Nastoiashchie Muzhiki and Depleted Masculinity in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

While demonstrating the intersection of gender, power, and ideology, this article centers on a particular model of masculinity in Kyrgyzstan – depleted masculinity – expressed by polygynous males (i.e., those married to more than one person). I argue that a *nastoiashchii muzhik*'s (real man's) sense of masculinity is depleted when one of its crucial attributes (in this case, earning wages) disappears but other crucial attributes (in this case, governing the family and the state) remain. Adverse consequences of Kyrgyzstan's economic transition laid the roots for the emergence of depleted masculinity among some men in Kyrgyzstan. By analyzing gender stereotypes held by a small subset of polygynous men in Kyrgyzstan, I offer a glimpse into familial and societal roles these men think they should play and familial and societal roles these men think local women should play.

Keywords

Central Asia – Kyrgyzstan – gender – masculinity – stereotypes – norms

Introduction

A 45-year-old politician in Kyrgyzstan summarized his view of a man's purpose in terms of familial and societal leadership: "A man must be a leader – men must lead and contribute to the country's development. The main workers in Kyrgyzstan are men; take the government, commerce, any field – men are the engine of the process. It's the same in the family. The man must be the leader,

provide for the family even if he simply tills the land."[1] The present research suggests that this is a common interpretation of masculinity in Kyrgyz society. Thus far, studies of gender in Central Asia have not focused on the topic of masculinity. I address this gap in the literature by posing a research question designed to elucidate the intersection of masculinity and the economy in contemporary Kyrgyzstan: What impact, if any, did the country's transition from a command to a market economy have on how men interpret their familial and societal roles?

This is an important area of inquiry in part because gender studies is not synonymous with women's studies. Moreover, research on expected femininity and expected masculinity is of normative significance because men struggling to conform to prevailing gender ideals may aim their frustration at their families and thus increase rates of domestic violence. Eshiev, an expert on masculinity in Kyrgyzstan, argues that it can be challenging for men to conform to a gender stereotype that portrays a *nastoiashchii muzhik*, or real man, as the head of his household who provides for his family. The core of this challenge – ongoing struggles to earn adequate money in harsh market conditions – is often, Eshiev argues, the root of tense family relations.[2] Similarly, a representative from the Alliance of Women's Legislative Initiatives argues that gender ideals describing men as primary breadwinners and women as passive subjects desiring financial support adversely affect men: "Gender stereotypes create problems for women and men in Kyrgyzstan … They ascribe to men strength and the desire to earn money. In market conditions when many men remain unemployed, women still demand that they bring money home. These stereotypes create massive conflict in the family."[3]

This article concerns the 1990s phase of Kyrgyzstan's shift from a command to a market economy. We know that this chapter of the transition adversely affected women, the majority of whom (82%) were employed in the formal labor force in 1991.[4] But the fact that it had an adverse impact on men is less recognized. Many men were laid off. The spectrum of reactions to abrupt unemployment among men in Kyrgyzstan stretches from those who quickly

1 The research methodology is discussed in the next section of the article.

2 A. K. Eshiev, "Predposylki formirovaniia gendernoi politiki v Kyrgyzstane," *Vestnik KarGU*, 2006, https://articlekz.com/article/5279.

3 Aizada Kutueva, "Mira Karybaeva: V Kyrgyzstane gendernye stereotipy sozdaiut problemy kak dlia zhenshchin i dlia muzhchin," *24.kg*, November 18, 2008, https://24.kg/archive/ru/mediaclub/42306/.

4 "Kyrgyz Republic: Country Gender Assessment, December 2019," *Asian Development Bank*: 16, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/546966/kyrgyz-republic-country-gender-assessment-2019.pdf.

found a niche in the transitional economy to those who were unable to do so, became alcoholics or drug addicts, and lost respect at home because they were unable to provide for their families.[5] While men remained dominant in the political arena, they lost positions at factories and farms that shut down when Moscow terminated subsidies that had kept them afloat. The rate of unemployment among the male labor force in Kyrgyzstan thus increased from 0.89% in 1991 to 7.44% in 1999.[6] This is a 727% increase. Sudden unemployment rendered it difficult for men to conform to prevailing gender ideals that stressed a primary breadwinner role. This situation has generated differences, which men articulate below, between socio-cultural expectations of male behavior and the existential reality of a transitional economy.

Eshiev has argued that economic problems plaguing independent Kyrgyzstan produced a crisis of masculinity that remains unresolved: "After the collapse of the Soviet Union many men were lost – they had no income, no work, yet had to feed their children, their family. Then women went to Russia for work, while men stayed home. Of course this generates a crisis of masculinity."[7] Similarly, Behzadi found that changing economic realities in a Tajik village known for coal mining have disrupted and reconfigured conventional masculinities.[8] Building on this scholarship, I argue that an inability to adequately perform the primary breadwinner role laid the roots for the emergence of "depleted masculinity" among some men in Kyrgyzstan. This concept captures an array of possible social, economic, and/or political conditions that affect stereotypical "real man" hegemonic models of masculinity. Depleted masculinity, which is characterized by a sense of disempowerment, results when, for a variety of reasons, a critical attribute of a stereotypical *nastoiashchii muzhik* disappears. Cohn's understanding of gender emphasizes the impact of "the constellation of meanings that a given culture assigns to biological sex differences" on understandings of ourselves as men, women, bigender, or non-binary.[9] Harris's

5 B. Gungoren, "Gendernye otnosheniia v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike," in *Naselenie Kyrgyzstana* (Bishkek, National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2004): 315–50, 315–316.

6 The rate of unemployment among Kyrgyzstan's male labor force was 0.89 in 1991, 1.00 in 1992, 3.11 in 1993, 4.34 in 1994, 5.01 in 1995, 6.38 in 1996, 6.55 in 1997, 7.90 in 1998, and 7.44 in 1999. The early 2000s were equally tough. The average rate of unemployment among the male labor force between 2000 and 2010 was 7.88%. See https://data.worldbank.org/country/KG.

7 I am citing an article written by Zhamilia Zhakypbekova, published in Russian, that I translated. "Krizis muzhestvennosti. Chetyre psikhotipa sovremennova muzhchiny v Kyrgyzstane," *24.kg*, November 19, 2018, https://24.kg/obschestvo/101592_krizis_mujestvennosti_chetyire_psihotipa_sovremennogo_mujchinyi_vkyirgyizstane/.

8 Negar Elodie Behzadi, "Women miners' exclusion and Muslim masculinities in Tajikistan: A feminist political ecology of honor and shame," *Geoforum* 100 (March 2019): 144–52.

