Bargaining with Virginity: Regulating Practices in Post-socialist Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This article explores systems of social control over women's bodies demonstrated by discourses and practices which regulate women's virginity in Kyrgyzstan. Emergence of these discourses are shaped by Kyrgyzstan's continued post-independence nation-building processes and economic instability. In this context, women's bodies are at the center of political contestation, ethnic nationalism, and collective power. Findings suggest that women have learned to use their bodies in economic struggles as sources of individual resistance. Drawing on in-depth interviews and ethnography of social media, we identify how young Kyrgyz women relate to the issue and its associated practices. We investigate their strategizing mechanisms and analyze how, in the attempts to undermine patriarchal oppression and optimize their opportunities, their coping strategies may actually contribute to perpetuate them.

Keywords

Kyrgyzstan – gender – virginity – body – violence

Introduction

This article explores controversial practices and narratives about premarital virginity ("kyzdyk" in the Kyrgyz language and "devstvennost" in Russian) among young women in Kyrgyzstan. We conceptualized virginity as a social construct rather than a medical or scientific term[1] and positioned the existing discourses about it in Kyrgyzstan, as shaped by the country's continued post-independence nation-building and ensuing dynamics of economic development. Women and their roles in society continued to be featured in political debates and symbolized not only women's position within the newly independent state but also of the nature of national and ethnic identity. The discourse on the latter embraced neo-familial ideals about men, women, and the family in the efforts to disidentify with the Soviet legacy of sexual egalitarianism. Developments in the global markets, economic instability, and an increased use of social media had a direct effect on how various audiences engaged with and responded to this issue. Our focus is on how young women themselves relate to the practices of virginity and make use of the newly evolved social institutions, such as the media, the medical field, and the market.

Existing literature discusses the symbolic and economic value of women's virginity and links it to power relations which control, objectify, and alienate women from their sexuality.[2] The preservation of virginity was described as justified in the name of traditional values, ethnic honor, and virtue,[3] or, on the contrary, as archaic and barbaric.[4] Researchers characterized virginity testing

1 Deanna Holzman and Nancy Kulish, *Nevermore: The Hymen and the Loss of Virginity* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997).

2 Alice Schlegel, "Status, property, and the value on virginity," *American Ethnologist* 18, no. 4 (1991): 719–734; Natalia Yargomskaya, "Transformaziya szenaria zhenskogo seksualnogo debuta: 'proshanie s nevinnostiyu' i gimenoplastika" (Transformation of women sexual debut scenarios: 'losing virginity' and hymenoplasty), in *Noviy Byt v Sovremennoi Rossii: Gendernie Issledovaniya Povsednevnosti* (New Byt: Gender Studies of the Everyday), eds. Elena Zdravosmyslova, Anna Rotkirch, Anna Temkina (Saint Petersburg: European University of Saint Petersburg, 2009), 287–315.

3 Zanele Ndlovu, "Virginity testing raises many questions," *The Free Library*, March 22, 2005, https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Virginity+testing+raises+many+questions.-a0135337948; Anna Temkina, "Premarital virginity: Cultural code of gender order in contemporary Armenia (case of Yerevan)," *Laboratorium*, 1(2010): 129–159.

4 Meredith Varner, "American protest: Virginity testing is outdated and barbaric", *The Daily Free Press*, November 12, 2019, accessed January 15, 2021, https://dailyfreepress.com/2019/11/12/american-protest-virginity-testing-is-outdated-and-barbaric/.

as medically invalid,[5] degrading and cruel,[6] unethical,[7] unprofessional,[8] and a "license to kill."[9] We argue that in the context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, virginity practices need to be viewed outside of the dichotomous frameworks oscillating between modernity and tradition, oppression and empowerment, and scientific and customary explanations. We analyzed virginity performances in Kyrgyzstan as emblematic of the dynamically changing cultural, economic, and political landscape with linkages to state-endorsed national ideologies and associated gender regimes ushered by the post-independence transitional processes. Following Parla,[10] we agree that the practice must be considered as a particularly modern form of institutional violence used to promote the symbol of modern Kyrgyz society whose women are contemporary in many regards yet "chaste" and "pure" as articulated by the (nationalist) post-1991 modernization and national identity building processes. We observed that newly emerging actors, institutions, and narratives about premarital virginity resulted in the practice becoming less routinized; the practice of virginity was no longer merely customary procedures, but more salient and reflexive in nature. These reflexive narratives varied and were expressed in diverse ways of relating to and interpreting virginity practices. In the article, our analysis builds on Kandiyoti's original work on patriarchal bargains in terms of women's lifecycles in patrilocal patriarchal families and women's gaining power over time with age and through their male children. We followed Kandiyoti's idea that "patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle

