



SOCIAL NORMS AND GENDER ROLES: SEX EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

by Karlygash Kabatova

Culture Wars Papers, no. 6, May 2022

In a teenage focus group, I asked a question: “If a teenage girl gets pregnant from her teenage boyfriend, does it happen because of a lack of awareness of both of them about safe sex or is the reason in something else?” A 16-year-old girl said: “It’s because the boy didn’t care and the girl wasn’t informed so she let the boy do that.” This one sentence offers a lot to unpack about gender relations in Kazakhstan: first, the assumptions that teenage boys (a) are informed about the risks of unprotected sex but they (b) do not care enough to ensure protection; and second, the assumptions that girls are (c) not well-informed and (d) if they know about the risks, they are empowered enough to stop/prevent sexual intercourse or ensure protection. The underlying premise is that the overall responsibility for ensuring sex being safe falls on girls/women. In this paper I would like to discuss the assumptions that are rooted in social norms and gender roles, and how they relate to the capacity of youth to access sex education.

Eternal Struggle for the Spotless Minds

As a researcher of youth access to sex education (sex ed) in Kazakhstan, in 2019 I conducted a [study](#) that aimed at finding out what perceptions about sex ed parents and young people had, if they wanted sex ed in schools, and if they did, how they thought it should be implemented. By sex ed, I mean not only formal sexuality education classes but availability of (1) verified information about puberty, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), relationships, gender equality, violence, etc.; and (2) practicing relevant skills, like identifying violence, negotiating safe practices with a partner, and others. I held ten focus groups in five regions of the country: one for teenagers (14 to 17 years of age) and one for parents of young children and teenagers in each of the five regions.

The study revealed fascinating things, especially because the field of SRHR and sexual relationships of and among young people, like in many other patriarchal conservative societies, is very sensitive in Kazakhstan and, thus, not well investigated. The findings mostly concern different factors that influence the capacity of young people to increase awareness about SRHR: linguistic-cultural socialization, family relationships, perceptions of children and young people by adults, and gendered messages the society transmits to young people. The latter will be my focus in this piece but, first, I would like to lay a foundation for understanding the current attitudes towards sex ed and SRHR in Kazakhstan.

“Forced, age-inappropriate sex education will lead to defilement of the young generation, to destruction of fundamentals of morality and decency,” warned a popular [petition](#) against Kazakhstan’s new Code on Public Health and the Healthcare System (the Code) in 2019. [Bloggers](#), [singers](#), and other [influencers](#) with large online followings spread misinformation to create public pressure and prevent the government from taking any active



steps to provide youth with reliable information on SRHR. Because Kazakhstanis have increased their political participation immensely in recent years (the number of protests more than [doubled](#) from 230 in 2019 to over 550 in the first half of 2021) and the decision-makers essentially have no experience in constructive interaction with citizens, any persistent disagreement between the two sides ends in one of the two ways: either the government overreacts with [violence](#), or it avoids any confrontation, giving in to pressure often created by conspiracy theory spreaders at the cost of making progress on important societal issues. This was the case with multiple revisions of the Code, walking back the adoption of a new [law](#) on combating domestic violence, and allowing the spread of deadly disinformation about the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

The Code was eventually adopted, and entered into force in July 2020, after an unusual amount and intensity of public discussions both online and offline. Among other things, the Code stipulates the right of children to information on protection of reproductive health and the right of young people from the age of sixteen to access medical consultation and diagnostic services without the presence of their parents or legal guardians. The petition “Stop the Anti-Public Code of RK on ‘Public Health’ ” is still active and has over 32,000 signees. It is an excellent example of how manipulative the global online public space has become, overflowing with conspiracy theories and unverified information. However, the idea of providing sex ed to youth has always made people uncomfortable, and Kazakhstan is definitely not the first country where people resist it. Therefore, despite cautious attempts to raise the topic and the evidence that teachers [support](#) the introduction of sex ed into school curricula, public schools still fail to equip students with knowledge about puberty, sexual and reproductive health, relationships, intimate and sexualized violence, online safety, etc.

Gendered views of sexuality

When discussing certain expectations of people’s behavior depending on their gender, it is crucial to talk about gender norms and stereotypes. Both parents and teenagers in the focus groups talked about different ways girls and boys are treated in their families, schools, by peers, and, thus, in society generally. A quite repressive moral code dictates that youth must maintain abstinence so they keep their families safe from shame (*uyat*). However, in reality boys and girls have different social norms to conform to.

I will start with assumption (a): “boys are informed about the risks of unprotected sex.” There is an expectation that males should be more knowledgeable about sex and more interested in it just because they are males. If parents or teachers notice boys watching pornography or harassing girls they often treat it as a natural part of boyhood. It is evidenced by the parental focus groups where most participants implied accepting the possibility of their teenage sons having sex and advised them to carry condoms. In fact, advising boys to have/use condoms was almost the only thing parents had to say to their sons in terms of SRHR. Therefore, the idea of young males being sexually active is normalized even though it is not discussed overtly by parents and adults in general. Male teenage participants reported being told by their parents to “use condoms” or “use protection.”

