

Introduction to Kazakhstan's Contemporary Gendered Nationalism: The Case of 2019 Protests of *Mnogodetnye Materi*¹

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Abstract

The text is centered on the continuous protests of mothers of multiple children (*mnogodetnye materi*) that have started in February 2019 in Kazakhstan. By applying V. Spike Peterson's theoretical framework on gendered nationalism, the author seeks to explain the lenient treatment of protesting mothers by the authoritarian Kazakhstani government, as well as an extensive backlash that the movement of the mothers have received both from the general public and certain governmental officials. The article argues that by emphasizing their roles as biological reproducers and cultural carriers of the nation *mnogodetnye materi* were able to distance themselves from pro-democratic grassroots movements that have started to emerge around the same period in Kazakhstan and, therefore, secure a more tolerant reaction from the government that consistently cracked down on protesters throughout 2019. However, an open critique of their current economic condition has undermined the mothers' adherence to standards of hegemonic femininity, which implies obedience, 'purity of heart' and does not presuppose active protesting and calling attention to the precariousness of their positions as mothers of multiple children.

Keywords: *gendered nationalism, motherhood, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, parental welfare.*

2019 has been a turbulent year for Kazakhstan, from the transition of power from Nursultan Nazarbayev, an authoritarian president who had been in power for nearly 30 years, to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to continuous civil protests. One of the well-known group of protestors has been

¹ The Russian term for mothers with multiple children is used in this essay, as there is no specific name for such mothers in English language.



a large and diverse group of *mnogodetnye materi* (mothers of multiple children – Russian). These mothers have started protesting the small welfare allowance for families with multiple children following an infamous fatal accident of one family in February 2019. On the scene of burgeoning civil protests in the spring and summer of 2019, *mnogodetnye materi* have actively engaged in peaceful demonstrations for their cause of increasing social welfare for families with multiple children. The reactions to the mothers’ protests have been rather ambiguous with some people siding with their demands, while others seeing their frustrations as over-reliance on the government to solve their problems. The persistence of the mothers’ protests and reactions they produced from the government and the public make this case an illustrative example of V. Spike Peterson’s (1996) argument. According to Peterson, social and economic processes of the state are always gendered and constantly influenced by the family/household relations how a family/household situation is a site of gendered processes that both affect and are affected by state nationalistic politics. In my paper, I apply Peterson’s theoretical framework of gendered nationalism to argue that both the lenient treatment of *mnogodetnye materi* protests by the government and the backlash it has received could be explained by analyzing the mothers’ roles as biological reproducers and cultural carriers of the nation-state. Whereas the mothers’ emphasis on their contribution to the reproduction of the nation and detachment from pro-democratic protests and feminist ideology have helped them to earn a more civil treatment from the government, the critique of *mnogodetnye materi* could be explained by their failure to comply with the state standards of hegemonic femininity.

In Kazakhstan, *mnogodetnye* families are considered to be families with four children or more¹. Drawing a complete picture of the situation of the protests and policies that followed in response to them would go beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I will focus on briefly outlining the timeline of the protests and the major aspects of the government’s response to them. According to the 2017 statistics, there are around 300 thousand families with four or more children². The problems with underfunding and inaccessibility of social support have existed before but the

¹ Kseniya Voronina, 2019, “Почему Помощь Многодетным Семьям Важна Для Будущего Всего Казахстана,” *Sputnik Казахстан*, March 5, 2019, <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/exclusive/20190305/9509918/mnogodetnaya-semya-kazakhstan-pomosch-unicef.html>.

² Kseniya Voronina, 2019, “Почему Трагедия Одной Семьи Стала Горем Для Всего Казахстана - Мнение Детского Омбудсмена,” *Sputnik Казахстан*, February 13, 2019. <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/exclusive/20190213/9277637.html>.

situation took a dramatic turn after the tragic death of five children, aged from 11 months to 12 years, on the night of February 4th, 2019. The five children died from carbon monoxide poisoning after a fire has started in their *vremyanka* home (a poorly built construction with an iron stove as a source of heating that is usually constructed for a temporary living). Both parents were out working night shifts when the fire broke out. Children of working-and lower-class families dying in fires, especially during the heating season, is not a rare occurrence in the country¹. However, after the accident in early February, more and more *mnogodetnye materi* have started to address the local governments all over the country about the inadequacy of the support they have been receiving. The case received a lot of attention from the public with multiple social media posts condemning negligence by the government of its people. It uncovered extremely poor conditions in which *mnogodetnye materi* and their children have to live in and unsatisfactory amounts of money that they receive as part of the social welfare system.

