



The Intersection of Gender and National Identity in History Textbooks in Kazakhstan

Zhazira Bekzhanova and Naureen Durrani

INTRODUCTION

Mass compulsory schooling is a key institution utilized by the modern state to naturalize national identity (Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1991). Defined as a political community's vision and differentiation from other nations (Miller, 1995), national identity is inherently gendered (Yuval-Davis, 1997), especially in newly independent states where men are expected to represent modernity in the public sphere while women are confined to preserving cultural heritage in the spiritual or domestic sphere (Durrani & Nawani, 2021). The symbolic significance of women in shaping the cultural and spiritual components of post-colonial national identity further necessitates their regulation (Dunne et al., 2020).

Z. Bekzhanova (✉)

Aktobe Regional Zhubanov University, Aktobe, Kazakhstan
e-mail: zhazira.bekzhanova@gmail.com

N. Durrani

Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan
e-mail: naureen.durrani@nu.edu.kz

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Given the significance of history textbooks in shaping national identity construction (Durrani et al., 2020), this chapter focuses on analyzing history textbooks in Kazakhstan, a country that prioritizes constructing national identity through schooling (MGIEP & UNESCO, 2019). As a country that exhibits positive gender equality indicators in the region (Ozawa et al., 2024; Tabaeva et al., 2021), Kazakhstan offers a critical case study for exploring the ways state discourses reciprocally construct gender and national identities through educational discourses.

As the most Russified of all Central Asian countries (Dave, 2007), independent Kazakhstan has placed great importance on constructing and consolidating national identity through compulsory education (MGIEP & UNESCO, 2019). To “construct a de-Sovietized-re-Kazakhified national identity”, Kazakhstan initiated education policy reforms to promote nation-building (Kissane, 2005, p. 45). These reforms, which prioritize the titular ethnic group and the Kazakh language (Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022; Smagulova, 2008; Spehr & Kassenova, 2012), include a comprehensive “overhaul of the history curriculum” (Kissane, 2005, p. 50). The subject of the History of Kazakhstan is mandatory for all secondary schools in Kazakhstan, with students studying it from 5 to 11th grade attending two lessons per week (Decree of the Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016). The subject is also included in the Unified National Test, which is crucial for graduation and university entrance. Furthermore, students in Kazakhstan undergo a state exam in the History of Kazakhstan as part of their academic assessment (Decree of the Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016). While researchers have focused on the Kazakhization and de-Russification of the history curriculum or the gender analysis of the history textbooks (Bekzhanova, 2023), little is known about the impact of these changes on gender dynamics and national identity.

Kazakhstan has consistently demonstrated its commitment to gender equality since gaining independence. The country has also prioritized adherence to international standards and treaties on gender equality (UNESCO, 2020), positioning itself as a leader in the region by securing 62nd place in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2023). While schooling is accessible to both girls and boys, higher education in Kazakhstan sees a higher participation rate among women, albeit with a concentration in traditionally feminine disciplines (Ozawa et al., 2024).

Despite the generally positive environment for gender equality, efforts to promote national values and culture in Kazakhstan, similar to other Central Asian countries, have focused on reinforcing traditional gender roles and male privilege (Kandiyoti, 2007), and education policy and curriculum only make passing references to gender equality (MGIEP & UNESCO, 2019). Textbook research indicates the presence of gendered discourses that uphold existing norms, potentially perpetuating gender inequalities (Bekzhanova, 2023; Durrani et al., 2022; Palandjian et al., 2018). This raises questions about the role of gender identity in nation-building. Considering Kazakhstan's official commitment to gender equality, it is crucial to assess whether these perspectives are adequately represented in the school history textbooks. As children's national and gender identities are profoundly shaped during their school years (Durrani & Dunne, 2010), it is essential to explore whether voices advocating for gender equality are incorporated into history textbooks.

