

Feminisms in Kazakhstan: On the intersection of global influences and local contexts

by Xeniya Udod

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploratory qualitative study into the recent revival of feminism which is now gaining its momentum in Kazakhstan, where several feminist unions and numerous individual activists publicly promote feminist ideas, advocate for gender equality and LGBTIQ rights in the country. By drawing on in-depth interviews with the outspoken feminist activists, I posit that contemporary feminisms in Kazakhstan are now entering the stage of reflecting on their specific stance vis-à-vis the complex set of gender ideologies and practices concerning Central Asian women and their space in the society, ranging from (but not limited to) the system of patriarchy, controversial Soviet project of “women’s liberation,” more recent influences of Western neoliberalism and capitalism, and the dominant discourse of “Western feminism.” My research data demonstrate that by admitting the constructed, complex nature of contemporary Kazakhstani feminisms, my respondents move to the elaboration on the modalities of the movement’s further prospects, such as its grounding in Kazakh(stani) context, as well as closer collaboration with other Central Asian feminisms which has the potential to form a particular local type of post-socialist feminisms, sensitive to and embedded in the region’s tangled geo-temporal realities.

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To my daughter

To my mother

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Introduction

On 8 March 2017 – International Women’s Day, which is a state holiday in Kazakhstan – an unusual event took place in Almaty, the country’s largest and the most vibrant city. Several dozen women and a few men carrying feminist banners and shouting slogans such as “*Freedom, sisterhood, feminism,*” “*Don’t tell us what to wear, tell them not to rape*”, “*Kitchen and fashion is not freedom!*,” “*My body – my rights,*” “*No’ to reproductive pressure,*” “*Observance of rights and safety in women’s prisons*” and the like, marched down one of the city’s main streets – Zhibek Zholy, and specifically its most central pedestrianized part called Arbat – a popular place usually occupied by many tourists and passersby, idling around numerous high street stores and fancy cafés, gazing at street musicians and artists selling paintings and souvenirs. However, on that day this relaxed, bourgeois place turned into its opposite – a stage of civic activism and protest. The rally lasted some ten minutes, and, despite being unauthorized by the city authorities, went smoothly, “with no incidents and arrests,” as media put it; however, a few days after the event several organizers and participants of the rally were invited to the city’s Akimat (the city administration) where they were reprimanded for their actions and requested not to break laws anymore.¹

By the time of this event I had already been closely following some Kazakhstani feminists on Facebook, as well as observing how local mass media were depicting them in their articles and editorials. My personal interest in the topic of feminism was instigated a few years earlier, in my early thirties, and was caused by my life experiences, and, most notably, with the experience of motherhood which turned out to be – quite surprisingly to me – a challenging and highly emotional task. I was upset with the discrepancy between the public image of ‘happy

¹ In line with the “Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Procedures of Arrangement and Holding of Peaceful Gatherings, Rallies, Marches, Pickets, and Demonstrations” (as of 17 March 1995), all mass gatherings must be authorized by local authorities (https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/prezident_respubliki_kazahstan/konstitutsionnyiy_stroy_i_osnovyi_gosudarstvennogo_upravleniya/id-U950002126_/#z11). According to my informants, the feminist march was unauthorized by the Akimat of Almaty.

motherhood’ and its real-life struggles, doubts, and fears. To solve, or, rather, to soothe my inner disillusionment and worries, I began searching for explanations of the nature of these discrepancies, which eventually led me to feminist theories and debates. By digging deeper into feminist topics, I came across the online interviews with feminists from different post-Soviet countries and discovered that there were Kazakhstani activists, too. I began following and befriending many of them on Facebook, and my interest coincided (though, it might not be a mere coincidence) with the feminist discourse becoming more visible in the country – mostly, on the internet, on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Vkontakte, YouTube, as well as in some online mass media, exposing a part of Kazakhstani web-audience² to the ideas and agendas of the country’s outspoken feminists. Thus, when I enrolled in the Nazarbayev University to do my Master’s degree in fall 2016, the general idea of the topic of my future research came quite quickly: I decided to dedicate it to the local feminisms.

As I mentioned above, by the time of the feminists’ rally in March 2017 there was quite a considerable history of feminist activism in the country. However, in this paper I lay a specific emphasis on this march as it served as a trigger sparking my keen interest in the topic of Kazakhstani feminisms *per se*, and, I think, this event may be used as a starting point for initiating a process of analyzing local feminisms in relation to their origins and present-day stances. The feminist rally quite predictably attracted attention of local and international mass media, exploding with news: *Feminists marched down the Arbat [street] in Almaty*³ and the like, the journalists asked the activists to comment on the goals of their march. One of the event’s

² According to the data published by *Informburo.kz* news site, as of May 2017, in Kazakhstan, there were as many as 356.000 “active users” of Facebook and 2.1 million users of VKontakte. One-third of all Facebook users were residents of Almaty (<https://informburo.kz/cards/za-chto-kritikuyut-facebook-i-kak-on-razvivaetsya-v-kazahstane.html>) (published on 30 January 2018, last retrieved on 8 April 2018).

³ Several mass media had quite similar headlines, for instance, *Tengrinews.kz*: https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/feministki-proshlis-marshem-po-arbatu-v-almaty-313736/, as well as *365info.kz* <https://365info.kz/2017/03/feministki-ustroili-marsh-na-arbate-v-almaty/>, and *Zakon.kz*. <https://www.zakon.kz/4847751-v-almaty-proshlis-marshem-feministki.html>. See also reports by *Nur.kz*: <https://www.nur.kz/1432089-miting-v-centre-almaty-ustroili-femin.html>; *Informburo.kz* <https://informburo.kz/novosti/s-lozungami-protiv-fashizma-i-seksizma-proshlis-feministki-po-almaty.html>; *Radio Azattyq* (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*) <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/28357729.html> (all last retrieved on 28 October 2017), etc.

organizers – a member of radical feminist grassroots initiative *KazFem* Arina Osinovskaya, reiterated in several interviews⁴⁵ that by marching down the Almaty streets the feminists had wanted to re-appropriate March 8 as *their* holiday, which has been established more than one hundred years ago as a platform to demand equal rights and opportunities for (Western) women and demonstrate their determination to become socially and politically engaged. However, with the course of time this date has gradually lost its initial radical connotations and transformed into a holiday as we know it now: “Women’s day – the day of spring and beauty,” when men praise women – from preschool girls to female co-workers – for their femininity and beauty.⁶ The activist also mentioned that the feminist march had been regarded by its organizers and participants as their contribution to the impressive feminist demonstrations which took place the same day (and on other occasions the same year) all over the globe, from Asia through Europe and Africa to the South and North America.⁷

I consider this interpretation of the feminist march in Almaty as an important point, highlighting the constructed, hybrid, and fluid nature of feminisms in Kazakhstan. The activist’s mentioning of the origins of the International women’s day refers to the problematic, complex history of women’s emancipation which took place in Central Asia throughout last century. From the emancipatory theories and practices of the early twentieth century (think: “Jadids”), the

⁴ *Infornburo.kz*: “Feminists marched down the Almaty city center” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bliu6M2N7CU>, published on 09 March 2017, last retrieved on 28 October 2018).

⁵ *The Astana Times*: “Kazakh feminists have something to say” (<https://astanatimes.com/2017/03/kazakh-feminists-have-something-to-say/>, published on 23 March 2017, last retrieved on 8 April 2018).

⁶ See, for instance, a quote describing this holiday published on the website of an official Kazakhstani TV-channel aimed at the promotion of the country abroad (emphasis mine): “International Women's Day is celebrated on March 8 every year. This day marks the achievements of women in political, economic and social fields, celebrates the past, present and future of women of the world. *The modern celebration of the International Women's Day has no longer the goal to fight for the rights of women, and is considered as the day of spring, female beauty, tenderness, spiritual wisdom. On this day representatives of the strong half of mankind can once again please their loved ones and relatives with gifts and attention.*” (http://kazakh-tv.kz/en/category/8th_march, last retrieved on 25 March 2018).

⁷ See the short summary of women’s marches of 2017 in the following report by *Opendemocracy.net*: “2017 in feminist protests: in pictures” (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/b-reng-re-sim/2017-feminist-protests-in-pictures>, published on 28 December 2017, last retrieved on 28 October 2018).

“emancipation of women” swiftly transformed into the radical Bolshevik struggle against Central Asian traditions deemed as “backward” and oppressing “the Eastern women.” At this historical point, mass demonstrations, including those connected to the Soviet policies aimed at “liberation of the oppressed women,” became a routine practice, with many “8th of March” occasions used to urge (think: “coerce”) Central Asian women to unveil, enter the workforce, etc. – not necessary upon their consent. In late Soviet and post-Soviet period, these radical approaches transformed into the essentializing of the category of “women” as mothers, the state and societal fixation on female domesticity and femininity, and the once protest-charged International Women’s Day mutated into the local substitute of St. Valentine’s Day (though, with a strong gendered underpinning). At last, the emergence in post-Soviet space of the very phenomenon of the “feminist theory and activism” in the 1990s, largely influenced and supported by the international organizations, donor agencies, and feminist scholarship, as well as the most recent attempts of the 21st century’s Central Asian feminists to reclaim and revitalize this date as the day of women’s activism connected to the global (think: “Western”) feminisms demonstrate that our region has long been and continues to be the field where numerous ideologies and strategies regarding women’s rights and opportunities contest, perpetuate and transform each other and themselves.

These considerations lead me to the main argument of this thesis. I argue that the positioning of Kazakhstani feminisms against the complex set of gender ideologies and practices concerning Central Asian women and their space in the society, as well as against the broader feminist theories, encourages the country’s feminists to start **elaborating a fluid, yet distinctive, locally-grounded feminism(s) sensitive to the region’s complex “geo-temporal realities” (Koobak, 2018: 12) and, as such, being particularly empathetic to local women’s identities and necessities in all their multiplicity and diversity.** Hence, the main objective of this thesis is an attempt to understand whether we can conclude that such type of feminism(s) is currently

“under construction” in the country, and, if yes, try to define its major features. Thus, in this study I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What socio-political, cultural, and historical conditions have determined the emergence of feminisms in Kazakhstan?
2. What kinds of feminisms can be identified in contemporary Kazakhstan? What agendas do they have and what types of activities do they employ as feminists? How do these feminisms interact with each other?
3. How do the Kazakhstani activists conceptualize local feminisms? How do they position local feminisms against the background of feminisms existing in other parts of the region/world?

Some recent studies⁸ focusing on the issue of gender in Central Asia provide insightful accounts of various aspects of women’s life in the region, bringing the researched women into the foreground, transmitting their agency and stands. These works concern multiple topics, for instance, they introduce radically new epistemologies challenging the very nature of theorizing on gender issues in Central Asia and contesting the superiority of Western feminism in the knowledge production (Tlostanova, 2010),⁹ examine the ways of women’s turn to religious life in Uzbekistan (Peshkova, 2014), senior women’s informal leadership and activism in rural (Ismailbekova, 2016) and urban (Satybaldieva, 2018) Kyrgyzstan. Other papers focus on the gendered aspects of nation-building in the entire region (Cleuziou and Dierenberger, 2016) as well as in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova, 2015). However, there is a very limited research on Central Asian, namely, Kazakhstani women as members of women’s movement (Snajdr, 2005; Zellerer and Vyortkin, 2004) and feminists advocating for women’s rights and gender equality

⁸ For an exhaustive list of works, conducted before 2009, please consult Marianne Kamp’s article "Women’s studies and gender studies in Central Asia: Are we talking to one another" (2009).

⁹ In her insightful and debated book “Gender epistemologies on Eurasian Borderlands” (2010), on which I will elaborate in the 1st chapter, Madina Tlostanova analyzes gender issues in two colonized regions – Central Asia and Caucasus; however, in this thesis I will focus only on the Central Asian dimension of her book.

(Kamp, 2016; Shakirova, 2012, 2015). With this paper, I want to contribute to the field of research on post-socialist feminisms and the processes of their self-identification, positioning, and conceptualizing vis-à-vis their specific contexts as well as the present-day feminist praxis and theory.

Research design and sampling

The primary method of obtaining data for this research was in-depth semi-structured interviews with contemporary feminist activists (under this term I understand activists active in the second half of the 2010s), conducted in summer 2017. In total, I interviewed ten feminists: members of grassroots feminist initiatives *Feminita* and *KazFem* (two members of each group), one representative of the queer feminist art grouping *Krëlex Zentr*, as well as persons publicly identifying themselves as feminists but not participating in either of these communities. The most significant part of my research took place in the city of Almaty where most of the activists reside; one interview with an activist studying abroad was conducted via Skype and one more (with a feminist who lives and works predominantly in other post-Soviet countries) – in Astana.

Nine interviewees were recorded, whereas one was provided to me in written form: the respondent had no time to meet me in person while I had been in Almaty but had agreed to answer my interview questions (*Annex 1*) which I had sent to her via email and she had emailed her reply back to me in a while. All interviews were conducted in Russian language.

My reasons for choosing this number of respondents were stipulated both by practical reasons and theoretical recommendations. First, this number of interviewees is feasible since the overall circle of publicly active, non-anonymous feminists in the country is quite limited. Second, the theoretical guidance on research design stipulates that “qualitative samples are usually small in size” due to the wealth of information that the researcher is going to work with, and the existence of a point of saturation beyond which no new information occurs (Ritchie, Jane, and Jane Lewis, 2003: 83), which was somewhat of my case.

In the process of identifying and approaching prospective respondents, I used a combination of sampling methods. First, I used *purposive sampling* as I was interested in a homogenous group of “individuals who belong to the same subculture or have the same characteristics” (Ritchie, Jane, and Jane Lewis 2003: 79). The respondents were selected if they met the following selection criteria:

1. they openly identified themselves as feminists in public discourse (on their personal web pages on SNS, namely, Facebook) and mass media;
2. on SNSs or in media, they could be recognized under their real names and/or photos and other identifiers;
3. on SNSs or in media, they disseminated information regarding feminism, supporting and explaining this notion.

Technically, the issue of approaching my potential informants was easily solved, as most of them were already included in my friends list on Facebook, so they could easily see my messages and reply, and no one of them refused to partake in the interview (with one exception of a person who did not “befriend” me on Facebook and thus, I suppose, could not see my invitation to participate in the research).

Second, some informants participated in *the snowball* or *chain sampling* method recommended by Ritchie and Lewis “for [interviewing] dispersed and small populations, and where the key selection criteria are characteristics which might not be widely disclosed by individuals or which are too sensitive” (Ritchie, Jane, and Jane Lewis 2003: 94). During the interviews, some of my respondents recommended me other prospective participants and introduced me to them. Thus, the chain sampling method proved itself as particularly appropriate and useful for my research.

Prior to beginning the fieldwork, I prepared and obtained the IREC’s approval for a list of questions consisting of ten ‘main’ queries, each supplemented with several clarifying sub-questions and prompts (*Annex 1*). For the sake of the respondent’s anonymity, in line with the

Nazarbayev University's confidentiality requirements in this paper I do not mention the respondents' names, exact occupations, and other data which might disclose their identities. Prior to the interviews, my respondents were informed that they would be anonymous and agreed to participate. This measure turned to be reasonable as in the process of interviewing some respondents touched certain issues, that they themselves regarded as sensitive, and these participants made it clear that they did not want to be disclosed as sources of this information. Since the circle of feminists in Kazakhstan is very limited, in case if I had chosen to mask those who wished to remain anonymous but name the others, still, the former could have been easily detected by process of elimination. Thus, in order to protect a few respondents, I must hide the identities of all of them.

A few points on my respondents' demography. As concerns my interviewees' age, it ranged from early twenties to forty-plus. One interviewee was a schoolgirl aged 17, whereas the activists aged 20-25 made half of my respondents (i.e. five persons). Three women were aged between 25-35, whereas the remaining two informants were above forty.

Regarding my respondents' educational status, the overall trend was quite evident: most of them (eight) had higher education, with several women having master and doctoral degrees, sometimes obtained from the universities outside Kazakhstan (predominantly in Russia). Only two participants had no university degrees: one – because of her young age (as she was still at a high school), and another one dropped her university education. The occupations of my interviewees varied, but in general, they all belonged to the intellectual, humanitarian professional strata. Some of them were teaching in either schools or universities, whereas two respondents were obtaining, respectively, higher and postgraduate education. Several others ran small businesses; about a third of the respondents were artists.

The fact that my participants (and the researcher, too) represent quite homogenous group of educated, middle-class, Russian-speaking city dwellers (with one important exception of a feminist whose native language is Kazakh, but she has excellent command of Russian and a

background in Russian academia). Such homogeneity of my research sample can provide a basis for reasonable criticism of both interviewees' and my study as being exclusive and limited, presenting a particular group's view as the only authoritative and valuable definition of Kazakhstani feminisms, whereas there could be other voices and feminist stances. In reply to this, I can say that the very layout of my research stipulated for addressing publicly visible persons identifying themselves as Kazakhstani feminists, and thus 'hidden' feminists fell outside the scope of my study. Besides, I emphasize that I am interested specifically in Kazakhstani feminists' understanding of their positioning and activism as not *the only* possible and noteworthy, but existing *here and now* and transmitted by a specific person or a precise group of people.

Besides, I additionally interviewed two prominent Kazakhstani activists of the 1990s-2000s, co-founders of *The Feminist League of Kazakhstan*: gender and feminist scholar Svetlana Shakirova (currently she estranged from the group and gender-related research, but occasionally appears in mass media with articles on related topics), and the *League's* leader and current director Evgenia Kozyreva. In the initial design of my study I planned to use the information obtained from these interviews for reference, since both respondents had a vast expertise of 'doing feminism' in Kazakhstan in the 1990s-2000s (hence, they were not anonymized), whereas in the focus of my research would have been 'the contemporary feminists' which have become active in the country very recently, in the 2010s. However, in the process of working on this paper I realized that these newest feminist groups cannot be regarded as if they had appeared 'out of nowhere': in fact, feminist activism in Kazakhstan has started well before the 2010s, and the earlier women's initiatives, such as *The Feminist League*, put in great efforts to improve the status of gender equality and women's rights and social protection in the country (I will discuss this issue in greater detail in Chapter 2). In addressing to these two experts the *snowballing exercise* has proven to be effective again: I was introduced to Shakirova by the Nazarbayev

University's faculty member via email, whereas she, subsequently, served as a mediator connecting me with Kozyreva.

Researcher's position

Prior to going to the research, I will describe my position as feminist since it will affect my analysis of the data. My feminist positioning is largely formed and informed by intersectionality with its specific focus on the multiplicity and diversity of women's experiences and the necessity to be attentive and respectful to all of them. Intersectional feminism, as I perceive it, highlights the existence of many axes of oppression and inequality, among which there is not only the oppression on the basis of one's gender, but also that of class, age, race/ethnicity, religion, educational level, (dis)ability, geography, sexual orientation/gender identification, and so on. Such a multilayered set of hierarchies implies for perceiving of every person's situation as unique and grounded in context, leading me to the conclusion that every feminist group, whatever small it might be, has the authority to formulate, declare, and pursue its own agenda based on its specificity and position right here and now.

With that feminist diversity in mind, I argue that feminisms still have a common goal: if not establishing but leading to the establishment someday in future of just and inclusive societies in which women and men are equal in terms of their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities, with women are able to exercise their authority and act independently.

I am not an activist, and I avoid extrapolating from my position or from my vision of feminism on feminist activists, which is quite the case in today's Kazakhstan, where public discussions on feminism often reduce themselves to uninvolved 'experts' prescribing feminists what they should do, what their agendas must be, and what should they understand about the state of women in the country.¹⁰ Whereas such discussions might mention certain relevant topics,

¹⁰ See, for instance, the following articles by local male 'experts' – a sociologist and online opinion-maker, in which they claim that feminists' agendas and actions "bear no relation to reality": *Feminist March in Almaty Raised the Wrong Questions* (<https://365info.kz/2017/03/marsh-feministok-v-almaty-podnyal-ne-te-voprosy-otvet-sotsiologa/>, published on 10 March 2017, last retrieved on 17 November 2018); *Three Different Feminisms in Kazakhstan* (with

in general they tend to discredit feminist groups as too small, too young, too fixed on the particularities of their agendas, and, as such, unable to represent the entirety of Kazakhstani women, to speak for all of them and to solve all their problems. I disagree with such argumentation as I believe that it is only up to feminists themselves to define what specific issues they want to address as activists and what strategies and actions will they employ to deal with these issues. Lastly, I think that the diversity of contemporary feminisms does not mean that they are not effective; on the contrary, the multiplicity of feminist thought and activism might result in the synergy of their struggle against different axes of inequality. Whereas these efforts may differ in terms of their persistence, longevity, and results, still, they all contribute to the common goal of achieving the more fair and balanced gender order.