Mnogodetnye materi have staged multiple protests throughout 2019 by occupying local *akimats* (regional governmental offices) and public spaces all over the country. Their consistent demands have resulted in the creation of family centers and state-sponsored foundations to tackle the problem². Nazarbayev, the president of the country at the time, announced the resignation of the current government due to its failure to resolve social issues in the country shortly after the accident and Yerbolat Dosayev, the vice-prime minister at the time, created a working group tasked with coming up with solutions to the problems of social support of *mnogodetnye* families³. The details of the policy change that followed the February accident and the unrest of the families, while important, are not as relevant for this paper. However, it is necessary to notice that the response from the government, in terms of public speeches and setting off the reforms targeting financial support and accessible housing on paper, was quite swift. Whether or not such a response will turn out to be consequential for families with multiple children, in the long run, remains yet to be seen.

I argue that what is worth focusing on in this situation is the government's engagement in a more or less consistent dialogue with the mothers and the negative comments made by both government's officials and members of the public accusing the mothers of depending on the state

¹ Ibid.

² Olga Loginova, 2019, "Материнский Раздор," *Власть*, August 19, 2019, <https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/34841-materinskij-razdor.html>.

³ Aleksei Aleksandrov, Svetlana Glushkova, and Ganizat Ospanov, 2019, "Kazakh Mothers: Proving A Force For Change," *Current Time*, February 21, 2019, <https://en.currenttime.tv/a/kazakhstan-mothers-protests/29880082.html>.

to solve their problems. As previously mentioned, 2019 has been a tempestuous year for Kazakhstan with multiple protests erupting in the country advocating for different causes. The government has cracked down heavily on the freedom of assembly and the freedom of expression resulting in some ridiculous arrests¹. However, the group of protesters that have been spared arrests and received arguably the most democratic treatment has been the group of *mnogodetnye materi*. They were the first group to openly protest in front of the parliament, an unprecedented occurrence, which led to a meeting with the vice-minister of labor and social welfare and vice-akim (vice-mayor) of the capital². The juxtaposition between this rather civil treatment of the *mnogodetnye materi* and consistent jailing and surveillance of, for instance, members of the pro-democratic *Oyan, Qazaqstan* (Wake up, Kazakhstan) movement could be explained with the feminist critique of nationalism.

Peterson (1999) reiterates the use of “women as heterosexual/biological reproducers of group members”³ described by other scholars like Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) and Vickers (1990). Nationalistic rhetoric puts women in a position where they are reprimanded to “fulfill their duty to the state/nation by bearing children in the service of group reproduction.”⁴ Biological reproduction guarantees survival of the nation and when women fulfill their role as the reproducers they are usually raised to a higher status within the society due to their labor of being a mother. Since *mnogodetnye materi* have positioned themselves first and foremost as caring mothers eager to carry out their “duty”, they are being given special treatment by the government because they represent a useful resource to the state/nation. In the scenario of a patriarchal state, “women are cast as baby-makers requiring protection to ensure group reproduction.”⁵ Not only *mnogodetnye materi* have fulfilled the implied mission of their lives by contributing to the increase of the country’s population, but their demands are also focused exclusively on their conditions as mothers. Peterson argues that the contemporary state is a patriarchal institution that assumes the role of the protector of the nation, where the state itself is masculine and strong, while the land is

¹ Daniel Victor, 2019, “A Man in Kazakhstan Held Up a Blank Sign to See If He’d Be Detained. He Was.” *The New York Times*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/world/asia/kazakhstan-protests-blank-sign.html>.

² Тамара Ваал, 2019, “Группа Многодетных Матерей Собралась На Акцию Протеста в Центре Столицы.” *Власть*, July 12, 2019, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/34320-gruppa-mnogodetnyh-materej-sobralas-na-akciu-protesta-v-centre-stolicy.html>.

³ V. Spike Peterson, 1999, “Sexing Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1 (1): 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45

feminine and in need of protection. *Mnogodetnye materi* coming out and claiming that they do not receive enough support from the state is the accusation that the state has failed to fulfill its primary role as the protector of women, who have held their end of the bargain by reproducing the members of the nation.

