

SPECIAL FEATURE

In Search of Shelter: Precarity, Protest, and Pronatalism among Laboring Women in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

In 2019, near Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, five children perished in a house fire while their parents were away at night shift jobs. This widely-reported tragedy brought to light conflicting imperatives and highlighted the precarity of gendered productive and reproductive labor across Kazakhstan. This highly-publicized incident ignited a conflagration of protests by “mothers with many children” (*mnogodetnye mamy, kopbala analar*), the official designation for low-income women who have four or more children and are eligible for state support. This paper analyzes the mothers’ protests of 2019, and the public and official responses to these protests. It finds that, by centering motherhood and traditional gender norms in their protests, these protestors successfully linked their demands for social benefits back to historic Soviet-era protectionist and paternalist policies, thus legitimizing their demands. However, the article argues that at the same time these gendered labor norms force women, especially marginalized mothers, to engage in precarious forms of labor that neither Western-style NGOs nor limited government support are able to adequately address. The article further concludes that “mothers with many children” labor under precarious conditions and are subject to skepticism and censure, as their actions challenge idealized national scripts of proper womanhood in Kazakhstan. This research contributes to the study of labor, gender, and reproduction in Central Asia and calls for centering the study of gendered labor precarity within Central Asian studies.

“Baspana!” (Shelter) and the Limits of Compassion and Goodwill

A wintry day in late February, Aziza apai¹ lurched into her seat across from me during one of our weekly discussions of current events in Kazakhstan that took place consistently over the course of my seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Almaty, Kazakhstan. “Mothers deserve help,” Aziza apai informed me, as she sat shell-shocked and mourning the accidental death of five young girls in a house fire in the outskirts of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan’s capital, which rocked the nation in the beginning of 2019. This widely-reported tragedy was attributed to poor living conditions and economic strife, as both parents left their children unsupervised in

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a coal stove heated house for their night-shift jobs. Aziza apai, a mid-fifties woman with carefully curled hair and neatly pressed clothes, is the mother of four daughters and seemed particularly moved by this tragedy, which had occurred to a family not so different from her own, although it had happened almost 800 miles away in Nur-Sultan. I had met Aziza apai in the summer of 2019, when she had agreed to teach me, an anthropology PhD student from the United States researching pronatalism and women in crisis in Kazakhstan, about Kazakh family life and women's hardships.

This event caught the popular imagination and encapsulated the public's increasing frustration with rampant corruption and inequality across many socioeconomic swaths of society. In the case of the five young girls, discussions swirled around who was to blame—was it the mother who had irresponsibly left her children unattended on a night shift?² Was it the government for so poorly providing for the most vulnerable groups of Kazakhstanis, so that they were forced out of economic necessity to leave their children in dangerous conditions in order to put food on the table? Was it the parents' fault for recklessly giving birth to far more mouths than they could feed? Finally, could it be, as some feminist activists proposed, the fault of a patriarchal society for prioritizing the birth of a male heir that a couple kept on giving birth to a string of children in the hopes that their fortunes would change once their long-awaited son appeared? In the aftermath of the death of the five sisters, hundreds of mourners attended their funeral, and people called for the resignation of the Minister of Labor and Social Protections.³ Thus, 2019 ushered in sweeping changes to the Republic of Kazakhstan, which had so long seemed to be frozen in a political torpor in a state of satisfying the status quo. These occurrences, along with widespread political protests, elite maneuvering, and shifting power alliances, contributed to a cascade of events culminating in the resignation of long-term president Nursultan Nazarbayev on March 19, 2019, after nearly thirty years of rule.⁴ Over the course of 2019, mothers' protests continued steadily from February to September, with a few protests each month ranging from gatherings of dozens to hundreds of women staging protests and sit-ins at various administrative centers.⁵ In total, there were approximately fifteen protests in 2019, but the mainstream media remained largely reluctant to highlight their demands and these protests were sparsely covered by most news outlets. Mothers' protests were only a portion of an upswell of larger political unrest against the newly-appointed president Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev and for increased electoral freedom. Moreover, they took place before and after the June 2019 elections, and thus were more disconnected to specific political events and rather seemed to capture a more sentimental airing of longstanding perceived wrongs of the state against family welfare. Likewise, unlike other protests at the time, which garnered swift reprisals from the government in the form of a strong militarized response by police antiriot squads and the imprisonment of the organizers, mothers' protests appeared to catch both the government and other protesting groups wrong-footed. Meanwhile, promises made by the government under President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev to increase childcare benefits and address housing shortages for low income families have been slow to be fulfilled, and women continue to labor at precarious jobs while birthing and raising the new generation of Kazakhstani citizens. As a result, conflicting imperatives of gendered productive and reproductive labor came to the forefront of the Kazakhstani peoples' public

consciousness, linking Soviet family ideals and government-mediated relations with contemporary national ideals of motherhood and protectionism.

This article comprises three sections which chart the history, context, and motivations of women engaged in a variety of precarious labor conditions, and how by protesting they are challenging the ideals of Kazakhstani motherhood, exposing fissures in nationalist narratives that showcase caring benevolent mothers as the hearthstones of Kazakhstani culture. First, the article reviews women's labor in Kazakhstan and how Soviet legacies continue to shape Kazakhstani women's attitudes toward motherhood and its state support, as these are the rhetorical underpinnings for understanding the uniqueness of mothers' protests and the effectiveness of the demands leveled at the government. The second section draws on the literature of gendered precarious labor and outlines some forms of precarious labor in contemporary Kazakhstan, in order to support my argument that gendered precarious labor characterizes the condition of a wide category of underprivileged and vulnerable mothers in Kazakhstan. The third section deploys media analysis and ethnographic research to drive home the argument about how a series of grassroots, unsanctioned protests at regional administrative centers—referred to as “mothers’ protests” by activists and the media—garnered widespread sympathy toward gendered structural inequality and shifted discussions of the social welfare responsibilities of the state, leading to the government issuing limited concessions in the face of these protests. Moreover, I contend that mothers’ protests challenged ideas of who are “suitable” civic activists, and that by demanding the Kazakhstani government uphold its part in the Soviet patriarchal bargain,⁶ these women challenged idealized scripts of “appropriate” gendered labor. Taken together, these three sections describe the historical underpinning and the shape of precarious women's labor in contemporary Kazakhstan among “mothers of many children” and call for centering the connections across and between gender, labor, and (re)production in Kazakhstan. Drawing on participant observation among vulnerable groups of women in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in 2018–2019, this article situates the topic of gendered labor precarity as an essential conversation within Central Asian studies and specifically highlights gendered precarity. It also argues that by expanding notions of Kazakhstani womanhood and precarious labor in Kazakhstan, women and their labor—both productive and reproductive—is recognized.

Women's Labor in Kazakhstan: Soviet Motherhood and its Legacies

Since the inception of the Soviet Union in 1922, women in the USSR were afforded more opportunities than in some Western countries at the time, including within the legal, educational, cultural, and labor realms.⁷ The Great Patriotic War was and continues to be a source of nationalist pride and unity as well as a trauma that resulted in the death of at least twenty-six million soldiers and civilians.⁸ Women played significant roles working in factories, collective farms, and other industries as well as on the war front itself.⁹ When the war ended, women were asked to do their duty for the motherland and repopulate the nation. In a departure from a more liberal period in the 1920s that had encouraged women's participation in the workforce, having children was seen as a production problem and became an essential aspect of the

Soviet Union's policies toward women, particularly in the immediate postwar period when the country experienced a demographic crisis, where in some of the hardest hit areas of the USSR there were almost twice as many women as men.¹⁰ The Soviet government saw the country's dropping birth rate and the dearth of reproduction-age males following the devastation of war as an issue of major national concern.¹¹ Its solution was to encourage childbirth by taking a comprehensive approach through pronatalist legislation and postwar anti-abortion campaigns.¹² While women were afforded such government benefits as childcare support and long maternity leaves, these benefits were still constrained by ideals of motherhood, wherein women who behaved in an "unmotherly" fashion were deemed to be bad workers and/or mothers.¹³ Nonetheless, the government subsidized large families by increasing the amount of direct assistance and the number of years women were eligible for material assistance to mothers with many children (Rus. *mnogodetnye materi*). It also offered aid to single mothers (Rus. *odinokie materi*), improved women's living conditions, and provided more comprehensive and higher quality medical care to pregnant women.¹⁴ As the use of terminology focused on women (i.e., "single mothers" and "mothers with many children") indicates, from the outset, state policy put reproductive responsibility firmly on women, rather than phrasing this as a family concern, or one jointly embarked upon by both men and women.