9 Carol Cohn, "Wars, Wimps, and Women," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woolacott (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 228.

definition goes a step further in its focus on the importance of living up to gender ideals to avoid social ostracization: gender is "a culture-specific ideal, varying over time, that males and females are supposed to live up to in order to become intelligible to, and accepted members of, their own communities."[10] Constructions of gender, which "categorically and unequivocally assert the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine," emerge through kinship ties, social organizations, the economy, and/or the polity.[11] They also, as Peshkova points out in her article, change over time. Connell, who launched the field of masculinity studies, argued that gender is relational: "masculinity does not exist except in contrast to femininity."[12] Gender is performed, Butler concurs, in relation to and for others.[13] Thus, we cannot discuss expected masculinity without considering expected femininity, nor can we discuss expected femininity without considering expected masculinity. If Kyrgyz culture assigns a constellation of meanings to anatomical sex, women and men perform roles for everyone they interact with in order to be intelligible to and accepted by their communities.

I explore the intersection of masculinity and the economy by analyzing voices of polygynous men (those married to multiple women) residing in the capital of Kyrgyzstan. To avoid the mistake, articulated by Reeves, of conceptualizing men as a single uniform group, I analyze gender stereotypes held by a small subset of men in Bishkek.[14] I therefore offer a glimpse into familial and societal roles these men think they should play, as well as familial and societal roles these men think women should play. This focus on subjective interpretations of prevailing gender roles sheds light on models of expected masculinity and femininity that drive complex dynamics of daily life in Kyrgyzstan.

Below, I discuss the research methodology and data sources I utilize to reach my conclusions. I also review prevailing gender stereotypes in Central Asia which envision *nastoiashchie muzhiki* as primary breadwinners and heads of household and state, and women as "keepers of the hearth" or caretakers.[15]

10 Colette Harris, *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 14.

11 Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–75, 1067.

12 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 68.

13 Judith Butler, *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

14 Madeleine Reeves, "Migration, Masculinity, and Transformations of Social Space in the Sokh Valley, Uzbekistan," ed. M. Laruelle, *Migration and Social Upheaval as the Face of Globalization in Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 307–31.

15 In consultation with Svetlana Peshkova, I translate the phrase хранитель очага as keeper of the hearth or caretaker. Both terms envision the wife as the center of her family.

I then present my findings concerning a sense of a depleted masculinity that stems from adverse consequences of Kyrgyzstan's economic transition. In conclusion, I ponder the political implications of my findings by discussing potential consequences of depleted masculinity on local politics.

Research Methodology

I went to Kyrgyzstan to hear from men in polygynous marriages because their voices are not reflected in the literature on Central Asia.[16] This is partly due to the fact that polygyny is illegal. The Kyrgyz Criminal Code defines polygyny as cohabitation with two or more wives, classifies it as a crime against the family, and punishes its perpetrators with public service, wage garnishment, or a fine.[17] Despite this prohibition, there have been no criminal convictions.[18] One member of parliament argued that the Criminal Code article pertaining to polygyny is dead: "In twenty-five years of independence, we have not heard of one sentence related to this Article. In order to file a criminal lawsuit, there must be a statement from the sufferers; in other words, first wives or their relatives. Women must take responsibility and report these facts."[19] Women are reluctant to appeal to the authorities because they fear their claims will be dismissed and/or because they fear retaliation. In addition, there must be proof that a husband financially supports a second wife in order for the court to

16 The rate of polygynous marriages in Kyrgyzstan is difficult to gauge because there are no criminal convictions or official statistics. But there are indicators suggesting the existence of polygynous marriages. For example, local women's organizations claim polygyny is practiced, polygyny is a topic of public discourse, there have been attempts to legalize the practice, the topic has arisen in electoral debates, local films have been made about polygyny, and well-known politicians and theologians are either rumored to have multiple wives or have publicly acknowledged their polygynous marriages.

17 *Ugolovnyi Kodeks Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*, Article 179, http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/111527/20?cl=ru-ru&mode=tekst.

18 Only five lawsuits related to polygyny have been filed since 2010, and none have resulted in conviction. See Ыдырыс Исаков, "В КР вновь предлагают узаконить многоженство," *Радио Азаттык*, July 6, 2015, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27111670.html. Another article published in 2015 on polygyny in Kyrgyzstan cites Vice-Premier-Minister Abdrakhman Mamataliev as saying that over the last four years there have been five lawsuits filed but no one in Kyrgyzstan has had to take legal responsibility for actions related to polygyny. See Kanymgul' Elkeeva and Burulkan Sarygulova, "Mnogoznenstvo – udar toporom po korniu naroda?" *Gezitter.org*, September 30, 2015, http://www.gezitter.org/society/43932_mnogojenstvo_-_udar_toporom_po_kornyu_naroda/.

19 "Кому нужны старые жены? В Киргизии опять волнуются," December 1, 2017, http://www.fergananews.com/articles/9669.

establish polygyny. The fact that men do not generally live with multiple wives in one dwelling renders it difficult to prove polygyny because the law defines the practice in terms of cohabitation and the keeping of a common household with two or more wives. One attorney has rightly argued that it is nearly impossible to prove polygyny in Kyrgyzstan.[20] Nevertheless, the fact that polygyny is illegal may deter researchers from studying the topic.

While I did not conduct ethnographic observation, I did adopt an ethnographic approach to my study that considers understandings people involved in polygynous marriages have of their own social, economic, and political realities.[21] My positionality as a female political scientist from the United States in a monogamous marriage informed my assumption that while men in polygynous marriages might talk amongst themselves in the presence of a Kyrgyz male focus group moderator, they would likely hesitate to do so in my company. I thus hired a local research firm to conduct focus groups.

During trips to Kyrgyzstan in 2013, 2015, and 2018, I gathered information from sources that reveal insights into prevailing gender stereotypes: (1) 61 semi-structured interviews with government officials, religious figures, academics, lawyers, and women who have produced films about polygyny, as well as representatives of the business community, women's organizations, crisis centers, and human rights organizations; (2) three focus groups (hereafter, FGs) and five individual interviews with men in polygynous marriages; and (3) newspaper articles about gender stereotypes in the region. I integrate FG and individual interview data by analyzing consistencies and inconsistencies from both sources. In utilizing a FG methodology, identifying a sense of disempowerment expressed by respondents, and interpreting that sentiment in a historical and socioeconomic context, I follow Coltrane who has encouraged researchers to integrate men's views into gender studies by focusing on men's emotions, studying men in groups, and situating men's experiences in a structural context.[22]

The El-Pikir Center for Public Opinion Study conducted FGs with men in polygynous marriages in 2018. I did not come into contact with any of the participants. Established in 1999, El-Pikir has conducted research for organizations

20 Ыдырыс Исаков, "В КР вновь предлагают узаконить многоженство," *Радио Азаттык*, July 6, 2015, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27111670.html.

21 For more on the contributions of ethnography to political science, see Edward Schatz (ed.), *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

22 Scott Coltrane, "Theorizing Masculinities in Contemporary Social Science," in *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994): 39–60, 55.

such as USAID, UNESCO, UNDP, and UNHCR.[23] FGs were voice recorded, conducted in the preferred language of participants, translated from Kyrgyz into Russian because I do not speak Kyrgyz, and transcribed. Participants were guaranteed anonymity, and most chose a pseudonym that I use here when possible. Because it is sometimes difficult to ascertain who said what in a lively group discussion, I use the label "respondent" to indicate when the source of a quote is unknown.