Here, it is necessary to mention that Kazakhstan is one of the countries with the least density population in the world¹. The importance of the growth of the population has been emphasized by Nazarbayev for years² with various policies implemented that warrant financial incentive to give birth to more children³. The call for the reproduction of the nation has been such an active part of the politics of independent Kazakhstan that *mnogodetnye materi* exposing how inadequate the state has been in supporting women who do produce many children has undermined the role of the state as the masculinist protector. This exposure to the state's masculinist inadequacy could be one of the reasons why the government was so swift in its response to *mnogodetnye materi*. The instantaneous and continuous response to the demands of the mothers, whether or not it is proving to be fruitful for the change of their quality of life, could be interpreted as the Kazakhstani state trying to rectify its reputation of the protector of fertile women.

Furthermore, besides from *mnogodetnye materi* representing the group of women who have successfully fulfilled their biological “destiny”, the response of the state to the mothers’ protests could also be explained by looking at their assigned roles of “social reproducers of group members and cultural forms.”⁴ The agenda of *mnogodetnye materi* movement is securing financial support from the government and making sure that this support reaches them. Unlike many other movements, they do not specifically demand democratization in the country and eschew the feminist agenda in their protests. Thus, it could be said that *mnogodetnye materi* do not cross the line of their role as cultural reproducers in a specific way, in which they do not frame their demands as fighting against the status quo of the current political system of the country. The women of the

¹ “Countries By Density Population,” 2019, World Population Review, September 30, 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-density/>.

² *Диалог*, 2010, “Назарбаев Возмущен Плохой Рождаемостью,” March 5, 2010, <https://diapazon.kz/news/9029-nazarbaev-vidit-paradoks-v-snizhenii-rozhdaemosti>.

³ Aygerim Abilmazhitova, 2016, “Бэби-Бум Казахстана Надо Поддерживать – Назарбаев,” *Tengri News*, December 15, 2016, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/bebi-bum-kazahstana-nado-podderjivat-nazarbaev-308280/.

⁴ V. Spike Peterson, 1999, “Sexing Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1 (1): 45.

mnogodetnye materi movement seem to be complicit in their role of “cultural carriers” and do not threaten the men of the group by demonstrating the lack of respect towards the dominating culture. Therefore, *mnogodetnye materi* represent a group of women that fulfill their primary function in the eyes of the patriarchal nation-state by giving birth to multiple children, as well as upholding the cultural values of the state by not going explicitly against the regime itself but rather demanding more stable support for their contribution to the survival of the nation. Both of these factors, biological reproduction and lack of cultural critique, could explain such tolerant reaction that *mnogodetnye materi* have received from the Kazakhstani government compared to the other protesting groups.

Now, let us turn to the criticism that *mnogodetnye materi* have received from the government officials and members of the public. The main point against the movement has been that the mothers are demanding for the government to take responsibility for their individual choices to reproduce. They have been accused of recklessness by continuing to get pregnant and giving birth to children when their families do not have enough resources to support all of the children. I argue that this critique is taking the situations of these mothers out of the context. In addition to the families simply agreeing and complying with Nazarbayev’s message that families should have more children, the critique also does not take into the account multiple factors like poor access to contraception, religious reasons not to use contraception¹, absence or bad quality of sexual education, historic background of the Kazakh Soviet past when having more children was considered a norm. Moreover, men often demand the continuation of their bloodline with either as many male heirs as possible or until a woman produces a male heir. What Peterson describes as men’s appropriation of a “familial model of reproductive ties but their distancing from reproductive activities” could account for why men desire more children. Their detachment from the processes of pregnancy, giving birth, and bringing up a child alleviates the burden of having more children in their eyes. At the same time, the patriarchal model of the nation-state demands from men to produce as many children as possible as a legitimization of their masculinity. All these factors are being overlooked when the blame for having “too many” children than one family can financially handle is placed on mothers. This blind spot in the critique stems from the way the

¹ The majority of Kazakhs are Sunni Muslims and contraception is considered to be a sin by many Muslims.

masculinist nation-state emphasizes women's responsibility for what is going on inside a family rather than exposing the way patriarchal institutions affect the private sphere.

