social grievances, and taking into account the growing role of social media, this chapter aims to explain the origins of the recent wave of women's mobilization in the authoritarian setting of post-Soviet Kazakhstan and analyze the implications of this trend for the country's political and social institutions. It argues that the recent rise in women's political activism is best attributed to a combination of different factors, including the changing socioeconomic context and rising grievances, evolving cultural and social attitudes about the role and place of women in society, and the growing role of social media, all of which have helped women overcome the limited political opportunities.

The long-term implications of women's mobilization for the country's social and political institutions are significant. First, the wave of women's political activism outside of formal political structures indicates just how unequal the gender distribution is in modern Kazakhstan in terms of access to power and resources. In that sense, women's collective action presents an important democratic counterbalance to the male-dominated power structure of the Kazakhstani state. If women's political mobilization continues, it has the potential to reshape the state of gender relations in modern Kazakhstan. As some feminist scholars argued, states will not willingly adopt feminist changes or take women's views into account without pressure from organized women groups (Viterna and Fallon 2008). Second, the protests point to the development of a robust civil society in Kazakhstan, which is considered a necessary pre-condition for the promotion of democracy and the protection of basic human rights. Altogether, the recent wave of women's political mobilization has the potential to address historical injustice and oppression as well as to liberalize the country's political institutions and contribute to the development of a more gender equitable state in Kazakhstan.

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and the *Concept of Family and Gender Policies in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030*, adopted by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 384 from 6 December 2016, available at http://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/U1600000384.

The study is based on extensive research conducted by the author in Kazakhstan between 2014 and 2019, including interviews with female activists, as well as a comprehensive review of primary and secondary literature on the topic. The chapter is organized in three sections. The next section offers insight into the role of social grievances, political opportunities and social media in contributing to mobilization of women in Kazakhstan. It also provides a theoretical framework for understanding the political and social implications of women's collective action. The following sections provide an overview of the place and the role of women in Kazakhstan before and after 1991 and examine the factors that contributed to the rise of women's collective action. The chapter concludes with a review of the main argument and a discussion of the long-term political and social implications of this trend for post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

15.2 Grievances, Political Opportunities and Social Media in Authoritarian Regimes: Theoretical Framework

To understand the origins of the recent political mobilization of Kazakhstani women, a review of relevant academic literature is required. The three main approaches that provide the most comprehensive explanation for the emergence of collective action in Kazakhstan are the relative deprivation theory, the resource mobilization approach, and the political opportunity structure framework. The relative deprivation approach postulates that people are more inclined to engage in contentious politics when they are dissatisfied with their current situation and experience feelings of illegitimate inequality, injustice, moral indignation, or societal alienation (Gurr 1970; Abeles 1976; Klandermans 1997). Depending on the conditions, these feelings may contribute to the development of a collective perception of reality and evolve into a social movement, a spontaneous protest or a rebellion. According to Alain Touraine (1981, 1988), the type of society and the level of its economic development may predispose people to certain grievances and demands. In the end, these feelings of deprivation and injustice, whether real or perceived and concerned with material or non-material issues, may motivate people to challenge the existing status quo and demand an improvement or correction to their original condition or situation (Gurr 1970; Bayard de Volo 2006).

Contrary to the relative deprivation approach, the theory of resource mobilization emphasizes the processes and actors internal to movements and pays little attention to psychological factors and the context in which they have developed. The proponents of this approach argue that grievances alone cannot explain the emergence of social movements, and that social mobilization and the possibility of a sustained collective action are determined by pre-existing social networks, the organizational infrastructure and the resources available to political activists (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 2001; Warkotsch 2014). Among the factors critical to the survival of a social movement, scholars identified the availability of actors with specific knowledge or skills required to accomplish various tasks such as organizing a protest event, running a meeting or

an information campaign, navigating the internet, or lobbying the government. Also, the success of a social movement depends on the degree of unity and commitment among its members and the presence of material resources such as financial and physical capital (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

As time passed, the resource mobilization approach came under criticism for neglecting the context in which movements developed. As a result, a new approach emerged that focused on political opportunity structures (POS) (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982). This approach argues that neither fully closed nor fully open POS present an ideal environment for protest, but rather a mix of both. Among the factors facilitating the opening of a political opportunity structure, scholars identified various events and situations, including the mobilization of old opponents, the fragmentation of an existing political landscape and party system, the rise of new ideas and ideologies, changes in international alliances, growing corruption and declining state capacity, changing perceptions of political activists about political opportunities, and several other factors (Warkotsch 2014). What makes the political opportunity framework particularly useful for understanding political events in post-Soviet states is that it identifies grievances and places them into a context, taking into account factors that are internal to a movement, such as people, ideas, and resources, and a political opportunity structure that plays a fundamental role in determining the timing and the reason for a movement's emergence (Tarrow 1994).