Thesis organization

This paper is organized in the following way. In the first chapter, I will define the theoretical framework of my research to demonstrate the set of socio-political, cultural, and historical conditions which determine the emergence and current state of feminisms in Kazakhstan. In the second chapter I will introduce the feminist groups and free-standing activists currently present in the country, and in the third chapter I will move to the discussion on particularities on their activism; here, I will argue that the strategies of their activism are largely informed by the type of feminism they associate with as well as by the time when these groups have been established and active. The fourth chapter will be dedicated to the Kazakhstani activists' perceptions of local feminisms as grounded in local cultural context as well as provide the activists' reflections on the prospects of further development of local feminisms as regional formations.

a subtitle: *Can the Media-Hyped Feminist Activists Solve the Real Problems of Kazakhstani Women* (<https://regnum.ru/news/society/2481660.html>, published on 13 September 2018, last retrieved on 17 November 2018).

Chapter 1. Positioning feminisms: Theoretical, historical, and socio-cultural aspects of Kazakhstani feminisms

Introduction

Above, I defined one of the central arguments of this paper by claiming that the contemporary Kazakhstani feminisms participate in the constant process of interaction with numerous influences such as the country's and the entire Central Asian region's legacy of gender orders, traditions, religion, ideologies, and policies which greatly varied over the course of last century. Besides, in the process of self-constructing and self-positioning local feminists engage in a continuous dialogue with feminist theories and praxis that originated in other countries and world's regions.

Hence, to define Kazakhstani feminisms, their agendas, as well as position them vis-à-vis global feminist context, we need to start from defining of this context as well as the socio-political, cultural, and historical conditions leading to the emergence of feminisms in Kazakhstan. This chapter will be dedicated precisely to this task. Thus, in the first part of this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical framework underlying my research. The second part will be dedicated to the outlining of the “geo-temporal” circumstances that preceded – and predetermined – the emergence of feminism in the country.

Theoretical framework

The intensive development of the feminist thought and action over the last decades has led to the present-day situation when many feminisms coexist, sometimes competing, sometimes collaborating with each other. In general, the feminist researchers emphasize the fact that today there is no such phenomenon as a unified, homogenized, universal feminism:

we need to be reminded of the immense diversity of feminist cultures, and the passionate commitment to self-reflexivity that characterises feminism as a social movement with a long history. These are key aspects of feminism that are especially neglected in accounts clinging to a taxonomy of waves. Feminist activism is not one thing [...] it is a complex set of identities and cultures (Fotopoulou, 2017: 2).

The issue of inclusion of non-Western feminist “identities and cultures” into the feminist discourse has been productively addressed by feminist scholars during some last three decades, resulting in the development and growing expansion of the Third World and women of color feminisms, queer feminism, as well as of transnational feminism paradigm as an “alternative to the international and global feminisms [...] seen as incorporating other feminisms such as postcolonial and Third World feminisms” [and becoming] central to feminist interrogations of globalization, empire, and the nation-state in the global North and South” (Rajan and Desai, 2013: 1).

However, the inclusion of the post-socialist¹¹ feminisms within the framework of transnational feminism represents a challenging task, since, the historical and sociopolitical development of this region, its state-socialist past, prevent them from adequately fitting the above-mentioned “First World /Third World” and “Global North/ Global South” dichotomies key for the transnational feminism’s paradigm. The researchers argue that second-world feminisms, then, become “inbetweeners,” hardly fitting either First- or Third World category: on one hand, during the period of state socialism the “second world” countries advanced quite energetically towards some sort of gender equality. Women were granted access practically to all spheres of public life – i.e., employment, education, to some degree, political participation; the socialist states provided women with welfare, social protection, medical and childcare services. Of course, distribution of these benefits was unequal and significantly varied in different times and places. Yet, in general, the average level of females’ education, self-reliance, social protection and public participation under state socialism was higher than in that in the countries of the Global South, and thus rejects associating the post-socialist feminisms with the Third World ones. On another hand, state socialism regarded the issues of human rights as ‘alien’ and

¹¹ The scholarship inquiring in this matter uses the term “post-socialist” or “post-state-socialist” in spatial rather than ideological sense; besides, post-socialist feminisms are also being often referred to as “Second world” feminisms (see, for instance, in Grabowska, 2012; Koobak and Marling, 2014; Suchland, 2011).

detrimental, it was very much oppressive of any signs of independent political mobilization of its population, and thus, there was practically no space for evolution of a women's movement not authorized by the authorities. Feminism was officially regarded as 'foreign,' bourgeois concept and, as such, it had no possibility to emerge in post-socialist societies well before the fall of the socialist regime in late 1980s-early 1990s. Hence, the post-socialist feminisms have not been developed in the process of social mobilization as it was the case in First World countries; rather, they were adopted from the West in their entirety and, as such, they often become overlooked and excluded from the present-day Western feminist theory (Cerwonka, 2008; Grabowska, 2012; Koobak and Marling, 2014; Koobak, 2018; Suchland, 2011).

However, many researchers see certain commonalities between the positioning of post-socialist feminisms and transnational feminisms vis-à-vis the "First World" feminisms: namely, it is transnational feminism's critique and contestation of "the hegemonic position of 'Western feminist theory'" (Koobak and Marling, 2014: 331) which is sometimes regarded as "a yardstick against which all feminist stories and imaginaries are measured" (Koobak, 2018: 2), as the only "true" and "progressive" feminism putting the rest feminisms into the position of always left behind, in constant need "to catch up with the West" (ibid., Cerwonka, 2008; Koobak and Marling, 2014; Koobak, 2018; Shakirova, 2007, 2015, Tlostanova, 2010). Thus, by admitting the persistence of intellectual imbalance between Western feminisms as the main source of "knowledge production" within the feminist scholarship, and the non-Western, post-socialist feminisms, the researchers from post-socialist spaces simultaneously attach great importance to the search for new, creative theoretical approaches challenging the superiority of the Western feminist discourses by being more embedded and aware of local contexts.

An example of such an innovative approach, seeking to challenge the existing hierarchies within feminist scholarship and introduce its own analysis of the post-socialist feminist formations and identities, can be found in the theory of *decolonial option/decolonial turn* – an

insightful and widely debated epistemology introduced by Madina Tlostanova, a Moscow-based scholar of Central Asian and Caucasian origin (Tlostanova, 2010).

Tlostanova's epistemology is often being deemed as radical in its substance as it suggests quite a categorical move – a *decolonial option* – standing for intellectual separation from the Western “coloniality of knowledge” by means of and towards the ends of independent “knowledge production” by non-Western “others.” This process includes the elaboration of locally embedded gender and feminist discourses, drawing from local authentic (i.e., non-affected by the colonizing powers) narratives and customs. Here, Tlostanova opposes the “Western” dichotomy between “modernity” and “tradition” where “modernity” is perceived as a positive and beneficial development, whereas “tradition” is understood as a negative, “backward” notion. Tlostanova, on the opposite, deems “progress” as an idea laying in the core of the modernist project, which, in her opinion, represents one of numerous manifestations of coloniality.

Further, Tlostanova sees the way out of the existing unequal “subject-object relationships” in engagement in a new kind of “pluriversal” (opposed to “universal”), non-hierarchical dialog when no one dominates anyone and special attention is paid to all local contexts:

[i]n order to come to an understanding and global interaction and coalitions at the points of difference with other colonized, racialized and gendered subjects, the women of Central Asia and Caucasus need first to decolonize their own minds. This would lead to a feminism which would not be a simple clone of the Western (or Russian) one and would not simply repeat the Soviet official gender discourse either. It has to be an independent and critical feminism, based on careful differentiating and empathic grasping of particular values and sensibilities born in particular historical and cultural contexts of Eurasian borderlands (Tlostanova, 2010: 203).

As follows from this quote, despite her principal suggestion to ‘think beyond’ the Western scholarship (e.g., Tlostanova is particularly critical of non-Western researchers who uncritically absorb and reproduce Western theories), the author does not propose to completely reject feminism as one of its brainchildren. Rather, she stands for elaboration of new forms of locally embedded feminism, however, without much elaborating on possible methods of its formulation.

Tlostanova's book has caused the ambivalent assessment from the part of the academic community: some researchers praised it as highly polemical, insightful and groundbreaking attempt to create a brand new epistemology coming from, indeed, the borderlands of contemporary feminist scholarship (Abashin and Shakirova, 2009), whereas others critically evaluated Tlostanova's intent to oppose the system of Western knowledge production by using its "master's tools," questioned her theory as being grounded in Mesoamerican decolonial studies which, obviously, have very different cultural context as compared to the Central Asian and Caucasian ones, and criticized the author for "limitation" of the voices and experiences of people who had been unable to deliver narratives and express subjectivities free from numerous colonial influences (Kamp in Megoran et al. 2012).

Although I find Tlostanova's work insightful in terms of its decolonial charge and the emphasis on the attention which has to be paid to local contexts and narratives, I agree with the criticism of the (im)possibility to discover real people, whose "authentic" voices and identities have remained unaffected by the colonial powers (Tlostanova defines such people as "*colonial gendered tricksters* whose legacy was never interrupted even in the harshest Soviet time" (2010: 187, emphasis mine)). I doubt that these days, when all-pervading flow of information can rapidly reach any part of the world through various mediums (imagine yurts equipped with satellite dishes in Mongolia), a person's identity might remain unchanged and free from any external influences. I rather share the perception of human identities, experiences, and worldviews as being constantly constructed and ever-changed, re-thought and reinvented by the people themselves – which, in my opinion, does not make their experiences and narratives less important and trustworthy. In this paper, I stand for such a reading of local feminist identities – as hybrid, affected by numerous multidirectional influences but having the agency to critically assess and interpret them.

Nevertheless, regardless of the reviewers' assessment of Tlostanova's theory, it seems that the main goal of her provocative book was, indeed, to provoke and instigate the debate on the

topic of “borderland” gender subjectivities aimed at creation of a broader, inclusive, and non-homogeneous dialog between the diverse, yet equal feminist partners, sensitive to their different sociocultural contexts and identities and thinking beyond the dichotomies of ‘superior’ and ‘secondary’, ‘progressive’ and ‘underdeveloped,’ and the like. In this sense, Tlostanova’s work has become an underlying epistemological principle and a source of inspiration for some recent studies analyzing post-socialist feminisms. Further, I will address to some of these inquiries as general points of reference for my thesis.

In a series of her consecutive articles, Redi Koobak, a Swedish-based feminist researcher of Estonian origin, together with her coauthors from different parts of the world attempts to analyze non-Western feminisms (Central and Eastern European, and, particularly, Estonian, as well as Russian, Central Asian, and Indian ones) through the lenses of both transnational feminisms and Tlostanova’s *decolonial option* approach.

The process of Koobak’s and her colleagues’ elaboration of their analytical tools is still underway, and its major points can be traced in three co-authored papers: *The decolonial challenge: Framing post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe within transnational feminist studies* (Koobak and Marling, 2014), *Border thinking and disidentification: Postcolonial and postsocialist feminist dialogues* (Tlostanova et al., 2016), and, finally, *Narrating feminisms: what do we talk about when we talk about feminism in Estonia?* (Koobak, 2018). The first paper presents Koobak’s key arguments regarding the positioning of post-socialist feminisms through the lenses of the decolonial option’s framework, whereas the last two articles introduce some analytical tools as well as preliminary findings from Koobak’s study of the Estonian feminisms – which, in my opinion, could be instrumental for my study of Kazakhstani feminisms.

Koobak’s et al. central argument develops and localizes the point, already problematized by Tlostanova: the researcher posits that the Western feminist discourses are not necessarily sensitive of local context and identities. Koobak and Marling suggest to solidarize with Tlostanova in proposing non-Western feminisms to address to the “thinking technology” of

decolonial framework which might be a useful method of “achiev[ement of] a more egalitarian and intersectional dialogue where we learn from plurality and locatedness” (Koobak and Marling, 2014: 340).

The next paper, *Border thinking and disidentification... (2016)* is written in collaboration with Madina Tlostanova as well as a Sweden-based feminist academician of Indian origin Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert. The very geography of the authors demonstrates their commitment to the idea of “decolonial” dialog between different yet equal postcolonial, and, in case of Koobak and Tlostanova, post-socialist, feminist subjects. This article is an important step towards more close analysis of the creative and critical ways of the postcolonial feminists’ resistance to their “othering” by “the dominant Western/Northern gender studies mainstream” (Tlostanova et al., 2016: 1). By drawing from examples of some feminist movements, art groupings, and individuals, the authors elaborate two interconnected *feminist transformative tools (strategies)*, aimed at decolonizing of “the established and fixed geocultural, disciplinary and epistemic models” (Tlostanova et al. 2016: 6).

The first tool is that of a *feminist border thinking* – “a horizontal transversal networking of different local histories and sensibilities mobilised through a number of common, yet pluriversal and open categories” (ibid.: 7). Here, again, the authors re-introduce the concept of “feminist tricksters” juggling their “infinite set of identifications, intersecting race, ethnicity, religion, class, language and sexuality” to implicitly challenge and undermine the systems of patriarchal oppression of women – for example, exploitation of women’s productive and reproductive labor, their underrepresentation in politics, art, academia, etc. As examples of *feminist border thinking* the authors mention an Armenian guerrilla queer art group *Yerevan Queer Collective (YQC)* that simultaneously

refuses both to be coopted into the state political system (as they find such co-optations ineffective and always leading to harmful compromises) and to come into a direct confrontation with the state (which would simply mean incarceration and other forms of prosecution). Instead YQC chooses a border trickster positioning of outsmarting power and overcoming censorship through the multiplicity of indirect (slant) interpretations and multi-semantic actions. [...] The

YQC is a border phenomenon both in its media and in its political and social positioning which is critical of the Armenian neo-traditionalist state as well as the Western neocolonialist habits of objectification, salvation and assimilation, stripping people of their agency” (Tlostanova et al. 2016: 8-9).

The strategy of *border thinking* in being realized through the second feminist strategy, “facilitate[ing] critical yet non-polarising dialogues” – namely, *disidentification*, understood as “a ‘third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology’ but in a way that does not erase differences” (ibid.: 9). In my opinion, the strategies of *border thinking* and *disidentification* represent quite an innovative, yet complex, way of analyzing the positioning of post-socialist feminisms, including the Kazakhstani ones, vis-à-vis their Western counterparts as well as native cultural and political environment, and I will try to employ these analytical tools in my further analysis.

Finally, I’m going to discuss the last theoretical underpinning of my thesis, which is the Redi Koobak’s most recent article *Narrating feminisms: what do we talk about when we talk about feminism in Estonia?* (2018). In this paper, Koobak steps aside from the decolonial option’s approach (I think, though, that it is caused by the fact that this paper seems to be the early fruit of the author’s ongoing research on Estonian feminisms, and in her prospective articles on that matter she might re-introduce the decolonial option’s approach). In this paper, Koobak stresses the importance for feminism “to be rooted in geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge (Tlostanova 2010), *to know local stories of feminism*” (Koobak 2018: 2, emphasis mine). To discover these *local stories of feminism* Koobak interviewed 24 Estonian feminists, and many of her findings greatly correlate with the data I obtained during my fieldwork in Kazakhstan. Here, I will provide the major themes of Koobak’s research to which I will refer as the referential points of my own analysis of Kazakhstani feminisms in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

The first correlation concerns the very demography of Koobak’s respondents who were 25-58 years old as she decided to interview “both feminists who became active at the beginning of

the 1990s – after Estonia regained independence from the Soviet Union – and feminists who became active later in mid-2000s” (ibid.: 6). I already provided the data on the age of my interviewees which was pretty much the same; if I’d included in the sample the age of *The Feminist League’s* members, who are in their early 50s now, then the analogy would have been even more evident, pointing to the commonality of the processes of emergence of feminisms in our countries, explained by their parallel histories as ex-Soviet republics. Koobak emphasizes that the nature and intensiveness of her interviewees’ feminist activities also depend on their age as well as personal experiences and choices: I find particularly instrumental her conceptualizing of Estonian feminisms as a *spectrum* of different age groups, worldviews, and feminist experiences:

some of [the respondents] used to be more active in the 1990s, some have become active only recently, for some of them feminism is their main activity, for others it is a position that informs their everyday life and work. The activities of these women form a *spectrum of Estonian feminisms* through several generations and different experiences with feminist activism, gender mainstreaming on the state level and feminist academic work (Koobak, 2018.: 6, emphasis mine).

However, despite this variability of personal experiences and histories, in general, Koobak’s interviewees represent quite a homogenous group of middle-class, well-educated women with Estonian as their mother tongue (ibid.: 7). This point both correlates and contradicts to my research sample since, as I mentioned, most of my interviewees also largely fit the same category of middle-class educated women, however, most of them were Russian-speaking with one exception of an activist whose native language was Kazakh. I agree with Koobak’s point on the possibility of unfolding of a broader perspective in case we would conduct our researches in other languages,¹² but, as concerns my thesis, the inclusion of data in other languages would

¹² Besides, Koobak mentions that pro-feminist men were also excluded from her sample but does not elaborate on her reasons behind this decision. As concerns my research, I decided to focus only on female participants since some of my respondents (*KazFem*) were radical feminists and, as such, they opposed the inclusion of men into the feminist agenda. Hence, interviewing men would have hindered my study in case the representatives of *KazFem* had refused to partake in not “women-exclusive” research. I am myself receptive to such argumentation; hence I decided to accept this position and focus my research exclusively on women.

have made its scope unfeasible. I am convinced that the study of a Kazakh-speaking audience's perceptions of gender equality and feminism deserves a thorough independent research which might reveal a different, even an opposite perspective on these issues shared by a large part of the country's population.

Returning to Koobak's findings, one of its major themes, repeated in all three of her mentioned articles, is that of the Estonian feminisms' positioning against their Western counterparts. The author claims that Estonian feminists commonly imagine the Western feminisms as the "real" ones (ibid.: 3), and thus feel the need to "catch up with the West", to correspond to their "progress," exemplified, for instance, by the "wave" metaphor (standing for consequent stages in development of Western, predominantly US feminisms). Another alleged marker of Western feminisms' superiority consists in the large number of their supporters and their public activism, which includes protests and rallies "à la second-wave." Since in Estonia the number of feminists is quite limited and they mostly perceive their activism as an academic and cultural project, generally defining their feminist identities as "liberal," the respondents tend to regard this situation as a proof that there is no 'real' feminist movement in the country (ibid.: 7, 10), as well as that only some serious violations of women's rights (here, the interviewees provide an example of abortion ban in Poland), can induce Estonians to engage in a mass feminist movement (ibid.: 10). The author also emphasized Estonian feminists' tendency "to set Western theoretical frameworks as a model to be followed rather than trying to create and support solidarities with other postsocialist states that have sometimes been viewed in a patronizing way" (ibid.: 11). This notion of lack of feminist solidarity will be important for my future analysis of Kazakhstani feminisms' attitudes towards their Central Asian neighbors.

The next point to which I will address, is the perception of some of Koobak's respondents that the process of 'importing' of feminisms from the West, which started in the 1990s, at first

was quite uncritical. The interviewees suggested that the “borrowing” of Western feminist paradigms was

inevitable and it would be absurd to idealize the possibility of self-generative and alternative options because ‘how many self-generative and alternative ways of thinking can there be?’ Western influence should not necessarily be seen as negative though because even if theoretical frameworks have come from the West, the question is: how to inculcate a way of writing in Estonia, a theory that would come from below and this cannot be done without knowing history (ibid.: 11.)

The last argument from the above quotation, that on the necessity of knowing one’s history for elaboration of locally-embedded theories and praxis, not only summarizes all argumentation of this chapter on the ideas of decentralization and decolonization of the feminist discourse in favor of its locatedness in the context; it also highlights the grounds of possible tensions between the Estonian and Western feminists. Koobak argues that many of her respondents have gradually become critical of the dominance of the Western feminisms, as well as well-aware of the essentializing and “patronizing” attitudes of some Western feminists who came in the country in the 1990s and acted “as if [their Estonian counterparts were] an empty place,” which had to be instructed and/or “observed as aquarium fish” (ibid: 12). However, local feminists had their stance and agency, they were well-educated and professional, and thus they refused to simply “transport” Western ideas without their proper reconsideration and adaptation to the Estonian realities. In my further analysis of Kazakhstani feminisms, I will address to this point as particularly relevant for the feminists in our country, too.

Koobak’s insightful study of Estonian feminism seems to be one of the first shots in the process of analyzing and locating post-socialist feminisms through the lenses of the decolonial option’s theory. Hence, I consider it as an appropriate reference for my study of feminisms in Kazakhstan – however, used not for the sake of a mere comparison, but, rather, as an invitation to enter the dialog between these two post-socialist feminisms. I am fully aware of the distinctions between Estonian and Kazakhstani contexts concerning the two states’ historical,

geopolitical, religious and cultural differences. However, our countries also have ‘shared experiences’ of being “the borderland colonies” of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, they had been almost simultaneously exposed to the influx of Western capitalist and liberal values after gaining independence in 1991; around this time, the contemporary feminisms have emerged in both states. Bearing in mind these commonalities, though not putting aside the differences, I will address to the Koobak’s article as a nodal point for my study of contemporary Kazakhstani feminisms. To start this journey, in line with the above argumentation on the necessity of the feminisms’ embeddedness in their particular contexts, I will start from locating Kazakhstani feminisms against their historical background.