CONCEPTUALIZING TEXTBOOK DISCOURSES, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND GENDER

The curriculum is conceptualized as a legitimized text produced through state power, aimed at educating the desires and identities of the student (Popkewitz, 2000). While textbooks are not the sole influencers of students' identity formation, as officially sanctioned texts to which students are compulsorily exposed throughout their formative years, they crucially shape students' national and gender identities (Durrani, 2008). Within this context, school history holds particular significance (Blakkisrud & Abdykapar Kyzy, 2017; Carretero et al., 2013) as it "constructs the myths of origins" and establishes "geographical, ideological, and affective boundaries to distinguish the nation from its 'others'" (Durrani et al., 2020, p. 1624).

National identity, an imagined identity (Anderson, 1991), creates internal coherence by constructing a sense of "us" in opposition to "them" (Özkirimli, 2005). It represents loyalty and attachment to a particular community while positioning others as outsiders. However, while national identity seeks to foster equality within the community, it also imposes homogeneity and creates internal hierarchies (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Gender often serves as a fundamental marker in constructing these hierarchies by framing the representations of the nation around conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Mayer, 1999).

Similar to national identity, gender identity is a social construction that is naturalized through the repeated performance of gender norms within social regulation (Butler, 1990). This naturalization of gender identity conceals the social construction of gender and reinforces the binary understanding of man/woman, girl/boy, and masculinity/femininity, marginalizing non-binary identities as illegitimate and deviant. All societies create a hierarchy of masculinities and femininities, prescribing socially desirable ways of being a man or a woman, with hegemonic masculinity occupying the privileged position. Consequently, deviations from hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are swiftly and severely regulated and sanctioned by social institutions, including schools, in order to maintain the existing gender order (Durrani et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Study Aims and Research Questions

The study investigates the intersection between gender and nationhood within history textbooks in Kazakhstan. These textbooks are produced by publishers recommended by the Ministry of Enlightenment, such as Atamura and Mektep (Decree of the Ministry of Education and Science, 2020). Developed by teams of professional historians, the textbooks undergo review by historians and history teachers. Feedback from public discussions informs revisions, and the final drafts are submitted to the Republican Scientific and Practical Center for the Examination of the Content of Education of Kazakhstan for approval. The center's state commission decides on acceptance or rejection, with subsequent testing and evaluation by teachers and students (Dukeyev, 2021). However, their input is limited, as the textbooks have already been selected and reviewed. Ultimately, the Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan recommends the approved textbooks.

The study examines these textbooks as reflections of the nation-building process, aiming to identify key actors, their occupations, gender, and the specific attributes for which they are praised and valued. It also explores the implications of these representations for gender equality and social cohesion in Kazakhstan. Two research questions guided this study:

1. Who are the national icons contributing to nation-building in Kazakhstan? This question seeks to identify the gender of these icons,

as well as the specific attributes for which they are praised. It aims to understand the roles assigned to each gender in nation-building processes.

2. Who represents the ideal Kazakhstani woman and man? This question aims to explore who is deemed more significant for the country and examines the expectations placed on students based on their gender.

Data Sources and Analysis

We analyzed seven history textbooks written in the Kazakh language that are used in grades 7 to 11 (Appendix 1). These textbooks were selected because we anticipated that they would play a key role in constructing national identity by emphasizing Kazakh symbols, icons, and historical narratives, as Kazakh is both the state language and the language of the titular group.

Our analysis involves a mixed-methods approach, utilizing quantitative analysis to address question 1 and qualitative methods to answer question 2. We analyze gender as three interrelated constructs—gender as a category, construction, and deconstruction (Knudsen, 2005). With gender as a category, quantitative analysis focusing on gender roles and gender stereotypes is used. Gender as construction uses qualitative methods to analyze femininities and masculinities as constructions produced by social institutions in a given context. Gender as deconstruction is qualitative and aims to destabilize gender constructions and discourses by “troubling” gender and studying it symbolically. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, our research provides a comprehensive understanding of how gender and national identity are represented in Kazakhstan’s history textbooks.

