



Owning and Disowning the Female Body: Mediating Gender and the Conservative Values Clash in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This article analyzes contemporary gender representation and perception in Kazakhstan's public sphere and the sexualization of social media required by the market economy. Through the example of a female social media influencer, Aizhan Baizakova, and her ambivalent public success, it analyzes gender and sexuality as the product of contradictory power orders: the traditional patriarchal system and retraditionalization in the name of nationhood, on the one hand, and the Soviet legacy of putting women into the labor market and the post-Soviet capitalist logic, on the other. It explores how women find themselves caught between two forms of illiberalism: a market-driven one pushing for evermore provocative online content and a conservative backlash in terms of gender roles.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Social media, Instagram, Culture, Policy, Empowerment

Sex sells. Numerous coded sexual messages circulate in the media, enhancing public relations and marketing techniques. New media technologies such as social media provide consumers with even more direct access to these messages everywhere and unrestrained by ethics and moral standards. As Reichert and Lambiase state, "sex has thoroughly permeated consumer culture, was so readily accessible to anyone at any age and was so distorted by ulterior commercial motives, that commercial pandering and incredible hypersexuality has mangled and perverted that which is natural and beautiful about sexual behaviour."¹ Such ever-present hidden and visible appeals to sex have led to a rapid and broad sexualization of cultures and the transformation of individual values, particularly among youth.

¹ Tom Reichert and Jacqueline Lambiase, eds., *Sex in Consumer Culture: The Erotic Content of Media and Marketing* (London: Routledge, 2013), x.

Reichert and Lambiase explain the prevalence of sex in contemporary media by reference to the censorship emanating from multiple political, educational, and religious discourses.¹ This tension is remarkably visible in the case of Kazakhstan. There, due to the combination of a traditional patriarchal society and the Soviet tradition, the public sphere was distinctly silent on sex until perestroika.² After the USSR collapsed, however, the market economy and new media brought Kazakhstani citizens both cultural and consumer products that put women's bodies and sexuality at center stage, thereby posing a significant challenge to traditional conservative cultural views. This has left the Kazakhstani public caught between contradicting ideologies of the role of sex on the public scene.

To explore this tension, this article looks at the case of a young social media influencer, Aizhan Baizakova, who is an actress, Candidate Master of Sport in taekwondo, and blogger with more than two million followers. She came to fame by posting overly revealing photos on her Instagram profile, projecting a sexualized and provocative image. Considering the predominance of traditional expectations for female behavior among Kazakhs, public engagement in taboo female conduct stirs up public disputes in the form of thousands of comments and likes.³ Baizakova's case illustrates the complex cultural shift in views of sexuality—and especially the female body—that is under way in Kazakhstan as a result of the encounter between traditional values and the capitalist use of sex as a consumer tool that is contributing to the “pornification” of contemporary popular culture.⁴

Aizhan Baizakova's Trajectory

In Astana on December 26, 2017, Instagram celebrity Aizhan Baizakova was arrested for three days for “disorderly conduct and disturbance of public and ethical norms.”⁵ The celebrity was already famous for her provocative Instagram account, where she posted images with strong sexual content. Going one step further, however, she had organized for girls at the nightclub ZakovaBar to strip. The performance sparked contrasting public responses: while part of the audience supported her and appealed to liberal values, a far larger group criticized her actions and shamed her for them.

The starkest evidence of the latter was a video statement by a male activist condemning her behavior as inappropriate and calling for public support in maintaining the traditional female image.⁶ The background music for the video is a song played on the Kazakh national instrument, the *dombra*, giving the video nationalist overtones and appealing to traditional culture. The speaker—surrounded by other men of athletic build—stands in a confident pose, his hands in fists, and gesticulates assuredly. The men's body language conveys physical power and fighting spirit, calling to mind the stereotype that men symbolize power and safety, and this overall impression is reinforced by the music.

1 Ibid., 2

2 Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 32.

3 Ibid., 12.

4 Angela McRobbie (2008), cited in Maddy Coy and Maria Garner, “Definitions, Discourses and Dilemmas: Policy and Academic Engagement with the Sexualisation of Popular Culture,” *Gender and Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 285–301, 286, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2012.667793>.

5 “V Almaty arestovana zvezda Instagram Aizhan Baizakova,” *Sputniknews*, December 26, 2017, <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/society/20171226/4139599/v-almaty-arestovana-zvezda-instagram-ajzhan-bajzakova.html>.

6 Mukassan Shakhzadayev (@mukassan), Instagram video, December 24, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BdFe-h5gNOg/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=embed_video_watch_again.

The activist's speech starts with the traditional Islamic greeting. The speaker then goes on to refer to his audience as good Samaritans indifferent to public issues. Next, he explains that, traditionally, Kazakh people honorably brought up the younger generation, especially girls, by having a social approval to police their behavior, an argument that he uses to justify his overreaction to the present events. He describes the act of stripping as a disgrace (*masqara*), one he says is compounded by the small amount of money that the girls were paid for engaging in such ignominy. He implies that Kazakh culture has tremendous value, which reinforces the shame of the girls' actions. Notably, he refers to the undressed girls as "younger sisters" (*qaryndas*), positioning himself as a brother irritated by his little sisters' wrongdoing.

He then appeals to people in the fields of sport, art, and religion to support him against actions similar to the one orchestrated by Baizakova that would paint the Kazakh nation in a negative light. There is a definite purpose behind this targeted call for support: people in sport are seen as defending the country's honor in international competitions; those in art are conversant with traditional culture and place a high value on the concepts of honor and dignity; and religious people are receptive to the idea that women should cover their bodies. He concludes the talk with a battle cry—"Wake up to reality, Kazakh people!"—that can be interpreted as a call to vigilante action.