Embedding Kazakhstani feminisms within the country’ historical context

Prior to going to the discussion, I need to make a point on the issue of a very limited research on Kazakhstani history examined through the lenses of its gender order, namely, as concerns its radical change introduced by the Soviet authorities in course of the twentieth century. For example, in her recent inquiry into this topic Tatiana Shchurko (2016) confirms that facts by mentioning that, firstly, there is an overall lack of research on the issue of the ‘Soviet gender revolution,’ second, most of the existing papers are focused on the countries which were the central and western Soviet republics, and, third, even when the research concerns gender order in Central Asia, it addresses either this region as a whole, or focuses on some particular countries, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Shchurko, 2016: 179-180). The author explains this discursive practice of ‘pocketing’ of the five Central Asian republics into one regional entity, as being grounded in the Soviet discourse on “«women of the East» as a homogenic group stemming from the Russian Empire’s colonizing, orientalist approaches towards the region (Shchurko, 2016: 185, 193; Tlostanova, 2010). Hence, the researchers of the Soviet gender policies are exposed to the historical documents on five Central Asian republics being addressed

very similarly, with little if any attention to the specificity of the countries' contexts (possibly, with an exception of *hujum*, a campaign of mass unveiling of Muslim women which mostly unraveled in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan where women used to veil themselves). Thus, in what follows, wherever possible I provide data from papers discussing Kazakhstani context; however, given the scarcity of such sources, I will also use relevant literature on Central Asia as well as on broader post-Soviet and post-socialist contexts. Since extensive research on the history of the emancipation of women in Central Asia goes far beyond the scope of this paper, in what follows, I will briefly elaborate only on certain nodal points in this history, which, in my opinion, were crucial for laying the groundwork for the emergence of feminism in the country.

The emergence of feminism in Kazakhstan in the 1990s was determined by a complex set of political and socio-cultural conditions, influences, and events aimed at the process of “emancipation” of Central Asian women, which was happening in the region in the course of the last century. One of the first developments in the long history of “liberation of a woman of the East” was an attempt of the Jadids reformers in Turkestan “to modernize Muslim women” which move, in their opinion, would contribute to the modernization of the entire region (Kamp, 2006; Khalid, 1999). Jadids saw the key to modernization of Central Asian women in granting them access to education as well as in elimination of traditions of arranged marriages, polygyny, and mistreatment of women in their families (Kamp, 2006; Khalid, 1999). Tlostanova (2010) criticized Jadids' reforms as aimed at production of “modernized wives” for the reformers themselves, as another layer of colonization and “othering” of Central Asian female subjects who were already colonized by the dominant discourse of Russian Empire on local women, seen as docile, obedient, and oppressed, yet at the same time dissolute and immoral.

After the October revolution of 1917 and the establishment of Soviet rule in Central Asia, the Bolsheviks appropriated some of the Jadids' modernizing ideas, such as an emphasis on universal education. However, in comparison with the Jadids' moderate reforms, the early Bolshevik initiatives aimed at the “liberation” of Central Asian women were radical in terms of

the scope of rights and liberties they had offered to women. The researchers investigating the gender politics of the communist state in Central Asia stress the utter importance of early Soviet state assigned to the gender politics as one of the crucial components of their political and social revolution (Ashwin, 2006; Kamp, 2006; Peshkova, 2014; Shchurko 2014; 2016). Most of these studies mention the controversial nature of policies used by the Soviet authorities to solve “the women question” in the entire USSR and in the Soviet Central Asia in particular.

During the first half of the 1920s the Soviet authorities adopted legislation eliminating all forms of inequality between men and women. New laws stipulated for official registration of marriages only in assigned state organs (*ZAGS*) instead of churches or mosques as before; polygyny, bride-price (*qalym*) and bride abduction were banned; the mutual consent of men and women was required to enter marriage. The laws envisaged for the freedom of divorce, fixed minimum marriage age at sixteen, state protection of motherhood and children, etc. (Ishkanian 2003; Kundakbayeva and Beisegulova, 2015; Kandiyoti 2007).

Apart from these literally revolutionary legislative measures, the communist authorities introduced several endeavors aimed at attracting women into the public space of education and labor force – which was earlier largely seen as the men’s realm. The propaganda and education campaigns were administered through the expanded network of centrally-governed *Zhenotdel* (abbreviation for *Zhenskii otdel*, the *women's department* of the *Secretariat* of the *Central Committee* of the Communist Party). This agency was also in charge of establishing daycare centers directed at “liberation” of women from their household chores and instead making them a part of social production. The *Zhenotdel* and its regional branches implemented mass literacy and political education campaigns through the network of women’s clubs and “illiteracy liquidation centers” (*likpunkty*) (Shchurko, 2014; 2016).

However, by implementing these measures, the young communist state was not solemnly pursuing a lofty mission of establishment of the egalitarian Soviet society: there were other, much more practical considerations behind this “liberation” campaign. The Bolshevik authorities

saw the key to survival of the country in its rapid modernization and industrialization, for which it needed a great number of the educated workforce, and thus attracted women to join it. Besides, by attracting women into the public sphere of work and education, the USSR authorities aimed at getting women out of the private sphere of their families, to destroy the century-long kinship relationships and the power of men – fathers, husbands, sons – over women. By doing so, the USSR sought to acquire control over the most intimate spheres of the country’s population – its private life and reproduction. These policies, however, were often met with opposition from the part of the population (Kundakbayeva and Beisegulova, 2015).

The methods, and, consequently, the outcomes of the revolutionary gender policies of early Soviet period were greatly contradicting. On one hand, mostly illiterate women in Kazakhstan (and in the entire Central Asian region) got access to education: whereas in 1926 literate Kazakh women made only 1.3 percent of all adult Kazakh population, by 1939 their part rose to 51.5 percent (Kozina, 2007: 38, 51). Women got access to health services and childcare resulting in significant improvement in child mortality which was very high due to the epidemics of highly contagious diseases such as typhoid or dysentery (ibid.). Gradually, women were entering the public sphere: “by 1940s, thousands of women entered the sphere[s] of public production and sociopolitical activism” (Kundakbayeva and Beisegulova, 2015: 116). Indeed, the expansion of the public space available for women, and the possibility for them to acquire education and occupation, get medical services, were among the biggest achievements of Soviet ‘emancipatory’ policies in Kazakhstan.

Since the 1930s, the issue of women’s emancipation had gradually disappeared from the communist agenda as the authorities proudly claimed that “the women question” in the USSR was successfully solved and once “oppressed women of the East” transformed into the “free women of the Soviet country” (Shchurko, 2016: 182). Since that time, women were expected to build communism alongside their male comrades: due to the increased shortage of workforce the state energetically attracted women into the labor force, especially during the Great Patriotic war

of 1941-45 (Michaels, 1998: 195). In wartime, women were allowed and encouraged not only work but fight shoulder to shoulder with men. Two young Kazakh girls, Aliya Moldagulova and Manshuq Mametova, became war heroes and symbols of Kazakhstan's brave and selfless participation in the war. Some researchers suggest that the Soviet propaganda intentionally promoted their stories to demonstrate that the state's gender policies in Central Asia succeeded, leading to "the success of the Soviet anti-patriarchal campaign" and "eras[ing] any discrepancy between femininity and combat duty" (Carmack, 2014: 105).

However, in the period of the 1930s and beyond, marked by a rapid industrialization and famine and war losses, the state demanded more work- and combat force, hence making a serious twist in its gender policies towards the reinforcement of patriarchal understanding of a woman's main mission as a mother. Hence, by expanding the public space available for women, the state at the same demanded Kazakhstani women to be simultaneously workers, citizens, and mothers (Shchurko, 2014: 145).

Such radical change of official approach toward the female reproductive rights signaled a new socialist perspective on "reproduction [...] as a state function, for which women should be rewarded" (Issoupova, 2006: 31), and the state, indeed, provided them with considerable financial assistance (Michaels, 2001: 323-324). Later, special honorable distinctions and titles for "successful motherhood" were introduced in the USSR: mothers of many children were awarded medals and orders (Akiner, 1997; Issoupova, 2006). However, by praising motherhood as the most important mission of women, as well as their primary duty before the state, the Soviet authorities simultaneously stressed the importance of another women's obligation – to participate in the workforce. Thus, women had to take upon themselves the dual role of "mother-workers," which is closely linked to the concept of the "double burden": a combination of professional responsibilities with all kinds of domestic labor and child care which were presumed to be the women's duty. However, this "double," or even "triple burden" (in case a woman was involved in social activism) might result not only in the feeling of self-fulfillment

and realization; rather, many women in communist states experienced a constant state of a “sheer physical exhaustion and a deeply ingrained sense of guilt” (Einhorn, 1993: 46).

Besides, the paid work was not that lucrative: though the Soviet women were employed alongside with men, the statistics of the second half of the twentieth century demonstrates that they were paid some thirty percent less than men (Michaels, 1998: 197; Ishkanian, 2003). In addition, in USSR existed a “gender-based occupational segregation,” prohibiting women from some specific (and quite profitable) occupations due to their alleged harm for female health (Ishkanian, 2003). The female participation in decision-making process was very low: during 1920-1991, there was only one woman heading the Kazakhstan’s branch of the Communist Party’s Central Committee just for two months in 1921.¹³ These figures demonstrate that, though officially proclaimed as reality, gender equality had never been fully achieved in Soviet Central Asia, not least because of the state’s reliance on “conventional gender order”: in Tatiana Shchurko’s definition, such gender order was simultaneously based on the proclaimed equality, “allowing every person to become a citizen regardless of one’s sex, and, at the same time, on biological determinism, endowing the femininity with “specifically” natural, physical and psychological features, whereas women were granted the status of special citizens” (Shchurko, 2014: 145).

Hence, the contradicting Soviet gender policies can hardly be regarded as truly liberating and fully successful as they were largely incoherent, representing, in Kandiyoti’s definition, the ‘Soviet paradox’

that resides in the combined and contradictory operations of a socialist paternalism that supported and legitimized women’s presence in the public sphere (through education, work and political representation), with a command economy and nationalities policy that effectively stalled processes of social transformation commonly associated with modernity. Whereas the communist regime achieved significant progress in some spheres of women’s emancipation, notably, in granting access to education and work, some other proclaimed emancipatory goals, such as representation in

¹³ Bibliotekar.kz: <http://bibliotekar.kz/istoriki-kazahstana-za-9-klass-nachalo-x/pervye-sekretari-ck-kompartii-kazahstana.html> (last retrieved on 26 November 2018).

politics and elimination of gender inequality at work were not met or met inadequately (Kandiyoti, 2007: 602).

To sum up, it is beyond dispute that the Soviet gender project offered women as many opportunities for participation in the public sphere as it could never have been imagined before. Women gained access to education, paid work, political representation, equal rights (at least, in terms of legislation). At the same time, the scope of women's rights and obligations had been carefully and firmly controlled, shaped and re-shaped in accordance with the state's most pressing needs. Thus, I argue that the way of addressing the "women's issue" in USSR had very little to do with feminism. In fact, the communist authorities drew a clear distinction between their own, "right" kind of emancipation of women and the "pernicious" Western feminism "as a project that defended *bourgeois* interests" (Kamp 2016: 270, emphasis mine) – namely, those of the capitalist society with the focus on a right to political participation (e.g., universal suffrage), as well as opportunity to enter the labor force without contesting capitalism, which was completely at odds with the communist ideology (Ghodsee, 2004). During the Soviet period, there was practically no room for grassroots female initiatives which might claim more space, be that public or private, as dictated by their own necessities and not by the Party. A tough Soviet grip allowed only very limited and, again, strictly sanctioned forms of public participation and suppressed any kind of public activism, including the feminist one: the communist regime was absolutely intolerant to any manifestations of its citizens' discontent and dissatisfaction with its way to solve "the women's question"; only the Soviet authorities could set and change the limits of women's space in the country.

A short story of a Russian underground feminist group offers telling evidence of such suppression. In the late 1970s, several female dissident poets, writers, and artists from Leningrad (now Saint-Petersburg) issued a few *samizdat* (i.e., underground, self-published) magazines with mostly (pro)-feminist agenda (though they could be regarded as a part of a broader dissident movement protesting the Soviet rule). They wrote, for instance, about the double burden laid

upon the Soviet women, their dependence on men and overall subordinated status in the patriarchal Soviet society; about humiliating attitudes of the healthcare workers towards pregnant women and those who had chosen an abortion, etc. This activism was very soon suppressed by the KGB (Committee for State Security), which forced most of the group's members to emigrate, whereas some of them were sentenced to several years of imprisonment for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" (Milewska-Pindor, 2013).

This situation began to change in the 1980s, when the socialist states of East Central Europe gained independence, and the USSR adopted new policies of *glasnost*' and *perestroika*,¹⁴ allowing to openly discuss once underground issues, including the feminist ones, "prompt[ing] public discussion [...] about women' status, gender relations, and equal opportunity" (Fuszara, 2000: 259). This quote, though depicting political changes in post-communist Poland, seems to be relevant for those in Kazakhstan right before and a decade after the independence.

Situating the emergence of feminism in Kazakhstan within the post-independence sociopolitical context

The emergence of feminism in post-socialist Kazakhstan became possible due to the specific combination of certain sociopolitical factors. First, due to the overall liberated political atmosphere in the country and the adoption of the legislation regulating the functioning of NGOs, the Soviet vacuum of civil activism was gradually filled by a multitude of civic initiatives and organizations. According to ADB, in the period right before the demise of the USSR and during the early years of Kazakhstani independence there were some 400 NGOs in the country,

¹⁴ Reformist social policies introduced by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985: *glasnost*' ("openness") campaign "was to reduce traditional constraints on the free flow of information", whereas *perestroika* ("restructuring") was "the full and practical re-establishment of Lenin's conception of socialism, in which indisputable priority belongs to the working man with his ideals and interest" (Battle 1988).

whereas from 1994 to 1997 this number grew exponentially, reaching 1,600 (ADB Overview of NGOs/Civil Society: Kazakhstan 2007: 2), including women's NGOs and feminist groups (Shakirova, 2015; Zellerer and Vyortkin, 2004).

Second, significant financial contributions were funneled to the country by outside donors (transnational financial and cultural organizations and foundations, aid agencies, private businesses, etc.). In her insider article on the institutionalization of gender policies in Kazakhstan, Svetlana Shakirova (2015) mentioned UN agencies, particularly UNDP, as well as the World Bank, OSCE/ODIHR, USAID, Soros, the British Council, SIDA, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation as some of the major players working with Kazakhstani women's NGOs.

Third, the transitional period was marked also by an enormous economic crisis which badly hit the Kazakhstani population. Though some contemporary researchers (Ghodsee, 2004) are cautious of representation of post-communist women as the main object of this economic and social collapse, claiming that such approach leads to women's "victimization," and rightfully stating that men were also badly affected by the turmoil, still, the crisis certainly had a devastating effect on Kazakhstani women.

In the 1990s, unemployment in Kazakhstan clearly had "a female face": women constituted up to 70 percent of the entire "jobless and poor" population, the educated women older than 45 years old "practically had no chances to find a job," whereas the wages of those who had worked were almost by one third lower than the men's ones (The Feminist League. *Otchet o polozhenii zhenshchin. Respublika Kazakhstan*, 1997: Ch.14). The welfare payments to families, which constituted a significant part of the Soviet paternalistic policies, were now insufficient or unavailable, and the "responsibility for supporting families shifted away from the state to families themselves" (Dugarova, 2016: 13).

Women became especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse, since "they were the first to be laid off and subsequently hired (if young) more quickly if 'attractive' and able to perform sexual favours" (Buckley, 1997: 4). Many women were involved in sex work: according

to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), in 2006 there were approximately “50,000 commercial sexual workers” in the country (Fayzullaeva, 2009: 252).

To make ends meet, women living in post-socialist countries employed various coping strategies. For instance, many of them, motivated by the deprived economic situation in their households and “their sense of responsibility to their family” (Kiblitckaya, 2006: 69), established their own small enterprises. In the 1990s, thousands of women from post-Soviet territories were involved in so-called “shuttle trade”: they traveled abroad, primarily, to China and Turkey, to buy some cheap consumer goods (clothes, shoes, and the household items) and resell them in their home countries. In 1995, some 150,000 people were engaged in small business in Kazakhstan, and nearly one third of them were women; as per the shuttle trade, most of its employees were women (The Feminist League. *Otchet o polozhenii zhenshchin. Respublika Kazakhstan*, 1997: Ch.15). Though the researchers note that such kind of business had mostly helped women meet only very basic needs (Bruno, 1997; Kiblitckaya, 2006; Werner, 2003), it paved the way for further development of female-run SMEs and invented a “culture of entrepreneurship” in the country (Bruno, 1997: 72). Among other benefits Werner mentioned “greater social interaction, reduced household chores, and increased physical mobility,” whereas the drawbacks might “extend as far as family dissolution” (Werner, 2003: 122).

The young and weak state was unable to cope with numerous problems concerning women and family, and some of these issues were addressed by Kazakhstani women’s NGOs. For example, the association of businesswomen in the northern regional city of Petropavlovsk ran their own SMEs, held events of public interest, appeared in media and even successfully (though for the short period of time) ran an association’s member for the country’s Parliament, whereas a small unregistered collective of rural women from the impoverished southern village of Yenbek managed to attract international donors’ aid to start farming (Zellerer and Vyortkin,

2004). In the country's capital of Almaty,¹⁵ *The League of Muslim Women of Kazakhstan*¹⁶ tried to combat domestic violence by means of persuasion, mediation, propagation of Islamic values of familial commitment, sobriety, and intolerance to intimate partner violence (Snajdr, 2005). Besides, in mid-1990s, an informal group of feminists decided to start activism in the form of an NGO, resulting in the establishment of *The Feminist League of Kazakhstan* – the first feminist organization in the country. I will elaborate on their activism in the Chapters 2 and 3, where I position this group vis-a-vis other feminist initiatives which are now present in Kazakhstan. In the remainder of this chapter, I will turn to discussion on the present-day situation with women's rights and liberties in the republic.

The state of women in Kazakhstan's contemporary sociocultural realities

Kazakhstan has quite a complex set of policies and attitudes towards gender equality and women's rights. On the decision-making level, the Kazakhstani authorities emphasize their commitment to the ideas of gender equality, claiming that all necessary conditions for its achievement have been created.

De-jure, it is the case. The very Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan stipulates for equal rights and non-discrimination of all its citizens, regardless of their "origin, social, official or property status, sex,¹⁷ race, nationality, language, attitude to religion, beliefs, place of residence," etc. (The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan: Part II. Article 14.)

Soon after gaining independence in late 1991, the republic was seeking to become a full member of the world community and exerted its best efforts to the process of elaboration of its legislation in accordance with international standards and requirements. One such trend in mid-

¹⁵ Almaty (Alma-Ata) became the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KazSSR) in 1927 and maintained its status until 1997, when the capital of the independent Kazakhstan was moved to Astana (ex-Aqmola, Tselinograd) by the decision of the president.

¹⁶ Though in his article Edward Snajdr (2005) hid the researched women's organization under the pseudonym "*The Society of Muslim Women (SMW)*" (307: n2), I am pretty much sure that he referred to *The League of Muslim Women of Kazakhstan*.

¹⁷ There is no such notion as "gender" in the Constitution.

1995 was the global agenda of *gender mainstreaming* – in Sylvia Walby’s definition, “a process to promote gender equality [...] also intended to improve the effectivity of mainline policies by making visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes, and outcomes” (Walby, 2005: 321). Gender mainstreaming was endorsed by many transnational actors – such as the UN agencies and other international organizations, which greatly relied on the growing women’s movement in the country (Shakirova, 2015: 214).

In 1995, Kazakhstani top-level politicians as well as representatives of grassroots women’s initiatives attended the *UN Fourth World Conference on Women* in Beijing. In the aftermath of this historical event, Kazakhstan committed itself to the promotion of gender equality by joining the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* in 1998, as well as by ratifying the *Convention on the Political Rights of Women* and the *Convention on the Nationality of Married Women* (“Strategy for Gender Equality in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2006-2016”: 3). Besides, a high-level official institution in charge of these changes – *The Council on Family and Women Affairs and Demographic Policy* – was established in the country (later it was restructured and is now titled the *National Commission for Women’s Affairs, Family and Demographic Policy under the President of RK*). This commission, in close collaboration with feminists and women’s movement activists, actively participated in the process of drafting, lobbying, and amending the gender-related legislation in Kazakhstan.

