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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GENDER ADAPTATION OF MIGRANTS IN KAZAKHSTAN: FROM RESETTLEMENT POLICIES TO INDEPENDENCE

Kazakhstan's migration history is traditionally examined through resettlement policies, demographic changes, and state campaigns. This article focuses on the family and community level, analyzing how population movements affected labor responsibilities, family hierarchy, access to education, participation in public life, and everyday adaptation strategies of men and women. The study covers major migration stages: colonial resettlement, early Soviet reforms, famine, deportations, the Virgin Lands campaign, late Soviet urbanization, and the socio-demographic situation before independence. The material is analyzed using a historical-gender approach, historical-demographic comparison, historiographical synthesis, and interpretation of archival and published sources. The findings demonstrate that social progress was not linear. During crises, women and children became particularly vulnerable, while Soviet modernization expanded opportunities for education, employment, and women's participation in public life. However, modernization did not completely eliminate patriarchal norms. This perspective deepens understanding of migration's everyday consequences and the relationship between demographic, social, and gender changes in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: migration history, gender and social adjustment, resettlement policy, famine, family hierarchy, women in steppe communities, Kazakhstan.

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Қазақстандағы көші-қон үдерістеріндегі гендерлік бейімделудің тарихи негіздері: қоныстандыру саясатынан тәуелсіздікке дейін

Қазақстанның көші-қон тарихы дәстүрлі түрде қоныстандыру саясаты, демографиялық өзгерістер және мемлекеттік науқандар арқылы қарастырылады. Бұл мақалада мәселе отбасы және қауым деңгейінде талданып, халықтың қоныс аударуы ерлер мен әйелдердің еңбек міндеттеріне, отбасылық иерархияға, білім алуға қолжетімділігіне, қоғамдық өмірге қатысуына және күнделікті бейімделу стратегияларына қалай әсер еткені зерттеледі. Зерттеуде көші-қон үдерістерінің негізгі кезеңдері: отарлық қоныстандыру, кеңестік реформалар, ашаршылық, депортациялар, тың игеру, кеңестік кезеңнің соңындағы урбандалу және тәуелсіздік қарсаңындағы әлеуметтік-демографиялық жағдай қамтылады. Материал тарихи-гендерлік тәсіл, тарихи-демографиялық салыстыру, тарихнамалық жинақтау және мұрағаттық әрі жарияланған дереккөздерді түсіндіру негізінде талданады. Нәтижелер қоғамдық прогрестің біркелкі болмағанын көрсетеді. Дағдарыс кезеңдерінде әйелдер мен балалардың осалдығы артты, ал кеңестік жаңғырту білім алуға, еңбекке орналасуға және әйелдердің қоғамдық өмірге белсенді қатысуына жаңа мүмкіндіктер ашты. Алайда бұл өзгерістер дәстүрлі патриархалдық нормаларды толық жойған жоқ. Зерттеу көші-қонның күнделікті өмірге әсерін және демографиялық, әлеуметтік әрі гендерлік өзгерістер арасындағы өзара байланысты тереңірек түсінуге мүмкіндік береді. Сонымен қатар тарихи тәжірибені зерделеу қазіргі Қазақстандағы көші-қон мен гендерлік үдерістерді объективті бағалауға жағдай жасайды.

Түйін сөздер: көші-қон тарихы, гендер және әлеуметтік бейімделу, қоныстандыру саясаты, ашаршылық, отбасылық иерархия, қазақ қоғамындағы әйелдер, Қазақстан.

