

EXAMINING THE CAUSES OF FEMICIDE IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Gender-based violence is a universal problem that occurs throughout the world in developed and developing countries, conservative and liberal societies, urban and rural areas. According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2017), every third woman in the world has experienced physical or sexual violence; 30% of women have experienced violence during a relationship; and 38% of all murders of women globally are committed by intimate partners. Both victim and aggressor are more likely to be involved in gender-based violence if they have lower levels of education, were abused as children, had mothers who were abused, overuse alcohol and drugs, have mental health issues, or share a mentality of male privilege (WHO 2017).



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Although violence against women is widespread, its frequency—and responses to it—vary from country to country. The Thomson Reuters Foundation (2018) Annual Poll indicates that the most dangerous countries for women to live in, in terms of being subjected to aggressive treatment, are India, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Nigeria, and the United States of America. It might be suggested that the majority of these countries with the exception of the US tend to share such features as: the preservation of patriarchal norms, which entails male privilege and gender inequality; high poverty levels, which implies unemployment; corruption; and a weak education system (Conant 2019; Olowoniye 2020). While Kazakhstan is not listed in this unfortunate ranking, domestic violence remains an all-too-common tradition that remains to be addressed properly by the authorities.

Femicide and Its Motivations

The United Nations General Assembly defines gender-based violence in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (United Nations 1994). Gender-related killing where women are victims is also known as femicide, a term derived from homicide, “an unlawful death deliberately inflicted on one person by another person” (OECD 2011). The term “femicide” was coined a few decades ago and has been defined as “gender-based murder of a woman” and “the murder of women because they are women” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018).

Jealousy, fear of abandonment, beating up women, and extreme mental health problems have been recognized as the main indicators for gender-based murders of women (Liem, Geene and Koenraad 2007). Research by the Public Opinion Research Center in Kazakhstan demonstrates that aggression leading to murder could also be explained by social triggers such as financial problems, instability, inability to resolve family conflicts, and exhausting jobs (CIOM 2018). An in-depth study of 105 male perpetrators found that more than half of them were involved in continuous conflicts with their victims, often using physical abuse (Dobash and Dobash 2015).

Karen Ingala-Smith, a researcher from the University of Durham, describes the majority of femicide cases as “overkilling”—that is, excessive cruelty that goes much further than the violence needed to take a person’s life (Women’s Aid 2018). Ingala-Smith sees femicide as being linked to children’s upbringing: girls are encouraged to be attractive to boys and thus objectified. She suggests that men feel like consumers who have ownership over women, which in turn allows them to mistreat women (BBC 2020).

Kazakhstani Femicides Before and During the Pandemic

Over the past few years, there have been frequent news reports in Kazakhstan of women being murdered by their present or former husbands. According to statistics provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and General Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic, the level of domestic abuse against women increased by 103.7% in 2018 and the overall number of crimes against women has risen by 90% since 2015, suggesting that some 400 women die annually (Mamyranova 2019). To this

should be added thousands of women who are “dying slowly” due to poor health and injuries caused by the moral and physical suffering they have to endure in their homes (Fergana 2019; EXPO & Women 2020).

On April 11, 2020, having regularly beaten his 30-year-old wife during their 10-year marriage, a man in the West Kazakhstan city of Aktau burned down the house with his wife and two daughters—aged eight and six—inside (Uralsk Week 2020). Nor is this the only recent case of femicide. In January 2020, two husbands beat their wives to death: one in the Northern region of Kazakhstan (Pritolyuk 2020) and one in Uralsk (Caravan Media Portal 2020). In April 2020, a woman who had previously reported domestic abuse to the police was fatally stabbed by her husband (Azattyg Ryhy 2020, April 29). On July 20, 2020, a man attempted to kill his ex-wife and 12-year-old daughter by setting fire to the house in which they were living (Azattyg Ryhy 2020, July 24). In 2019, a man drove his former wife to the outskirts of the capital and fatally burned her; she died of her injuries in hospital (Tengrinews 2019).

COVID-19-related quarantines have brought about what has been referred to as “the pandemic of violence.” Noting that women feel like they are living in a war zone while confined with domestic tyrants, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared that “Peace is not just the absence of war” (Okasova and Akshabayev 2020; UNFPA Kazakhstan 2020). In Kazakhstan, which had already experienced a sharp increase in violence against women in recent years, COVID-19 has only compounded the situation. The government introduced a state of emergency with its first quarantine measures on March 16, 2020. Further restrictions followed over the next six months, resulting in the closure of most state institutions, all schools, kindergartens, workplaces, entertainment centers, and other public places, with the exception of grocery shops and pharmacies (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2020). This national lockdown exacerbated the problem of domestic violence by rendering victims unable to escape.