I met with the director of El-Pikir and the FG moderator to develop questions and discuss participant criteria and recruitment. Participants had to be at least 18 years old and current residents of Bishkek. They also had to consider themselves married to multiple women. Because recruitment was challenging, El-Pikir relied on connections with Islamic institutions, human rights organizations, women's organizations, databases of individuals who had participated in other El-Pikir projects, and the snowball method. El-Pikir also trained social workers, who are aware of familial situations in their assigned neighborhoods, to recruit participants.[24] Twenty-seven men participated in three FGs: eight in one group, nine in another group, and ten in yet another group. The age range was twenty-five to sixty-four, and the average age was forty-four. Only one participant had three wives; the rest had two.[25] To ensure diversity, El-Pikir also recruited five men in polygynous marriages, with whom I did not meet, for individual interviews. Those men categorized themselves as follows: the first (37 years old) identified as poor, the second (30 years old) as wealthy, the third (39 years old) as religious, the fourth (43 years old) as rural, and the fifth (45 years old) as a politician. The moderator, a Kyrgyz male El-Pikir employee fluent in Kyrgyz and Russian, posed three questions to FG participants and individual interviewees designed to unearth prevailing gender stereotypes: (1) What role should men play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan?; (2) What role should women play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan?; and (3) What does the ideal wife look like? I analyzed FG data in terms of individual and group perspectives

23 For information on *El-Pikir*, see http://elpikir.kg/ru/.

24 Social workers are well positioned to recruit participants because second and third wives in their assigned locales visit them for assistance in the acquisition of benefits.

25 Additional demographic data suggest a diverse sample: (1) participants' place of birth (five were born in Bishkek; the others were born in various regions of Kyrgyzstan); (2) participants' level of education (fifteen had higher education, three had vocational education, nine had high school education); (3) education level of participants' parents (nine men have at least one parent with higher education; four men have at least one parent with vocational education; eight men have at least one parent with a high school education; seven men have at least one parent who has less than a high school education).

by constructing, from each discussion, stories participants told about themselves, their relatives, or their acquaintances.

Although my sample is small and specific, I have no reason to think that the views of masculinity expressed by the men interviewed for this project differ significantly from interpretations of masculinity held by the broader population. In fact, the views expressed by my interviewees coincide with findings Eshiev and other scholars note in their research. I would thus argue that my sample offers a glimpse into male psyches regarding familial and societal roles men think they should play *and* familial and societal roles men think women should play. The voices of FG participants and individual interviewees reveal a sense of depleted masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinities in Central Asia

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."[26] Though there are plural constructions of masculinity within a particular society at any given time, a hegemonic masculinity identifying and signaling acceptable norms of behavior to sustain a patriarchal system is always present.

There are many ways men in Central Asia demonstrate masculinity. For example, in his study of sports, masculinity, and authority, Bigozhin finds that the "ideal man" in Kazakhstan possesses physical strength and a bellicose spirit.[27] Harris argues that a real man in Tajikistan is defined by his ability to "penetrate a woman and beget a (preferably male) child."[28] Thibault suggests that masculinity in Kazakhstan concerns, as former President Nazarbaev indicated, sustained physical fitness. Other scholars emphasize the importance of economic power in cultural understandings of masculinity. Keskula finds in his study of Kazakhstani miners that masculinity is embodied in a man's ability to demonstrate, among other things, that he provides for his family.[29] Similarly, in his analysis of how President Karimov framed the Andijon massacre, Megoran

26 Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

27 Ulan Bigozhin, "Where is our Honor?" Sports, Masculinity, and Authority in Kazakhstani Islamic Media," *Central Asian Affairs* 6 (2019): 189–205, 192.

28 Colette Harris, "State business: Gender, sex and marriage in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011): 97–111, 98.

29 Eeva Keskula, "Oasis in the steppe: Health and masculinity of Kazakhstani miners," *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018): 546–562, 560.

interprets Uzbek masculinity in terms of being a dedicated son who is the head of his nuclear family for which he provides.[30] My research reveals three attributes of hegemonic masculinity in Kyrgyzstan that men are expected to perform in order to be perceived by their respective communities as *nastoiashchie muzhiki*: real men support their families, command their families, and govern their state.

A *nastoiashchii muzhik* provides for his family. One of my respondents, the interviewee who categorized himself as religious, associated a man's role in society with commanding and supporting his family: "He must work, provide for his family, including his wives. The man makes decisions in the family, he guides everyone … The man must be the head … The woman must listen to her husband, raise the children, teach proper behavior … A man must control his wife, tell her how to raise the children." A *nastoiashchii muzhik* thus commands his family in the sense that he makes decisions for his wife (or wives) and children. Another respondent, the interviewee who categorized himself as rural, interpreted a man's role in society in precisely these terms: "The man plays the main role in the family – he's the leader. He's responsible for everyone including his wives, children, and parents." As an extension of familial duties, a *nastoiashchii muzhik* governs his state. Men are expected to dominate the political arena. One FG participant saw a man's successful performance in the political arena as a prerequisite for successful performance in his family: "First a man must develop the state; he must assist its development. Then he must provide for his family. The better he is in relation to the state, the better he is in relation to his family." If men are supposed to govern the polity, women are supposed to refrain from political ambition. One member of the Jogorku Kenesh, Kyrgyzstan's parliament, listed "incorrect stereotypes about the fact that 'a woman's place is in the home, and men should be in politics" as an obstacle for women who want to run for political office.[31]

These gender norms are widespread in Kyrgyzstan. Ibraeva et al. argue that norms portraying women as responsible for reproductive and household labor and men as market-oriented, productive agents are transmitted from generation to generation by a persistent system of patriarchy.[32] Sometimes members of the Kyrgyz government acknowledge such norms. For example, a

30 Nick Megoran, "Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov's Account of the Events of 13 May 2005," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 1 (2008): 15–31.

31 "V aiyl'nykh keneshakh zhenshchin ne vidno," *Radio Azattyk*, February 12, 2018, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_policy_women/29034283.html.

32 Gulnara Ibraeva, Anara Moldosheva, and Anara Niyazova, *Kyrgyz Country Case Study* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012), 24, http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/EXTWDRS/EXTWDR2012/0,,contentMDK:22850830~

representative of the department on gender policies within the Ministry of Social Development summarized gender stereotypes as follows: "In our stereotypes 'the man is the breadwinner' and 'the woman is the keeper of the hearth,' which has pluses and minuses."[33] As Eshiev explains, men have a defined role that involves feeding and protecting their families, while women have a defined role that involves marrying, birthing and raising children, and caring for the home.[34]

Children in Kyrgyzstan become acquainted with these gender stereotypes, which are built into typical childrearing strategies, from a young age. The family is thus the first source of gender norm transmission. According to an Association of Crisis Centers representative, the fact that girls are not taught skills to compete with boys has consequences for the presence of women in politics: "How do we raise girls? How will they land in parliament if we convince them from childhood that their mission is to have children and stay home?"[35] Eshiev argues that boys have more freedom than girls, are taught to assert themselves, and learn from a young age how a *nastoiashchii muzhik* behaves: "They may play outside while their sisters remain at home to look after younger children and help around the house … From early childhood, a boy is convinced that he is the master of the house, the land, and the livestock, and that in the future he will be the head of his family and support his parents in old age."[36] In his work on male university students in Osh, Kirmse finds that gendered social expectations manifest themselves in a familial performance in which boys help support their families by earning money for the household.[37] School is another source of gender norm transmission. Gender stereotypes pepper the pages of textbooks: one study found that there are more pictures of men than women practicing a range of professions, and that the women who do

menuPK:8155094~pagePK:64167689~piPK:64167673~theSitePK:7778063,00.html (accessed on September 1, 2016).