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Исторические предпосылки гендерной адаптации мигрантов в Казахстане: от переселенческой политики до независимости

Миграционная история Казахстана традиционно рассматривается через переселенческую политику, демографические изменения и государственные кампании. В данной статье внимание переносится на семейный и общинный уровень, позволяющий проследить, как перемещение населения влияло на трудовые обязанности, семейную иерархию, доступ к образованию, участие в общественной жизни и повседневные стратегии адаптации мужчин и женщин. Рассматриваются основные этапы миграционных процессов: колониальное переселение, раннесоветские реформы, голод, депортации, освоение целины, урбанизация позднесоветского периода и социально-демографическая ситуация накануне независимости. Материал анализируется с использованием историко-гендерного подхода, историко-демографического сопоставления, историографического обобщения и интерпретации архивных и опубликованных источников. Полученные результаты показывают отсутствие прямой линии общественного прогресса. В кризисные периоды уязвимость женщин и детей значительно возрастала, усиливая нагрузку на семью и изменяя традиционное распределение обязанностей. Одновременно советская модернизация расширяла возможности получения образования, профессиональной занятости и участия женщин в общественной жизни, однако не устраняла полностью устойчивые патриархальные нормы. Такой исторический ракурс позволяет глубже понять повседневные последствия миграций, особенности семейной адаптации и взаимосвязь демографических, социальных и гендерных изменений в Казахстане.

Ключевые слова: гендерная адаптация, история миграций, переселенческая политика, голод, роль женщин, казахское общество.

Introduction

At different moments in Kazakhstan's modern history, mobility entered ordinary life not only as a movement across territory but also as a reordering of work, kinship, and authority. Resettlement, deportation, famine wartime mobilization, and urbanization changed who provided for the household, who could study who entered public institutions, and who carried the heaviest burden when communities were displaced. Seen from this angle, migration history is not only a matter of routes and population figures. It is also a history of social adjustment lived by men, women, children, and families under unequal conditions.

The Kazakh steppe offers a particularly revealing case. Imperial settlement brought land pressure and new demographic balances. Early Soviet reforms introduced the language of legal equality, yet they unfolded alongside collectivization famine, and forced sedentarization. Wartime deportations and the Virgin Lands campaign later brought new communities into Kazakhstan and created different arrangements of labor, marriage support networks, and interethnic contact. By the late Soviet decades, education and urban employment had widened the public presence of women in Kazakh communities, although domestic expectations and male-dominated authority remained persistent.

For this reason, the article does not ask whether migration was simply beneficial or harmful for women. The historical record is less straightforward. Some moments deepened dependence and exposure to risk; others created openings for education, professional work, and wider participation beyond the household. One and the same process could strengthen state control, weaken local communities and at the same time produce new routes for social mobility. The discussion therefore follows several turning points: late imperial resettlement, early Soviet transformation and famine, wartime deportations, the Virgin Lands campaign, late Soviet urbanization, and the eve of independence.

The aim is to clarify how major waves of mobility and state intervention affected family position, community standing, labor roles, and public opportunities for men and women in Kazakhstan. The article also examines how older patriarchal assumptions interacted with Soviet modernization and demographic change. It does not attempt to reconstruct the full experience of every migrant group. Its more limited task is to bring together historical evidence and demographic material in order to identify the main patterns of adjustment that shaped the gender order before independence.

The argument is organized chronologically. A historiographical overview is followed by a method-

ological discussion. The main sections then examine colonial resettlement, early Soviet rule and famine, deportations and wartime change the Virgin Lands campaign, urbanization, and the late Soviet socio-demographic context. The final analytical sections draw out what these historical episodes suggest for contemporary migration and equality policy.

Historiography

Studies on the colonization of Kazakhstan by the Russian Empire have shown how the arrival of settlers changed land relations, demographic balance and the social order of the steppe (Demko 1969; Sabol, 2003). Works on land appropriation and nomadic life, including Martin (2002) and Geiss (2003), help explain the pressure placed on indigenous communities, although questions of relations between men and women are often treated only indirectly.

Research on the traditional family and women's position in Kazakh society provides another important layer Argynbayev (1996) and Stasevich (2011) describe the norms that shaped marriage kinship inheritance, and domestic authority. These works suggest that the position of women was structured by a strong patriarchal order but also that female roles in household economy and kinship networks were more complex than a simple image of passivity would suggest.