Overall, his approach rests on the legitimacy of male power and gender oppression in Kazakhstan, where men are framed as guardians and women are treated as culprits. The narrative of kinship presents the Kazakh nation as a big family in which older brothers should take care of their younger sisters, effectively accommodating men's aggression while depriving women of the ability to stand up for the rights and liberties theoretically guaranteed to them in the constitution.

The furor around Baizakova's Instagram posts and nightclub action resulted in a win for the conservatives. The blogger was stalked by third parties who threatened her life and ended up being confined by police for three days, while her profile was blocked following user complaints.⁷ Subsequently, an unexpected pregnancy and delivery of a child out of wedlock complicated Baizakova's already ambivalent public image. After a while, she began participating in highly controversial campaigns that cemented her title as "hype queen" on the Kazakhstani internet. In May 2019, Kazakhstani media headlines announced her *syrga salu* (Kazakh traditional pre-wedding ceremony), which immediately came under public scrutiny.⁸ The following week, Baizakova posted a video of her bridal shower to her Instagram account; it garnered more than three million views and over 2,500 comments.⁹ The week after that, news outlets published photos and stories of Baizakova in bridalwear that had been taken from her Instagram profile.

But on June 7, in the bridal speech during her wedding ceremony, she alluded to issues such as being a single parent, public criticism for bearing a "bastard," and abortions. She also declared that it was a fake wedding organized by the media company Salem Social Media as a social experiment to draw public attention to

7 "Blogery vystupili v zashchitu Aizhan Baizakovoy," *Today.kz*, December 26, 2017, <http://today.kz/news/zhizn/2017-12-26/757041-blogery-vystupili-v-zaschitu-ajzhan-bajzakovoj/>.

8 Klara Kiyassova, "Aizhan Baizakovoi proveli obriad 'Syrga salu' (video)," *365info.kz*, May 15, 2019, <https://365info.kz/2019/05/ajzhan-bajzakovoj-proveli-obryad-syrga-salu-video>.

9 Bayzakova (@bayzakova_i), Instagram video, May 26, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bx7gDUUnwWG/>.

the issue of abortions.¹⁰ This deception created a new scandal, with many netizens accusing Baizakova and Salem Social Media of diverting public attention from the first presidential elections organized without President Nazarbayev (who had run the country for the almost thirty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union), which were to take place a few days later.¹¹

Sex Hype in Broader Societal Context

Baizakova's carefully orchestrated media campaign matches Vasterman's definition of media hype as a "media-generated, wall-to-wall news wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes within the news production of the media."¹² However, that is only the tip of the iceberg; the main potential stumbling block is gender-oriented political struggles. Foucault noted as early as 1969 that media hype tends to be consistent with broader crises.¹³ In our case, the broader crisis is reflective of Kazakhstan's lack of political pluralism (the absence of genuine parties that could match and oppose the presidential party, Nur-Otan), fragile civic engagement (repeated crackdowns on mass protests against the current government and repressions of civic activists), and regimented political system that is heavily embroiled in corruption. These factors combine to produce an unhealthy political environment extremely sensitive to any occasion and manipulation.

At the same time, media hype relates to essential power shifts that drive disputes in the social order and mark disruptive transformations.¹⁴ In the case of Baizakova, the close attention paid to her life reflects the extensive power imbalance that makes females the objects of public spin. Turning women's private lives into a topic of public debate on a par with major national political events demonstrates the undue pressure created by—and problematic character of—gender interplay.

Connell suggests reviewing gender relations through particular experiences taken from social dimensions such as religion, culture, politics, or economics.¹⁵ She approaches female subordination as "social inventory" in particular labor, power, and cathexis structures, which forms "gender order" or a "gender regime." In labor, gender oppression exists through the burden of housework and childcare, the salary gap, and the separation of occupations into "male" and "female." In power structures, gender inequality is seen through nonparticipation in significant decision-making processes (such as political and business leadership), institutional and personal assaults, domestic control, and sexual governance. The last structure, cathexis, is represented by cultural norms defining the features of people's emotional

10 "Aizhan Baizakova prankanula vsekh! Feikovaia svad'ba | Sotsial'nyi eksperiment," YouTube video, 44:20, posted by "Salem Park," June 7, 2019, <https://youtu.be/-yjiFvY8TEc>.

11 "Digistan 4—Jurttyñ Balasy i Aizhan Baizakova pro zheleznyy zanaves, iznasilovaniia i impotentsiu," YouTube video, 58:27, posted by "Alibekovkz," August 12, 2019, <https://youtu.be/dXXtPcqzYM>.

12 Peter L.M. Vasterman. "Media-Hype: Self-Reinforcing News Waves, Journalistic Standards and the Construction of Social Problems," *European Journal of Communication* 20, no. 4 (2005): 515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323105058254>.

13 Foucault, 1969, cited in Marcello Maneri, "Media Hypes, Moral Panics, and the Ambiguous Nature of Facts: Urban Security as Discursive Formation," in *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm: News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises and Public Opinion*, ed. Peter Vasterman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 39-60, 46.

14 Cohen, 2002, and Young, 2009, cited in Marcello Maneri, "Media Hypes, Moral Panics, and the Ambiguous Nature of Facts: Urban Security as Discursive Formation," in *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm: News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises and Public Opinion*, ed. Peter Vasterman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 46.