Over time, technological development and the rise of social media significantly expanded the collective action repertoire available to the actors. The use of new digital technologies and the internet diversified political engagement styles and allowed for much faster mobilization through social networks, which in turn decreased the significance of classic organizational structures, resources and instruments (Breuera et al. 2015; Selander and Jarvenpaa 2016). In these new modern realities, mobilization no longer required a lengthy investment of material and human resources, and even the nature of political activities and recruitment, and the role and purpose of leadership appeared to have been redefined. The introduction of digital media lowered the transaction costs associated with political activities and simplified the citizens' exposure to political information and its dissemination. To know about relevant events and meetings and to potentially join them, it was no longer required to be an active member of a social movement.

The long-term implications of a digital media revolution turned out to be particularly significant for the process of democratization in competitive authoritarian regimes (Warkotsch 2014; Breuera et al. 2015). The opportunities that technological development offered to political activists and social movements challenged the authoritarian institutions in several countries in the Middle East and the post-Soviet region and empowered social and indigenous movements in numerous countries around the globe (Bayard de Volo 2006; Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014; Duarte 2017). In the post-Soviet region alone, the 'Coloured Revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia and numerous protests in countries such as Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and several others demonstrated how collective action could be sustained in the absence of significant material and financial resources,

relying instead on new information and communication strategies (Salanova 2012; Bohdanova 2014; Mehrabov 2016).

Perhaps the most important conclusion to take from this discussion is that political opportunities may be limited in authoritarian regimes, but they do exist, and with a certain degree of organization and the effective use of social media, collective action and social movements can achieve much. At the same time, evaluating a movement's success or failure in authoritarian settings is complicated, since the effects of collective action are often multifaceted and go beyond the original goals set out by the organizers of a movement or a campaign, sometimes catalyzing broader changes in the system instead of producing the desired change for the target population. Therefore, the study of the effects of collective action in nondemocratic regimes should encompass both material and non-material changes, such as the rise of collective and civic identity as well as a feeling of empowerment that often extends beyond the actors directly involved in collective action. In the end, the long-term, non-material benefits of collective action in non-democratic regimes may include changes to a country's political system, as the rising social capital empowers citizens and enhances their political engagement, thereby increasing the chances for political liberalization and democratization (Seligman 1992; Putnam 1993; Booth and Richard 1998; Özler and Sarkissian 2011; Cannon and Hume 2012; Way 2014; Ibrahim 2015).

15.3 Women in Kazakhstan before and after 1991

15.3.1 Women, Nomadism and Islam in Pre-Soviet Kazakhstan

Low levels of political engagement and the challenges facing women in post-Soviet Kazakhstan reflect the complex historical legacies of the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. The modern Kazakh identity rests on two main pillars—nomadism and Islam, with the Soviet legacy adding an additional layer of complexity. In the pre-Soviet period, the place of women in the Kazakh social structure has been circumscribed by the strong nomadic traditions of Kazakh communities, in which age hierarchy was more important than that of gender and the final say in family matters belonged to the elder members of a family. In addition, Islam played an important role in reinforcing the traditional family structure and values. Starting from the mid-seventh century, Islam gradually spread to become the dominant religion in the region, producing a unique blend of Sharia law and nomadic cultural practices and customs (Abazov 2007; Mendikulova 2008; Laumulin and Laumulin 2009). Over time, the influence of nomadic traditions and Islamic practices resulted in the establishment of a gendered social structure, in which the public domain was dominated and controlled by men, whereas women belonged in the private domain of a family, where they took care of children, their husband's parents and the household (Werner

2009). No movement fighting for women's rights and gender equality existed in pre-Soviet Kazakhstan, although the Jadidist movement that emerged among Muslims in Russia and neighboring Islamic countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries strove to improve women's education level and marriage status within the existing traditional social structure (Hitchins 2008). In summary, although important differences existed between the nomadic and sedentary communities of Central Asia in terms of the role and the place of women in society, the general trend was that women were subordinated to and dependent on men in all major aspects of their lives (Shakirova 2015).

15.3.2 The Soviet Emancipation Project

The onset of the Soviet period in Kazakhstan resulted in a steady process of women's emancipation, which coincided with the policies of sedentarization and collectivization as well as rapid industrialization and urbanization (Kendirbai 2002). By 1922, 95% of the Kazakh population was both sedentarized and forcibly integrated into the Soviet political and economic structures. During this time, the Soviet authorities pronounced the right to work as the main tool for women's emancipation and implemented policies to increase gender equity in education and employment and to satisfy the needs of industrialization (Werner 2009). As a result, between 1922 and 1940, the proportion of women in various sectors of the Soviet economy as well as in the total number of workers skyrocketed. Many women worked alongside men in traditionally male occupations, though the majority were employed in education, health care and social services.