To address our first research question, we analyzed the national icons depicted in the texts and illustrations. These icons are influential figures portrayed as instrumental contributors to the country’s identity. We examined the gender distribution by tallying the characters mentioned in each grade’s textbooks. We categorized these icons into four domains, counting each character only once in each textbook. If a national icon was associated with multiple domains, we allocated them to the domain with the most emphasis in the text. These four categories encompass:

1. Leadership: This domain includes political and military figures, as well as influential leaders in different positions.
2. Science: This domain focuses on scholars, scientists, and researchers who made notable contributions.
3. Art: This category comprises writers, poets, musicians, and artists who played significant roles in artistic pursuits.
4. Other: This category encompasses individuals in sports and business.

For our second research question, we conducted discourse analysis to explore how the social context and representations of the world are portrayed in texts and images (Fairclough, 2010). This analysis examines how Kazakhstan as a state and the Kazakhstani nation are imagined and constructed by political elites, particularly in the context of nation-building. We analyzed the contexts in the textbooks where ideal femininity and masculinity were portrayed and encouraged. This analysis included textual passages and visual images representing both ordinary individuals and prominent figures. Through this discourse analysis, we gained insights into the complex interplay of gender in the textbooks, revealing the construction, reinforcement, and occasional challenge or subversion of ideal femininity and masculinity.

FINDINGS

We present our analysis under four key themes: the gendering of national icons, the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinities, the normalization of idealized femininities, and gender transgression.

The Gendering of National Icons: Male Dominance and Female Subordination

National narratives in history textbooks often feature national icons who embody exemplary qualities worthy of admiration (Durrani, 2008). When gender is analyzed as a category (Knudsen, 2005), it becomes evident that history textbooks in Kazakhstan primarily focus on national icons in three domains: leadership, science, and arts, while representation in business and sports remains limited.

A quantitative analysis of the national icons represented in textbooks reveals a clear dominance of men, both in textual descriptions (Table 4.1.) and visual illustrations (Table 4.2). Combining text and illustrations,

the study reveals that 679 male icons are portrayed in leadership roles compared to only 26 female icons, 331 male icons compared to 6 female icons in science, and 241 male icons compared to 19 female icons in arts.

Specifically, men are predominantly portrayed in leadership roles, while the domain of art exhibits the least male representation. Conversely, women are underrepresented across all domains, with minimal presence in leadership, art, and science, and no visibility in sports and business. Notably, there is a complete absence of female scientists in textbook visuals.

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 demonstrate that the grade 9 textbooks, both Part 1 and 2, published by Mektep, exhibit the least gender bias. These textbooks feature women in various domains except science in visual illustrations. Conversely, the least gender-inclusive textbooks are grades 7 and 11 published by Atamura, which rarely include women as national icons.

The hierarchical portrayal of domains in which national icons are depicted is noteworthy. The textbooks heavily emphasize political, social,

Table 4.1 Textual representation of national icons along the gender binary

	<i>Domains</i>							
	<i>Leadership</i>		<i>Science</i>		<i>Art</i>		<i>Other</i>	
	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>
Grade 7	111	1	55	0	4	0	0	2
Grade 8	103	4	52	1	67	2	4	0
Grade 9, Part 1	69	9	21	2	50	6	1	0
Grade 9, Part 2	123	3	31	0	40	5	1	0
Grade 10	96	2	29	0	36	3	1	0
Grade 11, Part 1	36	0	30	0	5	1	6	0
Grade 11, Part 2	35	0	60	3	13	0	3	0
Total	573	19	278	6	215	17	16	2