15 Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

affinity and putting bounds on sexual relationships.¹⁶ As she notes, the typical gender segmentation of labor is strongly backed by cultural mindset.¹⁷ Here, the policing authority is not particular people, but rather all those system participants who benefit from a social order in which men are the subjects of this authority and women are the objects of it.¹⁸ Finally, confirming that “sexuality is social,” women operate as both objects of men’s sexual desire and subjects who make money from this desire. Given that, it can be said that sexuality creates unequal deals and reflects the actual allocation of power in society.¹⁹

Changing Yet Still Governing Culture

As Rubin notes, sexuality cannot be explored solely from a biological perspective, as it is constructed by history and societal norms.²⁰ Although biological sex forms first, this is only the foundation for mediatization and cultural explanation.²¹ Moreover, biological prerequisites provide the context for such societal systems as marriage or kinship, which intertwine biology and culture into a social reality that has conventions and restrictions.²² Gender is also a social concept. However, the linkage of sexuality and gender is complicated because sexuality bridges genders and therefore serves as a basis for, negotiates, and accommodates injustice.²³ That is, sexuality reflects the social organization of the genders, the distribution of power, and the punishment/reward system.

In the present case, power allocation on the basis of sex and gender is legitimized by reference to a pre-Soviet Kazakh past. Historically, Kazakh women’s social status changed upon marriage, when they moved out of their parents’ house and went to live with their husband’s family.²⁴ This created a situation where from birth, girls were less preferred than boys, as they were destined to leave the household.²⁵ Throughout her life, a female’s public success was mainly connected with two central concepts: virginity and fertility. Even though some researchers note the possibility of premarital sexual relations, in general, the bride’s chastity was a critical component of her reputation. Another critical factor was fertility, a criterion that divided women from one another and reflected traditional Kazakh society’s demographic focus. For instance, a barren woman was deprived of the potential for public success and participation in public life; she could not perform certain social roles. Conversely, women who delivered and brought up several children, preferably boys, were particularly influential and acknowledged in society.²⁶

All this was accompanied by women’s complete financial dependence and lack of education, the perception of women as the property of the husband’s family, and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 129

¹⁹ Ibid., 134

²⁰ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, ed. Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (London: Routledge, 1984), 184.

²¹ Ibid., 149.

²² Robert Padgug, “Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History,” *Radical History Review* 20: 3-24 (1979): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1979-20-3>.

²³ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 165.

²⁴ Inga Stasevich, *Sotsial’nyi status zhenshchiny u kazakhov: traditsii i sovremennost’* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2011), 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 59, 175-176.

high maternal and child mortality.²⁷ There was a clear separation of male and female duties, with women taking on the burden of managing the household, as well as widespread child marriage, bride-stealing and ransom, polygamy, and so on. Interestingly, through household management, women could invisibly govern the family, leading to concealed female leadership within the family or the whole clan.²⁸

With the advent of the Soviet regime, several of these features partly disappeared and women were actively pushed into the workforce.²⁹ The number of women studying at schools and institutes and entering the civil service skyrocketed. Women were granted economic independence, title to their dotal property, and other land and water rights. Remote areas saw the birth of “Red Yurts” female unions that delivered medical aid, provided education and skills training, and created space for female communication while spreading Soviet ideology.³⁰ However, Kazakh society maintained some cultural customs and traditions that kept women under family and patriarchal control. The traditional division of labor persisted even as more women entered the workforce, leaving wives burdened with housework. In terms of marriage, although the Soviet government entitled women to free choice, they still were dependent to a significant degree on decisions made by their families.³¹

Regarding sex, the Soviet government refused to acknowledge public demand for sex, preferring to address it through healthcare and family policies alone. On the one hand, the legalization of abortions and contraception improved birth control and provided women with more authority over their bodies. On the other hand, there were informal antiabortion campaigns, including forceful “education” efforts by healthcare representatives aimed at imposing the state’s view of pregnancy, gender, and sexuality and thus getting women to say no to abortions. This, combined with a lack of sex education, poor access to contraception, and appalling conditions for abortions, significantly weakened women’s decision-making capacity, compelling them to bend to new regulatory standards.³² In addition, the Soviet regime intensely promoted parenthood and supported childbirth through social programs such as house distribution to (and improved housing for) married couples with children, the prolongation of paid and unpaid maternity leave, the provision of child benefits, and the institution of flexible work hours.³³

All sexual content was banned. Videocassettes featuring pornographic or sexually explicit films were criminalized and circulated only on the black market,³⁴ increasing the disparity between the formal and real sexual agendas. Overall, while it did substantially improve the status of women, the Soviet regime only helped

27 Anuradha Chenoy, “Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 9 (March 2, 1996): 516–518.

28 Stasevich, *Sotsial’nyi status zhenshchiny u kazakhov*, 177.

29 Zamira Yusufjonova-Abman, “State Feminism in Soviet Central Asia: Anti-Religious Campaigns and Muslim Women in Tajikistan, 1953–1982,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Melanie Ilic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

30 Chenoy, “Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia”; Stasevich, *Sotsial’nyi status zhenshchiny u kazakhov*.

31 *Ibid.*, 63.

32 Amy E. Randall, “‘Abortion Will Deprive You of Happiness!’: Soviet Reproductive Politics in the Post-Stalin Era,” *Journal of Women’s History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 31–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2011.0027>.

33 Lynne Attwood and Olga Isupova, “‘To Give Birth or Not to Give Birth?’: Having Children in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Melanie Ilic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 447–461, 449.

34 Valerie Sperling, “Peeking Behind the Celluloid Curtain: Glasnost and Explicit Sex in the Soviet Union,” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 18, no. 4 (January 1, 1991): 155–157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0195601.1991.10662029>.

to overcome the demographic gap in the labor force by getting more women into paid employment. It was unable to address local cultural practices and face actual challenges related to sex and its role in public space.