Although there was a pervasive belief that the postwar lack of men was uniform across the Soviet Union, the actual numbers varied from region to region. Indeed, in the Central Asian states, the lack of men was much less acute than in the European parts of the Soviet Union, perhaps because no fighting had occurred there.¹⁵ The belief that there were not enough available men made relationships outside of the bounds of wedlock more acceptable and these were officially encouraged by the state. Reproduction was emphasized as a civic responsibility of all Soviet women, and specific target production quotas were issued: women were encouraged to give birth to at least two children and could face fines and imprisonment for giving birth to fewer.¹⁶ As a result, beginning in 1944 when it became apparent that the Soviet Union would defeat Nazi Germany, the Soviet state began deemphasizing the importance of women as fighters and workers, and instead shifted to propagandizing motherhood. In demonstrating the importance of reproduction, maternity medals were given to large families, proffering glory and monetary rewards similar to medals awarded for valor in war or for outstanding labor achievements.¹⁷ Indeed, as Deniz Kandiyoti persuasively argued, for Central Asian women in particular, under certain circumstances Soviet gender policies entrenched not gender equity, but rather state support and preferential gendered treatment of women.¹⁸

Because the titular nationalities of Central Asian SSRs historically had larger families to begin with, many thousands more medals were awarded here than in other regions.¹⁹ As a newspaper read in 1975, "Kazakhstan is proud of its woman-heroines. The party and authorities highly regard their labor. 208 workers were awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labor, of which 108 were Kazakhs, and 22461 women were awarded the honorable title of 'Mother Heroine.'"²⁰ As Attwood notes, these medals, with names like "Medal of Maternity," "Maternal Glory," and "Mother-Heroine," were not awarded to both parents but given only to mothers—reinforcing "the notion that rearing children, as well as giving birth to them, was an exclusively female function."²¹

Traditional views of motherhood continued to dominate until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Indeed, in a striking parallel similar to the neoconservative reactionary backlash in the United States in the 1980s, during the same period in the Soviet Union, there was a reaction against women workers as “communists were accused of destroying the family and undermining women’s ‘natural role’ as wives and mothers and guardians of the family hearth.”²² A number of authors have spoken to the specific outlines of the “woman question” within Central Asia,²³ and in particular how Soviets seized upon women as a “useable proletariat” for the transformation of Central Asian society.²⁴

In post-independence Kazakhstan, as in Central Asia as a whole, many of these Soviet era legacies continue to resonate within legal, public, and private discourses. Now, over thirty years later, thanks to the combined tactics of encouraging repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs, a strong pronatalist policy in Kazakhstan aimed at growing the population through increasing the birth rate and many ethnic Russians emigrating from Kazakhstan, ethnic Kazakhs comprise nearly 70 percent of the population, and the percentage of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan hovers around 15 percent.²⁵ Social benefits such as extended maternity leave, similar to the social safety net guarantees that existed in the Soviet period, still remain, albeit to a lesser extent. Meanwhile, topics of feminism and “gender politics” continue to be regarded with suspicion from the general public and women’s organizations alike, as observed by the author throughout her ethnographic fieldwork. Likewise a holdover from the USSR, women’s activism in Kazakhstan is largely concerned with securing health benefits for women and their children such as subsidized medical care and childcare, privileges that were guaranteed in the Soviet Union. At the same time, while government policies of gender politics (Rus. *gendernaia politika*)²⁶ explicitly seek to align Kazakhstan with international (white, Western) feminist goals of equal pay in the workplace and representation in the government and high-level industry positions, many Kazakhstani women in Almaty, who were interviewed by the author, seemed more focused on immediate material welfare regarding housing, food, and access to education for their children rather than larger concerns of equity. Furthermore, the state-sanctioned promotion and protection of women in Central Asia, including legal codes restricting women’s labor, continues to feed national policies and relies on arguments of biological determinism to do so.²⁷ Moreover, the government of Kazakhstan continues to emphasize the paramount importance of women’s roles as mothers in maintaining national identity, as evidenced by the following statement made by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev: “For our state, as well as for me personally, motherhood is a unique care. Dear women, you are the anchor of the family, which means you are the anchor of the state. The future of our country directly depends on how we raise our children today.”²⁸

Thus, the pronatalist imperatives championed by Bolsheviks in the postwar period were reignited in independent Kazakhstan, as demographic concerns were taken up as an essential means of proving Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and separation from Russia to the north and China to the southeast. The woman question endures, as Kazakh women are urged to give birth to many children in order to outnumber the high numbers of other ethnic groups within Kazakhstan. In contrast with other more ethnically homogenous countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan at the time of

independence did not have a majority of Kazakhs within its borders, but instead maintained a plurality with ethnic Russians, many of whom had been encouraged to settle there under imperialist and later Soviet colonialist policies.²⁹

Finally, with rising nationalism in post-Soviet Central Asia, “traditional” gender roles have served a key function in shoring up the unity and legitimacy of Central Asian political regimes. Centering nationalism and “traditional” gender roles as a cohesive means of binding together the newly formed nations from the Soviet Socialist Republics proved to be a means of cohering people around a narrative of continuity and belonging within nascent independent democracies.³⁰ Cleuziou and Direnberger outline three means by which nation and gender are articulated within Central Asia: 1) the division of spaces into private as feminine and public as masculine; 2) the ordering of women’s bodies by making procreation a duty to the nation; and 3) the limiting of women’s political participation into categories that fit within a primal conception of womanhood and private, domestic spaces.³¹ Thus, both gender and nationalism became mutually reifying and entrenched within post-Soviet Central Asia, and were presaged by similar emphases of the special relationship between motherhood and the nation in the Soviet Union. Hegemonic femininity, then, has become a means of performing nationalism, despite the violence this enactment might wreak against those women performing this role—whether as grief-stricken mothers who lost their children and were forced into increasingly precarious jobs, or as women subjected to sexual violence as a result of conforming to traditional and social mores of Kazakh feminine behavior.³² Having established the historical antecedents to contemporary gendered social pressures, this article next explores the uneasy fractures between performing the nation and performing motherhood, which leads to specifically gendered dilemmas within the realm of precarious labor, as real-life Kazakhstani women collide against ideals of motherhood and gendered labor in Kazakhstan and the category of woman is elided to mother.

Theorizing Gendered Precarious Labor Globally and Locally

The study of precarity and precarious labor has grown over the last few decades within economic and historic scholarship. Leah Vosko defines precarious labor as “work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements.”³³ Precarious labor puts workers into a state of limbo or uncertainty and edges them into marginal employment types that are often not considered standard nor adequately protected by labor laws. Moreover, intersecting identities of gender, race, nationality, and class compound upon marginal labor types or conditions to increase workers’ vulnerability to market pressures, risk of exploitation, and abuse. This section reviews select research on gendered precarious labor across the world, then extends this framework to Central Asia and Kazakhstan. It argues that the legacy of the Soviet Union and the breeding ground of free market capitalism in Central Asia provides fertile ground for gendered precarious labor, particularly when motherhood and gendered social expectations are coupled with the boom of flexible, temporary, contract, and gray market economic employment, which characterizes many emerging markets in the twenty-first century.