However, this process was much longer than ratification of international documents. It took the women’s movement 15 years and some 14 drafts to navigate their proposals through the country’s Parliament,¹⁸ and after the long period of ratification, two domestic laws *On Prevention of Domestic Violence* and *On State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women* were eventually ratified by the president in December 2009 and came into force in 2010 (Shakirova, 2015: 217).

¹⁸ Research interview with director of *The Feminist League of Kazakhstan* Evgenia Kozyreva, June 2017, Almaty.

These policies mark the state's apparent success in the process of establishment of a *de-jure* gender equality, allowing some researchers to assume that the country can “make gender equality something close to reality” and refute criticism expressed by other scholars, international donors and NGOs as “problem-driven” and engaged (Kamp, 2016: 275). However, as concerns *substantive* gender equality,¹⁹ i.e., its *de-facto* acceptance by Kazakhstani society, culture, and institutions, the picture seems to be far less rosy.

Kazakhstani women and children remain un(der)protected from gender-based violence and sexual abuse and harassment which constitute a persistent and often underreported problem. The inability of the state to introduce egalitarian discourse in the private sphere is particularly evident in findings of some reports, claiming that 26% of Kazakhstani men “accept wife beating” (Rani and Bonu 2015: 1371), whereas “every one out of three women suffer[s] from a form of physical, sexual or other form of violence” (OECD Gender Policy Delivery Review 2017: 5). The civil activists report that some 400 women die of domestic violence every year.²⁰ Though Kazakhstan has adopted the law *On Prevention of Domestic Violence*, many experts claim it is ineffective due to many reasons,²¹ such as the police's reluctance to proceed with such cases, women's economic and psychological dependence on their partners resulting in their conciliation, inadequate punishing measures for abusers, etc. Besides, despite the civil society's

¹⁹ According to the definition of the European Institute of Gender Equality, *formal* gender equality consists in “principles of equality of women and men, equal recognition and the enjoyment and exercise of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as measures providing for equal treatment of, and equal opportunities for, women and men in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, domestic or any other field,” whereas the *substantive* gender equality represents the combination of the *formal* gender equality with “equality of outcome, [...] equality in impact, outcome or result” (<https://eige.europa.eu/rdc/thesaurus/terms/1401>, last retrieved on 8 September 2018).

²⁰ Though feminist activists often mention this number while emphasizing the high level of domestic violence and femicide in the country, I could not find any official documents proving this exact data; however, this information was widely reported by the media as words of a Chairman of a civic organization *The Union of Crisis Centers of Kazakhstan* Zulfiya Baisakova. See, for instance, in the article by pro-governmental online news service zakon.kz: <https://www.zakon.kz/4462265-zulfija-bajjsakova-v-kazahstane.html> (published on 9 December 2011, last retrieved on 3 September 2017).

²¹ Informburo.kz: *Domestic Violence is Decriminalized in Kazakhstan. How the Tyrant Husbands Will be Punished Henceforth* (<https://informburo.kz/stati/v-kazahstane-dekriminalizovali-bytovoe-nasilie-kak-teper-budut-nakazyvat-muzhey-tiranov.html>, published on 14 June 2017, last retrieved on 5 October 2018).

continuing efforts to include the concept of sexual harassment into the country's legislation, these clauses were continuously overruled by the Parliament.

As a successor state to the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan inherited and preserved its discourse on equality of women and men in the public sphere of paid labor, education, and political representation which I described in detail above. However, along with some achievements of this approach, as a universal (99.9%) literacy of the country's citizens regardless of their gender ("Women and men of Kazakhstan. 2009-2013. Statistics digest." (2014): 65), and a high level of female participation in labor force (some 75% of all women),²² women in Kazakhstan are still exposed to various types of workplace discrimination, such as serious underrepresentation as at a senior management level (in 2017, less than 30% top-managers in the country were women)²³ as well as in the decision-making and academia. Currently, there is only one female minister versus 18 male ministers in the government,²⁴ and some 20% of MPs are women in both chambers of the Parliament ("Assessment of the implementation of the Strategy of gender equality in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2006-2016" 2016: 19). Thus, the officially proclaimed gender equality in the public sphere seems to be unsatisfactory, and the policies aimed at its achievement – largely insufficient.

Another Kazakhstani attitude towards women and gender equality, again, bears a strong resemblance to the Soviet way of addressing "the women's issue" – namely, the state's and society's essentialized perception of gender roles, particularly, in the private sphere of family responsibilities, reproduction, and sexuality. In its attempts to populate its vast territory, contemporary Kazakhstan employs similar paternalistic measures of financial support as well as

²² World Economic Forum. *The global gender gap report*. (2017): 194 (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf, last retrieved on 5 October 2018).

²³ Forbes.kz: *How Many Female Bosses There Is in Kazakhstan* (https://forbes.kz/stats/jenskoe_otstuplenie_1/, published on 17 April 2017, last retrieved on 5 October 2018).

²⁴ The League of Women of Creative Initiative. *The role of woman in Kazakhstani society*. (2018) (<http://wlci.org.kz/>, last retrieved on 5 October 2018).

legal protection of mothers and motherhood (Dugarova, 2016) as its communist predecessor; Kazakhstan even preserved the Soviet policy of awarding women for being mothers of many.

To sum up, in this chapter I sought to demonstrate the complex set of historical, political, socio-economic and cultural conditions which influenced and formed the existing policies and attitudes towards women's empowerment and promotion in Kazakhstan. It is evident that the country has achieved significant progress in the establishment of a *de-jure* gender equality understood as protection of women's right to be present in all spheres of public life; it is claimed by the state that there are practically no hindrances for women to acquire an education, build a professional career, as well as access the healthcare services. Besides, the Kazakhstan's government claims to be particularly supportive of motherhood and childhood.

However, the level of *factual* protection and promotion of women's rights still leaves much to be desired. Kazakhstani women are more likely at risk of poverty, abuse, domestic and sexual violence, they remain very much underrepresented on high-level positions in politics and business. Feminist activists see this discrepancy between the proclaimed and actual state of protection of women's rights as demanding action. In the next chapters, I will introduce the types of feminisms and activism which are currently present in the country.

Chapter 2. Introducing Kazakhstani feminisms: varieties, agendas, and activism

Introduction

In the first chapter I provided the theoretical underpinnings of my study as well as sought to demonstrate the tangled set of socio-political, cultural, and historical aspects influencing feminisms in Kazakhstan. This chapter will be dedicated to the introduction of the contemporary feminist groups and single activists to the reader, with an aim of answering the following questions: What kinds of feminisms exist in Kazakhstan? What types of activities do feminists perform?

As Koobak argues in her research on Estonian feminisms, they do not exist ‘by themselves,’ they are embedded in their geo-temporal and cultural contexts, but simultaneously remain “intertwined with influences from the West and it is in frequent dialogue with ‘Western feminism’” (Koobak 2018: 12). According to my observations of Kazakhstani feminisms, this presupposition is also relevant for them since they cannot be divorced from either of these two major sources of influence. Thus, it seems logical that in describing the types of feminisms in Kazakhstan as well as their positioning against the Western feminist framework, I will apply the feminist categorial concepts, such as, for instance, the notion of a wide *spectrum of feminisms*. Kazakhstani feminists support this argument: in words of my respondent, an artist,

feminism is not rock-solid, and there are many feminist movements... Sometimes these movements cannot agree with each other, which I deem as a positive characteristic, as a sign of democratic nature of feminism, showing that there is no patriarch, no “founding father” or “founding mother,” no “right” or “wrong” feminism. [...] I like that there are so many different feminist movements, and when I speak about myself as a feminist, I mean that I am an intersectional queer-feminist.²⁵

My research data demonstrate that in Kazakhstan the spectrum of feminisms is quite broad, ranging from radical, anarchist, and Marxist feminists to liberal to intersectional and queer

²⁵ The research interview A6, Almaty, June 2017.

feminists²⁶ with the activists deeming this diversity as a hallmark of Kazakhstani feminisms. Some activists with similar worldviews and values organize into feminist NGOs or grassroots initiatives: half of my respondents represent such communities. Other respondents, however, does not associate themselves with any specific group; whereas two interviewees (out of ten) did not specify their feminist identity at all. In what follows, I will introduce the existing groups, their identities and activism in greater detail.

I will start from the discussion on the country's oldest feminist initiative, working as a registered NGO for some 25 years; thus, the discussion on this group will be far longer than on the more recent feminist initiatives.

The Feminist League of Kazakhstan

The country's oldest and most prominent feminist organization, *The League* evolved from an informal circle of Almaty's intellectuals discussing feminism in mid-1980s. In the 1990s, during the period of democratization of the country's politics, the group decided to put their feminist theoretizing into practice, and in 1994 *The Feminist League of Kazakhstan* was officially registered as an NGO. *The League's* formal chairs and co-chairs occasionally changed, but its core remained stable, consisting of an artist Evgeniya Kozyreva, her husband, journalist Yury Zaitsev – and they remain *The League's* leadership up until today – as well as Svetlana Shakirova, a gender and feminist academician.

In the research interviews *The League's* members did not specify on the group's identification with any variety of feminism; however, they elaborated on their complex worldview which had embraced two quite contradicting approaches towards gender order: the one resembling the late Soviet ideology, and the other resembling the neoliberal Western equality. Since the members of *The Feminist League* grew up in USSR, they inherited the Soviet

²⁶ Here, I need to emphasize that there indeed might be more feminist identities which fell out of the scope of my research: what I exemplify here is based only on the obtained data and reflect the opinions of the research participants.

perception of equality of women and men as a belief in their equal right to be productive members of society and fulfil their potential in any domain, be that public or private. Quite in line with Marxist-Leninist philosophy, *The League's* members attached great importance to economic side of life and believed that by solving women's most pressing material needs, it would be easier to protect their rights and freedoms.

Besides, the group's secular positioning stipulated for a fair share of anticlericalism in the sense that religion must not influence state institutions such as government, education system, etc., and should instead remain one's private matter. In the research interviews, the group's co-founders explained that they had purposefully chosen "the scary word «feminism»" for the title of their NGO, as they wanted to demonstrate their outspoken opposition to *The League of Muslim Women of Kazakhstan* (depicted as "*The Society of Muslim Women (SMW)*" in Snajdr 2005), a strong women's NGO propagating Muslim values, which was quite visible and active in the beginning of the 1990s. Whereas this women's organization put an "emphasis on Islamic spirituality and [...] "traditional Kazakh culture"" (Snajdr 2005: 298), *The Feminist League* represented the secular, anticlerical approach.

The second influence largely informing *The League's* activism was their embrace of the Western neoliberal values of democracy, market economy, rule of law, primacy of human rights, individualism, and gender equality promoted by the global donor agencies and financial institutions in the form of *gender mainstreaming*, in which *The League* had actively participated.

Quite from its onset, *The League* perceived its activism as a *political* one, aimed at impacting the country's policies regarding women with an aim to improve their financial and social protection badly hit by the unfolding economic crisis of the 1990s. *The League* members comprehended the dynamics of power hierarchies in the country quite well, realizing that the well-tried methods of Western civil and feminist activism, such as mass rallies, protests, etc., would not work in given circumstances. As Evgenia Kozyreva recalled, since the late 1980s public demonstrations in USSR had been common yet unproductive: dozens of protestors might

had camped right in the center of Almaty and nobody paid any attention to their demands. Thus, to make a real difference, feminists had to affect the decision-making process through legislation and lobbying:

*We understood that the situation could be changed only by the steps “from above” [from the top-level political positions], the decisions made “above,” and we needed to get on the political level, on all possible levels where there was an opportunity to exercise power.*²⁷

Hence, the group participated in drafting, lobbying, and amending the country’s gender-related legislative initiatives: according to Kozyreva, *The League* participated in drafting of as many as 14 versions of *The Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women*,²⁸ and only the 15th variant was ratified by the Parliament. *The Feminist League* has been observing the process of realization of national strategies on gender equality by providing its *Alternative reports* to the UN in 2000, 2007, and 2014.²⁹

The Feminist League was also closely related to the process of the institutionalization of gender studies in Kazakhstan. Svetlana Shakirova headed the *Center for Gender Studies* in Almaty and, alongside with some other local researchers elaborated and taught university courses on gender issues, wrote textbooks, organized regional and international summer schools and conferences, published articles and defended academic degrees. The introduction of gender studies into post-communist academic curricula in the 1990s-early 2000s was implemented, partially, to bring its higher education into compliance with the international requirements, as well as in line with the abovementioned trend for gender mainstreaming and due to the researchers’ interest in a new promising discipline (Kamp, 2009; Shakirova, 2005; Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2014; Zimmermann, 2007).

²⁷ Research interview with Evgenia Kozyreva, June 2017, Almaty.

²⁸ *The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women*: https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30526983 (last retrieved on 10 May 2018).

²⁹ Research interview with Evgenia Kozyreva, June 2017, Almaty.

However, by the 2000s this discipline and field of study became unpopular and marginal: as prominent Russian gender sociologists Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova wrote, gender studies “remained on the periphery of [...] academy” and the feminist perspectives failed to become incorporated into the broad academic approach (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2014: 261-262). They explained such neglect by various sociopolitical reasons, such as the rise of conservative discourse “with its demands for a return to traditional values and its criticism of any signs of westernization” (Ibid.: 265), shrinking international funding of study centers and academicians, lowering demand for gender expertise, etc. The situation in Kazakhstan seems to be quite similar as the *Center for Gender Studies* in Almaty no longer exists, and, as it appears from my research interview with Shakirova, recently, there are almost no university courses on gender issues in the country.³⁰

Besides, *The League* has also worked as an NGO implementing various projects aimed at informing certain target groups (viz., politicians, decision-makers, journalists, NGO members) on gender and feminist issues; it assisted other women’s initiatives in openings of shelters and hotlines for survivors of domestic violence, organized summer schools and study visits to other countries, etc. Most of these projects were financially supported by the foreign grant-givers such as UNDP, UNIFEM, OSCE and the like (Shakirova, 2015).

In the research interview Svetlana Shakirova admitted that at an early stage of their work *The League’s* members activists had hardly reflected on the reasons why they had been supported by the foreign agencies and what discourses they transmitted:

³⁰ The gender research centers do exist, at least, I have found some mentions of the *Research Center of Gender Education at the Kazakhstan National University* (Almaty) headed by Nazym Shedenova, PhD; no separate website of the Center is available, only its title on the list of respective University’s “laboratories and centers” (<http://www.kaznu.kz/ru/15674>, last retrieved on 15 May 2018).

More recently, there was a news on the opening of the *Gender Economics Research Center* in the (private) *Narxoz University* in Almaty, with financial support by the *Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan*. The Center is said to be studying “the issues of women’s economic empowerment, household economy and division of labor, gender gap, gender statistics and budgeting.” Besides, there are plans to open a study course on “Gender economics” in the *Narxoz University* (information from the Center’s official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/genderecon/>, published on 20 April 2018, last retrieved on 7 May 2018).

The economic, financial, grant dependency was not a talking point. We took it for granted – if the donors came, if they helped us – [it meant] they were good guys, thanks! While receiving a grant, nobody reflected why did we take it – we thought we had so many acute problems that needed to be solved! We wanted to hold a seminar for certain target group, to open a shelter, to support a hotline, and all [these activities] were so great. Now I have no issue with this, I understand that all these financial flows are being redistributed [by the grant-givers to] their [American] organizations.³¹

The NGOs' dependency on international financial flows was also precarious because it might result in the activists significantly altering their agendas and values to comply with the external perceptions of the region. As Guenther (2011) pointed out with examples of East European feminist organizations, their cooperation with international donors could implicitly influence the groups' initial goals, blurring their original feminist perspective, "push[ing] organizations to pursue specific agendas and [to] focus only on a single issue or a narrow range of issues rather than advancing a broad feminist platform" (Guenther, 2011: 878). Indeed, as concerns the agendas of Central Asian women's groups, such collaboration with international donors in some cases led to highlighting of certain "indigenous" topics, such as bride kidnapping and the likes – a phenomenon of "self-orientalism," as Shakirova (2007) pointed out in her appeal to the women's organizations:

at international women's networks we often speak as exotic Other for "diluting standards." Consequently, we have to appeal to the worst forms of discrimination and inequality of women in order to legitimize our activities, which we feel is a kind of orientalist service to the West. Proliferation of the issues of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, sex traffic of women in Central Asia, self-immolation by women in Uzbekistan, marriages arranged by parents in Tajikistan, sexual workers in Kazakhstan – aren't these typical orientalist clichés and stereotypes? (Shakirova, 2007: 1-2.)

Numerous researchers and experts from the region (Kamp, 2016; Werner et al., 2018) also mentioned that the foreign-funded researchers as well as Central Asia NGOs' mostly addressed

³¹ Research interview with Svetlana Shakirova, June 2017, Almaty.

to the abovementioned problems which could allow them to obtain funding of projects dealing with these issues, ignoring other less obvious problems.

Over the years, *The League's* members' came to the stage of reassessment of their activism, understanding that it was a tool in a global contest for influence over the new ideological space which had been left empty after the fall of the previous ruling ideology of the state communism. In this contest the “global, transnational, national, and local actors [...] sought to influence the process, whether powerful, less powerful, or largely uninfluential, did so and continue to do so for sometimes very different reasons” (Zimmermann, 2007: 132).

Indeed, different players have had and continue to have different reasons for gender mainstreaming: for instance, in the 1990s-early 2000s for Kazakhstani authorities it was one of the ways to bring its legislation and development programs into conformity with the international requirements, to achieve global recognition as a credible partner for further cooperation and investments. For the transnational players gender mainstreaming, again, was one of the tools of introduction of their values and policies in the new regional context. Thus, initially the government and the international donors collaborated with feminists and the broad women's movement, using their expertise and assistance. In words of Shakirova,

it is, of course, a part of the geopolitics. To be sure, it is a part of a big global politics, [and] the Western agenda, Western values, liberal values, market economy must have been brought here. Gender equality constitutes a part of the democratic discourse, market economy, and neoliberalism. Regardless of whether we want [to admit] it or not. An [ideological] vacuum had to be filled in, the communist ideas had to be eliminated [...] and [this space] had to be filled in with the new ideas. We took this bright-packed “candy” so sincerely, we chewed it and we liked it so much. Now I understand that this “candy” was right, good, and beneficial. But we took it uncritically...³²

Indeed, once the goals of the state and the outside actors were achieved, at least on a *pro forma* basis, gender mainstreaming and related ideas of women's rights and liberties gradually

³² Research interview with Svetlana Shakirova, June 2017, Almaty.

disappeared from the officials' as well as donors' agendas. To some extent, such process of alteration of main actors' strategies concerning women reminds the way the Bolsheviks had claimed that, after the adoption of an emancipatory legislation in 1920s, "the women's question" had been solved in the USSR. As history demonstrates, quite soon the Soviet state's demands had changed as it had needed manpower and, consequently, the legislation as well as the official discourse on women and their role in the Soviet society had taken a different direction towards the promotion of "familial values" and motherhood as women's primary mission.

Quite similarly, some 100 years later in independent Kazakhstan the official rhetoric had shifted towards the same paternalistic vein. This shift was reflected even in the title of *The National Committee for Family Affairs and Gender Policy* which was renamed *The National Committee for Women's Affairs and Family-Demographic Policy* in 2008, losing the word "gender" as if this issue was not up for debate anymore. And the feminists were not needed, either. Once important partners in the law-making process as well as some of the major drivers of the discursive change, they became practically invisible and supportive of the status quo – as Evgenia Kozyreva admitted, the very tone of *The League's Alternative reports*, which were so critical back in the 1990s, has significantly changed.

By the 2000s, *The League* entered a crisis phase, marked by a "loss of original energy" (Shakirova, 2015: 220), occupational burnout, and disillusionment. As Kozyreva reflected,

When we've begun [the activism], we were thinking that everything would change in two or four years at the most, and everything would be just fine. No, it doesn't work like that, within 20 years we've got very small but important changes in the right direction. [...] Now, the new members [of the Commission for Women's Affairs...] want to amend the law [on gender equality], so, it's a work for another twenty years. We'd love to have it tomorrow, but it doesn't work like this. It [the change] cannot be swift because it concerns the mentality, and [our mentality] for 2,000 years has been patriarchy – thus, nothing happens swiftly. There is plenty of work for the next 500 years.³³

³³ Research interview with Evgenia Kozyreva, June 2017, Almaty.

In her study of Russian women's organizations Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom (2002) observed that the women's movement had failed to overcome persisting patriarchal and anti-feminist sentiments in the post-Soviet space – partially, due to the complex negative connotations attributed to this concept (discussed above), partially because the women's NGOs did not manage to significantly influence public opinion, remaining “largely unknown to the wider population, partly because of the self-induced problem of detachment [...], but also in part because of mainstream mass media resistance to covering issues of gender inequality in a significant or serious manner” (Sundstrom, 2002: 215). For Kazakhstan, this conclusion is also valid: though local feminists had access to mass media, at least, in the 1990s, their outreach was still limited, reaching only a small urbanite population but failing to address the wider audience, and, indeed, feminist outreach was not able to overcome the century-old negative perceptions of feminism and the need for women's rights.