The New Capitalist Reality

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan stepped into a hybrid political system and a market economy. Included in the new market paradigm was a consumer-oriented approach to body and sexuality that made having a “sexy body” into women’s key source of selfhood.³⁵ According to Zygmunt Bauman, in the genealogy of consumerism, from the very beginning, physical surveillance represents the punitive power, and the body serves as an object of exercising and discipline.³⁶ In the case of women, Gill argues that such bodily control relates to alarmed self-surveillance and is intended to achieve the standards of femininity and sexuality widely portrayed in the media.³⁷

Aizhan Baizakova has had several cosmetic surgeries on her face and body as part of an advertising campaign promoting a center of aesthetic medicine. Her case illustrates the ambivalent relationship that women have with their bodies, which simultaneously represent women’s oppression and their empowerment. In one interview about the reasons to undergo such surgery, Baizakova admitted having surgery to make herself feel more confident. This perfectly echoes Foucault’s technology of the self, suggesting that individuals change their bodies, conduct, minds, and overall way of reaching perfection, satisfaction, pleasure or immortality.³⁸ Gill and Ograd extended this idea to suggest simultaneous internalization of liability for problem and solution.³⁹ Baizakova, for instance, found a quick fix for her lack of confidence in cosmetic surgery, which in turn provided a blueprint for more self-revelation. In sum, bodily transformations carried out in the name of gaining confidence—which has already become a psychological cult—strongly suggest that people have embraced the capitalist paradigm and accepted it as the basis for their own decisions.

The current debates about sexuality intertwine closely with the concepts of “choice,” “agency,” and “empowerment,” which are central to the terminology of feminism.⁴⁰ They also bring up the issue of authentic and inauthentic empowerment, trying to differentiate between the “subjective feeling of empowerment and actually being empowered.”⁴¹ On a larger scale, the exposition of practices fueled by particular formations denotes deep personal internalization of more comprehensive regimes. As Foucault explains, these practices are precised by cultural and historical context although individuals serve as agents of it.⁴² In addition, sexualities in the Western context comprise an overly disciplinary system manipulated by visible and hidden

35 Rosalind Gill, “Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising,” *Feminism & Psychology* 18, no. 1 (February 2008): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507084950>.

36 Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism* (London: Sage, 1992).

37 Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 2007): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>.

38 Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

39 Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, “The Confidence Cult(ure),” *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 86 (2015), 332, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001>.

40 Rosalind Gill, “Media, Empowerment and the ‘Sexualization of Culture’ Debates,” *Sex Roles* 66, no. 11 (June 2012): 736, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0107-1>.

41 *Ibid.*, 737

42 Foucault (1987), cited in Gill and Shani Orgad, “The Confidence Cult(ure),” 122.

restraint.⁴³ Stated differently, Baizakova's implementation of rituals considered "right" by capitalistic culture reflects her own deep embodiment of these values. Aizhan Baizakova is thus a construct of the modern overly marketed reality, taking on consumer principles as her own in a context of financial need. Albeit by running herself ragged to accommodate her empowerment within cultural standards, she has managed to fit into the contemporary commercial reality that intends her as the target. The new post-Soviet capitalist reality therefore artfully hides female oppression and mimics gender empowerment.

Is There a Royal Road to a Fair Wage?

According to Baizakova,⁴⁴ her sexually explicit content on Instagram has driven her increase in followers and public attention.⁴⁵ Appleyard's "consumer sex,"⁴⁶ Levy's "raunchiness," and McNair's "porn-chic"⁴⁷—all these affirm the presence of public demand for sex, whether pornographic content or, in the mainstream media, the disclosure of private sexual desire. Among the many women on Kazakhstani Instagram who post expressly sexual semi-nude photos, Baizakova stands out for adding to her sexual content such traditionally unrespectable behaviors as smoking, drinking alcohol, using dirty words in public, and signing her photos with provocative statements.

The key feature of the digital media economy is that it elides the distinction between consumers and producers, creating a new group of "producers."⁴⁸ In other words, the agents of commercialization are users themselves: influencers or bloggers advertise services and goods to their followers. Brands can reach out to influencers directly to have them endorse and advertise goods without any intermediaries. Worldwide, the dollar value of influencer marketing has skyrocketed over the past seven years from US\$10 million to more than US\$8 billion.⁴⁹ Today, 84 percent of all sponsored posts are created by females and only 16 percent by males.⁵⁰ This reality provokes tough competition among female influencers and requires them to work hard to win advertisers. In addition, considering that the modern world is flooded with women's bodies understood as objects⁵¹ and Instagram is a platform where visuals play a pivotal role, a beautiful body tends to be more important to female influencers' efforts to attract attention and make money than higher education or professional competence.

43 Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 150.

44 "Aizhan Baizakova—o skandal'nom video, litsemerakh, areste i svoei grudi/Efir," YouTube video, 35:38, posted by "TengriTV," January 6, 2018, <https://youtu.be/Qq7nQUxFSQ>.

45 Marat Akzhurekov, "Ia budu luchshe nazyvatsia suchkoi, chiei-to tikal—Aizhan Baizakova," *Karavan.kz*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.caravan.kz/news/ya-luchshe-budu-suchkoi-chem-chejito-tokal-ajizhan-bajizakova-401833/>.

46 Appleyard, B., 1997, "Between ne, you and the bed post," *Sunday Times*, 1997, cited in Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2002), 7.

47 Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

48 Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and Beyond: From Production to Prodsusage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

49 "Instagram Influencer Marketing Spending Worldwide from 2013 to 2020 (in Million U.S. dollars)," Statista, November 21, 2018, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/950920/global-instagram-influencer-marketing-spending/>.