Precarious labor has often been theorized in the West as having arisen within a post-Fordist framework of employment in the past thirty years, and as a change from the status quo and stability of Fordist working models. However, as some scholars have persuasively argued, precarious work is far from an emergent phenomenon, but rather a characteristic of capitalist labor.³⁴ Indeed, the “[s]exual division of labor and sex-based discrimination (e.g., maternity leave) appear to lie at the heart of the gendered nature of precarious work, which has characterized working conditions in industrial and postindustrial societies.”³⁵ Likewise intertwined with the long history of precarious work is the global feminization of employment³⁶ as well as what others term “gendered precarity traps” such as the “precarity-maternity nexus,” which continue to bedevil many forms of female employment.³⁷ Women are subjected to the “triple shift”—the duties of paid work, household work, and emotional work³⁸—and are likewise liable to the “gender contract”—the “normative and material basis around which sex/gender divisions of paid and unpaid labour operate in a given society.”³⁹

The gender contract and theorization of precarious labor rely on Western divisions of labor between the public and private that presuppose a model of “man as the breadwinner” and “woman as homemaker,” but stretch beyond this context. Studies in the West do provide context to the compounding vulnerabilities women engaged in precarious labor may face, however. Research in Italy demonstrates that female migrant workers in particular feel the brunt of economic shocks, and are afforded fewer protections than their male counterparts, and even those from lower social backgrounds.⁴⁰ Likewise, a quantitative and spatial analysis of census data in Canada underscores how a consideration of geographical distributions of jobs may create pockets of gendered precarity.⁴¹ Moreover, neither class nor job type necessarily insulate women from gendered labor precarity, as is highlighted in a study on the disenfranchised female adjunct workers who comprise the academic precariat in Ireland.⁴²

As demonstrated in the previous section detailing the historical contextualization around women’s roles in the Soviet Union, gendered precarity extends beyond the framework of purely Western, industrialized, and developed settings such as those outlined above. For instance, in South Africa, gender, race, and skill are intersecting factors influencing job security within the retail sector,⁴³ while in Mexico, as with other developing countries, gender discrimination was found to play an overwhelming factor in characterizing the ways in which women experience precarious work conditions, especially within masculinized public sector jobs, such as the police force.⁴⁴ Similar to the findings of precarity researchers in Mexico and South Africa, I identify these familiar outlines of gendered precarious labor among Central Asian women arranged upon the compounding intersections of gender, class, and nationality. These factors serve to marginalize certain workers within the economy, and as with the case of the widely-publicized mother of five whose night shift work left her children home alone to die in a fire, women are often forced to take temporary, shift, and gray market work to accommodate childcare and household responsibilities as driving market forces exert increasing pressures on local economies. Market forces within the countries that emerged from the Soviet Union continue to strip away the few remaining social supports of the old Soviet state

protectionist system, confronting post-Soviet women with the bind of both devolving women's rights and neglecting to shore up women's reproductive rights.⁴⁵ Moreover, a strain of pronatalism continues to pervade nationalist narratives of Central Asia:

the dangers of nationalism are twofold: (1) by emphasizing women's role as the reproducers of future citizens, the conservative nature of nationalism relegates women to a secondary role in civil life, and (2) by granting primacy to the importance of the ethno-nation, nationalism masks gender-based (as well as class based) inequality. The recent push to return post-communist women to the domestic domain is linked not only to increased familial stability but also to the need to increase birth rates.⁴⁶

Thus, the valorization of motherhood and its link to a nationalist agenda in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries reinforce the precarity-maternity nexus within precarious forms of employment, and burden women seeking to extract promised state support from the government, as outlined in the Soviet gender contract of labor and reproductive relations. This provides women with unique sources of leverage in their challenge of the gender and labor relations status quo in Kazakhstan as they invoke the power of motherhood in demanding better living conditions and work opportunities, as the next section details.

The Power of Essentialized Motherhood in Protest

In 2019, frustrated mothers in Kazakhstan experiencing extreme job precarity and income inequality engaged in a type of activism different from other political activists—one rooted in explicitly drawing upon women's connections to reproduction and the nation—which spurred the state apparatus to generate new responses to their activism. In a landscape of increasing protests by youth political activists and banned opposition party members, mothers' demands gained attention on the national scale because of how their claims to rights resonated with historical pronatalist imperatives and contemporary state policies encouraging motherhood and promulgating an idealized form of nurturing womanhood. Thus, gendered labor and reproduction became politicized in ways that elicited responses from the political and economic elite, from condemnation to scrambling to set up local resource centers for mothers eligible for government support as a means to appease the restless populace. This section examines the extent to which women's work—at the job, within the family, and in the public sphere—engenders governmental responses and social change in a field constrained by economic hardship, corruption, and patriarchal demands made by both society and the state. It draws upon the understanding, outlined in Hammer and Ness's examination of precarious work in the Global South, that the state often plays a crucial role in "instituting and/or enabling informal and precarious work" and, as this article details below, in exposing the relationship between "informal and precarious work, class consciousness and political action."⁴⁷ By highlighting how in 2019 a series of grassroots, unsanctioned protests at regional administrative centers garnered public sympathy toward gendered structural inequality and outrage against poor labor and living conditions, this section demonstrates how mothers were able to present themselves as uniquely positioned to protest

widespread structural and social problems without bearing the brunt of the repercussions that other Kazakhstani activists faced. It also expands upon insights into the complexity of women's agency and strategies for empowerment within grassroots women's movements in Kazakhstan from previous decades.⁴⁸

The 2019 mothers' protests were a series of ongoing women's protests occurring between January and October of 2019 in large urban centers—mainly Almaty and Nur-Sultan—across Kazakhstan. According to the author's key informants and fieldwork, although they were not covered by most official media outlets, word of mouth and Facebook live streaming notifications indicated they sporadically occurred for months in front of regional municipal buildings. These weekly protests mainly ended in the fall, when threats that women's participation in them would automatically exclude eligible women from the government welfare lists, which for a time shut down this activism.⁴⁹ Thus, although motherhood was a recognized protected status, both legally and culturally, mothers showcased the precarious role they inhabit within the Kazakhstani imaginary—by being granted privileges by the government for their reproductive labor. However, given that the more children one has, the more subsidies families are eligible for, the government's pronatalist policies encouraging an increased birth rate may have the unwanted side effect of deepening impoverished families' marginalization and precarization within the labor market.

In contrast to previous or simultaneously occurring political, environmental, and activist protesting, mothers' protests were not aligned with feminist activism, but rather stemmed from more nativist concerns. This loosely coordinated movement spontaneously arose from economic hardship and untenable living conditions of impoverished and fed up mothers. The protests were led by four state-recognized categories of women, all afforded various levels of governmental support by law, and all engaged in precarious reproductive labor with few economic resources available to them. The best-known group, which often serves as a synecdoche for the entire group, are the "mothers with many children" (Rus.: *mnogodetnye mamy*; Kaz.: *kop-bala analar*), the official designation for low income women who have four or more children and are eligible for monthly monetary allocations, in addition to other perks, such as preferential access to subsidized low-income housing,⁵⁰ subsidized state kindergartens, and early retirement.⁵¹ Second are the mothers of children with disabilities (*materiy detey-invalidov*) who have also made headlines by wheeling baby carriages and wheelchairs to the steps of government buildings, promoting the visibility of their disabled children and highlighting that often these municipal buildings lack accessible ramps. Although technically the official designation for parents or guardians of children with disabilities applies to both men and women, in practice it is the women who come out to protest because it is they who are left with the responsibilities of raising children with disabilities. The last two categories are single mothers (*materiy-odinochki*) and mothers with low incomes (*maloinushchye mamy*), who experience structural barriers in terms of being able to clothe and feed their children and find adequately paying jobs, and often also took part in the WhatsApp chat groups where mothers coordinated their protests (*mitingy*).⁵²

All of the aforementioned categories are protected, so they are granted (uneven and incomplete) access to government services and are likewise also the source of intense public scrutiny and moralistic hand-wringing. To varying degrees, mothers

whose identity aligns with the broader umbrella category of *mnotodetnye mamy* are eligible for certain monthly allowances for the care of their children, preferential access to kindergarten, and the opportunity to be housed in subsidized government housing, but the degree to which women can claim these privileges often depends on their abilities to navigate Byzantine bureaucratic paperwork and patiently wait—sometimes years—for their eligibility to be determined. The pervasive public perception that these women may be *darmoyedki* (moochers) and *khaliavshchitsy* (freeloaders)⁵³ informs both official responses that these needy families have individual responsibility to take care of themselves, and that they should be grateful for any state support and cease their protesting and public opinion.⁵⁴