Another reason why *mnogodetnye materi* draw criticism towards their actions could be that, while they do fulfill their role as biological reproducers, some people may perceive these women being in breach of their roles as cultural reproducers in a way that goes against the standards of femininity. Deputy of the parliament Qaraqat Abden has published an opinion piece in November 2019 appealing to the public to remember who the “real” mother of multiple children is. In her article, Abden states that, for decades, *mnogodetnye materi* have had a reputation of women full of kindness, elegancy, purity, and tenderness¹. Abden urges to remember this image juxtaposing it with “rude, untidy, embittered woman constantly yelling obscenities,”² which is supposedly how she sees the members of the *mnogodetnye materi* movement. According to Abden, even before *mnogodetnye materi* did not live in lavish circumstances but still managed to remain the epitome of purity and light. Abden's critique is quite telling of how quickly women tend to fall from grace when they show some level of aggression and dissatisfaction.

While *mnogodetnye materi* have succeeded in distinguishing themselves from the critics of the political regime and thus reinforcing their roles of cultural carries in this sense, their active speaking out against their treatment by the state still obstructs gender roles assigned to them. “Whenever women speak out, claim equal rights, control their reproduction, [...], they disrupt gender stereotypes and masculinist practices.”³ By displaying negative emotions *mnogodetnye materi* become hysterical and unhinged, which impedes the credibility of their demands. This creates a double bind for these mothers, in which asking politely by going through the system of complaints has resulted in little alleviation of their circumstances while clamoring for change more aggressively paints them as ungrateful and duplicitous. What Peterson describes as hegemonic femininity, an unachievable set of gender roles that are rooted in nationalist rhetoric, becomes even more unattainable for *mnogodetnye materi* who overtly state their discontent defying the role of complaisant women-nurturers. Moreover, men are largely absent from the movement, even though many of the mothers do have legal marital partners. This reiterates the fact that it is women who

¹ Qaraqat Abden, 2019, “Кто она — многодетная мать?” *Вечерняя Астана*, November 5, 2019. <http://vechastana.kz/kto-ona-mnogodetnaya-mat/>.

² Ibid.

³ V. Spike Peterson, 1996, “The Politics of Identification in the Context of Globalization,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 19 (1–2): 10.

are assigned the responsibility of taking care of the children and who are the ones to take the blame for both reckless reproduction and the audacity of asking for state welfare.

What such criticisms of *mnogodetnye materi* like that of Abden misses is that, while feminist agenda is actively absent from the movement's framework, the issues that the mothers are tackling are very much feminist issues that have little to do with the women becoming too dependable on the state but rather directly connected to the gendered policies of the state that tend to put women in the substandard position, to begin with. Peterson (1996) outlines how poverty is a feminist issue by simply looking at the statistics. "Worldwide, women earn less (approximately 60% of men's earnings) and own less (approximately 1% of the world's property) than men even as they are responsible (up to 30 % of households are headed by women) for themselves and society's children."¹ Peterson argues that state policies on welfare and benefits are gendered both because women tend to be poorer and because "current policies reproduce gendered (and ethnic/racist) divisions of labor and, therefore, power."² Thus, while it may seem that it was a conscious choice of *mnogodetnye materi* to continue having children knowing that they cannot provide for them, Peterson's theoretical framework allows us to understand that women exist in the system that is designed for them to fail in the first place, while also pressuring them to reproduce by placing the authority of their reproductive power into the hands of men.

To conclude, this essay places the recent emergence of the protests of *mnogodetnye materi* in Kazakhstan in the context of the feminist critique of nationalism by Peterson. Peterson posits that studying public sphere topics, like nationalism, without taking the gender aspect into the account, provides skewed results that cannot fully account for the social phenomenon in society. By showing how these mothers are perceived by both the government and the public, I argue that rather than placing blame on individual choices of those women, we need to understand the circumstances in which they are encouraged to fulfill their roles as both biological and cultural reproducers, as well as the rigid constraints, that are being placed on them due to their identities of women and mothers. While the value that *mnogodetnye materi* represent to the masculinist institution of the nation-state, especially in the context of a small population of Kazakhstan, has earned them a more magnanimous treatment from the Kazakhstani government, the women have

¹ Ibid., 8.

² Ibid.

still come under the attack for defying the impossible standards of femininity and maternity. What Peterson's work on gendered nationalism teaches us is that such treatments of women are never accidental and should be accounted for from the gendered perspective, as it is impossible to ignore the gender aspect in the system of the contemporary nation-state which nationalism rhetoric and public policies are inherently gendered themselves.

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