Note “Other” domain included sports and business

Table 4.2 Visual representation of national icons along the gender binary

	<i>Domains</i>							
	<i>Leadership</i>		<i>Science</i>		<i>Art</i>		<i>Other</i>	
	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>
Grade 7	9	0	7	0	0	0	0	2
Grade 8	9	0	7	0	2	1	0	0
Grade 9, Part 1	35	4	7	0	6	0	0	0
Grade 9, Part 2	11	3	2	0	5	1	0	0
Grade 10	27	0	8	0	7	0	0	0
Grade 11, Part 1	2	0	3	0	1	0	0	0
Grade 11, Part 2	13	0	19	0	5	0	1	0
Total	106	7	53	0	26	2	0	2

and military leadership in nation-building, while the arts and science domains appear to play a supportive role. Wars and conflicts are central to establishing the dominance of military, and political and social leadership, with men depicted as the primary figures responsible for defending the nation's geographical, political, and ideological boundaries. Examples include the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and the Zheltoqsan event (1986), which highlight male icons like Kairat Ryskulbekov (1966–1988), Bauyrzhan Momyshuly (1910–1982), and Alikhan Bokeikhan (1866–1937) as central figures in political conflicts, rebellions, and societal transformations. Furthermore, the textbooks specifically highlight prominent worker leaders during the Soviet era, with two women, K. Donenbayeva and Z. Tabyldinova, among the ten featured in the 9th grade textbooks (Part 2, p. 49 and Part 1, p. 116). Their presence in the narrative may reflect the gender equality policy of the time, which promoted women's equal participation in the workforce. However, the textbooks do not explicitly refer to this policy.

Art is presented as a subordinate domain to political and military leadership. Writers and artists are celebrated for their creations that depict the motherland, the nation, and political figures. One notable example is Bukhar Zhyrau (1668–1771), a renowned national poet and singer who gained fame as an advisor to the esteemed national leader Abylai Khan (1711–1781). Bukhar Zhyrau is praised for his wisdom and courage in expressing progressive values:

Bukhar Zhyrau was one of the wise judges during Abylai's reign. (...) In his works, he openly and boldly spoke of Abylai's drawbacks and praised him as a progressive political figure. (8th grade, p. 45)

Even as artists, male icons receive recognition for their contributions to nationalist struggles and causes. For instance, B. Zalesskiy (1796–1877), a deported artist, is commended for his artwork dedicated to the landscapes of Kazakhstan:

The artist (...) produced a wonderful painting called Daily life of the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) steppe. (11th grade, part 1, p. 99)

Interestingly, women in the domain of art are generally not linked to politics and nationhood in the textbooks, as they are merely listed among famous artists, with the exception of singer M. Mukhamedkyzy (born in 1969), who is recognized as a successful representative of the state. However, the textbook only provides details of her performance without expressing direct admiration or using positive adjectives for her, unlike male artists.

Maira Muhammedkyzy, who immigrated from China, sang in world-famous opera houses such as "La Scala", "Grand Opera". (11th grade, Part 1, p. 123)

Similar to art, science, both natural and social, appears as a supporting domain for politics and patriotism. Social scientists are portrayed as individuals who have studied and documented the nation's life and politics of specific periods in Kazakhstan's history.

Among the historical and ethnographic works on the nomadic civilization of the Kazakhs, we can mention the works of S. Zimanov on the social construction of the Kazakhs in the first half of the 19th century. (10th grade, p. 15)

The vast majority of prominent social scientists in textbooks are men. The only women represented in this category include A. M. Pankratova (a historian, 11th grade, Part 2, p. 132), and the Asfendiyarova sisters, Gulsym and Mariyam (doctors) (11th grade, Part 2, p. 119). Their works and contributions are briefly mentioned in a list alongside male scientists, without any further detail provided. Additionally, no portraits of

women scientists are included in any of the textbooks. In comparison, the Asfendiyarova sisters' brother Sanzhar, a doctor, has a portrait (11th grade, Part 2, p. 118).

In the post-Soviet context, the progress of women in education and science is not explicitly highlighted in the text but can be observed through the images. For instance, an image in the 9th grade textbook (Part 2, p. 212) showcases more female Bolashak scholars, recipients of the prestigious state educational scholarship for studying abroad, than male scholars. However, it is surprising that only male scientists from Maths and Space sciences are praised in the text (p. 213), despite the existence of many successful female scientists, such as Dana Akilbekova (a physicist), Kunsulu Zakariya (a researcher in biological safety), and Assiya Ermukhambetova (a chemist).