Over the course of a few months, Aziza apai shared with me the developments in a newly formed loose-knit coalition of women using WhatsApp to gain information, commiserate, and coordinate political protests. As Aziza apai explained, not that long after the tragedy of the five girls perishing in Nur-Sultan, a female Kazakh-language journalist issued a call for mothers to unite forces in order to share their knowledge and figure out further steps. While she quickly faced problems at her workplace and with the authorities for this suggestion, the idea had already gained traction. In Almaty, each city district created its own WhatsApp group—maintained and organized by active women of that region. Aziza apai, who met the qualifications for membership within the Almaty group, shared snippets of these conversations, playing the voice messages and sharing the text threads.⁵⁵ Typical engagement in the Almaty WhatsApp group included: women leaving voice messages detailing their stories and frustrations, as well as seeking advice and consolation from others with similar experiences. One had been on a waiting list for government subsidized housing for over fifteen years; another was caring for four children under the age of ten at home and her husband had just lost his blue-collar job and had turned to sporadic taxi-driving; a third was trying to figure out if she was eligible for discounts on her coal and electricity bills. Aziza apai listened to the litany of messages and clucked her tongue: “These mothers don’t understand that you need to live in the region for at least three years to get those services,” she explained. The WhatsApp groups served both as a means of spreading information and of curating expert knowledge, using group support and common experiences to inform one’s understandings of the larger movement and create common demands among women within a given region. An ephemeral solidarity was thus enhanced through the act of exchanging stories about their individual precarious situations and the conditions they were laboring within. This group identity eventually coalesced for some women in demanding that rather than being overlooked or brushed aside, they would force engagement and visibility by planting themselves in front of district municipal buildings until their demands were met.

These groups demonstrated the potential for mobilizing a group of formerly atomized and disenfranchised women—isolated by long work shifts, working from home, caring for their families, and the lack of community engagement—into a coalition of women that insisted on being heard. They organized themselves through informal channels, and would trickle in from around the district to protest, babies in tow, on the steps of government buildings. Indeed, when I brought up a recent protest in front of the mayor’s office of Nur-Sultan, in front of the international Astana

Economic Forum where the new president Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev and ex-president Nursultan Nazarbayev were both present, and at the local party headquarters of Nazarbayev's political party Nur Otan (Radiant Homeland, renamed by President Tokayev to Amanat), Aziza apai was already aware of them. She had heard of this activism from her WhatsApp groups, although few news outlets, except for the Western-sponsored *Radio Azattyq*,⁵⁶ reported on the protests, much less live-streamed them in real time. For Aziza apai, mothers' protests highlighted the gendered inequalities that structured her life as a mother with many children, gradually leading her toward a more critical political stance. Her participation in the WhatsApp groups, the sense of community and shared burdens she developed, and the continued mothers' protests spurred Aziza apai, a state-employee,⁵⁷ to change her opinions about her own motherhood and the obligations the state had to her because of it. Over the one and a half years of our acquaintance, Aziza apai went from initially condemning political activism as dangerous and threatening to the stability of the nation and the status quo to seeing mothers' protests as outlets for expressions of frustration by beleaguered mothers in untenable situations and engaging in precarious labor. Nonetheless, she never participated in any action herself, demonstrating the limits to new media activism and coordination, especially in the shift from online solidarity to opposing the police or picketing a government building.

Upon the onset of mothers' protests, many were taken aback by their rise and persistence, wherein waves of women consistently gathered to state their discontent against the status quo in front of government buildings and in prominent squares in urban centers.⁵⁸ Typically lasting a few hours regardless of weather, tens of women thronged together outside municipal buildings, brandishing babies and signs, shouting chants as well as singing the national anthem. They were Russian and Kazakh-speaking ethnically Kazakh women, their approximate ages ranging from late-twenties to early fifties, and most issued their demands in Kazakh, chiding surrounding policemen and reluctant political spokespeople alike, calling for people to have compassion for their children. These women demanded meetings with the former president Nazarbayev and current president Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, talks with the ministers of labor and local mayors, and at one point even declared a hunger strike until their demands were met and they were granted an audience with their chosen officials.⁵⁹ Popular chants at the rallies were "Housing" (Kaz.: *bas-pana*) and "Homes for our Children!" (Rus.: *zhilye nashym detyam*).

Unlike critiques that the elite activists were subjected to, it was more challenging to discredit the participants of mothers' protests by condemning them as foreign agents. Likewise, mothers were not subjected to police seizure, detention, or jail time, as other political activists protesting during this same time period were. As seen in mothers' activist movements elsewhere around the world, most famously with the Argentinian mothers of "disappeared" children, mobilizing motherhood can be an extremely effective tactic of civic engagement. Women engaging in mothers' protests were neither arrested nor detained, and footage of a wedge of stone-faced special forces militia encircling a group of colorfully dressed mothers and children served as a catalyst for spurring support for the mothers and condemnation of the government authorities for failing to meet their demands. Government authorities subsequently attempted to change their tactics, calling upon female police officers to blockade the mothers,

but this was also derided on social media—“Did you have to call every single female police officer in for this?” and “Shame on those women for blocking other women!” were some of the sentiments voiced.⁶⁰

Although few official media sources reported on the protests, one form of discrediting the mothers was via the Facebook livestream comments on independent media outlet Azattyq’s page. Online trolls derogatorily nicknamed “Nurboty” (Nursultan Nazarbayev bots) copy-pasted a variety of contradictory condemnations of the women. “Look at how they dress” was a common complaint both for those who were wearing too much (headscarves seen as overly religious and possibly Muslim extremists) or too little (scandalously showing off skin by wearing sundresses “as if they were at the beach”). The trolls questioned the moral fitness of mothers bringing their children to such a dangerous event, declaring that these women should work and earn money like respectable people, rather than expecting a handout from the government.⁶¹

On the one hand, the mothers’ protests enabled women to showcase their “dependent” status as a means to shame the government into providing the services and benefits promised to them. If reproductive labor was their work, then they deserved fair compensation for their special statuses as mothers in need, and deserved recognition and compensation for this work. On the other hand, in presenting themselves as mothers fallen on hard times or in difficult life circumstances who were concerned with their own material conditions and those of their children, women opened themselves up to critiques on the suitability of their motherhood and the propriety of their behavior. These women thus were insulated from the delegitimization tactics and derision leveled against other forms of activists, but also risked further disenfranchisement by their actions and potential of reprisals from the government.

In contrast to other official responses to the mothers’ protests resulting in promised or actually delivered increased benefits and consideration to the needs of mothers with many children, there was also the bizarre incident of Nazarbayev’s “two cow solution.” Although Nursultan Nazarbayev had stepped down as president in mid-March of 2019, he retained some key power positions, and continued to weigh in on current events, including the mothers’ protests. In a meeting of his political party Nur Otan (now known as Amanat) on August 22, 2019, Nazarbayev questioned why mothers with many children had been demanding government protections and support. Speaking derogatorily of the mothers’ protests, Nazarbayev characterized them thus “[They are saying] ‘Give me [a handout].’ What were you thinking of [in terms of family planning]?”⁶² In his speech, he proposed a solution: “Go out and buy two cows and provide for yourself,”⁶³ urging women to take out loans to buy cows, then to sell milk products at the market in order to pay off their loans and make money, demonstrating with this tone-deaf statement how out of touch he was with the everyday realities of ordinary Kazakhstani citizens’ lives.

Nursultan Nazarbayev’s out-of-touch suggestion highlights the tensions between government-proposed solutions and the realities that impoverished and fed up mothers face daily. The lack of adequate housing, labyrinthine bureaucracy and long waiting lists—a set of impossible exclusions for eligibility for various pittance of state support—and the overwhelming pressure to clothe and feed and house their growing

families caused frustrated and formerly apolitical women to take to the streets. While some mothers resorted to protest to voice their discontent, despite government promises and new programming directives, little changed in their material lives and to alleviate their precarious position in society. Through networks of online WhatsApp groups, disseminated by word of mouth, women challenged the state's authority. Likewise, low income and otherwise marginalized categories of women strategically employed their status as mothers⁶⁴ to air their discontents with the crumbling state welfare programs, insufficient institutional support, and income inequality.