Moreover, sometimes instead of leading boys through puberty by helping them understand the changes in their bodies, elder male relatives make very questionable [decisions](#), like taking young boys to prostitutes to gain sexual experience. Such a case was mentioned in a focus group as well, where a 15-year-old male participant said: “I have a friend who says he’s had a lot of sex. He explains to me what to do and how to do it. He says that his uncle or his brother takes him to hookers.”

This case illustrates the pressure adult and young males undergo to comply with the stereotypical image of a macho “real man” who is dominant, knowledgeable about sex and experienced in it. What is also revealed is how objectifying and consumeristic attitudes towards women in the society are: a woman in prostitution is still



a person but in the minds of people there are good, worthy women, and bad women undeserving of respectful treatment. This brings us to assumption (b): boys/men “do not care about protection.” Because women/girls are othered, not seen as fellow humans, the consequences of unprotected sex like unplanned pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) remain only their problems and responsibility. Such an opinion might be popular partly due to the fact that often STDs are asymptomatic in males compared to females and thus, a female is the one to notice an STD and get treatment first, while a male might go on to spread it to other people. This dehumanization of women is probably the result of the overall misogyny of patriarchal societies. It is displayed not only by males but by females as well and is reproduced by the younger generations, which the following exchange in the teenage focus group shows.

Teenage focus group 1 (city of Almaty)

Participant 7, male, 16 y.o.: *You know there are also cases when girls seduce boys and then report to the police being raped. There is such a risk.*

Facilitator: *Why would girls do that?*

Participant 7, male, 16 y.o.: *To get money, fame.*

Participant 8, female, 16 y.o.: *It's the 21st century: striving to be famous. A normal girl wouldn't do that. She would have stayed quiet and told her parents instead of the whole country and the whole world.*

Sex ed encompasses learning why gender equality is important; it teaches students to see other people as human beings instead of just carriers of certain gender roles. Assumptions about what boys know and are interested in prevent parents, schools, and rare initiatives on gender issues (often focused on girls) from educating boys in terms of SRHR. Assumptions about how “real men” should behave and treat women prevent boys from finding verified information instead of relying on myths circulated by peers and elder male relatives.

Teenage focus group 5 (city of Ust-Kamenogorsk)

Facilitator: *[Name], what is your experience [with sex ed at school]?*

Participant 2, female, 14 y.o.: *In the 5th grade we were gathered at the assembly hall and the principal didn't let the boys come. They gave us sets of hygiene pads and calendars and conducted a lecture. Afterwards we asked the boys where they went, and they said they didn't do anything, just waited for us. So, there are no such lectures for boys.*

Assumption (c), that girls are not well-informed about the risks of unprotected sex, is based in the societal expectation that women, especially when they are young, should be modest, submissive and have no interest in sex. A peculiar paradox is that on the one hand submissiveness is considered a natural female characteristic; on the other hand girls are expected to be taught by families to be submissive and well-behaved. If it is a natural feature why would any teaching of this sort be needed? A mother of four in Shymkent (a large city in the south) even referred to a Kazakh proverb: “Kazakhs always said that a girl should be disciplined [forbidden to do things] by forty families.”

Parents instill the thought that sex is bad and shameful in girls as well as in boys, but if for boys sexual curiosity and impulsiveness is considered natural and forgivable, girls have no such privilege. They must preserve their purity until marriage; otherwise, they have little value.



Teenage focus group 1 (city of Almaty)

Facilitator: *So, boys get condoms as presents for their 16th birthdays and girls are told: “Be careful! Don’t have sex! Preserve your virginity!” Why such different attitudes?*

Participant 8, female, 16 y.o.: *Maybe because at 16 it is not serious [relationships].*

Participant 4, female, 17 y.o.: *For boys it’s okay, but a girl can never recover [her virginity].*

Teenage focus group 4 (city of Atyrau)

Facilitator: *Who taught that lesson?*

Participant 3, female, 16 y.o.: *A nurse.*

Facilitator: *What did she talk about?*

Participant 3, female, 16 y.o.: *About menstruation, contraception, that we shouldn’t date boys, that it’s too early for us, about her personal experience.*

Facilitator: *When is not too early? When is the right time?*

Participant 3, female, 16 y.o.: *When we are ready for marriage.*

Facilitator: *When you graduate from school?*

Participant 3, female, 16 y.o.: *Yes.*

The stereotypical conviction about girls lacking interest in sex, active disapproval for showing any such interest, stigmatization of sexually active teenage females, and victim blaming females who endured sexualized violence result in young women having to be very discreet in attempts to educate themselves on SRHR. With the vast spread of mobile phones and social media it is much easier to do than even a decade ago, but girls can rarely turn to their elder sisters, mothers, or other female relatives for advice. The thinking seems to be that since girls are not supposed to have sex before marriage, they do not need to be informed about it either; striving to get informed is deemed equal to wanting sex, and therefore, a sign of bad upbringing and bad character.