50 "Distribution of Influencers Creating Sponsored Posts on Instagram Worldwide in 2019, by Gender," Statista, December 18, 2019, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/893749/share-influencers-creating-sponsored-posts-by-gender/>.

51 Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist media culture," 147.

Baizakova's experience bears this out. She left university without a degree and earns her income from advertising. As of July 2020, Kazakhstan has the second-highest Instagram penetration worldwide, with nearly 70 percent audience reach.⁵² Influencers who, like Baizakova, have more than a million followers, earn between 500 and US\$5,000 per post,⁵³ in a context where average monthly pay is approximately US\$500.⁵⁴ As such, there is no doubt that Baizakova successfully found a steady source of high income that demands a beautiful form rather than quality substance. Overall, Instagram represents a robust labor market with relatively low access barriers and where sexuality is one of the primary drivers of a steady paycheck, making it incredibly tempting to young women in low-income countries.

Self-branding as a breadwinning strategy is an entrepreneurship art of representing the self by taking full responsibility in an unsteady labor market.⁵⁵ First, personal branding on social media requires excelling year by year in the production of content ranging from professional photos to copywriting to video-making. Otherwise, Instagram's algorithms reduce posts' audience reach and visibility. Second, different social media sites are intended for different purposes and have different types of content as their primary focus.

Baizakova's choice of social platforms can be viewed through this lens. The focus of Instagram is the visual content rather than the caption underneath the photo, which benefits female bloggers who want to draw attention to their body and lifestyle, whereas bloggers who seek primarily to express their opinions may prefer text-based social media like Twitter or Facebook. While she was banned from Instagram due to mass reporting of her content, Baizakova also successfully created a channel on Telegram, which is believed to be one of the safest social networks. This step helped her avoid falling from the audience's view and propelled her to renewed success. In 2019, her Telegram channel was the most popular in Kazakhstan (number 2 in 2020).⁵⁶ It takes extensive work and an entrepreneurial approach for influencers to ensure that they are visible to their audience.

Sex or Shame: The Difficult Equilibrium of Economic and Cultural Capital in Kazakhstani Society

Nevertheless, the reward for self-branding is not directly proportional to the effort invested. Despite the prevalence of user-generated content, which suggests that social media are more democratic than traditional media, and the visibility of diverse social classes and groups, the actors who wield authority have not actually changed.⁵⁷ According to Djafarova and Trofimenko, who surveyed Russian followers (who are likely to have similarities to the Kazakhstani audience), Instagram celebrities should

52 "Countries with the Highest Instagram Audience Reach as of October 2020," Statista, October 20, 2020, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325567/instagram-penetration-regions/>.

53 Nick Baklanov. "State of Instagram Influencer Marketing in Kazakhstan," *HypeAuditor (blog)*, October 27, 2020, <https://hypeauditor.com/blog/state-of-instagram-influencer-marketing-in-kazakhstan/?fbclid=IwAR17nBTBjursKj5l-oNthP7OnR87x7kvHaMWN5Sp3wT-3KDd7Janr4xlfdc>.

54 "Main Socio-Economic Indicators," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reform of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://stat.gov.kz/>.

55 Jennifer Whitmer, "You Are Your Brand: Self-Branding and the Marketization of Self," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 3 (March 2019): e12662-n/a, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12662>.

56 Ulyana Salapayeva, "Forbes.kz predstavliaet obzor populiarnykh kazakhstanskikh Telegram-kanalov-2020," *Forbes.kz*, June 15, 2020, https://forbes.kz/leader/kakie_kanalnyi_v_telegram_populyarnyi_u_kazahstantsev/.

57 Miller McQuarrie, "The Megaphone Effect: Taste and Audience in Fashion Blogging," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 1 (June 1, 2013), 154, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669042>.

share their expertise to keep followers.⁵⁸ In other words, even Instagram—which at first appears to be a visual platform concerned with picture quality and attractive appearance—requires professional competency, and even this does not guarantee success.

This complex interplay can be analyzed through Bourdieu's concept of economic, cultural, and social capital. All forms of capital are interchangeable, supplement each other, and are subject to a conservation law: acquisition of one type of capital is paid for in another type of capital.⁵⁹ On the social media landscape, the interdependence of these capitals is clearly visible. Influencers need to make cultural investments—professional expertise, delicate taste, etc.—to increase their social capital, gain more attention, and earn commercial endorsements; losses from a cultural perspective reduce social and financial gain, respectively. This is exactly what happens to Baizakova. Her sexualized image in a conservative society ensures her more followers and attention but also brings personal reputational damage due to equivocal public acceptance.

The critical element here is public nonacceptance of female nudity. In 2018, local representative Dinagul Tassova wore a transparent dress while modeling on a runway.⁶⁰ While some empathized with her, acknowledging the stringent requirements of the fashion industry, others played the moral card. In an interview, Tassova said that she had been forced to leave her job due to public criticism.⁶¹ Similarly, the teenager Shyrin Narchayeva published photos in 2018 wearing national jewels on her bare skin and caused a public scandal, earning her the moniker “the second Baizakova” (she also experienced the same public stalking).⁶² All three women intentionally and unintentionally caught the hype train by showcasing nudity, getting back a great deal of hate speech and limited public support.