While subjecting the women of the mothers' protests to body shaming and accusing them of being *izhdyventsy* (Rus. "dependents") to the state are familiar refrains in the broader context of women's activism in Kazakhstan, local feminist activists' responses to the mothers' protests were mixed too. Some activists explained that intersectionality allowed for multiple feminisms and feminist movements, as well as different priorities. Others criticized the mothers' protests for conflating women's worth with their reproductive capacities and for expecting the government to intervene in a paternalistic way by providing state support instead of eliminating the root causes of economic inequality.⁶⁵ Thus, in their gender essentialism and demands that the state provide more social support to them, mothers' protests challenged ideas of what was "suitable" in the view of both activists and authorities, although for the opposite reasons.

Established activists from the elite circle of the aspiring upper middle class who received foreign funding for many of their projects were also taken aback by the grassroots nature of the mothers' protests. These activists organized protests and coordinated events that were often informed by and mirror global understandings of Western feminism and the neoliberal funding priorities of their international sponsors. Thus, women involved in mothers' protests confounded their opponents and proponents alike with their seemingly disorganized, minimally-coordinated protests that sprang up unannounced in front of various government offices. Their demands to be heard, paired with their disengagement with other concurrent political and feminist protests and reliance on a decentralized method of protest allowed them to agilely maneuver between local and international understandings of womanhood and activism, and exist in the interstices of acceptable actions, thus stymieing both state actors and local feminist activists.⁶⁶

Uneasy Solutions: Band-aid Responses in the Invention of a New NGO

The mothers' uncoordinated and decentralized sporadic protesting, mobbing of municipal buildings, and issuing of demands for the immediate payment of social benefits garnered some concessions from officials. Although mothers were not granted audience with the current president or his predecessor, they did meet with local ministers and mayors, and were reassured as to their eligibility for certain social services. In addition to promises made by the former president and reassurances that women on the waitlists would have their individual cases inspected and greenlighted, a new government-sponsored organization was created to appease mothers with many children, a population under government protection and that Kazakhstani legislation actively encourages to grow. The creation and promotion of the Happy

Family (Kaz. *Baqytty Otbasy*) by Almaty social service providers and formerly independent NGO female activists shows how often NGO workers are co-opted into government service and how engagement with “tamed” groups of civil society is one strategy by which the state responds to continued mothers’ protests.

Starting less than a month after the first mothers’ protests began following the fire in Nur-Sultan that killed five girls, then President Nazarbayev issued a decree ordering that each mother with many children be awarded a sum of 21,000 tenge (\$54) per child on a monthly basis.⁶⁷ This was in contrast to the \$27 per month *total* previously allotted to families with many children.⁶⁸ Likewise, in response to the overwhelming complaints regarding inadequate housing and insurmountably long waiting lists, evidenced in private WhatsApp groups and also frequently recorded in the livestreamed mothers’ protests videos, in March 2019, the Ministry of Industry and Infrastructural Development announced that thirteen hundred families with many children had been allotted housing.⁶⁹ These policies align with pronatalist imperatives in the government that conflate womanhood with motherhood and encourage women to produce children for the good of the state, incentivizing women to have more children by means of government subsidies and perks to mothers, such as a reduced age of retirement—fifty-three, as opposed to fifty-nine years old (for men it is sixty-three).⁷⁰ For women, then, having more children guarantees an earlier retirement and access to one’s pension, which includes Kazakhstan’s generous maternity leave as part of one’s years of employment, but only if women are employed full time and in the formal sector. The focus on having children as a lauded and essential life stage for many Kazakhstani women, however, also increases their involvement in the informal sector, part time work, or in lower-paid professions with more flexible hours in order to accommodate childcare. Thus, while some government subsidies and benefits are in place to provide some of the social support families received during the Soviet Union and socialized state healthcare, a combination of market economy relations, slashed social welfare budgets, and the deepening class divisions continue to heighten the labor precarity of some of the most vulnerable women and mothers in Kazakhstan.

Due to overwhelming demand for more information and a sea of conflicting information distributed by various sources, an article detailing all of the sources of support afforded to mothers from the government was published by a state-sponsored website.⁷¹ This information included a FAQ and a series of diagrams detailing these benefits (see [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) for highlights of the benefits).⁷² The benefits awarded to needy families—so called in official documents but in common conversation and elsewhere as “mothers of large families”—drive home the paramount importance of childbearing within the schema of receiving government aid, as well as other pronatalist links to the Soviet past.

While the focal image of the infographic depicted a family consisting of a man, a woman, and three children (notably two were boys), two smaller images underscoring the government payouts to families depict women holding infants without the presence of a man. The point is driven home that the more children a family has, the higher its valuation in terms of government payouts. The payments are not as generous as their corollary “maternity capital” in Russia, however.⁷³ Despite the incentives by the government to reward families who give birth to successively more

Table 1. A Translation of State-guaranteed Benefits to Impoverished Families

Benefits/child	One-Time Payment upon Childbirth	Upkeep of Child (until they reach 1 year of age)
First child	95,950 Tenge (~\$246 USD)	14,544 Tenge (~\$37 USD)
Second child	95,950 Tenge (~\$246 USD)	17,196 Tenge
Third child	95,950 Tenge (~\$246 USD)	19,822 Tenge
Fourth Child	159,075 Tenge (~\$408 USD)	22,473 Tenge (~\$58 USD)

Table 2. Benefits to Families with Many Children

# of Children	Award	Monthly sum
7 or more	Golden necklace	16,160 Tenge (~\$42 USD)
6 or more	Silver necklace	16,160 Tenge (~\$42 USD)
5 ore more	none	10,504 Tenge (~\$27 USD)

offspring, the amount was still small as one woman remarked ruefully “It’s not even enough to cover the cost of diapers!” That this is a largely symbolic gesture by the government is underscored by an awards system mimicking the earlier Soviet birth incentivization policies via “mother heroine” awards.

Besides these Band-Aid solutions, the government-sponsored organization Baqytty Otbası was created. According to promotional materials, Baqytty Otbası was a pilot program created to “lower the percent of divorces and strengthen the institute of the family.”⁷⁴ Constituting a small staff of lawyers, psychologists, and social workers who are almost exclusively women, Baqytty Otbası offers a number of services: individual consultation, assistance in compiling paperwork to apply for housing, and an evaluation of what types of services a mother and her children are eligible for (including free access to public pools and art classes). In addition, courses are offered in skills retraining for mothers who have been long out of the workforce, including instruction on hair styling, applying makeup, applying false eyelashes, manicuring, tailoring, baking, and other jobs that can be performed flexibly at home in between childcare. These are also jobs that fit into the gray market, where women work for themselves with no benefits (the informal sector likewise does not offer retirement perquisites available to legally employed women, either), and whose earning potential is inherently precarious and unpredictable. Indeed, whether intentional or not, these jobs for which Baqytty Otbası and other government-sponsored NGOs offered trainings fall almost exclusively into the category of temporary, part time, and precarious labor. The rationale for offering these trainings along with entrepreneurship workshops was to offer opportunities for women to easily learn a marketable trade and be able to make money at home while taking care of her domestic responsibilities. However, the language around encouraging mothers to enter into these

precarious professions offers the false hope of neoliberal promises of “getting rich quick” by engaging in the gig economy.

Conclusion

In *Gender and Nation*, Nira Yuval-Davis outlined how in certain national projects women were encouraged to have more children in what she called the “people as power” discourse.⁷⁵ A constellation of circumstances promotes precisely this discourse in Kazakhstan, including anxieties about China’s large demographic presence looming across the border, lingering concerns about Kazakh authority in their titular nation-state as a result of Soviet demographic politics, and rising neo-traditionalism and nationalism. This, coupled with post-Soviet legacies of women’s relation to the state,⁷⁶ gendered labor in low-paid and often precarious jobs, and pronatalist imperatives supported by government policies and neotraditional gender roles,⁷⁷ created the backdrop of broiling tensions against which mothers’ protests gained traction and public sympathy.