It is also important to mention that by the 2000s the Kazakhstani women's organizations, including *The Feminist League*, lacked new members (Shakirova, 2007; 2015). Both my respondents mentioned that some interested people did approach *The League*, but they were small in numbers and did not stay with the group for a long time. Shakirova explained this phenomenon in terms of the “generation gap,” a lack of common ground between the representatives of different feminist ‘generations.’³⁴ Shakirova suggested that the youth might have preferred to organize their own groups rather than join the well-established ones as they might have been afraid of the authoritative activists throwing their weight about the newcomers.

Evgenia Kozyreva explained the lack of youth in *The League's* ranks by the apparent “unattractiveness” or “difficulty” of the group's activities, to a great degree focused on legal

³⁴ In a publicized discussion between Svetlana Shakirova and her colleagues, Kazakhstani gender scholars and activists of the 1990s-2000s, Shakirova referred to them as to the “first-wave” of Kazakhstani feminism (Exclusive.kz: *The First Wave of Kazakhstani Feminism Prefers Academicism* (<http://www.exclusive.kz/expertiza/obshhestvo/113878/pages/3/>), published on 14 May 2018, last retrieved on 15 May 2018).

work and reporting, requiring the new members not to partake in a rally or performance, but, rather, to learn by heart the existing legislation and compare it to numerous international documents on the issues of gender equality.³⁵ Kozyreva's assessment of the country's new feminist formations was somewhat ambiguous: though she appraised their rallies and performances as "remarkable,"³⁶ still, she referred to their actions as being necessary, "first of all, for them, because they needed to realize their potential," and, second, explained that she had to exert every effort to protect the younger feminists from serious troubles with the law. In Kozyreva's words, after the unauthorized feminist march in 2017, the Almaty authorities approached *The Feminist League* asking for explanations since *The League* was the only feminist group they were in contact with; thus, Evgenia Kozyreva together with some members of *The National Commission for Women's Affairs*... she persuaded the Almaty akimat not to punish the activists who held their rally in violation of several laws. Apart from this single case of an indirect contact as well as some occasional conversations, Shakirova and Kozyreva said they did not meet the contemporary feminists, did not follow them on SNSs or elsewhere online and in general were not interested in their activities as well as in establishing contacts with them whatsoever: Shakirova – because she had distanced herself from feminist research and activism, Kozyreva – because of her busyness and lack of time which she was dedicating mostly to the reporting to the UN.

Presently, the group has considerably disappeared from the public eye, rarely appearing in mass media and is being practically non-present online as it recently shut down its official website thus annihilating the collection of its reports and publications created over the course of some twenty years. Kozyreva explained this move with practical reasons, saying that the initiative had no human and financial resources to maintain the website.

³⁵ Research interview with Evgenia Kozyreva, June 2017, Almaty.

³⁶ Since Kozyreva said she watched their activities online, I presume it were *KazFem* performances which I will describe in detail further in this chapter.

Due to the combination of the above-mentioned factors, currently *The Feminist League of Kazakhstan* is much less visible and influential than it was back in the 1990s-first half of 2000s. Svetlana Shakirova does not participate in the group's activism anymore and has turned to another academic interests – however, occasionally she appears in media and in scholarship with rare publications on feminism. Evgenia Kozyreva and Yuri Zaitsev continue working for *The League*, participating in high- and expert-level discussions on gender issues in the country but mostly focusing on reporting to the international observers.

The Feminist League of Kazakhstan: influence and legacy

The importance of *The Feminist League's* input into the process of establishment of a feminist discourse as well as of formal gender equality by means of adoption of a relatively progressive gender legislation can hardly be overestimated. The group significantly broadened the boundaries of the discursive as well as legislative spaces for feminist activism in the country as it applied the very term “feminism” upon the Kazakhstani realities, making it particularly visible in the sphere of civil activism and media discussion. The group actively partook in the process of introduction of notions of gender and feminism into the system of higher education and research; it contributed to the creation of a network of regional gender scholars.

Obviously, it would have been far too demanding to expect that the small group of activists would be able to make such an enormous change as a reboot of the entire system of patriarchy, especially in relatively short period of time. As the above quote from Evgenia Kozyreva showed, at the start of their activism the feminists themselves might had been overoptimistic to think that such change was achievable in the nearest future, but soon they realized that patriarchy was deeply entrenched into the very nature of Kazakhstan's sociocultural norms and political values. Thus, they had chosen a seemingly right strategy to focus on impacting the country's decision-makers, influencers, media, and international players, which would hopefully transmit the change to the broader society.

At first, it might have appeared that the politicians, deputies, civil activists and journalists were supportive of the idea of gender equality and the state welcomed gender mainstreaming and respective legislative and policy initiatives. However, further developments showed that these changes were very often been met by a serious opposition on all levels of the state hierarchy and even within the very civil activists: in particular, many representatives of women's NGOs as well as female high-level politicians refused to be associated with feminism as they often misinterpreted this concept whereas some of them expressed hostility towards this notion (Shakirova, 2008; 2015).

Apart from that, the process of collaboration with the authorities was two-way: not only the activists influenced the authorities, but the authorities influenced the activists. To communicate with officials, civil activists had to adopt their vocabulary, methods, style of reporting. Besides, they contributed to the promotion of some of their colleagues into the official institutions (for instance, some of the women's and feminist movements activists became members of the *National Committee for Women's Affairs...*, MPs, or heads of the pro-state GONGOs). Little by little, the former activists became absorbed by the government machinery and turned from the system's opponents into the part of this very system. This attitude change affected *The League* as well, as it altered the style of their reports: in the research interview, Evgenia Kozyreva admitted that the group's most recent papers were written "differently" (i.e., much less critically) as compared with those written back in the 1990s, which I called "very critical."³⁷

Nevertheless, the 'first generation' of Kazakhstani feminists had significantly expanded – or, rather, created from scratch – the space for precisely *feminist* discourse in politics, research, civil activism and media debates. *The Feminist League*, together with the broader women's movement, managed to elaborate and lobby the adoption of gender-sensitive legislation in the country, and, thus, the 'new wave' of Kazakhstani feminism has emerged in a relatively more

³⁷ Research interview with Evgenia Kozyreva, June 2017, Almaty.

favorable political and sociocultural environment with certain experience of feminist activism. However, the political, social, and cultural realities of the 2010s are different from those existing in the 2000s and especially in the 1990s as the public space allocated for any type of civil activism has shrunk significantly.

The relative freedom of sociopolitical activism which existed in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, in the 2000s-2010s has become gradually replaced by much more restrictive political environment. The authorities significantly limited the space for independent political and civil initiatives, especially those challenging and opposing the official policies. The official explanation of such move was the necessity to maintain political stability, economic growth and interethnic peace in the country whereas civil activism has become widely regarded as dangerous, having a potential to cause severe political turmoil and overthrow the existing political power as the “color revolutions” in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Georgia had demonstrated.

Thus, the state introduced numerous measures to tighten control over the civil society organizations, for instance, by requiring them to disclose their funding sources, as well as the aims at which this financial support had been directed (Dubok and Turakhanova, 2017: 10); apart from that, the state has become the largest grant-giver in the country, which led many NGOs to the financial dependency on the authorities, and, consequently, to their subordination to the government’s agenda (Knox and Yessimova, 2015; Schatz, 2009). Large financial flows from the authorities to the civil sector caused the mushrooming of NGOs, however, with a small parcel of them being active, and the majority remaining “dormant” or existing only on paper (Knox and Yessimova, 2015: 204; Ziegler, 2010: 808, 816). Besides, the state has toughened control of the information flows through (often indirect) state’s ownership of many mass media as well as by means of restrictive media legislation, causing self-censorship in journalists and loss of credibility of mass media among their audience (Knox and Yessimova, 2015; Schatz, 2009).

Thus, by the end of 2000s the proven methods of civil activism, such as establishment of NGOs aimed at active engagement with the state as well as participation in public and media debates, have gradually lost their effectiveness since, as demonstrated here, most of NGOs could have hardly remained independent and critical of the state (Dubok and Turakhanova, 2017). In give circumstances, the contemporary Kazakhstani feminists had to elaborate their own concepts of feminism and activism, approaches and strategies to become visible in the new era.

Feminita

The Kazakhstani Feminist Initiative Feminita (further – *Feminita*) was established in 2015; currently, there are five members of this Almaty-based community.³⁸ Officially, the number of the group's members is small, which, I think, can be explained by the fact that this initiative includes lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. Hence, claiming to be its member is equal to outing oneself which is still a rare and dangerous move in Kazakhstan where only a handful of women dared to publicly announce they were homosexual (with *Feminita* members being among the most visible of these open lesbians). Thus, implicitly the initiative might include more members and supporters.

The group positions itself as an intersectional³⁹ non-hierarchical grassroots initiative with a specific focus on LGBTQ advocacy and promotion of inclusive attitudes, anti-discriminatory policies and practices in the Central Asian region. To achieve these ends, *Feminita* employs feminist praxis and theory: as declared on the group's official website, "*we are not afraid of feminism and regard it as a necessary [tool] to make the rights of the oppressed groups visible,*

³⁸ *Feminita* official website: <http://feminita.kz/about-us/> (last retrieved on 12 April 2018).

³⁹ The concept of *intersectional feminism* can be explained as "a critical perspective on social and political life that draws our attention to the ways in which human actions and constructs create injustices that are experienced differently or uniquely by certain groups of women or because of the ways in which norms of gender intersect with other forces of social hierarchy including race, ethnicity, geography, immigrant status, sexuality, disability, and nationality (Ackerly, Brooke, and Jacqui True, 2010: *definition from the book's companion website*).

mainstreamed, and manifested. Feminism is not exclusively about women's rights, it is a movement [fighting] for human rights and her/his dignified life."⁴⁰

Research and advocacy are the central types of the group's activism. In July 2016, the group presented its "Alternative report on the implementation of the provisions of ICCPR related to LGBT people in Kazakhstan"⁴¹ at the UN Human Rights Committee session in Geneva, Switzerland,⁴² reporting on the cases of violence and discrimination against LGBTQI people in the country and stressing the need of "anti-discrimination legislation that would recognise sexual orientation and/or gender identity as protected grounds in civil and family law" ("Alternative report..." (2016): 1). However, later the group reconsidered its agenda: since there were some other public groupings advocating for rights of *all* non-heterosexual, non-cisgender Kazakhstanis,⁴³ *Feminita* chose to be focused specifically on women and thus excluded the 'gay' clause from its agenda.

In 2016-17, the initiative conducted a comprehensive research assessing the needs of LBQ (lesbians, bisexual- and queer) Kazakhstani women, covering 228 respondents from 16 regions of Kazakhstan. The research findings were presented on various international occasions such as a side event discussion at Europe's largest human rights conference Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, Poland (September 2017)⁴⁴; the first European Lesbian* Conference in Vienna, Austria (October 2017)⁴⁵; *Central Asia Days* Conference held at Lund

⁴⁰ *Feminita* official website: <http://feminita.kz/about-us/> (last retrieved on 12 April 2018).

⁴¹ *Feminita*: "Alternative report on the implementation of the provisions of ICCPR related to LGBT people in Kazakhstan" (http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/KAZ/INT_CCPR_CSS_KAZ_24058_E.pdf last retrieved on 11 April 2018).

⁴² The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights) official website: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20276&LangID=E> (last retrieved on 11 April 2018).

⁴³ See the official website of Kok.team, the most visible LGBTIQ advocacy group in the country: <https://www.kok.team/ru> (last retrieved on 22 November 2018).

⁴⁴ See the Meeting's side-events agenda: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/335086> (last retrieved on 11 April 2018).

⁴⁵ European Lesbian* Conference website: <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/> (last retrieved on 11 April 2018).

University, Stockholm, Sweden (November 2017)⁴⁶; at the side event during the 62nd UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, USA (March 2018),⁴⁷ and other occasions. *Feminita* participates in some local/regional events, such as the OSCE/ODIHR workshops on identification and reporting hate crimes for NGOs and civil activists from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.⁴⁸

The international scope and broad geography of these activities and cooperation demonstrate that *Feminita* heavily relies on the support from the part of global governance institutions, namely, the UN agencies, as well as European and US human-rights watchdogs, which was confirmed in my research interview with the *Feminita* member: while claiming that Kazakhstani feminisms had to be closer to the country's context (I will elaborate on that point in the next chapter), at the same time she stated that in terms of the observance of human rights Kazakhstan had to be compliant with the strategies and requirements of international organizations, namely, the UN.⁴⁹

Such an alliance with international players might instigate questioning of *Feminita*'s agency and independent stance vis-a-vis their foreign partners, and members of the group seem to be aware and self-reflective of this criticism. In an article depicting the group's activism and the Kazakhstani feminisms, one of the initiative's co-founders admitted that feminists in Kazakhstan were exposed to the process of the "double colonization:" one the one hand, they are influenced by international development institutions which "to more or less extent form the agenda of local NGOs. [...] Feminists, activists from gender NGOs – whether consciously or not – adopt Western feminism's tools and use them to recolonize the private and political space"

⁴⁶ Centralasiengrupperna website: <https://centralasien.org/2017/11/15/central-asia-days-2017/> (last retrieved on 11 April 2018).

⁴⁷ UN Women: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw62-2018> (last retrieved on 11 April 2018).

⁴⁸ See the report on the official OSCE/ODIHR site: *OSCE/ODIHR workshops in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan help strengthen civil society responses to hate crime* (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/374149>, published on 2 March 2018, last retrieved on 12 April 2018).

⁴⁹ Research interview A2, Almaty, June 2017.

(Serkebayeva, 2017: 144). The second source of “double colonization,” according to this paper, is Russia (and the legacy of the USSR) with their restrictive policies towards social protests as well as negative attitudes to the LGBTIQ persons. The activist claims that the Russian colonizing discourse is also evident in Kazakhstani feminist circles which “*replicate the history of the Russian feminist movement with its division into the intersectional and radical, trans-exclusionary feminisms*”⁵⁰ (ibid.: 148). The activist regards solidarity and cooperation of women’s and queer initiatives, as well as “adaptation of [feminist] definitions and concepts into Kazakh” as useful strategies in overcoming the controversies between different types of Kazakhstani feminisms as well as in the process of their self-decolonization.

Apart from intensification of collaboration between local feminisms, *Feminita* comprehends the necessity to enter the dialog with the state institutions as the initiative aims at seeing *the political results* of its LGBTIQ advocacy. Thus, *Feminita* members decided and repeatedly filed for official registration of their union as a civic organization (“*общественная организация*”), which would facilitate their access to official institutions and request information from them. Here, I need to mention that although the official requirements for the NGOs registration stipulate for its *de-jure* hierarchical structure designating certain positions (e.g., that of ‘chairpersons’ or ‘subordinates’) to its members, *Feminita* planned to preserve its current non-hierarchical horizontal organization where all members were ‘colleagues.’ For *Feminita* activists it is a principled stand as they perceive the application of a hierarchy upon the feminist group as undermining the very principles of feminist equality and sisterhood, leading to blurring of its feminist substance. As an example of such negative effect of collaboration with the authorities my respondents mentioned the Kazakhstani women’s NGOs of the 1990s which gradually became institutionalized and bureaucratized, lose their effectiveness and original vigor.

⁵⁰ This quote is quite a direct reference to the positioning of another well-visible Kazakhstani feminist initiative, the radical-feminist group *KazFem*, which is also a part of this study and will be introduced further.

Another matter of principle for *Feminita*'s registration process was the group's refusal to remove the clause on its LGBTQ agenda from its registration statute, though they got some "friendly" recommendations not to mention this issue. So far, *Feminita*'s registration requests were rejected twice (with explanation that the group's aims do not comply with the state requirements for NGOs), and the *Feminita* activists regard this rejection as a result of the state's implicit homophobic attitudes.

While I was working on this paper, it pointed out that a possible reason of rejection to register the group might lie in the fact that the number of *Feminita* members is too small to comply with official requirements for registration of an NGO. Indeed, according to the Law "On Non-Governmental Organizations," the group filing for registration as NGO must include no less than ten citizens of Kazakhstan.⁵¹ Unfortunately, I am unaware of the details of *Feminita*'s statute and documentation provided to the registration authorities (in an online conversation with one of the group's members I asked whether she could show me these documents and she replied that she would consult with her colleagues on that matter. Since the papers were not shown to me, I assume that the initiative found this information confidential). I can only presume that the initiative, which has a lawyer in its ranks, is aware of the official registration requirements and the number of its members listed in the statute might be bigger than five persons; as I already mentioned, the sensitivity of the group's positioning as LGBTQ initiative might prevent it from publicly claiming that it has more than five members.

Nevertheless, *Feminita*'s creative strategy of an implicit resistance to the rigid official requirements as well as attempts to subvert the only permitted organizational structure, allow me to regard the group's activism as incorporating the two *feminist transformative tools*, that of the *border thinking* and *disidentification*, which I exemplified in the theoretical part. By engaging in the process of indirect subversion of the existing standards of civic-state communication, *Feminita* members think "in-between" the official and protesting discourses and *disidentify*, i.e.,

⁵¹ The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Non-Governmental Organizations," Chapter 2, Article 10 (http://egov.kz/cms/ru/law/list/Z960000003_, last retrieved on 19 November 2018).

neither identify nor openly oppose these standards, seeking to preserve their unruly feminist substance. However, taking a principal stand for a feminist initiative might result in restraints of its ability to expand its reach, which point raises an important question of the limits of cooperation between the state and feminists in contemporary Kazakhstan. I will address to this issue in the next chapter.

Krëlex zentr (Creolex Centr, Creoleak Centr, etc.)

This ever-changing title stands for an intentionally distorted phrase “Creole center” and refers to the Almaty-based “imaginary cultural institution” – a queer feminist art grouping, composed of contemporary artists, musicians, poets and performers. The very title of this intersectional queer feminist group emphasizes its elusiveness, deliberate refusal to be put within margins of any existing dichotomy and strong commitment to remain marginal, which allows me to address to the *Krëlex zentr*’s activism as another example of the strategies of *feminist border thinking* and *disidentification*, applied on every cultural and social institution and concept, from their plays with language to their gender and ethnic fluidity.

It would be problematic to deem the *Krëlex zentr* as a feminist activist group, rather, it is an art community giving various types performances, combining theatre, public discussions, music, poetry, and so forth. However, the feminist mindset is central for this experimental art, and the grouping shares some feminist concepts with the outside audience – which in their case is not complete strangers, but, rather, the creative community within and beyond Kazakhstan. For instance, in the research interview the group’s member exemplified a project they had conducted in 2012 which was centered around public readings and discussion of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. The participants of this event were the country’s artists. My interviewee recalled that at the beginning of the project the participants had been largely unaware and suspicious of the feminist theory and problematizing, claimed that there was no need of feminism in Kazakhstan and accused the *Krëlex zentr* in being opportunistic followers of

“trendy” feminism. However, according to my interviewee, in some half a year these persons changed their attitudes saying that feminism, indeed, is necessary for Kazakhstan. To describe this process of one’s exposure to and adaptation of the feminist mindset, my interlocutor used the metaphor of “the feminist lenses” which, once being put on, highlight the inequalities and hegemonies of the outside world, and the person in these lenses starts perceiving it differently and critically.

KazFem

KazFem was established in summer 2015 as a “platform for study and development of feminist theory in digital and offline space.”⁵² In a research interview,⁵³ activists told me that some of them had initially met each other before that time, while they were participating in a young socialists discussion group, *Abbie Hoffman’s Foundation* (recently renamed into *The Recentiment Club*)⁵⁴. However, later they decided to organize their own community with a primary focus on feminism and women’s rights. There are around fifteen to twenty active *KazFem* participants with some five to ten of them representing the group’s core.

As concerns the initiative’s feminist self-positioning, it maintains its original leftist orientation, claiming to be supportive of “socialist, radical, left, and anarcho-feminism.”⁵⁵ In the research interview the activists said they opted for this radical stance because it was aimed at “revision of all institutions, from family to economy and politics” grounded in the system of patriarchy.⁵⁶ Though *KazFem* members do not exclude the possibility of some men being

⁵² *KazFem* official profiles on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/kazfem/> and Vkontakte: <https://vk.com/kazfem> (last retrieved on 20 April 2018).

⁵³ Research interview A3 A4, Almaty, June 2017.

⁵⁴ The group’s profile on Vkontakte: <https://vk.com/clubresentiment> (last retrieved on 19 November 2018).

⁵⁵ *KazFem* official profiles on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/kazfem/> and Vkontakte: <https://vk.com/kazfem> (last retrieved on 20 April 2018).