The Soviet period has generated a large body of literature on women's emancipation, modernization, literacy, and public participation. Kundakbaeva (2017) for example, examines how early Soviet reforms sought to produce a new model of womanhood in Kazakhstan. Olcott (1995) places these changes within a broader history of Kazakh society, noting both expanded rights and the persistence of older cultural expectations. Together, these studies make it possible to see Soviet modernization as an ambivalent project: it widened institutional access but did not fully transform everyday family hierarchy.

More recent scholarship has paid closer attention to crisis, famine, deportation, and forced mobility. The famine of 1931-1933 has been analyzed by Abylkhodzhin (1997), Omarbekov (1997), and Cameron (2018) while Kaşıkçı (2024) brings out the gendered consequences of starvation and displacement. Sen's (1990) work on "missing women" offers a wider comparative frame for understanding how scarcity and inequality can produce demographic asymmetry. Studies of wartime Kazakhstan, deported peo-

ples, and the Virgin Lands campaign (Pohl, 2002; Ilić et al., 2004; Kudaibergenova, 2024) further show that migration created distinct experiences for male and female groups.

Despite this substantial literature, the findings remain scattered across separate fields: migration history, famine studies Soviet modernization, deportation research, and women's history. The present article brings these strands together. Its contribution lies in treating mobility patterns and gender order as connected historical processes rather than as separate themes.

Methodology

The article uses a qualitative historical design supported by demographic comparison. The source base consists of census data, published archival materials, memoir evidence cited in the literature, and works by Kazakhstani and international historians. Since the available evidence is uneven – especially for the late imperial years and the famine period – the analysis separates three levels of material: numerical demographic indicators, interpretations already developed in historiography, and the author's own analytical inferences.

Historical-gender analysis was applied to trace changes in household duties, labor participation, legal position, and access to public institutions. Historical-demographic comparison helped to follow shifts in ethnic composition sex ratios, and population losses across key periods. The comparative approach was used to distinguish different forms of mobility: voluntary peasant settlement, state-organized relocation, forced deportation, famine-driven flight, and rural-to-urban movement.

The reading of sources was guided by two practical questions. First, what did a particular movement of population change in family, work, and community life? Second, did that change reinforce inherited hierarchies weaken them or create mixed outcomes? Sen's concept of "missing women" is used only as a supporting lens for situations where crisis and inequality produced demographic disproportions (Sen, 1990). It is not treated as a ready-made explanation for every period but as a useful way to understand why women and children could be affected differently under extreme pressure.

The limits of the study should also be noted. Some movements can be reconstructed more precisely than others, and many sources describe women through household or institutional categories rather than through their own voices. Even so, com-

binning demographic evidence with historical interpretation makes it possible to reconstruct the main modes of survival, vulnerability and social mobility that accompanied migration in Kazakhstan.

Colonial Settlement Policy Period (Late 19th Century – Early 20th Century)

By the end of the nineteenth century, Kazakhstan had been incorporated into the imperial administrative space of Russia, and resettlement became one of the tools through which the empire tried to solve its internal agrarian problems. The first arrivals included Cossack military families; later, peasant migration expanded after the abolition of serfdom. Demko identifies two major waves: military Cossack settlement and, from the 1880s onward large-scale peasant relocation (Demko, 1969: 52).

The demographic consequences were substantial. Between the 1897 imperial census and the pre-revolutionary period the proportion of Kazakhs in the total population fell sharply, while Russian and Ukrainian populations increased (Abylkhodzhanov & Zharkenova, 2001: 31–35). These figures do not merely describe population growth. They point to a deeper transformation of land use, economic pressure, and local social relations.

Women were also part of this movement. Demko notes that 47.4% of Russian settlers arriving in Kazakhstan were women (Demko 1969: 93). This fact complicates the common image of resettlement as a primarily male undertaking. At the same time, interaction between Slavic settler communities and the local population remained limited. Carrère d’Encausse observed that interethnic marriage was rare until the mid-twentieth century (Carrère d’Encausse, 1959: 18), partly because of linguistic religious, and cultural boundaries.