The analysis presented in this section reveals the minimal representation of women in history textbooks. The Kazakh national identity primarily revolves around male figures in political, social, and military leadership, safeguarding the nation's territorial and ideological boundaries. Icons in art and science domains are celebrated for their supportive role to national leaders. Even when women are included, their contributions are briefly mentioned without much detail. The historical narratives in textbooks can, thus, reinforce male superiority and entrench ideal femininities and masculinities.

In the following sections, we explore how textbooks construct dominant masculinities and emphasized femininities in the nation-building project in Kazakhstan, as well as how they metaphorically and subtly reinforce gender stereotypes.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Nationhood

Echoing the findings of the quantitative analysis, our qualitative analysis reveals that texts and images consistently position men as central figures in the process of nation-building, taking on various roles, such as political and military leaders, scientists, workers, artists, and singers. Textbooks frequently employ positive adjectives to praise the achievements of male professionals. For example, Abai Kunanbaiuly (1845–1904) is described as a prominent thinker, educator, great poet, and founder of Kazakh written literature. Similarly, the contributions of other renowned writers like A. Baitursynov (1872–1937) and Y. Altynsarin (1841–1889) to the Kazakh language and national traditions are also emphasized.

However, the core activity associated with men in nation-building is their involvement in warfare and their ability to overcome and conquer adversaries, reflecting the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity. The textbooks narrate history in a way that implies that every man, both in ancient times and in the present, is obligated to join the army: “Each male was included in the army” (7th grade, p. 208). Men are portrayed as protectors of the nation, requiring physical strength, leadership skills, bravery to challenge the status quo, and a willingness to make sacrifices of both lives and resources.

A national military leader, A. Imanov (1873–1919), appears first as a portrait and then “in action” while probably heading to the battlefield with his follower warriors (‘A.Imanov’s soldiers, 9th grade, part 1, p. 37).

A noticeable language bias is evident in the description of heroism and patriotism. The term “*ержурек*”, which translates to “bravery” and “courage”, carries a masculine connotation as it literally means “male’s heart”. Consequently, it implies bravery and courage in a specifically masculine manner. Many national icons are described using this adjective:

In the late 3rd century BC, the courageous commander Mode assumed leadership over the nomadic Hun tribes (Hunnu) residing in the Great Plain. (10th grade, p. 54)

Textbook discourses perpetuate the naturalized connection between “masculinity” and “protecting and leading the motherland” by consistently depicting valorized heroes engaged in combat and as saviors of the nation. Courage and leadership are predominantly associated with men, reinforcing the historical male privilege to be leaders within a patriarchal societal framework. This patriarchal duty of care toward subordinates and the latter’s obedience is further affirmed through the metaphor of the family in the descriptions of state building during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

As a ruler, the Khan was obliged to care for his subordinates and troops as if they were his own children. And they were expected to regard him as their father. (7th grade, p. 146)

The history textbooks reinforce and normalize masculine violence, particularly in the context of nation-building. They depict wars as the primary method of defending the nation’s territory, implying that the

ability to defeat the enemy by any means is the ultimate display of hegemonic masculinity. The textbooks also feature numerous graphic scenes from history, including Kazakh national icons. For instance, Fig. 4.1 shows Kazakh warriors holding Kalmyks hostage after a victorious battle, presented as a source of pride. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that hostage-taking cannot be morally justified. This underscores the normalization of masculine violence when it is perceived as serving the purpose of protecting the land and the nation.