⁵⁶ Research interview A3 A4, Almaty, June 2017.

supportive of female struggle against patriarchy, they insist on the exclusively female nature of feminism in general and their initiative in particular. Besides, in line with the Sekerbayeva's comments mentioned above, *KazFem*, indeed, represents “a radical, trans-exclusionary” type of contemporary feminism, rejecting the very category of transpeople,⁵⁷ which creates a ground for ideological tensions between this group and *Feminita* as well as *Krëlex zentr*, sometimes resulting in confrontation and heated debates.

Nevertheless, this clash of feminist opinions did not hinder their ability to cooperate, for example, to partake in the feminist march of 2017 which was organized by *KazFem* who invited other feminist groups and activists to join them on that day. In fact, this initiative is (or has been before 2018) well-visible in mass media as the organizer of several other offline actions. For instance, since 2016, *KazFem* activists held several performances on the main streets of Almaty, aimed at attracting passersby's attention to certain persisting gender-related problems. Thus, the feminists protested the practice of silencing the issue of domestic violence, for which matter they once “built a wall” of cardboard boxes inscribed with phrases “She is the one to be blamed,” “It's a family business,” “Put up with it,” etc., whereas a “beaten” woman lay behind this “wall,” symbolizing the victim of domestic violence hidden from the outside world by the “wall” of societal prejudices and reluctance to condemn abusers.⁵⁸ On another occasion, *KazFem* activists installed a temporary “memorial” of the female victims of domestic violence and laid flowers to it.⁵⁹ The group often refers to the issue of pervasiveness of gender-based violence in the country

⁵⁷ The roots of radical feminists' intolerance for transpeople can be found, for instance, in writings by Janice Raymond, such as “The Transsexual Empire (1979) and “The politics of transgender” (1994) which became “the archetypal articulation of radical feminist hostility to transsexuality” (Heyes 2003: 1099). For instance, Raymond explicitly excluded male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals from the category of women for having no shared female history; besides, she saw MTF transsexuals as not contesting gender inequality and oppression of women, but in fact perpetuating it by transmitting a stereotyped ultra-feminine, objectivized, “male-gazed” image of women.

⁵⁸ *Nasiliu.Net*: “Feminists Built a Cardboard Wall on Almaty's Arbat,” published on 16 April 2016 (<http://nasiliu.net/feministki-vystroili-na-almatinskom-arbate-stenu-iz-kartonyh-blokov/>), last retrieved on 20 April 2018).

⁵⁹ *Sputnik.kz*: “Installation [dedicated] to the Victims of Domestic Violence Appeared in Almaty,” published on 27 August 2017 (<https://ru.sputniknews.kz/regions/20170827/3103456/installyaciya-zhertvam-domashnego-nasiliya-poyavilsya-v-almaty.html>), last retrieved on 20 April 2018).

as their chief concern; however, to my knowledge, apart from these performances and online campaigning, *KazFem* did not embark on any specific actions aimed at combatting gender-based violence. In the next chapter, I will reflect on the issue of ability of contemporary feminism to act beyond information campaigns and performances.

In the research interview, the members of *KazFem* told me they tended to keep their radical stance implicit for several reasons. Firstly, their radical position can hinder their collaboration with counterparts from other feminist groups, committed to less extreme/exclusive agenda. Secondly, any radical position can pose danger for activists themselves as the present-day Kazakhstani legislation might be used for suppression of any type of organized protest groups, and *KazFem* activists have already experienced unwanted attention from law enforcement bodies.

On 8 March 2018, one year after the famous feminist march to which I referred in the beginning of this paper, a *KazFem* member from Almaty reported on her Facebook page that she with a dozen of other activists had agreed to march down one of the city's main streets. However, right before the planned demonstration, she was invited to a nearby police station for "a talk," and a policeman warned her that there had been a police minibus loaded with some 15 OMON⁶⁰ policemen prepared to detain them if they would start their march. After a long discussion, the activist agreed that the march would not take place, but the feminists would gather somewhere in the city center only to take some video of themselves saying no words, demonstrating no banners. During this filming, the activists were approached by two unknown men, apparently, plain-clothed national security service representatives, who let them know that they had access to the activists' chats in the online messengers and had tracked them down via geolocation services, so, basically, the feminists were under the police surveillance. The activists got the message and since that time they have begun applying to the municipal authorities

⁶⁰ Abbreviation for *Special Purpose Police Unit*.

(akimats) asking for official permission to organize mass events in accordance with the *Law on Peaceful Gatherings*. However, according to my sources, such requests had been declined.

After the mentioned developments, *KazFem* has become less visible; however, as follows from some comments on their V Kontakte profile, the group continues its work within the close circle of trusted members and supporters as well as on encrypted web-platforms such as Telegram since their communication via popular messengers such as Facebook and WhatsApp was most probably surveilled, making the prospects of future development of this group somewhat problematic.

Freestanding feminisms

Apart from the feminists representing the abovementioned groups, I interviewed other respondents who are not a part of any specific initiatives (however, most of them know the others and participate in joint feminist discussions and events). One of these interviewees claimed she was supportive of liberal feminism, putting a specific emphasis on the issues of persisting gender stereotypes, objectivation and sexualization of women in mass culture, tabooing of the topic of women's sexuality, and the like. Another interviewee was supportive of socialist/radical feminism (but was not a *KazFem* member), one more described herself as an intersectional feminist, whereas two more respondents did not specify their belonging to any particular "type" of feminism; as follows from the research interviews with them, their feminist mindsets can be described as a combination of intersectional and liberal feminisms, as well as postfeminism.

The type of activism of most of these free-standing activists can be described as the 'feminist journalism,' being particularly visible on the internet, where they publish their widely-debated posts analyzing the Kazakhstani realities through "the feminist lenses," discussing the issues of widespread sexual violence in the country, victim-blaming, female sexuality and its alleged suppression by the Kazakh(stani) cultural norms. Indeed, in Kazakhstan, many people

hesitate discussing the topics of sex and sexuality: this reluctance can be partially explained by the entrenched Soviet approach to these issues as “non-existent,”⁶¹ which is being recently reinforced by the local concept of *uyat*, which stands for, in the definition of Nurgul Zhanabayeva, “a local concept of shame [...] used as a mechanism of controlling correct gender performance, as well as an instrument of punishment for deviant behavior,” mostly the women’s one; it also refers to “a moral code which restrain[s] parents from discussing issues concerning [...] sex and contraception [with their children]” (2018: iv, 11).⁶² Given this background, there is a little surprise that the audience vividly reacted to the activists’ most provocative posts: whereas some readers expressed support of the authors for being brave for starting such a sensitive yet necessary discussion, others shamed and affronted the bloggers. Such overreaction demonstrated that these posts touched a sore spot of the society, one part of which, indeed, had very little or no ability/willingness to speak about sex and sexuality, whereas another part was ready to engage in such a discussion. Nevertheless, the bloggers’ activism turned to be productive for starting such debates as well as bringing the feminist agenda into the online and offline media, reaching out to the broad public.

Indeed, over the last couple of years, various popular and reputable online mass media, such as *Vlast.kz*, *Informburo.kz*, *The Village Kazakhstan*, *The Steppe*, *Sputniknews.kz*, etc. have published numerous interviews with the country’s feminists as well as articles on feminism *per se* – and in most of these texts the journalists demonstrated at least correct and respectful, at most – supportive approach towards activists and their ideology. I regard such representation of feminism in Kazakhstani mass media as a meaningful progress since much often media tend to depict feminists and feminism in a derogatory or scandalous manner.

⁶¹ This approach was coined by the famous phrase of a Soviet woman – a participant of a televised discussion (so called “spacebridge” between the Soviet and US citizens conducted in the end of the 1980s): “There is no sex in the USSR!” (Azhgikhina, 2000: 2).

⁶² In her Master’s dissertation, my peer Nurgul Zhanabayeva (2018) discussed the concept of *uyat* in the context of Kyrgyz youth’s premarital dating and romantic relationships practices. However, the same phenomenon exists in the Kazakh language and culture, and in recent years this notion is being widely address to and debated in public and media discussions.

Besides, in 2018 in Kazakhstan have been created two websites, entirely dedicated to the issues, closely related to the feminist agenda: first, the project of gender scholar and activist Qarlygash Qabatova Uyatemes.kz (“No uyat/not shameful.”)⁶³ This online platform provides information on sexual education as well as reproductive health to Kazakhstani youth and their parents – a bold and necessary move in the country with no culture of discussing intimate issues between adults and children, and where almost 10.000 underage girls experience unwanted pregnancy every year.⁶⁴ This site contains easy-to-understand information in Kazakh and Russian languages, provided by professional medical doctors and psychologists, or obtained from international educational web-sources and original research.

The second website, Manshuq.com, is defined by its team as an “online media for modern women, created by women for women, [...] denouncing sexism and accepting the equality of political, economic, private and social rights of women and men”⁶⁵ – thus, the platform demonstrates an explicitly empowering position, supported by its very title which invokes the name of Manshuq Mametova – a Kazakh machine gunner girl, who was posthumously awarded the title of a Hero of the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic war. This website contains articles on numerous aspects of life of contemporary women, such as relationships, sex, career, health, lifestyle, culture, etc.; besides, there are large interviews with successful Kazakhstani women. However, this website lacks Kazakh version (whereas a few texts are translated into English), and appears to be reflecting views and values of educated middle-class urban citizens but neglecting other Kazakhstani female identities.

These platforms cannot be described as entirely feminist as they, firstly, do not explicitly claim to be; and secondly, they cover a wide range of issues not necessary fitting the feminist agenda. Nevertheless, I consider the emergence of such web-platforms as a qualitative step forward in the process of delivering (pro-)feminist messages and concepts to the broad online

⁶³ For the discussion on the Kazakh term “uyat” see Chapter 3.

⁶⁴ <https://uyatemes.kz/about> (last retrieved on 3 October 2018).

⁶⁵ Manshuq.com: *About us*: <https://manshuq.com/about> (last retrieved on 3 October 2018).

audience. Contemporary feminists participate in creation of these messages – sometimes, by giving interviews or comments, sometimes – by writing articles themselves, and, again, act as agents of change, embedding the feminist thread into the large tissue of Kazakhstani public discourse.

Chapter 3. Modalities of feminist action and interaction

Introduction

The previous chapter, which was mostly descriptive, sought to introduce Kazakhstani feminisms, demonstrate their diversity and fragmentation as rooted in their different principles and feminist stands, as well as being significantly determined by the period when they have been established and the most active. In this chapter I will move from the description to the discussion on several questions which arose above, such as the contemporary feminisms' apparent lack of cooperation with the country's "first feminist generation," the problematics of their interaction with each other and with the state, as well as the specificity of their activism, to a great degree being a digital one, manifested in dissemination of information (which I refer to as a 'feminist journalism') and online campaigning.

Feminisms disconnected: generation gap

The above discussion on *The Feminist League of Kazakhstan* has led me to the conclusion that this group's contribution into the struggle for formal gender equality in the country was substantial and valuable. No less significant was its input into the feminist activism in general, since *The League*, indeed, was the country's first feminist initiative ever, introducing the very notion and practices of feminist activism to the Kazakhstan's civil movement's strategies as well as into the media and political discourses. In this part of the chapter I will move to the issue of *The League's* relevance for contemporary feminist activism in the country; my question here is how the contemporary feminists are informed by *The League's* activism – if informed at all; do they find their ideas relevant or disregard them?

As I mentioned above, *The League's* co-founders, Evgenia Kozyreva and Svetlana Shakirova, both stated that they had no connection with the contemporary feminists: Shakirova – since she claimed she was no more involved with *The League's* and feminist activism in general; Kozyreva – due to her work overload and reluctance to meet anyone beyond the scope of her

own professional interests (see the discussion on pages 47-48). Schuster (2013) explains such attitude as a bitter reaction of the representatives of earlier feminist generations who “have put much time, energy and commitment into achieving the feminist goals,” to the criticism from the part of the next generation of feminists, “who tend to be much younger and arguably less experienced in political struggles” (Schuster, 2013: 12).

But is there actually any “criticism” from the Kazakhstan’s “next generation of feminists”? How do they perceive the legacy of the earlier feminist formation? In fact, my respondents demonstrated different levels of their awareness on that matter, and so was their assessment of *The League’s* input and activism. Thus, three of my informants, all in their early twenties, not being members of any of the above-mentioned groups, were unaware of the very existence of *The League*, instead claiming to be “the first generation” of the country’s feminists:

*Feminism as a full-fledged movement is just emerging in Kazakhstan ... The history of its development is being written right now.*⁶⁶

Besides, a few more of my informants briefly mentioned they knew that *The Feminist League* had existed some time ago but gave no assessment of the group’s work or of its relevance to their own stances and activism. I think, this unawareness of the very recent history of feminism in Kazakhstan is indicative of the dynamics of the contemporary activists’ exposure to the feminist ideas. As I have shown, *The Feminist League* has cut most of the communicative channels connecting it to the broad audience: its members rarely appear in mass media, the group shut down its official website with a wealth of reports and other data, it remains invisible on SNS. Hence, for the young generation, which got used to obtaining all necessary data from the internet, *The League* is largely non-existent. Thus, this “new generation” is exposed to the information on the feminist theory and praxis from all over the world but has very little or no knowledge of the history of the feminist activism in their home country.

⁶⁶ Research interview A10, provided in written form, 2017.

There is nothing bad in being engaged with the global feminist developments; however, I think it can be problematic as the young Kazakhstani feminists with no knowledge of the earlier activism in the country may take for granted some of its struggles and achievements, such as the adoption of gender-related legislation, the establishment of the *National Commission on Women's Affairs*..., etc., which had become possible largely due to the activism of women's and feminist NGOs in the 1990s-2000s. Today, some young feminists tend to criticize this legislation and institution for being ineffective but, at the same time they are very much at an advantage in comparison, for example, to their Russian counterparts who are still fighting for adoption of laws on gender equality and against domestic violence, which never existed in Russia.⁶⁷ In my opinion, this situation represents the 'generation gap' at its extreme, when the two feminist generations have practically no common ground despite living and acting in the same country and even in the very same town.

Nevertheless, my findings suggest that other contemporary feminists were more familiar with the story of *The League's* activism, yet, they perceived it differently. Thus, the *KazFem* members appreciated the group's activism and told me they tried to organize a meeting with Evgenia Kozyreva but failed to access her.⁶⁸ Again, this situation demonstrates the persistence of the generation gap maintained not only by the lack of younger activists' involvement in local context and history, but also by the older group's inaccessibility.

Of all my respondents, the group most engaged with *The League's* legacy and its reevaluation is *Feminita*. Whereas its members do not disregard *The League's* input into the

⁶⁷ See, for instance, the Alternative Report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women on situation in Russia, linking the high level of violence against women to the absence of legislation directly targeting domestic violence and sexual harassment (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/RUS/INT_CEDAW_NGO_RUS_46_9974_E.pdf, last retrieved on 25 November 2018).

⁶⁸ As I already mentioned, Evgenia Kozyreva avoids meeting outsiders and made an exclusion for me only after Svetlana Shakirova asked her to do me such favor. When I told the *KazFem* activists that I managed to meet Kozyreva, they seemed to be surprised and a bit discouraged.

feminist activism in the country and study its reports,⁶⁹ at the same time they critically reassess some of its strategies. For instance, they problematize *The League's* close collaboration with the state which, in their view, has gradually diminished the group's ability to remain critical and oppositional towards the authorities. Since *Feminita* (quite similarly with *The League*) regarded its activism as aimed at achieving political ends and was the only contemporary feminist group striving to be registered as an NGO to enter a dialog with the state, it found *The League's* experience instrumental for the “lessons learned” process, crucial for building up their own feminist strategy, which, ideally, has to be inventive and flexible, allowing activists to work with the state and at the same time enabling them to preserve their agency and stance.

In fact, this point of the feminist collaboration with the authorities leads me to another crucial question: does the case of *The Feminist League* imply for feminist activism being (relatively) effective in Kazakhstan only when it is being backed by the authorities and the large number of women's NGOs who might not necessarily identify themselves as feminists but share (at least some of) its principles such as understanding of the need of gender equality and protection of women's rights? If it is the case, then does it mean that the lack (not to say ‘absence’) of the official support, combined with fragmentation of feminisms, their focus on very specific agendas and the overall limited number of activists stand for their activism as being much more problematic? I think that the most plausible answer to these questions would be ‘yes,’ with a proviso that the contemporary feminists are well-aware of these rather unfavorable circumstances and thus they try to adapt to them by means of cooperation and by elaborating the new types of activism, such as the digital feminism. Further in this chapter, I will elaborate on these issues in greater detail.

⁶⁹ In fact, the only available early report by *The Feminist League* and the UNDP country office, “On the state of women in Kazakhstan” (“Otchet o polozhenii zhenshchin. Respublika Kazakhstan.”), written in 1997, can be found only on *Feminita* website (<http://feminita.kz/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/%D0%9E%D1%82%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82-%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%89%D0%B8%D0%BD-1997.pdf>, last retrieved on 25 November 2018).

Feminisms interconnected: joint actions and common concerns

Despite certain differences in their agendas and positioning, the contemporary feminists tend to engage in dialogs with each other, sometimes supporting, sometimes contesting one another; the modalities of their cooperation and/or controversies seem to be directed by their stances. Hence, intersectional groups *Feminita* and *Krëlex zentr* closely cooperate with each other: for example, in spring 2018, they collaborated on publishing of a queer poetry book. Radical feminists from *KazFem* are also being supported by like-minded persons and groups (such as recently emerged *Fempoint* and *FemAstana* based in Kazakhstani capital).

Though radical and intersectional feminisms have certain discrepancies in their positions, they can put them aside and unite in achieving the common goal, such as, for example, the feminist march of 2017 which was organized by *KazFem* activists but was inclusive for other feminisms; or the feminists' joint protest against the sexist commercial by a big online ticketing service company which took place in summer 2017. In this advertisement, barely naked female models representing flight attendants offered tickets in a very sensual, provocative manner.⁷⁰ This commercial was harshly criticized for objectification and sexism by various parties, such as feminists, Kazakhstani and international mass media,⁷¹ etc. The situation seemed to be even more problematized by the fact that earlier the same year this company participated in the UN's *HeForShe* campaign, aimed at the promotion of gender equality and support of women.⁷² The Kazakhstani feminists came out in a united front urging the ticketing company's male top-managers to revoke the advertisement and to apology.⁷³ The company's heads refused to do so

⁷⁰ The full video was available via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm2pks4YeJY> but it is now unavailable due to the "copyright infringement," neither it is accessible via Youtube search.

⁷¹ For instance, see the reaction of *The Evening Standard*: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/kazakh-travel-company-s-naked-advert-sparks-sexism-row-a3605566.html>; that of the *FoxNews*: <http://www.foxnews.com/travel/2017/08/08/kazakh-travel-agency-under-fire-for-ad-featuring-nude-flight-attendants-pilots.html> (last retrieved on 09 September 2017).

⁷² *HeForShe* campaign's official website: <http://www.heforshe.org/en/our-mission> (last retrieved on 09 September 2017).

⁷³ The petition of Kazakhstani feminist groups (Stop sexism KZ, [Feminita](#), [KazFem](#), [FemAstana](#), the movement against gender-based violence [Nemolchikz](#), as well as organization [TEDxAbayStWomen](#)), urging the management of the *Chokofamily* holding as well the *Chokotravel* company to revoke their commercial as well as to bring public

saying they found neither objectification nor sexism in this promo campaign; however, soon the company revoked the scandalous advertisements from the country's billboards and digital space; now it is unavailable or blocked on Youtube.

Apart from these joint actions, feminists in Almaty often attend each other's events and performances – not necessary to reach agreements on all disputed matters, but, rather, to support each other despite all contradictions. Caroline Sweetman argues that, indeed, the development of feminist joint action happens not necessarily as a part of a well-defined political strategy – rather, it occurs on the grassroots level, in conscious-raising groups, where the feminist solidarity steps in, “strengthen[ing] the power of women to challenge gender-based violence, abuse, marginalisation and poverty,” multiplying their energies and capacities, “enabling them to take courses of action which would not be available to individuals” (Sweetman, 2013: 218). It seems that in Kazakhstan such process, whatever slow and hindered, is underway.

As concerns the specifically feminist strategies applied by the Kazakhstani feminisms, it is quite evident that some of them are well-aware and supportive of the *decolonial approach* since they use its conceptual framework in their manifestos (*Krëlex zentr*) and writings (*Decolonial Gender Epistemologies* by Madina Tlostanova can be downloaded from *Feminita's* website whereas this group's member uses its concepts in her articles). Both *Krëlex zentr* and *Feminita* resort to the transformative tools of *feminist border thinking* and *disidentification* as strategies enabling them to creatively interact with the state and society – without betrayal of their individualism and values but, on the contrary, with a premise to challenge the dominant powers.