Parent focus group 1 (city of Almaty)

Facilitator: *We now face a situation where early pregnancies happen; young mothers abandon their children. Do you think it is the result of young people’s sexual illiteracy or are there other reasons? According to one research, 30% of youth aged 15 to 19 are sexually active. Is it related?*

Participant 4, mother of four: *Maybe it is related. But it is also our mentality. Even if she’s sexually literate a girl can still get pregnant. Then she becomes a pariah, she is considered spoiled, she is bad, she is shamed. The whole village will know about it. That’s why many try to prevent anyone from knowing. They leave home.*

Participant 8, mother of a 13 y.o. girl: *Everybody brings up their children differently. If a girl gets pregnant, she’s the only one responsible. We have sexism. A boy is not liable for anything, it’s mainly the girl.*



Parent focus group 2 (City of Shymkent)

Participant 4, father of 12 y.o. daughter: *An elder [male] relative once told me that when my daughter grows up to around 15 I should take her if not weekly then at least monthly for a gynecological check. That's the right thing to do. That way the parents will know that their daughter is not spoiled, that she's a good girl. There should be control.*

Facilitator: *If you take you daughter to a gynecologist and will learn that she had a sexual intercourse, what will you do to your daughter?*

Participant 4: *Can't do anything at that point. I will try to find out who she was with. I will look for justice. Does she have a boyfriend? Who did she see? You have to try. Or you have to accept it if you can't prove anything. They say that a few days after the first sexual intercourse you can't prove anything—what kind of a guy that was. If they use protection [condom], can't prove anything. Then the daughter will go to [house] arrest, that's it.*

Facilitator: *What does it mean, “a spoiled girl”?*

Participant 5, mother of four: *The one who lost her virginity.*

Parent focus group 3 (city of Astana)

Participant 3, father of four: *... We should be more concerned about daughters because tomorrow they will need to get married. Keep your honor from the young age ... [part of a proverb].*

Parent focus group 4 (city of Atyrau)

Participant 7, mother of five: *... We forbid things. She gets invited to a birthday, we don't let her go. We believe that proverbially a girl must be forbidden things.*

Facilitator: *Till what age will you forbid things to her?*

Participant 7: *Now my daughter is 12. Till what age? Till she goes to a university I guess. Then she'll look after herself on her own.*

Parent focus group 5 (city of Ust-Kamenogorsk)

Participant 7, mother of a teenage girl: *As for my family I tell my child that a girl must marry pure. Why? Because when you conceive and you've had only one man, your energy is pure. And the baby will be healthy. It's better to have sex only with your husband.*

It is often overlooked that just being informed about the risks of unprotected sex is not enough. Knowing and applying the knowledge are different things. Even more so when it comes to the power dynamics in gender relations, and it is through the prism of gender power dynamics that assumption (d) should be analyzed: “if they [girls] know about the risks, they are empowered enough to stop/prevent sexual intercourse or ensure protection.” Women and men most of the time are not equal in their power when they interact with each other. In conservative patriarchal societies like Kazakhstan, females have significantly less power than males, and therefore, less influence on decision-making. The power difference depending on gender was [found](#) to be true for sex ed as well: “programs that addressed gender or power were five times as likely to be effective as those that did not.” Teenagers in the focus groups also understand that power is distributed unequally between genders.



Teenage focus group 1 (city of Almaty)

Participant 5, male, 14 y.o.: *It's his decision not to use condoms, and the girl couldn't resist psychologically. That's it.*

Facilitator: *He doesn't use condoms because he doesn't know [about risks] or because he doesn't want to?*

Participant 5: *He doesn't want to.*

Teenage focus group 5 (city of Ust-Kamenogorsk)

Participant 8, female, 16 y.o.: *I have a friend. Her boyfriend raped her; he forbade her from talking to other boys, even her classmates.*

Facilitator: *He raped her?*

Participant 8: *Yes, at her home. She was 13, he was 18. They studied at the same school. He would bug other girls, hold them by their waists but he forbade her.*

Facilitator: *Could she ask for help?*

Participant 8: *No. She was stupid at that moment, she was 13. If she went and told somebody right away ... But later there was no proof that he did it.*

Conclusion

One should appreciate the irony of the fact that in Kazakhstan, while being assigned nearly full responsibility for the consequences of unsafe sexual practices, women and girls have little negotiating power over how sex is practiced. Female gender socialization inhibits the capacity of girls for staying informed about the risks of unprotected sex, seeking professional consultations regarding SRHR, and acting assertively to protect their SRHR. Male gender socialization approves risky behavior and inhibits the capacity of boys to learn about SRHR, take care of their health and see women and girls as humans. Young people deserve to have the time to discover their sexuality, learn about their bodies and how to build healthy equal relationships. Instead, they are constantly pressured to fit strict molds the society cast for them continuously reproducing harmful gender stereotypes.