The process of women's emancipation was accompanied by a Soviet campaign against local customs and traditions. The campaign was aided by activists from Zhenotdel, a feminist organization founded in 1919 in Soviet Russia that aimed to enlighten women across the Soviet Union about their role in society and then draw them into the Soviet machine as workers (Rysbekova 2009; Whalley 2018). In Central Asia, the goal of these activists was to "awaken a Muslim woman from centuries of old hibernation and put her on the path of struggle for her own liberation" (Rysbekova 2009). However, it was not until the late 1920s that Kazakhstani women became more active in the party and started participating in regional and local elections. Several famous feminists emerged in Kazakhstan during this time, including Alma Orazbayeva, Nagima Arykova, Sarah Esova, and Madina Begaliyeva, who fought actively for the political, social and economic emancipation of Kazakh women (Nikiforova 2003; Ayagan 2004, p. 265; Rysbekova 2009; Zhumaliyeva 2016; Smirnova 2020).

In terms of political representation, as part of the Soviet affirmative action policies, approximately 30% of seats in the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and union republics were reserved for women (Kandiyoti 2007; Benedict 2014). Women also served in various ranks in the Communist Party structure at the republican, regional and local levels. And although women rarely reached the top positions in the Party's ranks,

their presence in Soviet political institutions was noticeably visible. In short, despite some local resistance to women's emancipation in rural communities, government policies had a profound influence on women's lives. The Soviet system made women into active members of Soviet society, with equal social, political and economic rights and access to education, health care and employment. By the time the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, 96% of Kazakh women were literate, 52% of university students in Kazakhstan were female, and approximately 90% of women between the ages of 30 and 50 were employed (Bauer et al. 1997; Rysbekova 2009; Werner 2009; Öz Döm 2018).

At the same time, the paradox of the Soviet emancipation project consisted of the fact that for the most part of its existence it coincided with the Soviet pronatalist policies, which promoted a traditional model of family and motherhood, with the purpose of utilizing not only women's industrial but also reproductive potential (Hoffmann 2000). The pronatalist campaign started in the late 1920s–early 1930s, when the feminist ideas of women's liberation from family and motherhood were replaced with an image of women as mothers of large families (Selezneva 2016). As part of the Soviet demographic policy, the government encouraged women to have children, offering them several welfare privileges, including a guaranteed paid maternity leave for up to one year or up to three years unpaid, access to low-cost child-care facilities, government allowances for families with children, some housing benefits, and so on (Constitution of the USSR 1936, Art. 122; Selezneva 2016). The outcome of these policies was that the Soviet emancipation project and the pronatalist campaign added several layers of responsibility to a long list of women's duties in a Soviet society. In short, 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.

Domestic violence and abuse as well as sexist attitudes were also prevalent across Soviet society, and few of these problems were openly acknowledged, discussed or addressed by the authorities and the public (Gal and Kligman 2000; Kandiyoti 2007). Independent political activism and political opposition to the regime barely existed in the Soviet Union. Some moderate criticism of the existing system was possible, but only when it unfolded within the official channels of political participation. Political dissent was not tolerated, and people who disagreed with the Soviet ideology, starting from Soviet dissidents to the representatives of national and religious movements, were harassed, imprisoned, or forced underground or into exile (Biddulph 1972; Powell 1972; Shearer, Shearer 2009). Women did participate in the Soviet civil and human rights movement, but most of their activities were concentrated in the Western part of the Soviet Union (Milewska-Pindor 2013). In summary, Kazakhstani women entered the post-Soviet period possessing high levels of literacy and education, but little to no experience of independent political struggle and living under the heavy burden of work and family obligations.

15.3.3 Women and Women's Organizations in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

The post-Soviet period in Kazakhstan produced several important but contradictory developments. On the one hand, Kazakhstan was among the first post-Soviet states to declare gender equality as one of the country's key social development indicators. In 1995 the government established a high-level but largely consultative body known as the Council on Problems of Families, Women and Demographic Policy and passed several legislative acts that tackled various issues affecting women, including discrimination in the economic and political spheres, domestic abuse and violence, and forced or compulsory labor (Dubok and Turakhanova 2017). In 2005, the government also adopted a national gender equality strategy for 2006–2016 that aimed to improve women's participation in public, political and economic affairs in Kazakhstan ('Strategy for Gender Equality in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2006–2016,' 29 November 2005). Later, several legislative acts, including the 2009 laws 'On State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women' and 'On Prevention of Domestic Violence' and the 2016 'Concept of Family and Gender Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030', were passed, which confirmed the government's commitment to dealing with gender-related issues (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 223-IV of December 8, 2009; Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 214-IV of December 4, 2009; Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 384 of December 6, 2016). These developments allowed the government to claim that the problem of gender equality in Kazakhstan had been successfully addressed.