Furthermore, the texts consistently associate warriors exclusively with men. This is exemplified in the excerpt below, where only the “sons” of Kazakhstan are praised for their participation in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), despite the fact that over 9500 women soldiers from Kazakhstan participated in the war (Saktaganova, 2021):



Fig. 4.1 Hostaged Kalmyks (8th grade, p. 39)

The sons of the Kazakh people are at the forefront of the soldiers fighting for their home country. (9th grade, Part 1, p. 184)

Men's superiority is established by emphasizing the physical strength and power of the male icons. Furthermore, textbook illustrations consistently depict male leaders in a stereotypically masculine manner, characterized by features such as beards, mustaches, and a prototypical athletic body shape (such as images of A.Imanov's soldiers, 9th grade, part 1, p.37 and "Hostaged Kalmyks", 8th grade, p. 39).

The texts highlight the significance of male relatives (fathers or grandfathers) when discussing heroes and famous individuals. There is an emphasis on the importance of inheriting the occupations and roles of these male relatives, as evident in the following excerpt:

After Joshi's death, Batu was recognized as his father's heir. [Chinggis] Khan said to his grandson Batu: "Accept your father's power and go where he wanted you to go". (7th grade, p. 115)

In summary, our analysis reveals that men are positioned as protectors of the nation, possessing physical prowess, leadership abilities, bravery, and a willingness to sacrifice lives and resources. Consequently, men are recognized as warriors, leaders, decision-makers, and the inheritors and successors of familial values. They occupy the top position within the national hierarchy. However, it is important to acknowledge that women also play a significant role in the discourse of nation-building, a topic that we explore next.

Idealized Femininities and Nation-Building

Women remain largely absent from the key arenas where Kazakh national identity is performed, i.e. warfare, conflicts, and sacrificing one's life in the line of duty. If wars and conflicts play a central role in shaping the notion of Kazakh nationhood, women are predominantly portrayed as victims of male violence. This is evident in the frequent juxtaposition of women with children, highlighting their equal vulnerability and helplessness:

Punishment squads (...) took away Kazakh women and children to enslave them (8th grade, p. 99).

Women play a crucial role in enabling the performance of protector masculinity by Kazakh men through their vulnerability: *“They [Kazakh soldiers] waged a war of slaughter to save women, children, and the elderly from the pursuit of the enemy”* (8th grade, p. 10).

Additionally, women are depicted as closely associated with children and the home, perpetuating gender stereotypes that position women as homemakers. Within the context of nation-building in the textbooks, women are portrayed as symbols of reproduction, both biologically and metaphorically. The first woman introduced in the 7th grade is Umay ana (Mother Umay), a deity responsible for protecting families and children (p. 48). Images of ordinary women often depict them as mothers and nurturers holding a child (‘Craddling’, 10th grade, p. 208).

The language used in the texts personifies the homeland as a mother, reinforcing the symbolic role of women in discussions of nationhood: *“Andronians [ancestors of Kazakhs] (...) associate funeral rites with the concept of returning to the womb of Mother Earth”* (10th grade, p. 64).

Women also serve a symbolic role as preservers of culture and traditions. Textbook images depict women adorned in national clothing and exhibiting prototypical Kazakh facial features, as shown in the 10th grade textbook (‘Weavers’, p. 202). The focus is mainly on older women, whose power in upholding traditions is emphasized. Both the text and images depict them passing down traditional knowledge and skills to the younger generation, specifically their granddaughters.

Textbooks often associate women with nature. In discourses of nationhood, women are depicted as an integral part of the motherland, with the landscapes of Kazakhstan serving as the backdrop for this representation (‘Weavers’, 10th grade, p. 202).

The textbooks also mention traditional family relationships. In the 11th grade textbook (Part 2), a woman’s obligations to her husband’s family and the importance of respect and assimilation are emphasized. These traditions reinforce the messages of a secondary role for women in the family and the necessity to obey and conform to their husbands. The bearer, preserver, and main reproducer of these traditions is the woman, particularly the young bride.