33 Ol'ga Fedorova, "Nazgul' Beisheeva: Zhenshchina ne dolzhna zaviset' ot brachnogo statusa," *Vechernii Bishkek*, June 16, 2014, http://www.vb.kg/276932.

34 A. K. Eshiev, "Predposylki formirovaniia gendernoi politiki v Kyrgyzstane," *Vestnik KarGU*, 2006, https://articlekz.com/article/5279.

35 Kanymgul Elkeeva, "V Kyrgyzstane net ni odnoi zhenshchiny-mera ili akima," *Radio Azattyk*, December 25, 2017, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-politics-women-gender/28937131.html.

36 Asylbek Eshiev, "Muzhskie roli i gendernye vzaimootnosheniiz v Kyrgyzskom obshchestve," *Alatoo Academic Studies* no. 4 (2015): 247–51, 247–48. http://aas.iaau.edu.kg/.

37 Stefan B. Kirmse, "In the marketplace for styles and identities: Globalization and youth culture in southern Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 29, no. 4 (December 2010): 389–403, 399.

make it into the textbooks appear as housewives, teachers, and sales clerks.[38] Society is also a source of gender norm transmission. As Eshiev explains:

> [Kyrgyz] society forces men to excel. They must grow up to be domineering and avoid showing any weakness; society encourages them to build a career, so they are more prepared for this than girls. They must be independent, demanding, and aggressive. For example, aggressive behavior is encouraged and violence has become notorious in films, sports, and the military. Male heroes as a rule are strong, cool, and presented as superhuman.[39]

Popular culture embodies these gender ideals. For example, the reality show *Kelin* (Kyrgyz for daughter-in-law) features young women who compete to impress a potential mother-in-law by demonstrating domestic skills such as tea serving. Beyer and Kojobekova argue that the show is "indicative of an intensification of traditionalization that assigns a stereotypically gendered role to women."[40]

Yet these gender norms are contested. Many civil society initiatives in Kyrgyzstan aim to change "sticky" ideas about how men and women should behave. For example, the Women Support Center has been running "gender schools" since 2002 throughout the country to eliminate gender stereotypes. One school called Gender and Education taught representatives of the Ministry of Education and school teachers how to break stereotypes. In an interview, a representative of the Women Support Center describes this effort with a metaphor of eliminating cockroaches:

> Because everything [in our society] is patriarchal, we said "Open the book and see what's written: Aisha washes the floors, Aibek rides horses." Early on, in kindergarten, we divide roles in school. We have a girls corner and a boys corner: girls have dolls, sewing machines, hairstyling tools; boys have cars, hammers. This shouldn't be! Girls and boys should be where they want to be, where their talent lies … Our gender school facilitators

38 Aida Shirinova, "Do gendernova ravenstva eshche daleko?" *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, January 27, 2016, https://slovo.kg/?p=53237.

39 Asylbek Eshiev, "Muzhskie roli i gendernye vzaimootnosheniiz v Kyrgyzskom obshchestve," *Alatoo Academic Studies* no. 4 (2015): 247–251, 248. http://aas.iaau.edu.kg/.

40 Judith Beyer and Aijarkyn Kojobekova, "Women of protest, men of applause: Political activism, gender, and tradition in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 3 (June 2019): 329–45, 335. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2019.1631258.

> have a goal: to work with participants on eliminating these cockroaches – these stereotypes.[41]

The research presented below indicates that these cockroaches stubbornly cling to life; in other words, these gender stereotypes are sticky.

Depleted Masculinity: A Sense of Disempowerment

The evidence that exemplifies my findings regarding the three attributes of hegemonic masculinity in Kyrgyzstan discussed above reflects a commitment among some respondents to retraditionalization, a term originally defined as a return to "traditional values, family life, and religion."[42] Their comments are thus indicators of the retraditionalization (or traditionalization) that scholars argue has swept through Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.[43] While it has many variants that can change within a culture and across time, retraditionalization is expressed by some of my respondents in terms of a gendered understanding of acceptable behavior that envisions men supporting and commanding their families and women taking care of their families.

My respondents envision *nastoiashchie muzhiki* in a role whereby they are primary breadwinners and heads of the household. The interviewee who categorized himself as poor articulated a man's role in Kyrgyzstan as beginning in the family and then, if possible, ending with the state: "He must provide for his family, and when possible be a patriot and do everything feasible to develop the state." Some respondents criticized families governed by women. For example, the interviewee who categorized himself as religious voiced this sentiment: "The man must work, provide for his family, for his wives. Of course the man makes decisions in the family; he guides everyone, while the woman can go somewhere to gossip. The man must be the head. At least that's how it is

41 Author's interview, Women Support Center representative, Bishkek (May 22, 2018).

42 Gail Kligman, "Women and Reproductive Legislation in Romania: Implications for the Transition," in *Dilemmas of Transition in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. George Breslauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 141–66, 142.

43 J. Cleuziou and L. Direnberger, "Introduction: Gender and nation in post-Soviet Central Asia: From national narratives to women's practices," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 195–206; Michele E. Commercio, "The Politics and Economics of 'Retraditionalization' in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 6 (2015): 529–56; D. Kandiyoti, "The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: Neither colonized, nor modern?" *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 601–23; Elena Kim, "Re-feminizing the post-soviet women: Identity, politics and virginity ceremonies in contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of Gender Studies* 29, no. 6 (2020): 706–16.

in my family; in some families yes, the woman manages everyone. But this isn't right, and it's rare." This view is not confined to the devout. The interviewee who categorized himself as wealthy concurred: "Everyone must do some good for the country, society, the people. The man plays the main role in the family: he is the breadwinner, he feeds the family, he must take full responsibility for guiding the family." The following exchange among FG1 participants underscores the importance of these two attributes of hegemonic masculinity:

> **Kairat**: A man's role is breadwinner. He earns money, feeds the children, and raises the children although he raises boys mediocrely.
> **Moderator**: And girls?
> **Kairat**: He also raises girls, although mainly the mother raises girls.
> ...
> **Aibek**: If a man is unemployed and the woman brings money to the family, then she has a higher status in the family. But the man's opinion must still decide questions in the family. The man should plan how to live, whether or not he's prepared to be the main one.
> **Moderator**: And by main, you mean that he must make the decision or something else?
> **Aibek**: The decision should be made mutually of course, he needs to consult her, but the man must be the breadwinner.
> **Akmat**: The man must be the example for the family in order to raise children, even if he earns less than his wife. He can't smoke or drink.
> **Bakyt**: The man has always been the head of the family, and he must continue to be the head of the family.