In addition, despite developing cult popularity, Baizakova has no official endorsement deals from major or global brands. Brands are unwilling to be associated with scandalous celebrities, as these individuals might limit brands' credibility with conservative Kazakhstani customers. This lack of demand among reputable brands can call into question an influencer's online fame. For instance, Baizakova is currently a brand ambassador for Baybet, an online sports betting site.⁶³ Sports betting is a fast-growing industry: worldwide, eSport betting market revenue has increased by more than 75 times in the past five years, reaching US\$1.81 billion in 2020.⁶⁴ However, concerns that a pathological addiction to gambling can result in adverse life choices produce negative perceptions of the industry as a whole.

58 Elmira Djafarova and Oxana Trofimenko, “Instafamous’—Credibility and Self-Presentation of Micro-Celebrities on Social Media,” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 10 (February 19, 2018): 1432–1446, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1438491>.

59 Pierre Bourdieu. “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 242–253.

60 “Ogolennaia grud’ deputata Astany vyzvala azhiotazh v sotssetiakh,” *Sputnik*, December 1, 2018, <https://ru.sputnik.kz/live/20181201/8320849/grud-deputat-astana-socseti.html?ga=2.45307874.793593544.1609192568-2076646100.1602997520>.

61 “Tosin ashkan ex-deputat kansha turady? | Model Dinagul Tassova ekskluziv sukhat | Talklike,” YouTube video, 57:19, posted by “Arman Tasygan LIVE,” November 20, 2019, <https://youtu.be/G-fcoQboDoE>.

62 “Golyshom v saukele: Shirin Narchayeva raskryla tainu svoei beremennosti,” *Zakon.kz*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.zakon.kz/4980427-golyshom-v-saukele-shirin-narchayeva.html>.

63 “Aizhan Baizakova - o mame, o kazakhskom mentalitete i syne,” YouTube video, 56:41, posted by “Ne Khabar,” September 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEcjiBp8WzM>.

64 “eSports Betting Market Revenue Worldwide in 2015 and 2020 (in million U.S. dollars),” Statista, September 9, 2015, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/618985/esports-betting-market-revenue-worldwide/>.

The lack of a clear policy on gambling in Kazakhstan compounds this problem, spawning further public criticism. For Baizakova, Baybet supplies her with a high income and naturally reinforces her already equivocal public image. Put concisely, there are numerous hidden dangers to sexuality as a technique for achieving mass attention and earnings and it may not be feasible in the long term.

As Nixon notes, advertising has critical importance to economic and cultural changes and defines an apparent marker of the activity of the commercial industry.⁶⁵ There is a complex interplay between women's pursuit of financial well-being through the use of the body and sexuality, on the one hand, and traditional cultural views, on the other. The burden of these contradictory requirements makes a woman into a popular stooge and commodifies her public image. The critical element here is public perception and the traditional paradigm as vital determinants of success. Women have to play a double game: as global capitalism encourages entrepreneurial approaches to self and sexualization of culture, local traditions push back, forcing women to navigate between the two. The failure to do so leads to the loss of both one's reputation and one's earning potential.

Kazakhstan: A Confusing Story of Gender Progress

However, struggles for better pay among females in Kazakhstan do not appear in online markets alone. Women demonstrate active engagement in the labor market: they comprise 55.4 percent of the service sector, 42.4 percent of agriculture, and 28.4 percent of industry and production.⁶⁶ However, women are still paid less for their work than men: there is a 32.3 percent gender pay gap. Moreover, women are more likely than men to be unemployed. Women also spend 14.8 percent of their day on housework, while men spend a third of that amount of time.⁶⁷ In terms of business, just 28 percent of enterprises in the country are run by women (28 percent of small businesses, 33 percent of medium businesses, and 17 percent of large businesses).⁶⁸ According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitoring report⁶⁹, women and men's rate of early-stage entrepreneurial activity is almost equal, but experts note that women-run businesses tend to cluster in tertiary sectors such as education or healthcare that are marked by low earning potential.⁷⁰

There is still a widespread perception in Kazakhstan that women are unable to run businesses. UNDP's Global Gender Social Norms Index shows that 96 percent of citizens have a bias against women's engagement in education, economic activity, politics, and sport. This bias is rooted in traditional culture, which prescribes that a woman should primarily fulfill the roles of wife and mother. According to UNFPA Kazakhstan, between 2005 and 2019, one in seven women got married under the age

65 Sean Nixon, *Advertising Cultures: Gender, Commerce, Creativity* (London: SAGE, 2003), 3.

66 "Share of Employed People by Groups of Types of Economic Activities, by Sex," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 29, 2020, https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=21&slug=-16&cat_id=7&lang=ru.

67 Ibid.

68 "Percentage of Businesses Headed by Women, by Dimensionality," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=19&slug=-15&cat_id=7&lang=en.

69 "Global Entrepreneurship Monitor: Kazakhstan 2016/2017" report, p. 31, accessed December 30, 2020 <https://nu.edu.kz/news/global-entrepreneurship-monitor-kazakhstan-2016-2017>

70 "Zhenskoe predprinimatel'stvo draiver rosta ekonomiki v Kazakhstane," *Zakon.kz*. November 24, 2020, <https://www.zakon.kz/5048699-zhenskoe-predprinimatelstvo-drayver.html>.

of 18.⁷¹ In 2019, the birth rate among adolescents was 23.2 percent, mostly in southern regions, in a clear sign of the robustness of traditional lifestyles.⁷² Early marriages and childbirth, along with the burden of housework, put women in a position where they are unable to provide for themselves and their children financially, thus making them increasingly dependent on men. Overall, the public expectation that women perform certain traditional functions creates invisible barriers to personal autonomy and success in politics, the labor market, and education. In the long run, female financial independence is a serious question for Kazakhstan. Making money is becoming more challenging both for traditional businesses and in emerging spheres like social media.