For indigenous communities, colonial-era migration had contradictory effects. Traditional family structures persisted, but land pressure and market relations altered the material basis of household life. Men were more visible in public economic exchanges, while women carried a heavy burden in domestic production, trade, and survival strategies. Some were pushed into hired labor yet their legal and public position changed little. Practices such as forced marriage and dowry payments continued (Kozybaev, 2006: 185). Attempts by the colonial administration to limit certain customs, including initiatives concerning polygamy, did not fundamentally remove patriarchal authority.

The late imperial resettlement phase therefore weakened the demographic and economic base of

Kazakh communities and placed female members of the indigenous social order in a particularly difficult position. This experience later shaped the conditions under which Soviet reforms would attempt to redefine family relations and women’s public role.

Early Soviet Power Establishment and the Famine (1920-1930s)

After 1917 and the Civil War, the new Soviet authorities tried to reorganize the social order in the Kazakh region. One visible part of that project was the legal removal of women from older forms of dependence. During the 1920s polygamy was prohibited, dowry payments were declared illegal, and the right to education and free marriage was formally recognized (Kundakbaeva, 2017: 45). Literacy courses local councils, and cooperative activity gave female groups new channels of participation, at least in institutional terms (Abusseitova et al. 2001).

The official language of the decade promoted the figure of the “new woman”. Kundakbaeva notes that early Soviet modernization sought to alter not only legal norms but also speech, public conduct, everyday habits, and the style of citizenship expected from Kazakh women (Kundakbaeva, 2017: 102). In practice, however, this new order entered village life slowly. Rural households continued to rely on older hierarchies, and legal equality often coexisted with the authority of customary expectations.

Collectivization and forced sedentarization then broke the fragile balance created in the 1920s. The famine of 1931-1933 caused the death of more than 1.5 million people, or roughly 40% of the Kazakh ethnic population at the time (Cameron, 2018: 3). The catastrophe struck the whole community, but displacement, hunger, and the collapse of support networks made women children, widows, and elderly people especially exposed. Kaşıkçı’s research shows that family survival strategies during starvation were also shaped by patriarchal assumptions and unequal value attached to sons and daughters (Kaşıkçı, 2024).

Flight from famine produced a new geography of survival. Families moved to neighboring regions and beyond the republic’s borders, including China, Mongolia, Iran, and Uzbekistan (Mendikulova, 1997: 142). These departures contributed to the early formation of the Kazakh diaspora (Mendikulova, 1997: 88). The routes themselves were dangerous; those with fewer resources and less physical capacity to travel – many mothers children, and older people – faced the greatest risk before reaching safer places (Cameron, 2018: 112).

The famine left consequences that were demographic, social, and cultural at once. By the end of 1933, the number of women had fallen noticeably in relation to men (Abylkhodzhanov & Zharkanova, 2001: 48). Widows and orphans became more numerous, household stability weakened and marriage patterns were disturbed. Later measures to return refugees and restore the economy could not quickly repair this damage. The Kazakh population did not recover to its earlier level for decades (Tätimov, 1994), while the memory of catastrophe continued to influence ideas about family survival, children, and gendered responsibility.

Deportation of Peoples, War, and Post-War Change (1940-1950s)

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, cross-border movement within the Soviet space slowed, but forced relocation expanded sharply. Between 1937 and 1944, several ethnic groups were removed from their homelands and sent to Kazakhstan. The deportation of Chechen and Ingush communities in 1944 is especially important for understanding survival through a gender lens. Because many adult men had been mobilized, killed, or repressed, deported trains brought a large share of women, children, and elderly people to the republic (Pohl, 2002: 402).