On the other hand, the country saw the revival of traditionalist values. This trend had been tacitly supported by the government, as it boosted the integrity of the nation and reinforced support for the regime among the conservative members of Kazakhstani society (Kandiyoti 2007). As a result, there was a slight increase in the number of arranged marriages, which were considered a 'traditional' Kazakh practice, and a significant increase in non-consensual bride abductions (Werner 2009; Shvets 2017). Also, despite the government's initiative to enact the law 'On Prevention of Domestic Violence' in 2009, the situation did not improve. According to various accounts, patriarchal values remained strong, and many women suffered from some form of domestic abuse. As some observers warned, the real situation may have been even worse than the official data, as many women refused to report their husbands due to fear, economic insecurity, and/or societal beliefs ("Sample survey on violence against women in Kazakhstan" 2017; Dubok and Turakhanova 2017).

Likewise, not much had changed in the gender structure of the labour market in Kazakhstan since Soviet times: women constituted nearly half of the Kazakhstani workforce, but their pay remained lower than that of men, comprising, on average, only 57% of a man's salary (ADB 2018). This was partially the consequence of the fact that nearly 70% of women were employed in traditionally low-paid sectors of the economy, namely health care, education, catering and services (OECD 2017). In

addition, many women during the transition were forced to work informally, often being denied social guarantees, such as maternity and sickness benefits and pensions.

In politics, despite the government's legislative initiatives, the share of women in the national parliament remained low compared to most OECD countries and even the Soviet levels of political participation. As stated earlier, as of 2018, women occupied 22.1% of seats in parliament, way below the minimum 30% gender equality threshold, which is the accepted international standard (UNDP 2018). Likewise, in the executive office, women comprised 55% of administrative civil servants, but only 20.7% of women occupied managerial positions in local executive bodies, and 8.4% held politically appointed positions (OECD 2017). These numbers suggest that women remained underrepresented in political institutions of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, holding lower and less important positions in the hierarchy and usually supporting political decisions of the male-dominated political elite (Satymbekova 2016). According to Gulnara Ibraeva, a feminist activist from Kyrgyzstan: "Claims for democratic changes in the region of post-Soviet countries are oblivious to the fact that development does not change the essence of political and public patriarchy. We lived and still live in a political environment that is unfriendly to the idea of gender equality and democratic parity" (Shakirova 2008).

In short, Kazakhstani women entered the post-Soviet period possessing high education levels and hopes for greater political and economic opportunities. However, gender equality, while declared, was never fully realized. Women faced discrimination in the labour market and in politics and were forced to accept lower pay and less secure employment conditions. Growing emphasis on traditional values and customs seemed to further reinforce gendered stereotypes about the role and the place of women in Kazakhstani society. Also, gender-based violence remained an important socio-economic barrier for women (OECD 2017).

Addressing these challenges proved to be particularly difficult in the male-dominated, authoritarian political structure of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Ruled by Nursultan Nazarbayev from April 1990 until his resignation on March 19, 2019, the country remained firmly in the hands of the ruling political elite also after his formal departure. Even after the transfer of power, the executive and legislative branches continued to be controlled by the same old elites who were loyal to Nazarbayev and his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, with no viable political opposition existing in the country. As such, Kazakhstan represents an example of a consolidated authoritarian regime best described as a presidential autocracy (Svolik 2012; Freedom House 2018). Participation in political life in such regimes, if one is not a member of the ruling party or other closed political circles, is limited, and the registration of political parties is a lengthy and non-transparent process.

In addition, Kazakhstan's civil society lacks an independent voice, as the operation of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is closely monitored by the government. This is not to say that independent women's organizations never existed in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. In fact, the abundance of educated women and the growing exposure to Western values during the early 1990s created a fertile ground for the development of various CSOs and NGOs willing to fight for equal opportunities in education, business and politics and against all

forms of discrimination against women (Shakirova 2015). One such organization was the Feminist League of Kazakhstan founded in 1994, which actively lobbied the government on various issues affecting women and participated in drafting and amending the country's gender-related legislative initiatives. The organization did not engage in open confrontation with the authorities, instead trying to influence decision-makers through lobbying, media, international actors, academic research and educational outreach and participation in high- and expert-level discussions on gender issues (Udod 2018).

During the 1990s, the operation of many NGOs was supported with foreign grants issued by various international organizations and foreign agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The government also benefitted from cooperation with local NGOs and their foreign grant-givers, as this was one of the ways to bring the country's legislation into conformity with international requirements and to achieve global recognition as a credible partner for further cooperation and investments. At the same time, the focus of these NGOs often fell in line with the agenda and ideology of international donors, leaving the biggest concerns affecting women in Kazakhstan neglected and underreported (Seydakhmetova 2018a, b; Udod 2018; Shakirova 2015). In summary, during the 1990s, the country saw the establishment of numerous CSOs and NGOs working to advance women's interests, and government cooperated with these organizations and their international donors, drawing on their expertise and assistance. And although important progress in the gender-related legislative framework was made thanks to this cooperation, the overall impact of these initiatives was rather limited, mainly affecting the urban population and failing to address the needs of the wider audience in rural and smaller communities.