In the Global Gender Gap Report, Kazakhstan ranked 72nd out of 153 countries, and only 106th in political empowerment.⁷³ Considering that only two of the country's 17 ministers are female and women comprise just 26 percent of the parliament,⁷⁴ that is little surprise. In local elected bodies (*Maslikhat*), women comprise 22 percent of the total—or 740 out of 3,335—due to newly introduced gender and youth quotas according to which at least 30 percent of party lists should consist of women and candidates under the age of 29.⁷⁵ And the numbers are dramatically lower in other law enforcement and political spheres. As of 2019, women comprised just 2.1 percent of military personnel in managerial positions, 12.5 percent of police officers, and seven percent of political officers.⁷⁶ Overall, despite some presence of women in Kazakhstan's governing bodies, there is still significant female underrepresentation throughout the country's political system.

On the other side of the gender issue, Kazakhstan has very limited policies on domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual education. According to national statistics, 16.4 per cent of women aged 18 to 49 have been subject to physical or sexual violence from husbands or partners during their lives. Over the last ten years, the number of domestic violence cases against women has doubled, reaching 96,750 registered incidents. Despite such growth, there are just 119 police officers nationwide dedicated to defending women's rights.⁷⁷ Taken together, these facts lead irrevocably to the conclusion that state structures pay insufficient attention to—and do not do enough to ensure—women's ontological security.

The decriminalization of physical violence is another sore subject. According to the 2009 law on domestic abuse prevention, measures to protect women from violence include preventive talk, defending order, administrative arrest, and others with no

71 "In Kazakhstan 96 Per Cent of Population are Biased against Women," UNDP Kazakhstan, March 6, 2020, <https://www.kz.undp.org/content/kazakhstan/en/home/presscenter/announcements/2020/march/in-kazakhstan-96-per-cent-of-population-are-biased-against-women.html>.

72 "Adolescent Fertility Rate," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=84&slug=-69&cat_id=4&lang=en.

73 World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2020," 9, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf.

74 Serik Sabekov. "Skol'ko zhenshchin-deputatov v Kazakhstane," *Inform.kz*, May 21, 2020, https://www.inform.kz/ru/skol-ko-zhenshchin-deputatov-v-kazakhstane_a3652523.

75 Aigul Ibrayeva, "V Kazakhstane vveli gendernye qvoty dlia partiynykh spiskov," *Kursiv.kz*, July 5, 2020, <https://kursiv.kz/news/politika/2020-07/v-kazakhstane-vpervye-vveli-gendernye-qvoty-dlya-partiynykh-spiskov>.

76 "Proportion of Women in Political Posts," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=72&slug=-59&cat_id=9&lang=en.

77 Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, 2020.

criminal liability.⁷⁸ The strongest sanction for physical abuse of women (such as slight bodily injury and beatings), codified in the Code of Administrative Offenses, is 15- and 20-day arrests. In 2019, new President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev declared that there was an urgent need to introduce stringent measures against gender-based sexual and domestic violence.⁷⁹ Such measures have not been forthcoming, and international and local activists continue to call for the criminalization of domestic violence in line with international standards.⁸⁰ Overall, legal protections for women facing domestic violence are both too weak and formalistic, staying largely on paper.

The country is also lagging behind on sex education, as the many sordid cases of young girls throwing away newborns reveal.⁸¹ Sexual education researcher and civic activist Karlygash Kabatova notes that such unintended teen pregnancies, neglected newborns, abortions, and early marriages result from parents avoiding discussing sex with children due to social norms, coupled with the lack of formal sexual education. This means that the Internet is young people's primary source of information about sex.⁸²

UNFPA surveys from 2018 show that nearly 30 percent of Kazakhstani adolescents ages 15 to 18 are sexually active, with the median age of first sex being 16.5 years. Yet among respondents, 91 percent did not know enough about HIV, while nearly half were unaware of the consequences of unsafe abortions and catching STIs.⁸³ This reality has the greatest impact on women, who account for the majority of cases of HIV⁸⁴ and STIs;⁸⁵ women also face the frustration of unintended pregnancies and intense public stigmatization. There is an urgent need for comprehensive sexual education in Kazakhstan, not merely to prevent unwanted pregnancies, HIV, and STIs while helping young people make informed decisions about the life-changing questions of their sexual and reproductive health, but also to enlighten young people about their sexuality and bodies and improve gender equality by empowering them with knowledge.

78 Republic of Kazakhstan Law "On Prevention of Domestic Violence" (with Amendments as of July 07, 2020) #214-IV, dated December 04, 2009, https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=30525680&doc_id2=30525680#pos=3:-98&pos2=184:-80

79 President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address "Constructive Public Dialogue—The Basics of Stability and Prosperity of Kazakhstan," *Akorda.kz*, September 2, 2019, http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019.

80 "Kazakhstan: Little Help for Domestic Violence Survivors," Human Rights Watch, October 17, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/17/kazakhstan-little-help-domestic-violence-survivors>.

81 Amir Zhanuzakov, "Mertvyi mladenets naiden na ulitse v Shymkente," *365info.kz*, June 12, 2018, <https://365info.kz/2018/06/mertvyj-mladenets-najden-na-ulitse-v-shymkente/>; "Mat' vybrosila novorozhdennogo v tualet v Vostochnom Kazahstane," *Sputnik*, April 27, 2018, <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/regions/20180427/5437247/novorozhdenyj-mladenec-rody-tualet.html>.

82 Karlygash Kabatova, "Overcoming a Taboo: Normalizing Sexuality Education in Kazakhstan," *CAP Fellows Paper* (2018), <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Kabatova-CAP-Fellows-Paper-January-2018.pdf>.