Young brides did not mention the name of their husbands’ close relatives as a sign of special respect for the husband. She respected her husband’s father and mother and called them ‘ata’ [father-in-law] and ‘yene’ [mother-in-law] (11th grade, Part 2, p. 83)

Brides tried not to be noticed by their grandfathers and brothers-in-law. (11th grade, Part 2, p. 83)

These ancient traditions may require clarification for contemporary girls, especially regarding the unequal expectations of respect between spouses and their respective families. These messages contribute to the perception of women occupying a secondary role in the family, which in turn exacerbates gender inequality in public domains such as leadership, art, and science.

The analysis reveals that women are framed within idealized femininities, depicting them as vulnerable and in need of male protection. They are also portrayed as the biological reproducers of the nation and the preservers of national traditions. Furthermore, women are associated with nature, the home, and children. Despite perpetuating these gender stereotypes, the textbooks do occasionally present commendable efforts to “trouble” idealized femininities in national discourses, which is a positive development. We present these moments of transgression of gender norms in the next section.

“Troubling” Gender Norms

The textbooks challenge traditional gender stereotypes by featuring exceptional women who could become successful political and military leaders, such as queens and military leaders Tomyris (lived in 570–520s BCE) and Zarina (seventh century BCE—sixth century BCE), as well as soldiers in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) A. Moldagulova (1925–1944), M. Mametova (1922–1943) and K. Dospanova (1922–2008). The 8th-grade textbook also highlights Kazakh female warriors who fought in the Kazakh-Dzhungar wars.

Aytolkyn, Abylai Sultan’s daughter, Aibike, Bulanbay Batyr’s daughter, and others fought heroically against the enemy. Gaukhar, the wife of Kabanbai batyr, led the squad. She participated in all major battles. (8th grade, p. 20)

In an extended paragraph, the three women—Moldagulova, Mametova, and Dospanova—are praised for their bravery and are specifically admired as “brave Kazakh girls and young women” who actively participated in the wars. While depicting women in non-traditional roles, such as combat, which is associated with men, may intend to break gender

stereotypes, it might reinforce gender norms and perpetuate the idea that women need to adopt traditionally masculine roles to be considered equal. It could also inadvertently normalize or glamorize violence, potentially overshadowing other important aspects of women's contributions to society.

In contrast, the textbooks do not portray any "feminine" men. Prominent male figures are not associated with qualities like sensitivity, gentleness, or vulnerability. This suggests that challenging stereotypes by embracing femininity are not considered acceptable within the discourse of nation-building, further reinforcing the notion that masculinity is the only accepted norm for nation-builders.

Gender equality is not given a dedicated chapter or paragraph in any textbooks except grade 9. This omission is unfortunate as it could shed light on important issues related to women's rights and their marginalization. Only a few images depict the gender equality agenda of the Soviet era, such as the one in the 9th grade textbook ('A lesson in the Soviet school', part 2, p. 70), which shows girls' complete enrollment in secondary education.

In Grade 9, the history textbooks highlight four advocates for women's rights, including three men and one woman. Among the male advocates are Zh. Shayakhmetov (1902–1966), who established the Women's Pedagogical Institute (9th grade, Part 2, p. 61), as well as A. Baitursynuly (1872–1937) and M. Dulatuly (1885–1935), whose newspaper addressed women's equality issues (Grade 9, Part 1, p. 30, p. 51). The female icon is Nazipa Kulzhanova (1887–1934), an activist and the first Kazakh female journalist who focused on the destiny of Kazakh women (Grade 9, Part 1, p. 47). However, this representation does not accurately reflect history, as other notable female activists such as Alma Orzabayeva (1898–1948), Akkagaz Doszhanova (1893–1932), and Nagima Arykova (1902–1956) actively pursued women's emancipation and gender equality agendas. By "troubling" gender in textbooks, we can better understand the significant advancements in education and employment that occurred during the Soviet era.