Kazakhstani Minister of Internal Affairs Erlan Turgumbayev issued a statement at a press conference held in June 2020 indicating that the rate of domestic violence had risen by 25% in the three months since the beginning of quarantine (Rakhmetov 2020). According to Dina Smailova, a leader of the “Don’t keep silent” movement, which provides legal and public protection for victims of sexual and physical abuse, since the second week of quarantine 10-15 women per day have been calling her helpline to report domestic violence (Smailova 2020). It has been estimated that the major crisis centers’ hotlines received 42,000 calls in the first four months of lockdown (Almukhanbetkyzy and Eaton 2020). By April, there was a 50% increase in calls and messages reporting domestic violence compared to February, before the lockdown began; half of these came from women experiencing physical abuse at the hands of other family members and half from women facing emotional abuse (UNFPA Kazakhstan 2020; Sultan 2020).

Since the national lockdown has paralyzed public movement, most women living with aggressive partners have experienced difficulties in reaching out for help, as they are controlled and watched in their homes. According to Zulfiya Baisakova and Anna Ryl, the directors of crisis centers in Almaty and Nur-Sultan, they have received desperate messages from victims unable to call and ask for help for fear of being overheard by perpetrators—and some of these messages have mentioned suicidal inclinations (Zhunusova and Sarachakova 2020). The number of police appeals has decreased during the pandemic: only two out of every 10 female victims report offences to the police because women cannot leave their houses due to lockdown restrictions and offenders return home after three hours’ detention (Smailova 2020). Due to the state of emergency caused

by COVID-19, the courts are not operational and the police are working on a tight schedule to keep watch on borders and checkpoints, with the result that court cases are being postponed until quarantine ends (Smailova 2020).

Femicides in Kazakhstan have exposed just how vulnerable the country's women are: neither society nor the government is able to provide adequate and just protection for the female population against violence and abuse. A number of discussions on social media and local television programs have explored the reasons for the current situation where women in Kazakhstan do not feel safe and where their rights are not respected. It is often suggested that ancient historical events and geographical location have influenced the development of women's roles in contemporary Kazakhstan, but these factors have less explanatory power than recent historical developments.

Kazakhstan's Struggle for Gender Equality and Its Limits

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly emerged Republic of Kazakhstan took steps toward attaining gender equality. Alongside a need to implement reforms at local government level, the country's policies were expected to be compliant with international organizations' requirements, including in matters relating to gender equality (Zellerer and Vyortkin 2004).

At local level, the government implemented a number of policies directed at achieving gender equality and eradicating discrimination and violence against women. These included the 2009 Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women, Kazakhstan's Strategy of Gender Equality for 2006-2016, and the Concept of Family and Gender Policy up to 2030 (UN Women 2017). At the international level, Kazakhstan ratified the UN Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women, six International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) (UN Women 2017). Theoretically, therefore, Kazakhstan appears to be on the right path when it comes to tackling gender issues and empowering women.

However, it can be argued that, on the contrary, women's status has been declining since the country gained independence from the Soviet Union. According to the World Economic Forum's (2020) Global Gender Gap Index, which assesses women's access to resources and opportunities, Kazakhstan has fallen by 17 places since 2014 and now sits at 72nd out of 153 countries. For Svetlana Shakirova, feminist activist and director of the Science and Innovation Department at Kazakh State Women's Teacher Training University, patriarchal government officials see international actors' gender equality policies as alien to local traditional values but nevertheless feel obliged to comply with them in order to maintain UN membership and be seen as a "democratic and secular state" in the eyes of the international community (Shakirova 2013).

The main issue that women face in modern-day Kazakhstan is gender-based discrimination and a lack of flexibility for female workers with family responsibilities. This leads to underrepresentation in high-paid jobs, as well as unemployment and poverty. Abramova et al. (2018) show that women's unemployment in post-Soviet countries is due to employers' preference for hiring male workers;

cases of gender discrimination against pregnant women and mothers of young children are widespread (Khamzina et al. 2020).