83 "Sociological Survey on the Status of Reproductive Health of Adolescents and Young People aged 15-19, Their Sexual Behaviour and Access to Reproductive Health Services and Information," United Nations Population Fund, March 2019, https://kazakhstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ENG_Pager_Reproduct_03-2019_new.pdf.

84 "VICH i migratsiia v stranakh Tsentral'noi Azii i Rossiiskoi Federatsii," technical report, United Nations Population Fund, February 18-20, 2018, https://kazakhstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/HIV%20REPORT_RUS_FIN.pdf.

85 "Rate of Incidence of Sexually Transmitted Infections," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=117&slug=-93&cat_id=3&lang=en

The Limited Outreach of the Feminist Agenda

Domestic violence, reproductive health, and sexual education resonate with a feminist agenda that does not have a strong following in the country. The first authorized feminist rally took place in September 2019 in Almaty, with only about one hundred participants. They called for the criminalization of domestic violence and psychological support for the victims thereof, increasing the number of women's shelters, proper clearance in jails, the decriminalization of prostitution, the introduction of sexual education at school, protection against workplace harassment, and monitoring of sexism and gender discrimination in workplaces, media, and advertising.⁸⁶ Veronika Fonova, an activist of the KazFem initiative, had previously organized a rally in July 2019 that was denied authorization. According to the official response, this refusal was due to the planned replacement of drainpipes, but, as Fonova notes, it also expressed concern that LGBT+ representatives and other wavemakers might attend the rally. Fonova made 36 requests for permission to hold the rally, following in the footsteps of opposition civic activist Alnur Ilyashev, who likewise made 36 requests before he got permission for a peaceful gathering.⁸⁷

In 2020 feminist activities included an unauthorized march for women's rights organized by feminist organizations KazFem, Feminita, Femagora, Femsreda, and the SVET social fund.⁸⁸ The participating men and women wore black, symbolizing the funeral marches of those women who had fallen victim to domestic violence. Participants chanted slogans: "Every woman is important," "My body, my rules," "Choose yourself," "For women's independence," and the names of women who lost their lives to domestic abuse. Activists' main demands were that abusers not be released early under conditional relief, that legislation on sexual harassment be enacted, that domestic violence be criminalized, and that sentence enforcement be monitored. The main organizers of the rally, Fariza Ospan and Arina Ossipova, were later fined for disorderly conduct and organization of/participation in the protest.

In sum, feminist activism calling for fundamental human rights—namely, female safety and rights—is treated almost on a par with opposition movements by the Kazakhstani authorities. It is certainly not welcomed.

Another strategy employed by the authorities is sending indirect messages about the revival of traditions through controversial books. On December 5, 2019, Maslikhat deputy Karakat Abden released a book entitled *You are a Kazakh girl. Be proud of it!*⁸⁹ devoted to the role of girls in contemporary Kazakh society. It consists of nine chapters covering Kazakh traditions connected with women, family relations, dating, body and soul, life mission and self-realization, public life, appearance and manners, lifestyle, and even virtual reality. It is an impressive attempt to recover traditional values, presented as 160 lifehacks for young Kazakh girls. The author came under fire from civic activists for nationalism, sexism, and promoting

86 Daniyar Aisarov, "Pervyy razreshennyi miting feministok proshel v Kazakhstane," *Informburo.kz*, September 28, 2019, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/pervyy-razreshyonnyy-miting-feministok-prohodit-v-kazakhstan.html>.

87 Daniyar Aisarov, "V Almaty feministkam otkazali v provedenii demonstratsii protiv trgovli liud'mi," *Informburo.kz*, July 23, 2019, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/v-almaty-feministkam-otkazali-v-provedenii-demonstratsii-protiv-torgovli-lyudmi.html>.

88 Rashit Ilyasov, "Marsh feministok proshel v Almaty," *TengriNews*, March 8, 2020, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/marsh-feministok-proshel-v-almaty-393909/.

89 Karakat Abden (@abdenkarakat), "Ty—kazashka! Gordis'!" Instagram photo, December 5, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5sjr7vFBIV/>.

traditional values.⁹⁰ Journalist and civic activist Fariza Ospan spoke out against such controversial activities by the government, saying that they promoted discrimination and oppression against women to maintain illusory political stability.

Conclusion

As Nakamura states in her book *Cyberrace*, our online life is not something different from our offline life, but rather a continuation of it.⁹¹ Aizhan Baizakova encapsulates the entangled online and offline realities of Kazakhstani women, who remain limited in their choices between a traditional patriarchal society and new market demands for more sexual content. These conflicting messages, both illiberal in their own way, leave them with no way to win.

According to Connell, ending gender oppression involves determining significant areas of gender struggle and taking steps to diminish and challenge the existing institutional gender order.⁹² Yet in the long run, Kazakhstan's political sphere seems largely inhospitable to gender-related topics: it tends to equate the traditional gender order with regime stability, seeing gender activists who advocate for women's health and safety as opposition forces that could unleash broader protests. Not only do the current policies in force in Kazakhstan not sufficiently protect women's rights, but they also promote oppression by both supporting traditional gender stereotypes in the name of rediscovering national traditions and simultaneously defending market principles that push for sexually provocative online content.

90 Malika Moldakhanova, "Ty—kazashka. Smiris'. Ili eshe raz o knige Karakat Abden," *Esquire.kz*, December 11, 2019, <https://esquire.kz/t-v-kazashka-smirisy/>.

91 Lisa Nakamura, "Cyberrace," *PMLA* 123, no. 5: Special Topic Comparative Racialization (October 2008): 1673–1682, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1673>.

92 Connell, *Gender and Power*, 114.