The situation has arguably worsened during the 2000s, when many women's organizations lost members, funding and influence and, eventually, were forced to close operations. Several factors contributed to this development. Specifically, by the mid-2000s, the government had earned sufficient experience in drafting gender-related legislation and its formal commitment to gender equality was recognized by the international community. As a result, the Kazakhstani authorities lost incentive and interest in cooperating with independent women's organizations. Also, once the country demonstrated steady economic development and its de-jure commitment to gender-related issues was recognized by international agencies, the funding provided by international donors dried up. Ironically, this development coincided with the government tightening its control of the media and civil society organizations. Partially a response to the 'color revolutions' in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, the Kazakhstani government introduced numerous measures to oversee the sources of funding and the activities of civil society organizations in the country (Dubok and Turakhanova 2017). In 2016, the government even established the Ministry of Religion and Civil Society, whose purpose was to streamline cooperation between the state and civil society and to register all NGOs in a special database. In short, over the past decade, the public space for independent civil society shrank considerably in Kazakhstan, with the government becoming the largest grant-giver in the country, coopting many NGOs and turning them into loyal supporters of the regime

(Knox and Yessimova 2015). As a result, despite the seeming abundance of civil society and non-governmental organizations, their resources, geographic coverage and independence from government control remained limited, especially after the Kazakhstani government increased its monitoring of the media and the NGO sector.

In conclusion, to this day, women in Kazakhstan experience various forms of discrimination in political, social and economic spheres, and face obstacles due to customs and traditions as well as closed political structures that limit women's roles in public life and decision-making. Until recently, the pre-Soviet and Soviet legacies, coupled with the post-Soviet authoritarian trends in Kazakhstani politics and the revival of traditional patriarchal values as a central tenet of national identity, continued to undermine the development of civil society that would be capable of advancing women's interests in public life. However, not so long ago, the country experienced an unprecedented wave of spontaneous political action led by women activists who demanded greater visibility and influence in the politics of Kazakhstan and called for a more equitable and inclusive future for all. The next section provides an overview of the origins and dynamics of women's mobilization in Kazakhstan since the early 2010s.

15.4 The Social, Political and Cultural Dimensions of Women's Mobilization in Kazakhstan

Starting in the early 2010s, the country saw a dramatic increase in the intensity and frequency of protests and campaigns that were either organized and led by women or developed with their active participation. Shortly after the protests of oil industry workers in the western town of Zhanaozen in December 2011, which ended in their violent dispersal by security forces, the country was faced with another episode of sustained collective action, this time organized by women. The protests emerged spontaneously in the winter of 2013 in response to the government's decision to increase the retirement age for women from 58 to 63 and decrease maternity benefits (Maltseva and Janenova 2018). The news about the pension age hike came after the government's regular assurances of having no intentions to raise the retirement age in the foreseeable future. The public announcement of the reform coincided with another controversial government decision to suspend the full indexation of maternity benefits to women whose annual salary exceeded the sum of 10 minimum wages, thereby shifting the responsibility for the rest of the maternity payment onto the employers (Weiskopf 2013).

As soon as the key aspects of both reforms became known to the public, the government was faced with one of the most massive women's protests in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet history. Most of the initial public outrage was related to the fact that no consultation with civil society and major stakeholders was sought during the policy formulation stage. According to Gulnur Hakimjanova, head of the Almaty-based NGO that works with vulnerable social groups, "The reforms have been conceived

and are being implemented by a small and well-connected group of men who do not care about concerns of the majority of the country's population, including women. We need open debates in which people can learn about what is really going to change, how much money is involved, and how the changes will be implemented" (Khamidov 2013). The legitimacy crisis further deepened in the spring of 2013 when the parliament supported the controversial bills despite strong public protests and calls for further discussion.

The mobilization of both movements occurred on social media networks. The activists protesting against the pension age hike used different platforms to spread the message and mobilize the masses, including several closed and public Facebook groups and a YouTube channel. In a similar vein, the protesters who demanded preservation of the old system of maternity benefits created a Facebook group called "For Fair Maternity Benefits!" as a platform for the communication and coordination of protest activities across the country. In both cases, the activism on the internet and social media networks was accompanied by regular peaceful protests in several cities throughout the winter and spring months of 2013. In addition to online activism and public protests, both women's groups drafted several petitions in which they called on the authorities to consult with civil society before making any final decisions concerning the country's pension and welfare systems. One such petition against the retirement age increase was signed by over 100,000 citizens including prominent female leaders in education, culture, sports and politics. The petition was passed to the president along with alternative suggestions on how to improve the welfare system (Janenova 2015; Maltseva and Janenova 2019).[2]