I interpret adherence to the conviction that a man must command his household even if he is unemployed or earns less money than his wife as an attempt by men who expressed this view to preserve one attribute of hegemonic masculinity as another disappears.

Kyrgyzstan's economic transition challenged prevailing gender ideals. A Women Support Center representative linked the importance of power for men today to the disempowerment they experienced as a result of the Soviet Union's collapse: "One reason men take second, third wives is power. Due to the emancipation of women, men think of themselves less and less as leaders compared to twenty or thirty years ago. Back then they were privileged."[44] The economic transition of the 1990s, which forced countless factories and collective farms to shut down, rendered many men suddenly unemployed. The ruin

44 Author's interview, Bishkek (May 22, 2018).

of state-owned factories and collective farms in Kyrgyzstan that accompanied the demise of the Soviet Union has been well documented. Here I offer the Kombinat wool factory in Bishkek as one example: at its peak it employed 5,000 people; by 2012 it employed 250 people.[45] Although some men quickly reinvented themselves in the aftermath of losing their jobs, others had difficulty adapting to market conditions. A representative of Legal Perspective, an Osh organization providing legal advice to entrepreneurs who suffered from the violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks that broke out in 2010, comments on gender stereotypes that made it difficult for men to acclimatize to market conditions:[46]

> When our organization began to work [2011], 90% of victims of credit institutions were women because of the mentality that remained after the Soviet Union. It was a fact that many men worked in industry, in factories, whereas women had the standard of being housewives and caretakers. After the Union's collapse, many women began to launch their own businesses because men became inactive. Lots of men simply went on a lethargic regime; they didn't adapt to the market economy.[47]

Many women confronted with men 'on a lethargic regime,' or men who failed to adapt to the market economy because they lacked appropriate skillsets and were thus unable to support their families, entered the shuttle trade and became the primary breadwinners of their families.[48] Gungoren argues that although the hegemonic image of a man in Kyrgyzstan features a primary breadwinner who governs his household, as the economic transition unfolded, women confronted with unemployed husbands went to earn money, working in bazaars and on street corners where they sold various commodities regardless of conditions or pay in order to ensure their children's survival.[49] According to one source, between 79 and 90% of bazaar vendors in Bishkek

45 Regine A. Spector and Aisalkyn Botoeva, "New shop owners in old buildings: Spatial politics of the apparel industry in Kyrgyzstan," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2017): 235–53, 239.

46 For more on the 2010 violence, see Michele E. Commercio, "Structural Violence and Horizontal Inequalities: Conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, no. 4 (2018): 764–84.

47 Author's interview, Osh (July 21, 2015).

48 Richard Pomfret, *The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century: Paving a New Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

49 B. Gungoren, "Gendernye otnosheniia v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike," in *Naselenie Kyrgyzstana* (Bishkek: National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2004): 315–50, 339.

were women in 1997.[50] A member of Parliament aptly summarized this phenomenon as follows:

> Women were in a difficult situation when the Union collapsed. Men dropped their hands but women, in contrast, took themselves by the hands and began to escape this difficult situation. Many became the breadwinner of their family. In the past they could stay home, feed their children, manage their husband's salary. But when men lost their salary, out of hopelessness they didn't know what to do. So women began to shuttle, to go to Turkey, Italy, Russia, the Arab Emirates.[51]

The financial independence women have gained over the years threatens the status and personal power of men in Kyrgyzstan who continue to feel the loss of the privilege they had during the communist era. Men suffered a more severe drop in status than women as a result of changing market conditions precisely because they had occupied a comparatively privileged position in the labor market throughout the Soviet era. A fall from that position had grave financial and psychological consequences.[52] Hegemonic masculinity has traditionally obligated men in Kyrgyzstan to serve their families in the capacity of primary breadwinner. The notion that a *nastoiashchii muzhik* is the primary breadwinner was not a subject of debate prior to the 1990s. But the economic transition prevented many men from fulfilling this obligation, and this dealt a severe blow to a critical attribute of their performed masculinity.

Respondents commented on what they perceived as threats posed by the economic disempowerment of men and the economic empowerment of women. A FG3 participant noted that a woman who becomes primary breadwinner might then aspire to command her family. In this respondent's view, a woman who earns more money than her husband and then seeks to govern the family challenges two attributes of hegemonic masculinity, threatens the patriarchal status quo, and represents a dangerous path to matriarchy:

50 Armin Bauer, David Green, and Kathleen Kuehnast, *Women and Gender Relations: The Kyrgyz Republic in Transition* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1997), 67.

51 Author's interview, Bishkek (October 8, 2013).

52 This is Marina Kiblitskaya's argument concerning men in Russia. See Marina Kiblitskaya, "'Once we were Kings': Male experience of loss of status at work in post-communist Russia," in *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Sarah Ashwin (London: Routledge, 2000): 90–104.

Respondent: The state begins with the family; the family is first, then the state.

Osmon: I agree, the family is first.

Respondent: It's the same in Sharia, everything starts with the family, it's written in the Hadith. You need to care for your family first. You will answer for your family.

Bekzat: First and foremost, the man is the head of the family; as the saying goes, strong family, strong country. And if the woman begins to earn more money and aspires to be the head of the family, we cannot allow this; we cannot provide a path to matriarchy. This will lead to the collapse of the family, to divorce.

Respondent: The man must govern at home.

Bekzat condemns economically independent women who govern their families because he views their power as a threat to the patriarchal system that defines the parameters of marriage. Sultanbek, a FG1 participant, expressed a similar view: "From time immemorial men have governed the Kyrgyz, the man's word was law for wives and everyone. But now the woman's word is law in the family. Now the woman earns money, she is the main source of income, while men raise children at home. Due to this respect for men has fallen; divorce stems from this. Women don't obey men as a result of democracy." Sultanbek associates a sense of depleted masculinity ("now the woman's word is law") resulting from massive economic changes ("now the woman earns money") with a man's loss of power in relation to his wife ("women don't obey men as a result of democracy"). From his perspective, Kyrgyzstan's transition has strengthened women's familial status and weakened men's familial status, thus altering power dynamics between men and women to such an extent that women no longer obey men.

Some respondents assumed that if all is well in a man's family, meaning that if he and his wife perform their respective gender roles on a daily basis, all will be well in a man's outer circle. The following exchange between FG2 participants underscores the notion that a *nastoiashchii muzhik* provides for his family. It also emphasizes the idea that a wife is responsible for creating a pleasant home environment, which sets the tone for her husband's day: a wise wife gets dressed, feeds her husband, and sends him to work.