The government reinforces gender inequality and the gender-based division of labor by making the mother figure central to social policymaking processes. For instance, in the 2006–2016 Strategy on Gender Equality of the Republic of Kazakhstan issued by the Presidential Administration, women are perceived as moral educators of the younger generation and motherhood is stressed as the key to a prosperous future for the young nation (Akorda 2005). The government introduced pronatalist and pro-mother policies, such as monthly payments to women raising more than four children until the oldest one turns 18, with the aim of boosting the population (Kapital 2020). It is viewed as a social norm that women are the ones who take leave from work after the birth of a child and sacrifice their professional development, while fathers are expected to carry on with their lives as normal (Kuzhabekova, Janenova, and Almukhambetova 2017). The insufficient size of maternity leave payments might suggest the patriarchal basis of this policy because it implies that women taking parental leave have breadwinner partners with higher salaries who can financially support them.

Moreover, women are concentrated in low-paid, part-time, and service sector jobs, whereas top managerial and decision-making positions in the labor market are mainly occupied by men. For instance, more than 70% of staff in the health, education, and social service realms are female (Buribayev and Khamzina 2019). In 2016, women constituted 22% of Parliament and held 24% of executive jobs in the banking sector (Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan 2017). The prevalence of male representatives in Parliament and law enforcement institutions creates conditions for so-called “male solidarity” and leaves little room for understanding and considering women’s interests when designing social policy initiatives. For example, domestic violence is not treated as a criminal offence in Kazakhstan and offenders are not even charged with a crime; instead, an aggressor is merely given a warning or arrested for 10–15 days (Sputnik 2020). The absence of a criminal offence for domestic violence devalues women’s suffering and the injuries suffered at the hands of their partners. There is also a persistent wage gap: women earn considerably less than their male colleagues. According to the Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan (2017), women earn 31.4% less than men on average.

On top of this, the collapse of the USSR resulted in a need for the country to forge a new national identity to replace the one imposed by Soviet ideology. Kazakhstan has begun reviving a mild version of Islam that draws on Hanafi teachings and the national traditions of citizens’ nomadic ancestors, both of which were suppressed during the communist regime (Akiner 2003).

Consequently, patriarchal values and the oppression of women have become more widespread in society. A “victim-blaming” mentality often prevails, particularly in rural areas, where female victims are stigmatized as deserving cruelty by being labeled as provocative and disobedient to their partners. Brides in Kazakh families are warned with well-known traditional sayings such as “The badly behaving daughter-in-law should not be blamed, but her parents should be,” “A daughter-in-law should be disciplined from the start when she marries into a new family,” “A daughter-in-law should be soaked up like water and drowned like a stone in her new extended family,” “A daughter-in-law gets married with aim of making her husband’s relatives happy, not herself,” and “A conflict between brothers should be blamed on their wives” (Kudaibergenova 2018). These proverbs convey the overall message of objectifying a woman from the moment she

becomes a wife by representing her as a servant to her husband's family and making her responsible for problems within the family.

Moreover, society and even police officers typically regard domestic violence as a private family matter and do not take any steps to protect women from aggressive partners. This indifference from their neighborhood results in regular physical injuries and even fatal outcomes for women. According to a survey conducted by the Committee of Statistics of Kazakhstan, 17% of 18-75-year-old women who have had partners have experienced physical or sexual violence and 21% have faced emotional abuse (Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan 2018). The deterioration of women's equality can also be observed from the restrictions on protests, including gender-related ones, in public spaces under President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Activists were hopeful that the situation would improve with the election of new President Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev on June 9, 2019 (Akorda 2020; Higgins 2019). Although the law on public demonstrations has been altered, it remains difficult to get permission for peaceful protests from the local authorities, as the law requires that: the organization is registered and licensed; the type of gathering is carefully defined; and the protest is held at a pre-designated site. Prospective protesters must also wait 5-7 working days for a decision to be made (Rittmann 2020).

A 2019 application by feminist group Feminita was not successful; they still do not have the legal right to set up protests (Rittmann 2020). Nonetheless, in 2020, on the symbolic date of International Women's Day in Kazakhstan (March 8), more than 200 women participated in an unauthorized march through the center of Almaty that had been organized by feminist leaders, ignoring government representatives' demands that they leave (Duisenova 2020). The main aim of the first-ever feminists' march was to remember women who had lost their lives due to gender-based violence and to raise awareness about this issue.