In criticizing the reforms, the activists identified several problems. When speaking on the Kazakhstani labour market conditions, many women raised the issue of limited full-time employment opportunities for women age 40 and older. Some women also argued that the introduction of a higher retirement age would have a dramatic impact on the economic well-being and social fabric of many Kazakhstani families. Since many young families are relying on their mothers for free babysitting services due to the shortage of state-run pre-school childcare facilities, a higher retirement age for women would mean that many young families would find it extremely difficult to balance their work and family obligations in the absence of free and regular help at home (Maltseva and Janenova 2019).[3] In addition, many women expressed their concern over numerous health problems that undermined women's ability to work effectively after the age of 58 and called for the establishment of a better system of disease prevention and health promotion, especially in rural areas and among poorer population groups (Maltseva and Janenova 2019).[4] Furthermore, those women who were worried about the cuts to maternity benefits emphasized the costs associated with raising a child and predicted gender discrimination in hiring policies due to the financial burden that was now shifted onto the employers.[5] In summary, the protesters

[2] Author interview, Astana, Kazakhstan, 9 July 2015.

[3] Author interview, Astana, Kazakhstan, 9 July 2015.

[4] Author interviews, Astana, Kazakhstan, 10 June 2015 and 9 July 2015.

[5] Author interview, Astana, Kazakhstan, 9 July 2015.

argued that Kazakhstan needed more jobs and a diversification of the economy to accommodate a greater number of female workers, better employment policies and their stricter enforcement, significant improvements in the healthcare and education systems and no drastic changes to the existing system of maternity benefits (Maltseva and Janenova 2019).

The government responded by pointing to growing demographic and fiscal pressures as well as the need for an equalization of payments across the various income groups. Surprised by the intensity of women's protests, it promised some moderate adjustments to its original plans and confirmed its intention to address the structural problems evident in the labour market. It also promised to engage self-employed women in the *Employment Program—2020* and improve access to micro-credit for women engaged in business or willing to start their own business. Also, the government agreed to train women who are on maternity leave in their chosen professions. In addition, a complex plan, *Initiative 50+*, was announced to facilitate the employment of people over 50 years old within state and sectoral programs ("Pravitelstvo RK utverdilo" 2013; Maltseva and Janenova 2019). Amendments were also made to the Labour Code to strengthen guarantees aimed at the elimination of discrimination during employment, keeping jobs for employees who are over 55 years old, and introducing fines for publishing vacancies that contain gender and age requirements. Finally, the government argued that further gender differences in pension provision would be reduced thanks to the availability of a minimum-pension guarantee for persons who reached retirement age but did not have sufficient retirement savings. In a reconciliatory move, the government also pushed the start date of the retirement age hike from 2014 to 2018, with an annual increase of the retirement age by six months and kept the right to retire early for some groups such as women with five or more children unchanged (Maltseva and Janenova 2018, 2019). At the same time, it kept its decision to cut maternity benefits but promised better protection of women's rights in the workplace. The protests subsided by the summer of 2013, though the core of committed women's activists remained active online and continued advocating for women's rights in other areas.

The next wave of women's protests occurred in February 2014 following the government's decision to comply with the rules of the Eurasian Customs Union regarding the ban on the import of female lace underwear (Oliphant 2014). These protests coincided with another case of public discontent related to an unexpected devaluation of the Kazakhstani currency, the tenge. Several other protests, including protests against the unjust seizure of people's land by the state, in which women took an active part, followed. Numerous, spontaneous and lacking a coordinating centre, these protests did not last, but they pointed to important changes in the dynamics of protests, the strategies of recruitment and the willingness of Kazakhstani citizens to participate in collective action (Mukankyzy 2014). The fast mobilization of numerous civic activists and the age of those involved in these protests, with many of them being in their 20s and 30s, also pointed to the evolving methods of communication and mobilization as well as the rise of a new generation of young activists who were not afraid of publicly challenging the authoritarian structure of post-Soviet Kazakhstan ("Molodeiushchee litso kazakhstanskikh protestov" 2014).

The protests increased in frequency and intensity in April 2016 following the government's announcement of the upcoming land reform that would allow business entities with at most 50% foreign ownership to lease agricultural land for 25 years, which was a 15-year extension from the older code that only allowed a 10-year lease. The announcement caused widespread protests across the country, with many people worrying about the country's sovereignty and the way in which the government was preparing the reform. According to the opposition leader, Zauresh Battalova, the people "were mostly upset because of the lack of communication. We didn't know anything about the reforms" (Sholk 2016). This lack of information produced rumors and anti-Chinese sentiment, as many Kazakhstanis feared that the law would open a window for the Chinese businessmen to buy Kazakh land. With 43% of the workforce residing in rural areas and 18% of the workforce engaged in agriculture, many of them women, the issue of land ownership proved to be a sensitive topic. Also, the fact that the reform came as a surprise angered the population, prompting many people of various ages and demographic groups to take to the streets in an act of civil disobedience (Sholk 2016). On May 21, 2016, the country saw one of the biggest demonstrations in Kazakhstan's history, organized via social networks and taking place in several cities across the country (Pannier 2017).