Respondent: The family plays a significant role. It's your hearth. If you're tired, you recharge at home in the circle of your family. Maybe you come home in some sort of mood and your wise wife improves your

mood. A wise wife does everything so that you're in a good mood again, and in the morning she gets dressed, feeds you, and sends you to work.

Medet: The first in line is the family, then the state. Because the state consists of people and families.

Arstanbek: I think the man must be the breadwinner of the family, provide for everyone and not dash here and there. He must persistently work to provide for his family. But if you work in politics, then you must provide for the country and look after the people.

...

Ulan: A modern man must always be a patriot. If he takes two wives, then he must provide for both of them and all of his children.

Moderator: So first he must provide for his family? Everyone thinks this?

Respondent: Yes, absolutely (everyone agrees).

Ulan: A man must always think about them. For example, I'm a driver and I always have time to think about them – it's winter, are they cold or warm? It's necessary to take care of them.

Damir: The man must provide for his family and at the same time modern men of Kyrgyzstan say that everyone must be a patriot. But if you ask them which country they'd like to become a citizen of they'll say the US, China, Turkey, Germany. A patriot shouldn't answer like this! His people are here, he should work for his country. It's necessary to ask yourself, what have I done for my country?

Moderator: Does everyone think the family comes first?

Respondent: Yes, the family comes first.

Respondent: In the morning you go to work in one mood, and you stay in this mood the whole day. If you go to work in a bad mood, you'll be in this mood the whole day.

The respondents quoted above connect gendered performances in the family, community, and polity. A *nastoiashchii muzhik* provides for his family, a task that is facilitated by an accommodating wife who makes sure he is in good spirits, and then for the people of his country: if his wife hinders his ability to perform the first task, it is unlikely he will be able to perform the second task. Responsibility thus rests on the woman. In other words, expected femininity permits expected masculinity.

Some respondents linked the need for a man to command his household, or "be first," with Islam and/or Kyrgyz traditions. The following exchange among FG2 participants distinguishes the Kyrgyz from Westerners, who, according to some respondents, erroneously elevate women above men:

Respondent: In Islam, men have always occupied the first place. We Kyrgyz aren't the West: they place women first, then the son, then the dog, then the lawn; men are in last place. This isn't right.

Farkhad: In many cases, men are becoming last; we also need to be protected by the law. We see on television how when a woman divorces the man is left with nothing. The law must stipulate the rights of men so that everything is divided equally.

Respondent: Men and women must have the same status so that there's justice.

Moderator: Which rights should be protected?

Respondent: If you have four children, two go with the father and two with the mother.

Respondent: In any case, men must stand higher.

Moderator: Why?

Respondent: Because in Islam, and among the Kyrgyz, the man stands in first place.

The first respondent's peers echoed his view that a social hierarchy in which women – and dogs and lawns – are elevated above men is fundamentally distorted. While the first respondent voiced his opinion of social hierarchies in the West, his peers focused on their perceptions of the social hierarchy in Kyrgyzstan. The very notion of a social hierarchy that elevates women above men, which might never have become a subject of debate had it not been for the tumultuous economic changes that deprived many men of breadwinner status, touches on differences between socio-cultural expectations of male behavior and the existential reality of an undeveloped economy.

The belief that Islam and/or Kyrgyz traditions sanctify the conviction that men must govern while women must passively submit was expressed by participants in FG3 as well. Consider the following exchange, which notes the disempowerment of men, that occurred when the moderator asked about Islam's attitude toward the family:

Mirbek: The man must stand higher than the woman because they say the woman descends from the rib of a man.

Moderator: Why?

Respondent: Today women rule men, and this isn't right. The man must stand higher than the woman in Islam – it's written in Hadith. If a woman satisfies a man then she will go to heaven. If at night a man wants contact with his wife and she denies him, then angels will berate her all night. Therefore she needs to listen to her husband.

Respondent: It's necessary to listen to the man.

...

Respondent: In Islam, the woman must listen to the man.

Moderator: Let's talk about what actually happens.

Bekzat: Men have a duty to protect the country, to serve the state. Men must be first, they must be leaders, heads of the family. This isn't linked to Islam, the Kyrgyz have it in their blood the more so because we live in Asia.

Respondent: We say that we must be first, be the leaders, but in fact it turns out that we gave up this leadership a long time ago.

Thus, some respondents underscore the importance of Islam in dictating a man's position in the family, while others emphasize the importance of Kyrgyz traditions in doing so. Regardless, the above exchange reveals dissatisfaction with the status quo, which these men interpret as a surrendering of power that has placed women at the top of a social hierarchy where they can, and do, rule men. The threat – actual or hypothetical – of the empowerment of women was articulated during individual interviews El-Pikir conducted as well. For example, the politician articulated a woman's role in Kyrgyz society in terms of birthing and raising children, helping her husband build a home, and preserving relations with relatives; a woman who returns to work a year after the birth of a child violates these norms and is, in the eyes of this respondent, responsible for the child's long-term physical suffering:

> The woman must look after the home and the children's health. She must raise the child herself until he goes to school. Only after this can she work. The child must be five or six. But today women give birth, look after the child for a year, then go to work. During this time the child's health worsens, and then he suffers his whole life … The man is the engine of the process, the leader. The woman, after taking care of her child for five or six years, must help the man build a home, preserve relations with relatives, attend family events, and help the parents.

This comment, reminiscent of Soviet rhetoric concerning gender ideals, summarizes the constellation of meanings Kyrgyz culture assigns to women: they are to marry, raise children, take care of the home, and help their husbands and relatives. Recalling the relational aspect of gender, I note again that expected femininity permits expected masculinity. When asked what role women should play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, respondents expressed views that reflect the politician's comment. For example, the interviewee who described

himself as wealthy represented women as subordinate subjects designed to reproduce and care for the home: "The woman is secondary. Her responsibility is housekeeping, and if there's no mutual understanding about this the family breaks up. Our society is constantly changing, it's as if women have become oriented toward the West, in a more secular direction. The changes are big. We are a Muslim country; the Kyrgyz have strong family traditions." This comment voices the idea that women who fail to conform to prevalent gender norms, some of whom may adhere more to Western values than Kyrgyz values, are responsible for familial havoc.

If my respondents envision *nastoiashchie muzhiki* as encompassing the roles of primary breadwinner and head of the household, they consider women to be responsible for creating conditions that facilitate the fulfillment of these roles. An obedient wife who takes care of her home serves her husband well; a disobedient wife who fails to take care of her home hinders her husband's ability to live up to the gender ideals that render him intelligible to and accepted by his community. But this gender stereotype of the obedient wife who keeps the hearth conflicts with a socioeconomic reality in which wages earned by a woman can be simultaneously threatening to a real man's masculinity but also appreciated *if* the woman does not aspire to become head of the household, thus eliminating another attribute of hegemonic masculinity. Participants in two FGs discussed this disconnect between gender norms and socioeconomic realities. FG1 participants emphasized the importance of a wife who ensures a harmonious home environment that facilitates her husband's ability to conform to prevailing gender ideals:

> **Moderator**: What role should women play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan?
> **Bakyt**: A woman keeps the hearth.
> **Respondent**: She's the caretaker.
> **Moderator**: What is a keeper of the hearth? I'm young, explain to me, I don't have a wife.
> **Kairat**: The keeper of the hearth is when a woman is home, she does the housekeeping, she provides comfort in the family, when the man comes home from work there must be mutual understanding, even at the table with the children there must be joyful events.
> **Moderator**: So the atmosphere in the home?
> **Respondent**: Yes, and the woman must create this.
> **Aibek**: On the whole I agree, but it's not necessary that she only do the housekeeping only. Let her work, let her be in politics, maybe serve as a deputy. She shouldn't just keep the hearth.