While patriarchal demands and nationalist concerns about the importance of women’s *reproductive* labor in creating new citizens constrain the potentially transformative possibilities of mothers’ protests, women also engage in *productive* labor at precarious, often part time jobs, fitting work around childcare and the demands of care work in a society where extended kin networks demand huge amounts of women’s labor. However, unlike their feminist, political, and environmental activist counterparts who had likewise engaged in widescale protests over a similar period in early 2019, these mothers largely escaped harassment by state authorities, potentially because their orientation and demands are framed within socially legible and politically safe discussions of moral motherhood and sacrificial, suffering women. As they yearned for a brighter future for themselves and their children, women engaged in mothers’ protests indicate at least one direction of potential change in women’s status in Kazakhstan, although this potential hinges on their reproductive and social status as mothers, rather than a shedding of their familial burdens. It also points to the importance in centering an analysis of gendered precarity and precarious labor within the context of Central Asian scholarship.

This article addressed the dilemmas of precarious feminized labor in Kazakhstan and highlighted one facet of the conception of Kazakhstani womanhood and the family. In so doing, it has underscored the importance of foregrounding studies of gendered precarious labor within studies of Soviet and contemporary Central Asia. Although protests were organized by mothers of different social categories eligible for social provisions, which are technically for *families* with many children, children with disabilities, single parents, or impoverished parents, they were galvanized by mothers in particular. Likewise, mothers were understood to be the beneficiaries of the social services they were demanding. Organizing around motherhood and the attendant care work that is involved with raising children is how women initially founded WhatsApp groups that later served as grassroots organizing cells for protests. Men were either structurally missing, as in the cases of *materi-odinochki* (single mothers) or functionally not seen as having enough at stake in the conversation (as in the case of the tragedy of the five girls who died in the house fire).

Women's (re)productive precarity is exacerbated by high divorce rates in Kazakhstan and the difficulty in extracting alimony from delinquent parents. Instead, the paternalistic state stepped in as a replacement for absent men, and as the entity responsible for helping impoverished mothers raise their children—future generations of Kazakhstani citizens and contributors to the economy. Indeed, in some cases, the state also intervened to bar those delinquent on their child support payments from leaving the country, forcing absent fathers to face financial consequences for their actions.⁷⁸ The state, then, felt the brunt of mothers' dissatisfaction with its failure to hold up the old Soviet social contract of providing social services and taking care of its citizens and children. In order to appeal to its benevolence and not risk reprisals it made against other protests (arrest and large fines), members of the mothers' protests presented themselves in positions of dependence and as victims of feminized precarity—mothers with children who depended upon them, thus a category most in need of government intervention and assistance. Future studies would do well to focus on how legacies of the Soviet gender contract affect contemporary labor and gender relations in Kazakhstan and Central Asia more broadly, and could expand this research beyond state-recognized vulnerable categories of women to other structurally vulnerable groups, including state employees and other *biudzhethniki* (including social service providers and teachers) who labor productively and reproductively under precarious conditions.

Notes

1. All names in this article, other than those of political figures, are pseudonyms.
2. While this family comprised of two adult caretakers—a mother and a father—the public discussion focused particularly on the mother, although the reality of the parents' precarious labor and living conditions forced the two of them to leave their children at home alone overnight in shoddy housing and with a heating source dangerous for minors to operate.
3. Zakhar Mostovoi, "Bol'no i Strashno': Strana Potriasena Tragediei v Astane." 365info.kz, February 5, 2019. <https://365info.kz/2019/02/bolno-i-strashno-strana-potryasena-tragediej-v-astane>.
4. Nevertheless, Nursultan Nazarbayev remained a major power broker in Kazakhstan until January of 2022, when a series of violent protests, which began as worker strikes in Western Kazakhstan due to rising oil prices and escalated into violence, finally prompted his successor to remove Nazarbayev from the political posts he had retained for the nearly three following years.
5. Mothers' protests continued in limited capacities from 2019 through 2022, but they were most prominent in 2019, which is the time period analyzed in this article. See "V Kazakhstane snova pogibli v pozhare piatero detei, na etot raz v Zhambyl'skoi oblasti" (Nastoiashchee Vremia, 2021). <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/new-fire-kazakhstan-five-kids-dead/31111782.html>, Ernur Doszhanov "Nazyvaiut materei darmoedkami i khaliavshchysami! - mnogodetnyie v Kazakhstane snova prishli s protestami k chinovnikam" (Nastoiashchee Vremia, February 22, 2021). <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/31115787.html>, and Aigerim Shagapat "Mnogodetnye sem'i v 'Novom Kazakhstane' - iadro ocherednykh protestov?" (OpenDemocracy, June 1, 2022). <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/mnogodetnie-semyi-v-kazakhstane-yadro-novih-protestov-tukusheva/>.
6. A term coined by Deniz Kandiyoti to refer to women's conforming to certain societal expectations of femininity in order to benefit from the patriarchy, in this case via social protections. See Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 2 (3): 274–90; <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>.
7. See Alice Erh-Soon Tay, "The Status of Women in the Soviet Union," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 20 (4): 662–92; <https://doi.org/10.2307/839036>. Barbara Alpern Engel, "Women in Russia and the Soviet Union," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12 (4): 781–96; <https://doi.org/10.1086/394111>.

doi.org/10.1086/494366; and Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917* (Athens, OH, 1999).

8. V.P. Tarasov, “Poteri SSSR v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voiny: sovremennoe sostoianie problemy.” International Conference *Odinochestvo zhertv. Metodicheskiye, eticheskie i politicheskie aspekty podschyeta liudskikh poter’ Vtoroi mirovoi voyny* (Budapest, Hungary: December 9–10, 2011).

9. See “Na fronte i v tylu: zhenshchiny Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny,” *Ria.ru* October 5, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200510/1569651745.html>, and Andrei Sorokin, “V goriashchuiu izbu voshli...o mobilizatsii zhenshchyn na raznykh etapakh Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny,” *Rodina*, December 22, 2015, <https://rg.ru/2015/12/22/rodina-mobilizaciya.html>.

10. Olga Vadimovna Sobolevskaya “Demograficheskoe ekho voiny,” *iq.hse.ru*, September 2, 2013; <https://iq.hse.ru/news/177669270.html>.

11. Mie Nakachi, “Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union, 1944–1955” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008).

12. Amy E. Randall, “‘Abortion Will Deprive You of Happiness!’: Soviet Reproductive Politics in the Post-Stalin Era,” *Journal of Women’s History* 23 (3): 13–38; <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2011.0027>.

13. Suzanne LaFont, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Women in the Post-Communist States,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 34 (2): 203–20.

14. Mie Nakachi, “Population, politics, and reproduction: late Stalinism and its legacy,” In *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between reconstruction and reinvention*, ed. Juliane Furst (New York, 2006), 23–29.

15. Nikolai Savchenko, “Podrobno o poteriakh Velikoi Otechestvennoi,” *Demoskop Weekly*, June 2013, 559–60; <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2013/0559/tema02.php>.

16. Mie Nakachi, “Population, politics, and reproduction: late Stalinism and its legacy,” In *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between reconstruction and reinvention*, ed. Juliane Furst (New York, 2006), 29.

17. Sociologist Lynne Attwood lists the various medals as follows: Medal of Maternity, Class II (for five children), Class I (for six children); Order of Maternal Glory, Class III (for seven children), Class II (for eight children), Class I (for nine children), and finally, the most famous and prestigious one, Mother-Heroine (for ten or more children), 146.

18. Deniz Kandiyoti, “The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?” *Central Asian Survey* 26 (4): 601–23.

19. This fact somewhat abrogated the stated intent of incentivizing childbirth, as Central Asian women were more likely to have large families anyway, thus the medals were devalued. This is heavily contrasted with the awarding of these medals in other parts of the Soviet Union, where so few women gave birth to large families that there was little penetration of the existence or supposedly exalted nature of these medals.

20. Partiinaia Zhizn’ Kazakhstana, “The role of Soviet Women in Building Socialism,” *Partiinaia Zhizn’ Kazakhstana: Zhurnal Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KP Kazakhstana*, 1975, vol. 3. (Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, 1960) 83.

21. Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women’s Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–1953* (New York, 1999), 147.

22. Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Boulder, CO, 1998), 15.

23. See D. A. Alimova, *Zhenskii vopros v Srednei Azii: istoria izucheniia i sovremennye problemy* (Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 1991); Douglas Taylor Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, 1st ed. (Ithaca, NY, 2004); Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ, 2006); Marianne Kamp, *The new woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, modernity, and unveiling under communism* (Seattle, WA, 2006); and Deniz Kandiyoti, “The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?” *Central Asian Survey* 26 (4): 601–23.

24. Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, NJ, 1974).

25. See Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms, *Itogi Natsional’noi perepisi naceleniia 2021 goda v Respublike Kazakhstan* (Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan, 2022), 11. Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, however, and a flood of Russians seeking better economic or political conditions in Kazakhstan, it is unclear how these proportions may shift in the future.

26. For more information on the first of a series of presidential decrees, see *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. 2005. “Ob utverzhdenii strategii gendernogo ravenstva v Respublike Kazakhstan na 2006–2016 gody, Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan ot 29 noiabria 2005 goda N 1677,” *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* (Almaty,

Kazakhstan), December 3, 2005; http://ru.government.kz/docs/u051677_rus.html, and A.T. Smailova, "O Realizatsii Gendernoi Politiki v Respublike Kazakhstan," zakon.kz, April 20, 2017; <https://www.zakon.kz/4854940-o-realizacii-gendernoi-politiki-v.html>.

27. See Kamal Consulting, "Law of the Ministry of Social Protection on July 31, 2007 #186-p 'On Confirming the List of Work which is Prohibited to Women and Maximum Norms for Women to Lift and Move Objects by Hand"; <http://www.pavlodar.com/zakon/?dok=04002> (accessed on April 27, 2013).

Biological determinism continues to vex the reception of feminism in the former Soviet space, as men and women alike strongly believe in differences between the sexes. For further discussion, see papers presented by ASEES panel "Where is Feminist Analysis after the Critique of Dualisms? Interrogating Russia's Gender Politics, Mapping Feminist Interpretation" (with panelists Michele Rivkin-Fish, Julie Hemment, and Cassandra Hartblay). Cassandra Hartblay, Julie Hemment, and Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Where is Feminist Analysis After the Critique of Dualisms? Interrogating Russia's Gender Politics, Mapping Feminist Interpretation," panel, *Annual Meeting of the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies* (Boston, November 2013).

28. Quoted in Damir Baimanov, "My dolzhny vernut' bezuslovnoe uvazhenie k zhenshchine – N. Nazarbayev," December 15, 2012; <http://www.zakon.kz/kazakhstan/4530879-my-dolzhny-vernut-bezuslovnoe-uvazhenie.html>.

29. These concerns have been exacerbated by the gradual opening of previously classified archives detailing the tremendous loss of life in the 1930s in Kazakhstan, where an estimated one-third of Kazakhs perished in a famine partially engineered by Soviet sedentarization policies and helped along by harsh steppe conditions. For further discussion of the famine and the complex issue of the depth of Bolshevik involvement and the Central Party's knowledge of the potential damage their policies would wreak upon the Kazakh population, see historian Sarah Cameron's extensively researched *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca, NY, 2018).

30. Deniz Kandiyoti, "The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?" *Central Asian Survey* 26 (4): 601–23.

31. Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Direnberger, "Gender and nation in post-Soviet Central Asia: From National Narratives to Women's Practices," *Nationalities Papers* 44 (2): 196–97.

32. Aizada Arystanbek, "Can you beat your wife, yes or no?": a study of hegemonic femininity in Kazakhstan's online discourses," *East European Politics* (2002): doi 10.1080/21599165.2021.2024516.

33. Leah F. Vosko, *Temporary Work: the Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto, 2000).

34. Eloisa Betti, "Gender and Precarious Labor in a Historical Perspective: Italian Women and Precarious Work Between Fordism and Post-Fordism," *International Labor and Working Class History* 89 (2016): 64–83; <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547915000356>; Bridget Kenny, "The Regime of Contract in South African Retailing: A History of Race, Gender, and Skill in Precarious Labor," *International Labor and Working Class History* 89 (2016): 20–39; <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547915000320>; Leah F. Vosko, *Temporary Work: the Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto, 2000).

35. Eloisa Betti, "Gender and Precarious Labor in a Historical Perspective: Italian Women and Precarious Work Between Fordism and Post-Fordism," *International Labor and Working Class History* 89 (2016): 65.

36. Leah F. Vosko, *Temporary Work: the Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto, 2000).

37. Eloisa Betti, "Gender and Precarious Labor in a Historical Perspective: Italian Women and Precarious Work Between Fordism and Post-Fordism," *International Labor and Working Class History* 89 (2016): 65.

38. Leah F. Vosko, *Temporary Work: the Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto, 2000).

39. Leah F. Vosko *Managing the Margins: Gender, Citizenship, and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment* (Oxford, 2010) 5.

40. Eloisa Betti, "Gender and Precarious Labor in a Historical Perspective: Italian Women and Precarious Work Between Fordism and Post-Fordism," *International Labor and Working Class History* 89 (2016).

41. Waad K. Ali and K. Bruce Newbold, "Gender, Space, and Precarious Employment in Canada," *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 112 (2021): 566–88; <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12488>.

42. Theresa O'Keefe and Aline Courtois, "'Not One of the Family': Gender and Precarious Work in the Neoliberal University," *Gender, Work, and Organization* 26 (4): 463–79; <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12346>.

43. Waad K. Ali, and K. Bruce Newbold, "Gender, Space, and Precarious Employment in Canada," *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 112 (5): 566–88; <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12488>.
44. Mariana Chudnovsky and Ana Laura Reyes Millan, "How Precarious Public Jobs Are Even More Precarious for Women: The Case of Mexican Police Forces," *Latin American Research Review* 56 (3): 625–41; <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.833>.
45. Suzanne LaFont, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Women in the Post-Communist States," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 34 (2): 20c–20.
46. LaFont, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Women in the Post-Communist States," 34 (2): 212.
47. Anita Hammer and Immanuel Ness, "Informal and Precarious Work: Insights from the Global South," *Journal of Labor and Society* 24 (1): 5; <https://doi.org/10.1163/24714607-20212000>.
48. Evenly Zellerer and Dmitriy Vyorkin, "Women's Grassroots Struggles for Empowerment in the Republic of Kazakhstan," *Social Politics* 11 (3): 439–64.
49. In February of 2021, another tragedy occurred in the small town of Zhanatas in Southern Kazakhstan, when another five children perished in a fire when their parents left them unattended. This sparked further mothers' protests in 2021 and 2022, as women gathered in front of the ministry of labor and social welfare in Nur Sultan. See "V Kazakhstane snova pogibli v pozhare piatero detei, na etot raz v Zhambylskoi oblasti" (Nastoiashchee Vremia, 2021); <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/new-fire-kazakhstan-five-kids-dead/31111782.html>, and Doszhanov Ernur "Nazyvaiut materei darmoedkami i khaliavshchysami! - mnogodetnyie v Kazakhstane snova prishli s protestami k chinovnikam" (Nastoiashchee Vremia, 2021); <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/31115787.html>. Some claim that the mothers' protests are some of the loudest and most sustained protests in Kazakhstan, spanning at least three years, although their demands for social welfare improvements have not yet been adopted by any political parties, however. See Aigerim Shagapat's retrospective coverage of the results of three years of mothers' protests "Mnogodetnye sem'i v 'Novom Kazakhstane' - iadro ocherednykh protestov?" (OpenDemocracy June 1, 2022); <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/mnogodetnie-semyi-v-kazakhstane-yadro-novih-protestov-tukusheva/>.
50. The average wait time of which is approximately ten years, according to complaints made in the WhatsApp groups.
51. Zhadra Zhulmukhmetova, "Mnogodetnye Sem'i v Kazakhstane: Vse of Posobiiakh, Ocherediakh Na Zhil'ie i Sotsial'noi Pomoshchi," *Informburo*, February 13, 2019; <https://informburo.kz/cards/mnogodetnye-semi-v-kazakhstane-vsyo-o-posobiyah-ocheredyah-na-zhilyo-i-socialnoy-pomoshchi.html>.
52. For a retrospective on three years of WhatsApp coordinating and demanding government responses, see Aigerim Shagapat's retrospective coverage of the results of three years of mothers' protests "Mnogodetnye sem'i v 'Novom Kazakhstane' - iadro ocherednykh protestov?" (OpenDemocracy June 1, 2022); <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/mnogodetnie-semyi-v-kazakhstane-yadro-novih-protestov-tukusheva/>.
53. Doszhanov Ernur, "Nazyvaiut materei darmoedkami I khaliavshchysami!-- mnogodetnyie v Kazakhstane snova prishli s protestami k chinovnikam" (Nastoiashchee Vremia February 22, 2021).
54. See Aigerim Shagapat, "Mnogodetnye sem'i v 'Novom Kazakhstane' - iadro ocherednykh protestov?" (OpenDemocracy June 1, 2022); <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/mnogodetnie-semyi-v-kazakhstane-yadro-novih-protestov-tukusheva/>, and Nursultan Nazarbayev's response that women shouldn't demand the government solve their problems Azattyq "Nazarbayev - trebuiushchim sotspodderzhki: 'Ty o chem dumal? Eto zhe tvoi problemy,'" *Radio Azattyq*, August 21, 2019; <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30120725.html>.
55. As a foreign researcher and not part of the target audience, I did not join the group, but gathered information via Aziza apai, who became my key informant to the inner workings of this WhatsApp group and the hundreds of members within it. These insights, as well as the public posts made by the female journalist who initiated the creation of these WhatsApp groups informs this section of the article, which is supplemented by a media analysis of livestreamed mothers' protests across major metropolitan cities in Kazakhstan.
56. A regional branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.
57. Thus, as Chudnovsky and Millan noted, particularly exposed to gendered precarity within the state administrative structure. See Mariana Chudnovsky and Ana Laura Reyes Millan, "How Precarious Public Jobs Are Even More Precarious for Women: The Case of Mexican Police Forces," *Latin American Research Review* 56 (3): 62c–41; <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.833>.
58. They differed from other types of protest in Kazakhstan—either characterized as an elite phenomenon, which was then criticized as being funded by the West and out of touch with everyday life and ordinary people's demands as in the case of the marathon protest against snap presidential elections in 2019 or