The government quickly recognized the danger of the escalating protests and abstained from using violence against the protesters. Instead, President Nazarbayev placed a moratorium on land reform through December 31, 2016 and announced the establishment of a formal presidential commission that would include politicians, businessmen and members of civil society to explore questions related to land use and ownership and draft a new bill. This effectively meant that the land reform was suspended until better times. Since then, spontaneous protests with women's active participation have become a regular occurrence in Kazakhstan.

The most recent case of women's mobilization took place in the winter of 2019 after a house fire in Astana, Kazakhstan's capital, killed five sisters aged between one and 13. Following the tragedy, many women took to the streets in several Kazakhstani cities, including Astana (now Nur-Sultan) and Almaty, demanding better housing and social and financial support for mothers of several children (Glushkova and Ospanov 2019). Many mothers complained about miserably low child benefits, poor housing conditions, and inaccessible child care services due to the shortage of subsidized places and high fees. In the words of one mother who attended a protest: "20 thousand [tenge] is a child care fee in a state-run child care facility! How is it even possible, given the fact that a child subsidy does not exceed two thousand [tenge]! Where is the logic?" (Glushkova and Ospanov 2019). Once again, the triggering factor—the tragic death of five children forced to live in dismal housing conditions in an oil-rich Kazakhstan, even though their parents worked full time—proved to be enough to cause numerous women's protests in freezing winter temperatures (Stronski 2019). Echoing the earlier protests, social media and communication apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp were used to organize the protests and inform the public about the upcoming events. Women also drafted petitions outlining their demands to the authorities, which they published online and, in several cases, handed personally to the authorities (Dorr 2019). Some of the protesters recorded videos, in which they

openly criticized the Minister of Labour and Social Protection and called on the president to deal with the problem. Several opposition media outlets, e.g. Current Time, covered the protests and women's demands (Glushkova 2019).

The government's response came quickly. Many regional and city administrations organized meetings with women activists to try to appease the public. Although there was no repression of protesting mothers, some women reported pressure, visits or calls from the police arranged to conduct so-called "preventive talks" with the activists (Glushkova 2019; "Politsiia zaderzhivala" 2019). In an attempt to soothe public anger, the authorities promised to speed up the construction of social housing and develop better social and economic measures that would help lift families with children out of poverty. Many women, however, remained skeptical about the sincerity of the government's actions, and so the protests continued into the fall of 2019 ("Zhil'ie nashim detiam!" 2019). In fact, in the summer and fall of 2019, the protests increased in intensity, with women organizing unsanctioned protests and even blocking entry to the Ministry of Economics in the capital of Astana/Nur-Sultan. In another case of state-society confrontation, two single mothers from Almaty were put first under house arrest and then moved to jail following claims that the pair were secretly plotting to help organize anti-government demonstrations. Both women actively participated in the rallies and demonstrations in Almaty in the summer of 2019, sharing their personal perspectives about the difficulties of life as low-income mothers, while also calling for free elections and a more open political system (Rickleton 2019).

The spontaneous mobilization of women driven by feelings of social injustice and frustration over their inability to influence the policy-making process coincided with another wave of women's activism that aimed to address the issues of gender violence and inequality and to challenge the old authoritarian and male-dominated political and social structures of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The radical feminist movement emerged in the mid-2010s, and since then the movement has become particularly visible in big cities like Almaty and Astana/Nur-Sultan, although smaller towns and rural areas also had a core of committed women activists. The activists were inspired by global feminist trends and the growing emphasis on women's issues and gender equality on the international scene as well as a much greater exposure to Western social media trends compared with even a decade ago. International campaigns such as the UN Women's #HeForShe campaign and the global #MeToo movement also worked to raise the profile of the problem and revive feminist ideas in the post-Soviet world (Yergaliyeva 2018).

The modern feminist movement in Kazakhstan is comprised of small but diverse and active feminist groups, which, despite their ideological differences, cooperate and organize joint events and demonstrations. The majority of its members are young, progressive, well-educated (often with foreign diplomas) and tech-savvy (Udod 2018; Seydakhmetova 2018a). Some of these groups, such as KazFem, FemPoint and FemAstana, are regular organizers of cultural and art events, lectures, protests, feminist marches and street performances, highlighting the existing gender stereotypes, sexual abuse and gender violence in Kazakhstani society (Udod 2018; Dyussembekova 2017). And although the impact of their public actions as well as the public

appeal of these feminist groups remain limited outside the large urban centers, their existence and commitment to the feminist agenda point to important cultural changes in Kazakhstani society.