For these deported communities, arrival in Kazakhstan meant immediate adaptation to hunger, climate, housing shortages and unfamiliar social surroundings. Testimonies and ethnographic evidence describe how Chechen women kept family networks together sought help from local Kazakhs, and built informal systems of support under extreme constraint. Pohl records cases in which Kazakh assistance helped deported families survive while some female deportees sought security through marriage or local integration (Pohl, 2002: 415). Such examples show that gender shaped not only vulnerability but also the practical work of rebuilding community life.

World War II changed the republic's sex structure in another way. Between 1941 and 1945, roughly 1.2 million people were drafted from Kazakhstan, and at least one fifth did not return; most of the losses were male (Masimkhonova, 2015: 89). Those who remained on the home front, especially women, filled key positions in agriculture and industry. Their responsibilities expanded, but recognition did not always follow. After the war, the return of men often pushed female labor back into a lower public profile, even when wartime survival had depended on it (Olcott, 1995: 270).

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Kazakhstan had become more multi-ethnic and demographically uneven. Repression, war losses, and organized relocation increased the share of Slavic and other European groups, while Kazakhs fell to about 30% of the population (Tätimov, 1994). The 1959 census recorded more women than men in the republic (Asylbekov & Zharkanova, 2001: 85). This imbalance later influenced labor planning, family formation, and official approaches to women's work.

The Virgin Lands Campaign and Subsequent Changes (1950-1980s)

The Virgin and Fallow Lands campaign launched in 1954 brought a new mass movement into northern Kazakhstan. From 1954 to 1962, around 2 million people arrived from other Soviet republics, and some estimates give an even higher number (Pohl, 2005: 53). Many were young people recruited through Komsomol channels, which gave the campaign a distinctly youthful and socially experimental character.

Life in the new settlements developed under a clear demographic imbalance. Men often outnumbered women, and this shaped both labor demand and everyday social relations. Female labor was needed in agriculture, but also in schools, medical points, shops, accounting offices, and domestic services. The state even organized so-called 'bride trains' that brought single women from western Soviet regions to the Virgin Lands (Ilić et al. 2004: 55).

Temporary work camps gradually became permanent settlements. Women served as doctors, teachers, shopkeepers, accountants, agricultural workers, and community organizers; some were awarded state honors for their labor (Ilić et al. 2004: 55). The campaign also increased everyday contact among Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Kazakh youth. Interethnic marriages remained limited in the 1960s (Carrère d'Encausse, 1959) but the conditions for daily interaction had already changed.

For local Kazakh communities, the campaign altered the north's demographic and cultural landscape. In several regions, Kazakhs became a minority and some villages moved southward or toward cities. Sedentary agriculture industrial work, and collective-farm routines gained priority over older nomadic economic values. Female members of Kazakh communities also entered roles previously associated mainly with men, including tractor driving and field management (Taizhanova, 1995: 218).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, urbanization and industrialization became decisive forces. Rural

youth moved to Almaty, Karaganda, Tselinograd, and other cities for study and work. Urban institutions widened access to higher education and professional employment. In the 1970s, more than 40% of highly educated specialists in Kazakhstan were women (D'yachenko, 1972: 34), and in the 1980s women made up about 30% of the industrial workforce (Usenova, 1986: 45).

Still, Soviet equality had clear limits. Participation in public production did not free women from housework and child-rearing; the familiar 'dual workday' remained part of daily life. Senior political and administrative positions were held mainly by men (Olcott, 1995: 301). In rural areas, the model of male breadwinner and female domestic caretaker retained influence. By the end of the Soviet era, however women's educational and professional standing had risen sharply compared with the early twentieth century (Taizhanova, 1995: 310).

Demographic Situation on the Eve of Independence (Late 1980s)

By the late 1980s, the crisis of the Soviet system and Perestroika brought new political and social pressures. Interethnic relations became more visible, and political activity among Kazakh youth increased. The participation of Kazakh men and women in the December 1986 events can be read as a sign that women's public and political presence had expanded beyond the earlier Soviet model (Koigeldiev, 2004: 90).