In summary, textbooks occasionally feature exceptional women who defied gender stereotypes and became successful military leaders. However, this portrayal may inadvertently reinforce the idea that women must adopt traditionally masculine roles to be considered equal. The textbooks also lack representation of "feminine" men, further emphasizing masculinity as the norm for nation-builders. Gender equality is not

adequately addressed, with women's rights advocates primarily depicted as men, despite the existence of notable female activists throughout history.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the reciprocal construction of national identity and gender in Kazakhstan through the analysis of history textbooks used in Kazakh medium schools. The research employed a two-stage analysis, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, to explore the representation of national icons and the portrayal of ideal Kazakhstani women and men in nation-building narratives.

The quantitative analysis uncovered a notable gender imbalance, with men being predominantly represented as national icons in all domains, including leadership, science, and arts. Among these domains, science emerged as the most discriminatory toward women, while arts displayed relatively less discrimination. Interestingly, the two textbooks published by Mektep for the 9th grade demonstrated the least gender bias, while the textbooks published by Atamura for grades 7 and 11 were found to be the least gender inclusive.

Textbooks construct the imagined nation of Kazakhstan through narrating stories of war and conflicts, with the portrayal of different masculinities and femininities woven into the narratives. Dominant masculinities portray men as warriors, political leaders, and military figures. Men are portrayed as key contributors in nation-building, holding positions of power in politics, warfare, invention, decision-making, and the arts. They are seen as inheritors of wisdom, power, talent, and wealth, passing these traits to male successors. Thus, the superiority of men in national identity is established through their frequent inclusion as well as their association with power and leadership.

On the other hand, idealized femininities depict women as victims of wars initiated by men, positioning them as vulnerable and in need of protection. Their role in nation-building revolves around nurturing the nation through teaching traditions, preserving culture, giving birth to the next generation, and transmitting cultural knowledge.

While there are positive exceptions that depict women as warriors, leaders, scientists, and artists, such portrayal is rare. The valorized female icons are often praised for demonstrating masculine prowess and dominating others, with political leaders and warriors being the most celebrated. Although female icons have a relatively greater representation in

the domain of arts than in science, their recognition and admiration in this field are limited. As a result, the ideal Kazakhstani woman is often depicted as strong and possessing stereotypically masculine traits. The unintended effect of such portrayal might be the further perpetuation of masculine power and the glorification of war rather than the subversion of gender stereotypes. By highlighting the masculinized representations of female icons, we are neither challenging the historical accuracy of the narration nor arguing for the exclusive portrayal of women in feminine roles. Instead, we argue that how the female icons are incorporated within nation-building narratives fails to offer an alternative vision to the patriarchal imagination of the nation, a phenomenon also observed in history textbooks of independent Kyrgyzstan (Blakkisrud & Abdykapar Kyzy, 2017). In contrast to masculinized women icons, there are no prominent men praised for stereotypically “feminine” characteristics or practices such as vulnerability, weakness, starvation, victimization, and nurturing or care in the domestic sphere.

The nation-building discourse within the history textbooks portrays the Kazakhstani nation as a patriarchal society centered around wars and conflicts. This emphasis on masculine violence, as highlighted by Bekzhanova (2023), has significant implications for the normalization of violence. Moreover, the textbooks not only justify but also praise the violence perpetrated by prominent Kazakh men, which hampers students’ understanding of peacebuilding and social cohesion. Such a limited perspective on national and gender identities is unsuitable for contemporary times, especially as the Kazakhstani government strives to position the country among the top advanced nations. The inadequate representation of women across various domains serves as a significant obstacle to achieving this goal.

The study offers multi-faceted implications for policy and practice. Firstly, there is a need to address the gender imbalance in the representation of national icons in textbooks by developing inclusive curriculum guidelines for authors and reviewers. Secondly, it is important to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes and promote a nuanced understanding of gender identities. Thirdly, the normalization of violence in nation-building narratives should be replaced with an emphasis on peaceful conflict resolution. Lastly, recognizing the crucial role of teachers in promoting gender equality, peacebuilding, and social cohesion (Durrani & Halai, 2018), teachers’ capacities in gender-responsive practices need to be supported.

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APPENDIX I HISTORY TEXTBOOKS INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS

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