Most of these feminist groups have an active online presence, running various feminist sites and moderating several feminist groups on social networks like Instagram, Facebook, and Vkontakte as well as messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. In fact, the rise of feminist activism was accompanied by the development of digital feminism, best described as consistent attempts by feminist groups and individual actors to use technology as a tool of resistance and activism to achieve a much greater degree of feminist mobilization and awareness (Udod 2018). Similar to its Western counterparts, many Kazakhstani feminists use hashtag online campaigns to draw attention to issues of gender violence and inequality. One example of a successful hashtag campaign that gradually evolved into a national movement against sexual violence was the #*NeMolchi* (Don't be silent) campaign, which originated in Ukraine in 2016, but quickly spread to other post-Soviet countries. Shortly after the campaign was launched, the avalanche of personal stories revealed the degree to which sexual and gender violence, discrimination and gender stereotypes pervaded post-Soviet society. In the end, the hashtag campaign contributed to the development of a national movement against sexual violence, *NeMolchi.Kz*. The founder of the movement, Dina Smailova, herself a survivor of sexual assault, quickly became a national hero, providing women with psychological and legal support as well as ensuring that cases of gender violence and sexual assault receive enough media coverage to guarantee that the abusers are held accountable for their crimes (Kadyrova 2016; Udod 2018).

In short, two major women's movements emerged in Kazakhstan in the early 2010s. One of these movements was socioeconomic in nature and represented a series of spontaneous protests in response to mounting social and economic grievances and the growing frustration on the part of many women over their political and socioeconomic marginalization. The other movement was political and ideological in nature and was comprised of young, educated and liberal-minded activists who called for cultural modernization of Kazakhstani society and legal and political reforms. And although the origins of these movements lay in different dimensions, their social, economic and political demands resonated with many women across Kazakhstan. Such unity in resisting the government's social policies and authoritarian practices, as well as in challenging the cultural norms and conservative trends in Kazakhstani society, send a powerful message of women rising up against the oppressive structures of post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

15.5 Women Rising: Why Now, and What Comes Next?

It is clear that the origins of women's recent mobilization and collective action lie predominantly in the growing feelings of social deprivation and political marginalization. The country's remarkable economic recovery during the 2000s raised hopes and

generated higher expectations. However, not everyone benefitted from the reforms, as poverty and wealth inequality persisted, undermining the legitimacy and long-term stability of the regime. The feelings of relative deprivation and social injustice were further exacerbated following the government's unilateral decisions to reform the Kazakhstani welfare and pension systems as well as in response to the government's ineffectiveness in solving some of the pressing social problems such as the lack of subsidized and accessible housing.

In addition to the said frustration-aggression mechanism, two other factors need to be mentioned to better understand the origins and strategies used by women's activists to keep their movements alive in the context of closed authoritarian structures. Specifically, the digital revolution and the rise of new forms of mass communication simplified the tasks of civic activists and significantly complicated the government's efforts at controlling public opinion. In the case of Kazakhstan, the transformation was remarkable: if in the early 2000s Kazakhstan's internet penetration rate was only 2%, by 2013 the percentage of internet users had skyrocketed to 54% (Internetlivestats, n.d.; Niyazbekov 2017). Furthermore, many of these users became active participants on social media networks, which made it more difficult for the government to control access to alternative news sources and ban content it deemed dangerous or politically sensitive to the regime. Not that the government did not try. Following the passage of a restrictive Communications Law in 2014, the authorities regularly blocked popular internet resources such as Google, Twitter, Skype, YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp, though they usually stopped short of banning them permanently, instead preferring temporary blocks (Niyazbekov 2017; Stojkovski 2019). And yet, aware of these restrictions, the public, especially its younger generation, learned to bypass the restrictions using Virtual Private Networks (VNPs) or proxy servers and encrypted applications such as Telegram and WhatsApp. In addition, generational change, coupled with the revival of the global feminist movement and the growing exposure of the younger generation to Western values and feminist ideas, contributed to the rise of a new feminist activism that aims to advance the broad feminist agenda in the country, including the promotion of cultural and social changes in Kazakhstani society, the advancement of gender equality in politics and decision-making and the protection of women from gender-based violence and harassment (Udod 2018).

In conclusion, despite the evidence of lower levels of political activism among youth in Kazakhstan than in other post-Soviet countries (Laruelle 2019), the recent trends provide some hope that the revival of civic activism in Kazakhstan will start with women. Kazakhstani women are rising and demanding an opportunity to meaningfully contribute to political and public policy processes in the country as well as the right to challenge the country's patriarchal cultural norms and practices. In the long run, the rise of women's civil society that is willing to pressure the men-dominated political structure and advocate on behalf of the country's female population has the potential to not only empower women but also facilitate the liberalization of the country's political institutions.

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