From the points made above, it might seem that Kazakh women's financial disadvantages and material dependency on their spouses have combined with the revival of a national identity linked to patriarchal traditions to increase women's vulnerability to male aggression and cause a rise in gender-based violence and femicide. However, economic and cultural factors explain only part of the problem.

Informality as a Structural Reason for Impunity in Committing Gender-Based Crime

Government weaknesses such as corruption, impunity, bureaucracy, and nepotism are also responsible for the increase in crimes committed against female citizens. Since 2018, Kazakhstan has occupied 133rd place out of 180 countries in the ranking produced by anti-corruption organization Transparency International (2018). According to Dosym Satpayev (2014), the roots of Kazakhstan's current corruption began in the 1980s with a rise in Soviet bureaucracy. Corruption accelerated during the perestroika period, which saw the illegal privatization of state-owned assets by groups of privileged former Soviet party leaders who later became elites and confidants of the President (Satpayev 2014).

As a consequence of the unfair distribution of national wealth and an absence of legal punishment, the country has been robbed of a massive fortune that could have been spent on government reforms, measures to improve the well-being of the population, and social services, all of which

could have elevated women's status and protected them. For example, there is an alarming shortage of crisis centers and shelters for victims of sexual and physical abuse, while the functioning ones are heavily underfunded and most offer only 10-15 places for women in need (Zhunusova and Sarachakova 2020).

According to Azat Peruashev, leader of an oppositional democratic party, at least US\$138 billion has been offshored over the almost 30 years of the country's independence (Satpayev 2014). Bribery represents one of the main symptoms of the overall corruption problem and is widely practiced in Kazakhstan, especially in judicial and police systems (Risk and Compliance Portal 2016). It is quite often the case that criminal offenders avoid fair prosecutions by paying money to judges and police officials. As has been emphasized by Margarita Uskembayeva, an expert on gender equality and director of Alasha, a shelter for victims of gender-based violence: "Abusers just buy off the police and doctors. Everything is for sale here, including male solidarity" (Seydakhmetova 2018).

In sum, corruption leads to impunity and gives aggressors the courage to commit gender-based violence against women. There has been an increase in the population's distrust of state institutions and in attempts to punish offenders through acts of vigilante justice. For example, in July 2020, in the small town of Satpaev, a furious crowd of a few hundred people gathered in front of the pedophile's house and a local police station demanding that they hand over a pedophile for lynching (Mostovaya 2020). Moreover, the alarming rate of corruption has opened the way for nepotism and excessive bureaucracy to flourish, contributing to the deterioration of the country's criminal situation, including misogynistic violence. There is a widespread belief in Kazakhstan that if an offender has relatives working in law enforcement institutions and police departments, he will likely evade prosecution (Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2013).

Similarly, it has been stated that persistent over-bureaucratization at all levels of the country's government slows down medical and legal responses to violence and abuse cases, thereby preventing the just and effective punishment of aggressors and the timely provision of aid to victims (Potter 2017; UNFPA Kazakhstan 2011). Well-established experts and investors such as Olzhas Khudaibergenov, Rakhim Oshakbayev, and Erkin Tatishev consider bureaucracy and corruption to be the main reasons for the stagnation of the national economy over the last 20 years, emphasizing that "bureaucracy and corruption are the two wings of the government" (Exclusive 2020; Temirkhanov 2019). The arguments stated above suggest that gender-based violence and femicide are likely to flourish in countries with high levels of corruption, impunity, bureaucracy, and nepotism because these factors weaken the work of state institutions and social policy initiatives.

Conclusion

Weaknesses in governmental systems, such as corruption, impunity, bureaucracy, and nepotism, might serve as an explanation for the recent dramatic increase in hostile treatment of women in Kazakhstan. As a result of persistent and "chronic" corruption at all levels of state institutions for almost three decades, the political, social policy, criminal justice, and legal systems of the country have been weakened. This has led to cases of gender-based violence being resolved inefficiently by the government, which takes a long time to respond because of bureaucracy, or unfairly due to

court decisions that protect perpetrators through impunity and nepotism. In summary, the article suggests that the main causes of—and contributing factors to—the increase in gender-based violence and femicide in Kazakhstan are: historically and socially structured patriarchy; gender inequality; the impact of religion; the economic dominance of males over females; a corrupt and bureaucratic government; nepotism; and impunity.

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