Bakyt: I think that the old way, when the woman was silent, wasn't right. I think the modern woman goes forward: she supports her husband and has the right to work, to have a career.

Aibek and Bakyt's comments reveal discomfort with prevailing gender stereotypes and permit an expanded role for women in society that allows them to work outside the home as long as they keep the hearth and obey their husbands. The disconnect between gender norms and socioeconomic realities mentioned above has encouraged, if not compelled, some men to envision an expanded role for women in Kyrgyz society. The individual who categorized himself as poor, for example, envisoned such a role: when asked what role women should play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, he answered as follows: "A woman is a housewife, she maintains daily life, she looks after the children; she's the caretaker. And she should work."

The following FG2 excerpt reveals the same discomfort and permits a similarly expansive role for women in Kyrgyz society: women who do not work outside the home are expected to live up to prevailing gender ideals, but those who do work outside the home are respected as long as they refrain from governing the family and using the fact that they earn money to challenge their husbands:

Moderator: What role should women play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan?
Farkhad: If a woman wants to work and has a good job, then it's forbidden to prohibit this. If she doesn't work, she must look after the house well.
Respondent: I, for example, oppose the idea that a woman must sit home.
...
Medet: The man is the head of the family, and if she will consult and ask permission from him then there won't be any conflict in the family. Let her be a seamstress, work in a bank, in academia, let her be president of an organization, but she must consult with her family.
...
Respondent: The main thing is that the wife should not poke the fact that she earns money – that's the worst thing.
Moderator: So her personality must be calm, wise?
Respondent: For example, it happens that a woman indulges, "I earn money and you don't, or I earn more money than you."
Respondent: That depends on the man, what kind of training the man gives his wife, whether such consequences will appear.
Respondent: Yes, at home the man is president.

These respondents highlighted the importance of a power dynamic in which a woman who earns money, perhaps more than her husband, avoids "poking" or using this fact to her advantage. One respondent considered it the man's responsibility to make sure a wage-earning woman knows her place within the family: he must train his wife. In emphasizing the relational aspect of gender, this respondent thought that if a man governs his household adequately, his wife will not use her financial status as a weapon to challenge her husband's authority. Here, expected masculinity permits expected femininity.

While they acknowledged the leadership role women have played in Kyrgyz history, FG3 participants argued that this role had, and should continue to have, limits requiring a woman to first and foremost reproduce and keep the hearth:

> **Moderator**: The man must be the head of the family, provide for the family, and then develop the country. What role should women play in contemporary Kyrgyzstan?
> **Mirbek**: Women should stay at home, they shouldn't show their bodies to other men.
> **Bekzat**: Men and women have had equal rights since time immemorial. Women have always played an important role in society, for example Kurmanzhan Datka, Kanykei, Zhanyl-Myrza – but everything was in limits.
> **Moderator:** What should those limits be?
> **Respondent**: To give birth, take care of the hearth; they have their own mission. Men also must help. Today a woman must work. And if she works, then she will help you financially.
> **Almaz**: It's forbidden to prevent women from working because her parents gave her an education, invested in her so that she'd receive an education, they chose a profession for her, some will become teachers, lawyers. You yourself must choose a wife. If you want an obedient wife, choose an obedient wife.

Almaz's response indicates disagreement with prevailing gender norms and poses a view rarely expressed in these FGs, which is that a man should choose the type of woman he wants to marry. This response contradicts the notion that a man must train his wife to conform to gender ideals, which was expressed by the interviewee who characterized himself as religious:

> A woman must listen to her husband, raise the children, teach them proper behavior. From a young age children listen to their mother, who raises them, and she must give them proper understandings according to Sharia and normal laws of humanity. A man must control his wife, tell her

> how to raise the children. For example, let our children read the Koran, fast, observe purity – but the man must tell her all of this.

The interviewee who characterized himself as rural expressed a similar view: "A woman must only raise the children and listen to her husband. If she works, she also must do some good for her relatives … A woman has two responsibilities: when her husband comes home from work he must be greeted warmly, and the children must behave well. Then she must satisfy her husband, even physically; she must never refuse her husband. The man is the head of the family." This quote underscores the need for some men to either marry a submissive woman who ensures a harmonious home atmosphere and satisfies her husband sexually, or train a woman to conform to these expectations.

These attributes of expected femininity (being obedient, serving) are fundamental elements of the "ideal wife" picture FG participants drew, regardless of whether or not they envisioned an expanded role for women in Kyrgyz society. When the moderator asked each FG what the ideal wife looks like, he received mixed answers: some reflect prevailing gender stereotypes participants adhered to when answering other questions, while others reflect the expanded role for women in society discussed above. FG2 participants articulated views reflecting prevailing gender norms: their ideal wife takes care of the hearth and "stifles" herself:

> **Moderator**: If we were to draw a portrait of the ideal wife, who is she?
> **Respondent**: It seems to me that the understanding of an ideal wife is one who takes care of you and manages the children, and is good in all aspects whether she's the first or fourth – that makes no difference.
> **Moderator**: What sort of wife is ideal? Kurman said the main thing is that she must take care of everyone, keep the hearth.
> **Arstanbek**: For me too she must keep the hearth at home. The house must be in order, the children well-groomed, she must cook, and be affectionate and gentle.
> **Respondent**: She constantly stifles herself [laughter in the room].

FG3 participants travelled further down this road of misogyny, articulating their view of an ideal wife as one who not only keeps the hearth and obeys her husband, but also has a "wonderful exterior appearance":

> **Moderator**: Let's draw a portrait of the ideal wife.
> **Respondent**: She is well groomed, clean, smart, in excellent health, cooks well, and looks after the children.

Respondent: As they say, the path to the heart of a man is through his stomach – same with me [laughter].
Respondent: She gives her children a good upbringing because a good person only gives a good upbringing.
Mirbek: A smart woman never says a bad word to her children about their father. A smart woman never yells at her husband, she calmly explains things to him.
Respondent: Yes, that's right.
Respondent: She must respect her husband.
Respondent: All sorts of things happen in life.
Osmon: The ideal wife listens to you.
Emil: One who gives her children a good upbringing.
Erbol: Today there are no ideal wives! [laughter in the hall]
Respondent: If she listens to you and respects herself, then you will earn money and not waste time.
Respondent: The Kyrgyz have a saying – choose a wife like your mama. If a good woman raised you, you'll always compare your wife to your mother and you won't be satisfied. For example, I had three wives and I was not able to compare one to her. Maybe the food wasn't as tasty, or the house was cleaned only once a week. Women must also have a wonderful exterior appearance because men often operate on animal instincts, and we are inclined to pay attention to beautiful women.
Respondent: Yes, the ideal wife must have a beautiful appearance.