However, the process of interaction with the state is complicated on both sides: not only do some feminists oppose it, but the Kazakhstani government and law enforcement agencies confront feminisms. The official institutions use their apparatus to create obstacles to *Feminita's* attempts to be registered as a NGO, thus limiting its access to official institutions. The state

apologies: <https://www.facebook.com/SvetlanaDdruz/posts/1895322544122210> (last retrieved on 09 September 2017).

forbids holding unauthorized rallies but rarely gives authorization for them to take place (in fact, this implicit ban extends over most occurrences of non-authorized civil mobilization, not only the feminist ones). Also problematically, the activists are being intimidated by the police or by some “plainclothes men.”

Moreover, the pressure on activists seems to be stepping up, as in August 2018 one of the *Feminita* activists was detained by the Almaty police after she had participated in an action that she had described as a “photo session” aimed at destigmatization of menstruation. In the swift court hearings, she had been found guilty in ‘minor hooliganism’ and fined at a rate of KZT 12,025 (some USD 33).⁷⁴ However, it is difficult to distinguish whether the feminists became subjected to such pressure precisely because of their feminist stance or due to the mere fact that they are engaged in civil activism as such, which is being largely controlled and restricted in the country.

Such alarming practices of suppression of feminist activism are not unusual for post-socialist societies: the resonant case of incarceration of members of *PussyRiot* feminist group in Russia for their ‘punk prayer’ in Moscow’s Christ the Savior Cathedral in 2012 as well as the very recent plan of Hungarian government to ban gender studies in the country⁷⁵ are among the most strong examples of the authorities’ backlash against feminist activism and theory. It is hard to predict how the situation will evolve in Kazakhstan, whether feminists will face more issues with law enforcement bodies and be forced to limit their activism.

⁷⁴ See, for instance, the report by the *Amnesty International*: Kazakhstan: Feminist LGBTI activist standing trial for photoshoot (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/kazakhstan-feminist-lgbti-activist-standing-trial-for-photoshoot/>, published on 16 August 2018, last retrieved on 2 November 2018).

⁷⁵ *Sciencebusiness.net*: Hungary’s Plan to Ban Gender Studies Sparks International Backlash (<https://sciencebusiness.net/news/hungarys-plan-ban-gender-studies-sparks-international-backlash>, published on 22 August 2018, last retrieved on 2 November 2018).

Going digital: online feminism as an effective tool of feminist mobilization

However, even in the situation of suppression from the part of the authorities, there is still a space for creation and maintenance of women's social networks as well as organization of campaigns against female discrimination. The example of feminist mobilization in such an authoritarian state as Iran demonstrates that the persistent civil movements can “grow under authoritarian regimes, among restricted public spaces and the repression of civil society” by means of “transition from public places to alternative spaces” – namely, the digital ones (Abbasgholizadeh, 2014: 833). This trend of civil activism, specifically, feminist activism, becoming active online, in particular, on the social networking sites (SNS), can be clearly observed in many parts of the world (Baer, 2016; Benn, 2013; Fotopoulou, 2016; Knappe, 2014).

The researchers lay special emphasis on the new forms of mass communication – i.e., digital media, SNS, and the like – for feminist mobilization, “creat[ion of] a renewed and widespread consciousness of feminist issues in the public sphere, but also for promoting a dynamic new engagement within feminism itself” (Baer, 2016: 18). Alongside with feminist mobilization and awareness raising, as well as with creation of communication links between the activists all over the globe, one of the most crucial goals of digital feminism is the “dissemination of the feminist ideas”, getting feedback, as well as “shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge” (Baer 2016: 18). However, scholars point out that the rapid development of digital feminism does not stand for disappearance of offline activism, with feminists remaining “embodied [...] and political subjects [...] enacting [them]selves through media practices and imaginaries of technologies and the internet, but also as citizens and users of these technologies” (Fotopoulou 2017: 5, 2). Hence, the combination of such factors as certain suppression of civil activism as well as the expansive growth and accessibility of digital platforms have led to the swift ‘digitalization’ of contemporary Kazakhstani feminisms, and the process of spreading of feminist agenda and debate on the is well under way in the country.

Among the most efficient and visible mediums of contemporary digital feminism researchers mention ‘hashtag feminism’ – online campaigns which have been occurring on SNSs since 2010, for instance, those related to the activities of *Pussy Riot* in Russia, *FEMEN* in Ukraine and the EU, *Slutwalk Berlin* and *Muslima Pride* in Germany, *#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen*, as well as very recent *#metoo* and *#Timesup* in the United States (Baer, 2016; Fotopoulou, 2017; Loza, 2014; Rodino-Colocino, 2018). By means of the immediate and all-permeating social media, these campaigns addressed different issues such as, for instance, resistance to sexual harassment in various parts of the world, creating senses of “affective solidarity” and “empowerment through empathy” among the campaigns’ participants and audience (Rodino-Colocino, 2018: 98-99), as well as in the establishment of social movements, such as the *Time’s Up!* campaign, primarily aimed at real changes and assistance to the survivors of rape and sexual abuse.⁷⁶ Quite at the same time, a similar hashtag feminist initiative has taken place in some of the post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, where many women’s narratives of survived sexual harassment grow out of the online space and become a matter of social life and civil activism.

#HeMолчи: a hashtag campaign as a catalyst of feminist activism and cooperation

The above-mentioned cases of “online journalism” in the form of the feminism activists’ blogs illustrated the process of feminist rhetoric and argumentation entering the Kazakhstani public discourse. In summer 2016, a particularly notable example of online activism took place in the country’s digital space. This online campaign, aimed at revealing the scope of sexual abuse and harassment through the narratives of survivors, has initially occurred on the Russian-speaking segment of Facebook and involved several post-Soviet countries. In Kazakhstan, it

⁷⁶ The official campaign’s website: <https://www.timesupnow.com/> (last retrieved on 8 September 2018).

outgrew the framework of a hashtag feminist campaign, paving the way for the establishment of a national initiative against gender-based violence.

The campaign originated in Ukraine, where, on 5 July 2016, a social activist Nastya Melnychenko published a story of experienced sexual abuse on her Facebook page, urging other women “not to keep silence,” accompanying her post with a hashtag #яНеБоюсьСказать (“I am not afraid to say it”). In the following weeks, this ‘flashmob’ took the Ukrainian and Russian segments of Facebook by storm: thousands of women and some men revealed their stories or supported other participants (Lokot, 2018).

Many Facebook users in Kazakhstan supported this initiative, using a Russianized version of hashtag #яНеБоюсьСказать in combination with the locally introduced one, #НеМолчи (“Don’t keep silence”). One of the persons revealing a story of a gang rape that she had survived at the age of twenty, was a prominent producer Dinara Smailova (Dina Tansari), who, on the back of this online campaign, established a *National Movement Against Sexual Violence NeMolchi.KZ*. This initiative claims to be providing women – survivors of sexual abuse – with psychological and judicial assistance as well as publicity and media attention as a guarantee that their cases will not be “shut down” by the police or dismissed due to conciliation of the parties.⁷⁷

The example of this digital feminist campaign is very important for several reasons. First, #яНеБоюсьСказать/#НеМолчи hashtag campaigns overcame the well-established mode of personal and persistent” (Lokot, 2018: 13). It was, maybe, the very first time when so many

⁷⁷ Official Facebook profile of the National Movement Against Sexual Violence *NeMolchi.KZ*: <https://www.facebook.com/NeMolchiKZ/> (last retrieved on 29 October 2017).

NeMolchi.KZ initiative has become a target in a scandal aimed at discrediting of its leader, Dina Tansari. In fall 2017, some civil activists, including the initiative’s ex-members, accused Tansari in getting money from the persons she claimed she was protecting, and using this money for her personal gain. However, in fall 2018, one year after these accusations had been made public, no information on the status of these accusations has occurred in media or elsewhere.

women in this part of the world confronted the culture of victim-blaming and stigmatization of survivors of rape by revealing their bitter personal stories. This campaign showed that women did not want to “keep silence” anymore; instead, they were ready to be in focus of public and media discussions.

Mass media in Kazakhstan actively covered news related to the *#HeMолчи* campaign. Though in some cases they produced the sensationalist, tabloid reports insensitive to the survivors’ feelings,⁷⁸ some other articles were more balanced, covering not only the shocking details copied from the women’s online confessions but also providing the experts’ comments on what actions might have been done to solve the issue.⁷⁹ Thus, this digital hashtag campaign affected the flow of “traditional” media and transmitted once “shameful” and muted issue of gender-based violence into the public discourse.

Second, the mass character of this hashtag campaign clearly demonstrated that there were thousands of women and men who had experienced sexual abuse (given that not all survivors found the resolve to openly speak about their traumatic experiences). The avalanche of revelations illuminated the fact that sexual harassment and abuse were deeply ingrained in Kazakhstani social and family life. Thus, this campaign emphasized the legitimacy of claims made by civil activists and feminists on the ubiquity and persistency of gender-based violence in the country as well as incapability of legislation and police to defend women and girls. *#HeMолчи* campaign showed that this problem was not made up by activists but was real and systematic, and, as such, the authorities, civil society, law-enforcement bodies, mass media, etc. had to join forces for its elimination.

⁷⁸ See, for instance, the report by *Nur.kz*: “A Prominent Kazakhstani Producer Revealed The Story of Being Raped in The Young Age” <https://www.nur.kz/1187430-izvestnyy-kazakhstanskiy-prodyuser-ra.html> (published on 12 July 2016, last retrieved on 4 April 2018).

⁷⁹ See, for instance, the report by *Novaya Gazeta-Kazakhstan*: “Life is Dreadful, But I’m Not Afraid to Say It” (<https://www.nur.kz/1187430-izvestnyy-kazakhstanskiy-prodyuser-ra.html>), published on 14 July 2016, last retrieved on 4 April 2018).

Third, the example of the initiative against sexual abuse *NeMolchi.KZ* demonstrated the potential of digital feminism campaign to reach beyond the boundaries of the internet and turn into the real-world activism, indicating that

cyberspace not only accelerates the speed of information exchange and social mobilization by providing a place for information exchange, it also facilitates movement organization and movement building (Abbasgholizadeh, 2014: 839),

and this was exactly what has happened in Kazakhstan. This hashtag campaign acted as a catalyst in the process of creation of feminist action in the country, when the public debates on the painful subject of everyday gender-based violence transformed into online as well as offline civil society force. Interestingly, in course of her cooperation with feminist groups the *NeMolchi.KZ* campaign's leader became exposed to the feminist theory and praxis and gradually adopted it. Indeed, the "founding mother" of *NeMolchi.KZ* Dina Tansari did not identify herself as a feminist at the start of her initiative in 2016. However, some two years later she uses feminist argumentation in her blog entries, tags prominent feminist figures and organizations in her appeals, and closely cooperates with one of the country's most active feminist groups, *Feminita*. This group was among the first feminist initiatives supporting *NeMolchi.KZ* by providing legal assistance and sharing the feminist theory; *Feminita* also used its Facebook blogs and website for spreading information on the campaign.

Within a short space of time, *NeMolchi.KZ* has managed to become locally and internationally recognized. In August 2017, the initiative marked its first anniversary by a high-level conference with the participation of the representatives of the regional division of UN-Women and the General Prosecutor Office.⁸⁰ In September 2017, Dina Tansari was chosen to participate in The Global Goals World Cup in New York, USA, "an all-women football

⁸⁰ See, for instance, the report by *Vlast.kz*: "When People's Hearts Became So Hardened?" <https://vlast.kz/avtory/24583-kogda-ludi-uspeli-tak-ocerstvet.html>, published on 31 August 2017, last retrieved on 30 September 2018).

tournament organized by the UN to raise awareness on the Sustainable Development Goals.”⁸¹ In March 2018, a lawyer working with *NeMolchi.KZ*, Aiman Umarova, was awarded the 2018 International Women of Courage Award by the U.S. Department of State.⁸² Gradually, *NeMolchi.KZ* has become backed by numerous feminists and pro-feminists from across the country and beyond Kazakhstan; the most recent example of this support is illustrated by their participation in a new hashtag campaign titled “(say) No to reconciliation with abusers” («*Hem примирению с насильником*») aimed at challenging the existing legislation allowing abusers to “reconcile” with rape survivors and/or their families and thus not to bring their cases to the court; in order to remain unpunished, the violators try to bribe survivors and their relatives, as well as intimidate, victim-blame and exert physical or moral coercion on them. In November 2018, *NeMolchi.KZ* announced its plans to appeal to Kazakhstani MPs with demands to change the national legislation by eliminating the clause on reconciliation with abusers.⁸³

However, all these rather positive developments and achievements did not guarantee the group any success in its main field of activism – that of juridical support and representation in court of survivors of sexual violence and abuse. As Dina Tansari bitterly admitted, in 2018 *NeMolchi.KZ* lost most of its cases: they were closed either “due to a lack of evidence” or due to conciliation of the parties.⁸⁴ In one particularly notable case, a 19-y.o. working-class woman, who had accused an ex-deputy/powerful businessman in rape, was herself accused of false denunciation and sentenced to three years in prison.⁸⁵

⁸¹ See the quote from the official Facebook profile of the UN Central Asia published on 18 August 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/unwomen.centralasia/posts/1946946622185343> (last retrieved on 30 September 2018).

⁸² See the announcement on Umarova’s awarding in media note by the International Women of Courage Award: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/03/279434.htm>, published on 21 March 2018, last retrieved on 4 April 2018).

⁸³ This campaign is planned for 27-28 November 2018, the corresponding information is available on Dina Tansari’s Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/dina.tansari/posts/2523279154379055>).

⁸⁴ As published on *NeMolchi.KZ* initiative’s Facebook page on 16 September 2018 (<https://www.facebook.com/NeMolchiKZ/>).

⁸⁵ See the report by *Zakon.kz*: “A Girl Accusing an Ex-Deputy in Rape Is Sentenced in East Kazakhstan Oblast” (<https://www.nur.kz/1744131-obvinavsuu-eks-deputata-v-iznasilovanii-devusku-osudili-v-vko.html>, published on 25 July 2018, last retrieved on 30 September 2018).

Considering this background of the feminist activism in the country, I can conclude that the feminists in Kazakhstan have reached the point at which they have started to experience resistance from those who are in power. They demonstrate – sometimes, implicitly, sometimes, quite openly – that they would not tolerate the attempts to bring civil activism and protest sentiment in to the decision-making processes, cities’ streets, official media, and the like. Nevertheless, I demonstrated how feminists use the limited space of civil activism by engaging in various types of activities; at the same time, some of them embark on a process of rethinking, reconceptualizing of feminism in order to bring it closer to the country’ context and realities, to ground it in Kazakh(stani) culture and values which might presumably diminish the opposition towards this concept which is still common among many people in the country. In the following chapter, I will move to the discussion on the process of such reconceptualization of feminism.

Chapter 4. Conceptualizing Kazakh(stani) feminisms: on the intersection of global influences and local contexts

Introduction

In previous chapters of this thesis, providing a detailed inquiry into the feminist activism in Kazakhstan, I sought to show that despite its quarter-century history and certain achievements, feminism remains widely contested, opposed, and marginal, whereas feminists, still very limited in numbers, are perceived with a great degree of suspicion and negativity. At the same time, the country faces a multitude of gender-related problems, such as the persistent violence against women and girls, including, but not limited to sexual, domestic, economic abuse; prevalence of teenage pregnancies, underage marriages, and female suicides; lack of women on top positions in all sectors of employment; widespread misogynic and stereotyping attitudes towards women as well as unrealistic expectations of their responsibilities, appearance, and behavior; discrimination of women on grounds of their gender, sexuality, religion, and so forth. Thus, there is an evident discrepancy between the necessity for feminist action aimed at protection of women's rights and integrity, awareness-raising campaigns on domestic and sexual abuse, sexual education, etc., and the factual rejection of feminism by a large part of the population.

This discrepancy is very much reflected by the feminists themselves, and, as appears from my research interviews, some of my respondents engage in the process of reconceptualizing of the existing feminist thought and action to make it more suitable for Kazakhstani context. In this chapter I argue that in the process of this rethinking, some of the country's feminists attempt to legitimize their fight for women's rights and liberties by grounding it in local culture(s) and values. In this chapter, I will elaborate on this process of reconceptualization of feminism as well as on possible ways of its development in Kazakhstan as defined by the activists themselves.

Embedding feminism in Kazakhstani context

Prior to going to the central topic of this chapter, I must make it clear that not all my respondents feel the need of feminism being adapted for Kazakhstani context. For instance, radical/socialist feminists, including *KazFem* members, consider feminism as a universal notion, standing for the same goals and fighting against the same system of oppression – that of patriarchy – in all corners of the world. Similarly, an artist from the *Krelex Centr* art grouping said that Kazakhstani feminists did not have to “reinvent the wheel” and can “appropriate” the already existing feminist findings and strategies. On one hand, this process of “appropriation” of feminist action and thought by Kazakhstani activists is inevitable since the very concept of feminism originated and has been developing beyond our country. However, this exact embeddedness in very different sociopolitical, cultural, historical settings makes if not the process of “appropriation” but that of “application” of feminism problematic in Kazakhstan. Indeed, the country’s feminists address issues persistent in most societies of the world. The question is how to approach these issues from the position which would will be the most efficient in given circumstances? As I argued in the beginning of this chapter, some of my interviewees see a possible solution to this question in elaboration of the concepts of feminisms which would be sensitive to Kazakhstani context, which process resonates with Koobak’s appeal to do the work of building new embedded and embodied knowledges that are more attuned to our local geo-temporal context, experiences and subjectivities, always beginning with ourselves, with our bodies, with our geopolitical locatedness (Koobak, 2018: 13).

The notion of the feminism’s ‘embeddedness’ in the country’s context is central for my respondents’ conceptualization of the country’s feminisms; hence, I think that it would have been more accurate to define it as not “Kazakhstani” but “Kazakh” feminism, bearing in mind that none of my interviewees was limiting its scope to one ethnicity. Rather, they referred to Kazakh culture, language, and traditions as the insightful underpinnings for formulation of a specific type of feminism. For instance, several interviewees emphasized the necessity of translation of articles, brochures, and other information materials and literature on the issues of

gender equality, gender-based violence, sexuality, etc. into Kazakh as they saw a significant gap in providing Kazakh-speaking audience with such kind of information; in words of my respondent, “*everybody must have access to information on where the nearest shelter is.*”⁸⁶ This intention, however, opens the feminists up to criticism of being “enlighteners,” educating “ignorant” others against their will, thus, they do not hasten the process of “dissemination of feminist information” to the county’s regions and remote auyls, claiming that the interest in this initiative must be mutual, expressed by both sides and not imposed upon somebody:

*Why don’t we, people with no specific problems, deal with our [own issues]? After all, it is not nice to meddle in someone else’s affairs, it is colonialism, too. When there will be their own activists [in rural areas], we could work together.*⁸⁷

It is interesting that while addressing to the problems of women living in countryside, my interviewee – a young, urbanite visual artist – referred to her possible involvement in these women’s affairs as an example of colonialism, thus, reflecting on the modality of relationship between educated urbanite feminists and rural women. Indeed, there is a trap of perpetuation of a deeply rooted perception of Kazakh rural women as eternal victims of gender-based discrimination and inequality, which should be “saved” and “modernized.” This attitude can be traced from the period of Russian colonization, through the works of pre-Soviet Central Asian Jadids reformists up to the Soviet modernizing discourse on Central Asia (Shchurko, 2016; Tlostanova, 2010). Given the embeddedness of this victimizing, objectivizing vision of auyl women, the ability of contemporary feminists to reflect upon it can be regarded as a sign of Kazakhstani feminisms’ shift from being simply one more “modernizing,” “saving” force to a more sensitive, empathic stance not intended to impose its values upon all women around.

The contemporary Kazakhstani feminists try to unravel the multilayer set of discourses on women, their rights and places, on gender and feminism, defined by the Soviet legacy and

⁸⁶ Research interview A6, June 2017, Almaty.

⁸⁷ Research interview A7, June 2017, Almaty.

Western influences, and add national meanings to these concepts. Thus, one of my respondents, a Kazakh woman mostly living abroad and not being a part of Almaty feminist community, shared with me her concept of Kazakh feminism as being grounded in what she defines as “gender balance,” which, in her opinion, existed in nomadic communities a long time ago. For instance, she mentioned such attitudes as respect for women and girls, their protection from the part of their fathers, husbands, and brothers, as positive features of national culture which, in her view, also contains the concepts of gender equality and women’s right for self-reliance and autonomy.

Such a vision of nomadic culture as not contradicting to the concepts of gender equality and women’s rights, but, on the contrary, as embracing these ideas, which, according to my respondent, have always been ingrained into this culture but might have been forgotten, disrupted, and corrupt with time, has wide distribution these days. In her insightful study of contemporary Central Asian female artists, Diana Kudaibergenova (2016) observed quite similar intentions of the artists who had foregrounded women and their problems in their artwork and tried to distil the authentic gender equality from the colonizing influences. Yet, Kudaibergenova emphasized that despite placing women at the heart of their art, her respondents rejected regarding it as feminism and themselves as feminists:

[w]hat they argue for instead is the restoration of the normal and authentic vision of the national character and culture in Central Asia by bringing gender equality and strong positions of women back into an ideology that, in their opinion, was imitated in the new Sovietized form for the interests of a few, mostly male, powerful figures. [...] Their denial of feminist art positioned as something unnatural to the normal conditions of the “real Central Asia” (defined by them in terms of full gender equality) is explained by their initial beliefs and visions on how things work “here.” In doing so, they locate gender equality at the heart of authentic (not constructed) Central Asian culture and values (Kudaibergenova, 2016: 227).