The 1989 All-Union Census recorded a population of 16.2 million in Kazakhstan. The ethnic composition was diverse: Kazakhs made up 39.7%, Russians 37.8%, Germans 5.8%, and Ukrainians 5.4% (Kudaibergenova, 2024). Women outnumbered men, with 92 men for every 100 women (Demography Yearbook, 1990). The imbalance was especially visible among older age groups because of the long-term demographic effects of wartime male losses.

On the eve of independence, Kazakhstan was therefore a multi-ethnic, increasingly urbanized, and more educated society, but its gender balance remained historically layered. The late Soviet decades had expanded public opportunities, yet inherited family norms and demographic asymmetries continued to influence social life.

Analysis

Scientific Results: The article brings together Kazakhstan's migration history and the changing relations between men and women from the late nine-

teenth century to the eve of independence. Instead of treating imperial resettlement, collectivization, famine, deportations, the Virgin Lands campaign, industrialization, and urbanization as separate episodes it reads them as connected moments in a longer history of household labor and community adjustment.

One finding concerns colonial and crisis settings. Resettlement weakened indigenous community structures, while famine and forced displacement made women children, widows, and elderly people especially exposed to risk. These episodes suggest that patriarchal assumptions became more rigid when resources were scarce and social order broke down.

A second finding concerns Soviet modernization. Legal reforms and educational campaigns expanded literacy, rights, and employment opportunities. At the same time, family hierarchy and male-dominated institutions continued to shape everyday life. The figure of the 'new Soviet woman' entered schools, offices, factories, and public organizations, but the domestic burden and limited access to leadership remained visible.

A third finding relates to post-war mobility and development. Deportations, the Virgin Lands campaign, and industrialization created new communities, widened interethnic contact and increased women's presence in professional spheres. By the late Soviet decades, education, medicine, pedagogy, science, and culture had become important fields of female participation, although household expectations changed more slowly.

The policy relevance follows from this historical complexity. Contemporary programs in Kazakhstan need to protect vulnerable groups during displacement, recognize the gendered effects of labor mobility, and address cultural attitudes that do not change through legislation alone. Historical experience therefore offers not a ready prescription, but a necessary caution for policy design.

Conclusion

The evidence considered in this article shows that mobility in Kazakhstan affected men and women differently across time. Imperial resettlement weakened the demographic and economic base of Kazakh communities and increased the pressure placed on household labor. The 1916 uprising, Civil War, and famines of the 1920s – 1930s revealed how extreme conditions could disrupt family stability and intensify the vulnerability of women, children, and other dependent groups.

Soviet rule introduced a new legal and ideological language. Formal rights to education, public participation, and employment produced real changes. Even so, modernization did not remove older patriarchal assumptions. During collectivization, famine, war, and forced relocation, the position of women often worsened despite official rhetoric about equality. The tension between legal emancipation and everyday hierarchy remained one of the central contradictions of the Soviet experience.

From the 1950s to the 1980s the Virgin Lands campaign, industrial growth urbanization, and higher education created new professional trajectories. Women from Kazakh communities appeared more visibly in education, science, medicine, culture, and administrative work. Yet leadership remained largely male, and responsibility for the household continued to fall mainly on women. Public participation expanded faster than domestic norms changed.

The late Soviet and early post-Soviet transition brought both continuation and disruption. Emigra-

tion, repatriation, and economic uncertainty reshaped opportunities for work and family survival. In this setting, women's labor-market activity became especially important, while older family expectations remained influential. Social adjustment therefore did not end with independence; it moved into a new historical phase.

For contemporary Kazakhstan the main lesson is caution against simple solutions. Migration policy and equality initiatives work better when they take account of inherited family models, demographic vulnerability, and the different experiences of men and women during mobility and crisis. Studying earlier adaptation patterns helps formulate more careful, historically grounded, and socially sensitive policy today.

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