In contrast to participants from FG2 and FG3, FG1 participants articulated an expanded role for women in Kyrgyz society: the ideal wife looks after her husband but might conceivably work outside the home:

Moderator: So the ideal wife is one with whom you've lived many years and with whom you have a mutual understanding. Does she work?
Sultanbek: If finances are tight then she must work.
Bakyt: I think she should work; she can't just sit at home.
Kairat: When a woman sits at home, her nerves carry over to her husband. She should work, she should be distracted from headaches and such.
Moderator: Does the ideal wife take care of you?
Respondent: Yes, she should take care of us.
Respondent: Yes, she keeps an eye on you.

My research suggests that some men in Kyrgyzstan accept the notion of a female breadwinner as long as she keeps the hearth, an obligation that requires her to refrain from challenging the head of the household. This does not, however, represent a severe rupture in gender relations: men continue to expect their wives to fulfill prevailing gender roles. This expectation extends beyond the family into the political arena, where women are expected to play a limited role.

Political Implications of Depleted Masculinity

My research reveals three features of hegemonic masculinity in Kyrgyzstan: *nastoiashchie muzhiki* support their families, command their families, and govern their states. The transition from a command to market economy made it difficult for men to perform this sort of masculinity. An inability to sufficiently perform the primary breadwinner role laid the foundation for the development of depleted masculinity, which is characterized by a sense of disempowerment. Depleted masculinity results when a critical attribute of a stereotypical *nastoiashchii muzhik* disappears. Below, I discuss the political implications of this phenomenon.

The Kyrgyz case sheds light on a global phenomenon typically described in terms of "crises of masculinity" resulting from changes in economies, social structures, and household configurations. Women's increased presence in the labor force and "the loss of men's assured role as breadwinner and provider to the family" contribute to crises of masculinity everywhere.[53] Itulua-Abumere argues that masculinity is not natural, but that it is rather "a gender identity that is socially and culturally constructed, historical and political.[54] The Kyrgyz case suggests that the constellation of meanings ascribed to bodies can change as a society moves through different historical periods. In particular, a society's hegemonic masculinity can shed or acquire attributes as structural contexts change. The Kyrgyz case thus illuminates the impact of tumultuous economic changes on masculinity, as well as how those transformations can create a sense of depleted masculinity characterized by a sense of disempowerment.

53 Frances Cleaver, "Men and Masculinities: New Directions in Gender and Development," in *Masculinities Matter! Men, Gender and Development*, ed. Frances Cleaver (London: Zed Books, 2002): 1–27, 3.

54 Flourish Itulua-Abumere, "Understanding Men and Masculinity in Modern Society," *Open Journal of Social Science Research* 1, no. 2 (2013): 42–45, 4.

Connell views masculinity as "a configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations" that can be disrupted or transformed.[55] For some men in Kyrgyzstan, the disruption of masculinity that stemmed from the country's economic transition has resulted in a sense of depleted masculinity. Though they have not been completely deprived of their masculinity, these men have lost one of the three principal pillars upon which their sense of masculinity has historically been based. My research suggests that an important feature of depleted masculinity is a sometimes begrudging acceptance of an expanded role for women in the labor force.

But that expanded role does not necessarily extend into the political arena. While national politics are beyond the scope of this article, local politics – where women are few in number or entirely absent – are not. Former President Roza Otunbaeva argues that a lack of tolerance for women in leadership positions contributes to the fact that all of Kyrgyzstan's governors, *akims*, and mayors are men.[56] Turdalieva, a Kyrgyz anthropologist, highlights the sticky gender ideals discussed in this article: "We are developed, we keep in step with the times, but at the same time the perception of women in society remains traditional. A woman is perceived as an instrument in the household … Today a woman might occupy a high position, she might be financially independent. But when a matter approaches the adoption of an important decision, she remains an obedient member of the family."[57] This perception of women in Kyrgyz society does not envision a presence of women in politics.

The fact that prevailing gender norms render it difficult for women to win seats in local councils, where decisions affecting village life are made, influenced former President Sooronbai Zheenbekov's decision to sign a law in 2019 requiring a presence (at least 30%) of women in local councils. In effect, this means that three of seven mandates are reserved for women in each council. The first post-quota elections, which were held in 2019 in Saruu village in the Issikyl region, reveal the intensity with which some men cling to one of the remaining attributes of hegemonic masculinity: political power. About 70 candidates running in those elections signed a letter sent to President Zheenbekov in which they argued that gender quotas "violate the rights of skilled horsemen" and undermine "trust of the population in the electoral system," demanded a

55 Connell, *Masculinities*, 84.

56 Aidai Erkebaeva, "Odnim grafikom: Kak (ne) soblydalis' gendernye kvoty v parlamente za poślednie 5 let," *Kloop*, 2019, https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/07/16/odnim-grafikom-kak-ne-soblyudalis-gendernye-kvoty-v-parlamente-za-poslednie-5-let/.

57 Sooronbaeva, Asel', "Kyrgyzstan: voprosy gendernogo ravenstva dolzhny byt' na povestke dnia vsegda," *Cabar.Asia*, February 26, 2020, https://cabar.asia/ru/kyrgyzstan-voprosy-gendernogo-ravenstva-dolzhny-byt-na-povestke-dnya-vsegda/.

reaction from the president, and threatened to disrupt the elections if their appeal was not acknowledged.[58]

President Zheenbekov did not respond, the signatories did not disrupt the elections, and women were elected to the Saruu council. But the appeal letter reflects the disempowerment voiced in this article that characterizes the depleted masculinity that emerged in reaction to Kyrgyzstan's economic transition. I interpret the letter, in part, as an attempt by its signatories to preserve one attribute of hegemonic masculinity (a *nastoiashchii muzhik* governs his state) in the context of the disappearance of another attribute (a *nastoiashchii muzhik* provides for his family). Though they continue to play a leadership role in the family and the polity, men no longer necessarily play a leadership role in the economy. A *nastoiashchii muzhik*'s sense of masculinity is depleted when one of its crucial attributes (in this case, earning wages) disappears but other crucial attributes (in this case, governing the family and the state) remain.

58 Evgeniia Mikhailidi, "Muzhchiny protiv gendernykh kvot. Mestnye vybory v Saruu sostoiialis', nesmotria na ugrozy ikh sryva," *Kloop*, September 23, 2019, https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/09/23/muzhchiny-protiv-gendernyh-kvot-mestnye-vybory-v-saruu-sostoyalis-nesmotrya-na-ugrozy-ih-sryva/.