To me, the fact that my respondent, independently from the researched artists of the region, but well in tune with them, voiced a quite similar opinion, illuminates a significant trend of Kazakh women addressing to the nomadic culture as a source of their empowerment,

independence, and equal status in contemporary society. This trend demonstrates that some Kazakh women, regardless of their self-positioning as feminists or non-feminists, feel the need to legitimize their fight for their rights and liberties, and in doing this they use the example of the Great Steppe as the origin of such equality.

However, the vaguely described concept of “an authentic gender balance” remains very much problematic since it is subject to anyone’s interpretation. Since this interpretation largely depends on a researcher’s or activist’s stance and positioning, hence it can be used to support literally any views. Thus, whereas some feminists regard the “primordial gender balance” as a proof of gender equality being embedded in the system of Kazakh national values, their opponents can use the very same argumentation to dismiss feminism by claiming that, since “gender balance” is embedded in the country’s ancient past, hence, the feminists’ struggle for women’s rights in the country is at least unnecessary, and at most detrimental: why should one fight for gender equality if it has always been there? Moreover, the politicians, researchers and public figures opposing the very concept of “gender equality” as entirely wrong, alien, and misleading, can also use the above-mentioned examples of Kazakh men being “protective and respectful” of women as an evidence of existence of essentially different categories of women and men who cannot be “equal” due to their very “nature.” Hence, though the intellectual attempts of some Kazakhstani feminists to legitimize their stance by grounding the modern and, well, imported concept of gender equality in the elusive conception of authentic, primordial “gender balance” is understandable and intriguing, yet, it might be dangerous for feminist activism in the country as it can have a double edge effect, undermining the significance of feminist action as unnecessary and “unnatural.”

Nevertheless, other participants of this study do not address the disputed ancient history of the region as a mean of bringing their activism closer to local realities. Instead, they highlight the examples of Kazakh/stani women’s potential, self-reliance and independence as pointing to the fact that women in our country have had and do have agency and stance, regardless of societal

(mis)perception of “Eastern women” as obedient, domestic, dependent – again, a stereotype deeply rooted in the region’s past and still very persistent in its present. Typically, my respondents drew the cases of women exercising their agency from the experience of their own families, from the positive examples of their mothers and other relative women. In many interviews they referred to their mothers as close friends, who supported them in every endeavor, including feminism; sometimes they called their mums feminists – however, as appears from the data, only a few of them might be regarded as such. Indeed, two of the mentioned mothers were directly exposed to gender problematics: in one case, my respondent’s mum used to work as an employee for an international organization dealing with women’s issues, whereas another interviewee’s mother wrote her second diploma on a gender-related topic – however, the informant knew no details of this study as with time her mum had distanced from the sphere of her research interest.

In other cases, the interviewees claimed they regarded their mothers as “feminists” because of the latter proactive and ambitious attitudes in life; they claimed they “inherited” these features from their mothers. However, again, such positioning is very much up to the interviewees’ interpretation and extrapolation of their own feminist stances upon their mothers who personally did not identify themselves as feminists. A curious example of one of my respondents demonstrates, however, that the “feminist lineage” goes not exclusively from the top to the bottom, from a mother to a daughter but might take the opposite direction: in fact, my 20-something-y.o. interviewee has taught her mom how to be a feminist:

My mom always supports me in all my undertakings, but this one [feminism] she initially treated rather neutrally. She noticed that I was getting more and more interested in it, and thus she spoke to me and asked all the typical questions: “How a woman cannot be blamed for being raped? She might have been wearing skimpy clothes!” [...] Gradually, we’ve engaged in a dialog – it has always been ok, yet she talked to me and understood me more and more, and I also acquired better knowledge [of feminism]. By the time I’ve become an activist, she strongly supported me. [Now,] she helps me draw banners and

*posters. [...] She motivates me, directs me to the more radical stance, and this is great, [as] I feel so much support in this regard.*⁸⁸

The trope of importance of mother for the respondents' feminist identity appeared in many interviews I conducted, though sometimes in an implicit way. For instance, one of my respondents, raised in a rural Kazakh family in which parents preferred to channel all their energy and resources into the support of their only son, ignoring the needs of several daughters, addressed to this concept in the form of a “*motherly figure*.” The activist mentioned early Soviet and pre-Soviet period stressing that “*there were Kazakh feminists, who took up [the Bolshevik ideology]*” and “*explained to the people what communism was all about, what human rights were all about.*”⁸⁹

By making this point, my interviewee talked about the example of a first Kazakh female journalist and educator Nazipa Kulzhanova (1887-1934), who propagated the importance of education, equality, professional occupation for Kazakh women. Kulzhanova tried to convince her contemporaries that they would not become mothers of “proper people” unless they would be “proper women” by themselves – i.e., “educated, interested in arts, and free” ones.⁹⁰

Nazipa Kulzhanova transmitted her independent position not only through her articles, but by setting a personal example of an outstanding woman: for instance, she was able to act as a self-reliant woman well before the Bolshevik revolution as in the beginning of 1900s she refused to enter into an arranged marriage and hence had to repay *qalym* to the unsuccessful fiancée's family (later, she married for love). Kulzhanova built a career of a politician, journalist, enlightener, translator, etc., during the Soviet times she became a member of the Kazakh branch

⁸⁸ Research interview A3 A4, June 2017, Almaty.

⁸⁹ Research interview A2, June 2017, Almaty.

⁹⁰ See Kulzhanova's article *Free Woman Can Advance the Country* (originally published in the newspaper *Qyzyl Qazaqstan*, N 15, 1923) in Kazakh as well as translated in Russian by the Feminist Initiative *Feminita*: <http://feminita.kz/2018/03/%d1%81%d0%b2%d0%be%d0%b1%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%bd%d0%b0%d1%8f-%d0%b6%d0%b5%d0%bd%d1%89%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%81%d0%bc%d0%be%d0%b6%d0%b5%d1%82-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b2%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%83%d1%82%d1%8c/> (published on 8 March 2018, last retrieved in 29 April 2018).

of the *People's Commissariat of Education* in charge of development of textbooks, and, most notably, of Kazakh alphabet. However, some sources indicate that the last years of her life were hard because of the change of the attitude by the Soviet authorities to Kulzhanova: she fell from its grace for being an ally and friend of many Alash party members, many of whom were soon subject to the Soviet purges and executed.⁹¹

My interviewee called Kulzhanova and women like her “*our grandmothers*,” saying that contemporary feminists disseminate the same ideas “*as our grandmothers did*.” This image of “feminist grandmothers,” combined with (pro)feminist mothers mentioned above, create an imaginary “family tree” of Kazakhstani feminism, passing to their “descendants” the examples of female agency, self-reliance, assertiveness, passion for equality and improvement of other people’s lives, which made their daughters – real or self-proclaimed sensitive to feminist values and goals.

Before going to the final part of this chapter, I feel the need to add a few words to this discussion on the importance of the topic of motherhood for contemporary feminists. Not only this issue is significant for them – it is very important for me as well. In the beginning of this paper, I mentioned that it was my own personal struggle with motherhood which led me to feminism. In the process of preparation of this thesis, I discovered many revealing and insightful stories on mothers going through their emotional upheavals and dramas, sharing their parental experiences and advice on the internet with anyone who might be in a similar situation as they are, and making their (read: ‘my’) lives a bit easier and settled. Not all these online authors were feminists (whereas some very articulated certainly were); yet, I believe that the very possibility of spreading such deeply personal, sometimes uncomfortable stories owes greatly to the spreading of feminist consciousness and ideas in my part of the world. These feminist attitudes allow to take the guilt off imperfect mothers, to relieve – at least, for a while – their panic caused

⁹¹ For more detailed biography of Nazipa Kulzhanova see the *National Digital History of Kazakhstan* portal: <http://e-history.kz/ru/publications/view/1234> (published on 24 June 2015, last retrieved in 29 April 2018).

by a moral and physical exhaustion, to start asking – and demanding – for help and support from partners. Life becomes easier once you start distinguishing between the real needs of your children and your duties as a mother, and the socially constructed, unrealistic expectations from women which they would never be able to comply with. I very much owe to this positive – not in terms of ‘being optimistic’ but in terms of ‘being good’ – discourse on motherhood as it made my life more grounded and complete.

Thinking regionally: trajectories of development of Central Asian feminisms

In the concluding part of this chapter, I will elaborate on the topic of Kazakhstani feminists’ reflections on the prospects of development of feminisms as being embedded not only in Kazakh(stani) context and realities but seen as a part of broader Central Asian feminisms. In several research interviews my respondents demonstrated their inclination to think about ‘local’ feminisms not only in terms of specifically Kazakhstani feminisms but referring to the entire Central Asian region as a prospective playground for a broader feminist outreach and activism. My interviewees particularly exemplified Kyrgyz feminisms as the most active and visible in the entire region, stressing the need to enter a dialog with them as well as other regional feminism:

Kyrgyz feminists [are] the brightest ones; their identity, their experience is different from the Western one. We have our [shared] history, our [common] foundations. We have our own experiences. Presumably, we need to create something Central Asian, not [just] the Kazakhstan’s.⁹²

[...]

I think that we need to talk about Central Asian feminism – with regard to the language, with regard to some perception of feminism as more cooperative with men. In Tajikistan, Uzbekistan local communities – mahallas – are important, and perform any kind of activities would be very difficult without men’s permission. [...] In Central Asia you need to talk about more inclusion of men into the [process of] protection of women’s rights,

⁹² Research interview A2, June 2017, Almaty.

*human rights, help women in getting there. Here I can see far-reaching perspectives, probably, of working together – with our context, historical nuances in mind.*⁹³

Collaboration with other feminists from the region, indeed, might be fruitful for all participants, since, first, it would add more members and thus validity to the joint Central Asia feminist movement. Second, the activists from the region could share their experience with each other as they have their achievements to be proud of. Thus, whereas Kyrgyzstan is being often represented in mass media and academic discourse as a country with a persistent problem of bride abduction (Werner et. al, 2018) in fact this is the only country in the entire post-Soviet space (excluding Baltic states) where a woman, Rosa Otunbayeva, served as the country's interim president.⁹⁴ Besides, Kyrgyz feminists were effective enough to push for the inclusion of the clause on 30-percent gender quotas up in the state's Election Code, resulting in the significant increase of women in Jogorku Kenesh, the country's Parliament.⁹⁵

This position represents quite a significant contradiction to Koobak's observation of Estonian feminism as feeling its inferiority before the 'real' Western feminisms, resulting in its desire to 'catch up with the West' and thus ignoring feminisms coming from the neighboring post-socialist countries as even less significant. The above quotes demonstrate that contemporary Kazakhstani feminisms tend not to compete with each other in terms of their closeness to the Western feminisms; on the contrary, they wish to cooperate and to study from each other. Many activists in their interviews or off the record provided a negative example of divided, conflict-ridden Russian feminism⁹⁶ and voiced hope that the future Central Asian feminisms would not

⁹³ Research interview A8, June 2017, Almaty.

⁹⁴ Coincidentally, at the time when I'm finishing this thesis, a woman runs for presidency in another post-Soviet country, Georgia.

⁹⁵ UNDP. Regional report on human development. "Progress and risks. Combatting Gender Inequality in Political Participation in Kyrgyz Republic." (2016): 22-23 (http://www.kg.undp.org/content/dam/kyrgyzstan/Publications/gender/Case%20study_Rus10Oct2016.pdf, last retrieved on 26 November 2018).

⁹⁶ See, for example, an article by Russian news agency RIA Novosti, illustrating conflicts and controversies surrounding last year's FemFest festival in Moscow: <https://ria.ru/society/20170314/1489845377.html> (published on 14 March 2017, last retrieved on 27 April 2018).

go down the same path. As one of my interviewees said, *“if I had to distinguish one characteristic feature of local feminism, it would be its tendency for collaboration both within the country as well as beyond it.”*

This tendency, though yet unorganized, based on informal relationship rather than on certain articulated platform, seems to be a reassuring and positive trend of future development of Central Asian feminist subjectivities, aimed at forming a distinctive feminism(s) sensitive to the region’s specific context, and, as such, being particularly emphatic to local women’s identities and necessities in all their multiplicity and diversity.

Conclusion

With this study, I aimed to explore the contemporary feminisms currently existing in Kazakhstan. My findings demonstrate that the country's feminisms represent complex, constructed entities largely formed and informed by the multifaceted set of gender ideologies and practices concerning Central Asian women, such as the controversial legacy of the Soviet policies of "liberation of a women of the East," Western liberal concepts of gender equality as well as a great body of feminist theory from different parts of the world. Although the number of country's feminists, in particular, those who publicly identify themselves as such, is limited, the spectrum of their stances varies and includes representatives of liberal, radical/anarchist/Marxist, as well as intersectional and queer feminist grassroots initiatives and artistic groupings, demonstrating a high level of their exposure to the Western feminist theory and praxis. The experience of shared feminist stances allows the activists to form the above-mentioned grassroots initiatives and groups, which might cooperate with each other on certain occasions; however, the discrepancies of the feminists' worldviews and agendas sometimes lead to the controversies among them.

Generally, the Kazakhstani feminists name the same issues constituting the broad feminist agenda in the country: promotion of *substantive* gender equality in the country (as opposed to the formally achieved *formal* one), protection of women from gender-based violence, harassment, underrepresentation in politics and decision-making, dissemination of information on feminism to the broad audience, LGBTQ advocacy. However, the activism of every group varies as it significantly depends on their specific positioning and subsequent agendas. No less importantly, it is also determined by the political situation in the country at the time these groups have been the most active.

Thus, *The Feminist League of Kazakhstan*, being a sort of a liberal feminist initiative, gave absolute priority to the issue of social protection and financial stability of women badly hit by the economic crisis of the 1990s. In this period, a vivid and effective women's movement had

the opportunity to collaborate with the state's authorities as well as international donor organizations which were particularly influential in Kazakhstan at that time. The participation of *The League* in lawmaking process eventually led to the adoption of the country's legislation stipulating for gender equality and fight against gender-related violence. Apart from that, this group introduced the notion of feminist activism into the country's public discourse and media debates, assisted in development of gender studies in the country's higher education system as well as academic research.

The three newest feminist groups appeared in very different sociopolitical setting of a second half of the 2010s when the space for political and civil activism in the country has become much more controlled and limited by the state. Due to these restrictions, as well as out of concern to become institutionalized and lose their critical stance and vigor as many earlier women's organizations, the new feminist initiatives do not register as NGOs, with an exception of *Feminita*, which twice filed for registration as a feminist LGBTQ advocacy group and was rejected both times. Thus, these groups do not cooperate with the state, and have practically no tools and intentions to collaborate; the only means of influence for some of them is to report to international human rights organizations about the status of women in the country. This is the case of *Feminita*; however, since this initiative positions itself as a LGBTQ advocacy group it focuses predominantly on the issue of violation of rights of LGBTQ women and related research, and only residually addresses to the problematics of women outside the scope of its outreach.

Other activities of this group as well other contemporary Kazakhstani initiatives and free-standing feminists largely consist in delivery of information on feminism to the broad audience through various media: mostly, via social networking sites, and, much rarely, by means of public debates and lectures on offline discussion forums. Feminists make zines, documentaries, give performances, as well as, occasionally, hold demonstrations and rallies attracting the most focused public attention. However, the effect of these public actions for promotion of feminism might be rather ambiguous, not to say detrimental as it fits well into the common misperception

of feminists as “angry, scary man-haters,” and many women, whatever implicitly supportive of the ideas of gender equality they might be, would not demonstrate their sympathy with feminism out of fear of being associated with these “scary” ones.

Moreover, this public activism has turned to be dangerous for the activists themselves as in 2018 the country’s law enforcement bodies surveilled, intimidated, detained and fined some feminist activists on several occasions. In given circumstances, digital feminism seems to be the Kazakhstani feminists’ coping strategy allowing them to remain active and visible in relatively safe online environment. SNS can provide platforms for a feminist mobilization as in case of the establishment of the National Movement Against Sexual Violence *NeMolchi.KZ* which has appeared in 2016 as a hashtag campaign supporting survivors of gender-based violence and transformed into the social initiative providing Kazakhstanis survivors of sexual violence with legal support in dealing with the abusers. The researched feminist groups voice their support to this initiative with *Feminita* providing its assistance and legal expertise, as well as publicity, to several *NeMolchi.KZ* cases.

Hence, the activism of contemporary Kazakhstani feminists is limited by several internal and external reasons. Among the internal factors is the small number of activists who cannot address many issues due to the lack of womanpower and resources, as well as the specificity of every group’s agenda focusing its efforts on certain issues and groups of women bypassing others. For example, *Feminita*’s primary focus is on the LGBTQ advocacy, which might antagonize many cisgender women who do not share the group’s central concern and do not want to be associated with non-normative gender and sexuality. Among the external reasons limiting feminist outreach in the country, are the implicit restrictions on civil activism from the part of authorities as well as indifference and even hostility of the general public towards feminism. However, the contemporary Kazakhstanis feminists are still in the process of elaboration of possible development of their activism; they may likely come to different types of activism if their mindsets and personal circumstances will once change.

The same is valid for the Kazakhstani feminists' positioning vis-à-vis international feminist theories and mindsets: in some cases, the concepts of other, predominantly Western, feminisms, can be taken for granted; however, in others the activists try to reassess them critically to come to the grounding of the feminist ideas in the country's context. For instance, some activists attempt to legitimize their struggle for gender equality in general perception of ancient Kazakh nomadic gender order as a sort of a "gender balance," stipulating for women's freedom to exercise their agency. Though this approach is very much intriguing, in my view, it can be used to discredit the feminist struggle as the vaguely defined notion of "gender balance" is subject to everyone's interpretation.

Other respondents do not go that deep in history and focus on the most evident examples of independent women from their inner circle – their mothers, as well as on the stories of prominent women who lived in the recent past, signaling the attempts to draw a feminist genealogy, rooted, again, in Kazakh(stani) soil. These considerations, whatever idealistic they might be, are aimed at foregrounding of the uniqueness of Central Asian region as not a part of the First or the Third world but, rather, as placed somewhere in between them. By analyzing certain aspects of Western and decolonial feminisms, local activists attempt to elaborate their own feminist agendas, such as close collaboration with other feminists from the region – Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, as well as with local men, whom they regard as close associates in the process of achieving more fair gender order – or balance, as they put it.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

Individual in-depth interview questions

1. Personal information

To begin with, could you please give me some information about yourself?

What is your date of birth?

Where were you born?

What is your education background?

Do you define yourself as a feminist?

2. Perception of feminism

When you say: “I am a feminist”, what do you mean?

In your opinion, what features, qualities, principles are necessary to define a person as a feminist?

What were your initial perceptions of feminism? Those by your family? friends?

How and why did they evolve?

What is your current approach to feminism?

How do you define feminism?

What are the important features of this concept?

3. Self-positioning as feminism

How did you come to identify yourself as a feminist?

Can you remember the first time you were introduced to this idea?

4. Feminism in Kazakhstan

Some might say that Kazakhstan has already achieved gender equality as women have access to education and work, contraception and car driving, and there is no need of feminism here. What would you answer to these voices?

In your opinion, why are such perceptions are shared by some Kazakhstanis?

Can you extrapolate this issue on other countries of our region and the world?

Is there a specifically Kazakhstani feminism?

If yes, what are its specific features?

Why is feminism important for Kazakhstan?

Why do some people adopt feminism as their ideology?

How has feminism developed in Kazakhstan?

How do you see its future?

What obstacles do you see in front of feminism in the county?

Could you please describe your own activities as a feminist?

5. Prospects of development of feminist movement in Kazakhstan

Are there other feminist groups in the country?

If yes, what is your attitude to them?

Do you collaborate with others and if yes, how?

Can you say that there is a feminist movement in the country?

If yes, what are this movement's features?

If not, why?

What should be done to organize a movement?

What are the other possible ways of feminist struggle in Kazakhstan?

6. Perceptions of feminism among Kazakhstani society

How to introduce it to a broader audience?

What is the usual attitude towards feminism among ordinary people?

Have you ever dealt with hostility, aggression toward you as a feminist? What were your actions, response to it?

How can you explain the reasons of this negative approach?

How this negativity can be addressed and minimized?

Some might say that feminism is a popular notion these days, with many Western popstars and actors identifying themselves with this concept.

Do you think it somehow influence people and if yes, how? To what extent?

Is this popularity harmful for feminism or beneficial?

Is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you feel is important to the conversation?