environmental activist campaigns in Almaty in 2018–2020, or as dangerous rabble rousing by malcontents that was swiftly shut down by militarized responses, as in the case of the Zhanaozen workers' strike in 2011, and Blood January 2022 in particular.

59. "Zhil'ye nashym detyam!" Mnogodetnye materi reshili ob'iavit' golodovku, *Radio Azattyq*, June 4, 2019; <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-nur-sultan-mnogodetnye-materi-obyavili-golodovku/29978618.html>.

60. "Zhil'ye nashym detyam!" *Radio Azattyq*, June 4, 2019.

61. Comments gathered from fieldwork observations on Facebook livestream in 2019. For more examples of Nur-bot comments, see reader comments on "V Taraze mnogodetnye materi trebuiut ot vlastei pomoshchi" (Ratel.kz September 2, 2020); https://ratel.kz/raw/v_taraze_mnogodetnye_materi_trebujut_ot_vlastej_pomoshchi

62. "'Korovy' Nazarbayeva i 'Shveitsarskii Zamok' Ego Docheri," *Radio Azattyq*, August 24, 2019; <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/press-review-kazakhstan-nazarbayev-castles-and-cows/30126599.html>.

63. I "'Korovy' Nazarbayeva i 'Shveitsarskii Zamok' Ego Docheri," *Radio Azattyq*, August 24, 2019.

64. See Spivak, for a discussion of strategic essentialism, which I link here to gendered essentialism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago, IL, 1988), 27c–313.

65. "Pochemu Feministki ne Zashchishchaut Mnogodetnykh Materiei?" *The Steppe*, September 30, 2019; <https://the-steppe.com/razvitie/pochemu-feministki-ne-zashchishchayut-mnogodetnykh-materiei>.

66. This ability to weave between different modes of understanding their own economic and social agency mirrors earlier findings on Kazakhstani women's grassroots activism in the 1990s (Zellerer and Vyortkin, 2004).

67. "Nazarbayev poruchil platit' mnogodetnym po 21 tys. Na kazhdogo rebenka," NUR.KZ,

February 27, 2019; <https://www.nur.kz/1780903-nazarbaev-porucil-platit-mnogodetnym-po-21-tysenge-nakazdogo-rebenka.html>.

68. Zhadra Zhulmukhametova, "Mnogodetnye Sem'i v Kazakhstane: Vse of Posobiiakh, Ocherediakh Na Zhil'ie i Sotsial'noi Pomoshchi," *Informburo*, February 13, 2019; <https://informburo.kz/cards/mnogodetnye-semi-v-kazakhstane-vsyo-o-posobiyah-ocheredyah-na-zhilyo-i-socialnoy-pomoshchi.html>.

69. "Svyshe 1,3 tys. Mnogodetnykh semei Kazakhstana poluchili v mae arendoe zhil'ye" Analyticheskii internet-zhurnal Vlast," *Internet-Journal Vlast*, June 3, 2019; <https://vlast.kz/novosti/33511-svyshe-13-tys-mnogodetnyh-semej-kazakhstana-polucili-v-mae-arendnoe-zile.html>.

70. See Michele Rivkin-Fish (2010), for an analysis of pronatalism in Russia, which has very similar outlines to Kazakhstan's policies and whose legislation Kazakhstan often mimics.

71. Zhadra Zhulmukhametova, "Mnogodetnye Sem'i v Kazakhstane: Vse of Posobiiakh, Ocherediakh Na Zhil'ie i Sotsial'noi Pomoshchi," *Informburo*, February 13, 2019; <https://informburo.kz/cards/mnogodetnye-semi-v-kazakhstane-vsyo-o-posobiyah-ocheredyah-na-zhilyo-i-socialnoy-pomoshchi.html>.

72. Zhulmukhametova, "Mnogodetnye Sem'i v Kazakhstane: Vse of Posobiiakh, Ocherediakh Na Zhil'ie i Sotsial'noi Pomoshchi," *Informburo*, February 13, 2019.

73. For a more detailed analysis of maternity capital and pronatalist imperatives in Russia, see Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Pronatalism, Gender Politics, and the Renewal of Family Support in Russia: Toward a Feminist Anthropology of 'Maternity Capital,'" *Slavic Review* 69 (3): 701–24; <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0037677900012201>.

74. "V 8 gorodakh Kazakhstana zarabotaly tsentry resursnoi podderzhki sem'i," *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*; (accessed on October 1, 2019) <https://www.kazpravda.kz/news/obshchestvo/v-8-gorodakh-kazakhstana-zarabotali-tsentri-r>

Esursnoi-podderzhki-semi. However, as other scholars have noted, while neotraditionalism and pronatalism combine within government programming to invoke ideals of the intact family unit and values of giving birth to many children, divorce rates remain high in Kazakhstan. See Jasmin Dall'Agnola and Helene Thibault, "Online Temptations: Divorce and Extramarital Affairs in Kazakhstan," *Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI) Religions* 12 (8): 654; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080654>, and Zhulduzai Iskakova et al., "Kazakhstanskaia molodezh': deklaruiemye semeinye tsennosti i real'noe povedenie," *Kazakhstan-Spektr* 103 (3) 2022; <https://doi.org/10.52536/2415-8216.2022-3.02>.

75. Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London, 1997).

76. Mie Nakachi, "Population, politics, and reproduction: late Stalinism and its legacy," In *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between reconstruction and reinvention*, ed. Juliane Furst (New York, 2006): 23–29.

77. Janet Elise Johnson, *Gender Violence in Russia: The Politics of Feminist Intervention* (Bloomington, IN, 2009).
78. “Vyезд iz Kazakhstana zapretili 16 tysiacham dolzchnikov po alimentam,” Tengrinews.kz; (accessed on January 30, 2023) https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/vyезд-kazakhstana-zapretili-16-tyisyacham-doljnikov-489793.