5 Mehri Robatjazi, Masoumeh Simbar, Fatemeh Nahidi, Jaber Gharehdaghi, Mohammadali Emamhadi, Abou-Ali Vedadhir, and Hamid Alavimajd, "Virginity testing beyond a medical examination," *Global Journal of Health Science* 8, no. 7 (July 2016): 152–164.

6 Andreas Harsono, "Indonesia: 'virginity tests' for female police. Testing applicants is discriminatory, cruel, degrading," *New York: Human Rights Watch*, November 17, 2014, accessed January 15, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/17/indonesia-virginity-tests-female-police.

7 Amirhossein Moaddab, Laurance B McCullough, Frank A Chervenak, Garry A Dildy, Alireza Abdollah Shamshirsaz, "Virginity testing in professional obstetric and gynecologi- cal ethics," *Lancet* 288, no. 10039 (2016): 98–100.

8 Mehri Robatjazi, Masoumeh Simbar, Fatemeh Nahidi and Jaber Gharehdagli, "Virginity testing beyond a medical examination" *Global Journal of Health Science* 8, no. 7 (November 2015): 153.

9 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Imposition of virginity testing: a life-saver or a license to kill?" *Soc Sci Med* 60, no 6 (2005): 1187–96.

10 Avse Parla, "The 'honor' of the state: Virginity examinations in Turkey," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 65–88.

and renegotiation of the relations between genders."[11] We added to her work by exemplifying how, in the context of post-Soviet political transformation and economic turbulence, these negotiations were manifested and incorporated new institutions such as markets, social media, and medicine. In this paper, we demonstrate how young women living in today's Kyrgyzstan understand, resist, adapt, and negotiate meanings about their bodies and sexuality in connection with ideas and practices about premarital virginity and the ideas about female virtues it came to symbolize in the current patriarchal context.

Considering debates over this concept of "patriarchy," we used the term throughout this article to refer to intricate structures of diffused and persistent power relations seen as "natural." This concept reflects relations of exploitation and inequalities at multiple levels (e.g., the law, state, and home-life) and permeates all social institutions, media, and education. We concurred with Higgins's understanding of patriarchy as the "invisible mechanism that connects a host of seemingly isolated and disparate events, intertwining the experience of women of vastly different backgrounds, race and culture, and ranging in force from the trivial and personal to the serious and geopolitical."[12] Importantly, as the Higgins noted, patriarchy is easily obscured by fragmentary advances in gender equality. This invisible patriarchal power is discoverable; to expose it, is an important task for us as researchers. We aimed to add to the existing understandings of how oppression was supported by taken-for-granted routine activities. Patriarchal control over women's sexuality, including by other women through practices of virginity testing, was our specific concern in this paper.

Human Body as a Site of Discipline and Control

We drew upon feminist scholarship produced in Europe and the United States, which put the human body at the forefront of intellectual debates. This scholarship criticized male-centered associations of women with bodies based on the body/mind binary.[13] Subsequent derivation of women's social existence based on their physiology, where biological sex dictated social meanings

11 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy" *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3 (1988.): 275.

12 Charlotte Higgins, "The age of patriarchy: how an unfashionable idea became a rallying cry for feminism today," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/22/the-age-of-patriarchy-how-an-unfashionable-idea-became-a-rallying-cry-for-feminism-today.

13 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Howard Madison Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley:

for women's experiences, eliminated women from the category of those possessing the "mind" and capable of rational thinking. Beginning from 1970s, the use of Foucault's scholarship[14] helped feminist thinkers see how power relations worked through the body and through body disciplinary practices. Patriarchal social expectations shaped human bodies as gendered throughout their lifetime. As Bordo insisted in reference to gender binary, "our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of … masculinity and femininity."[15] Social construction of womanhood operates through the female body, and the female body becomes a site of patriarchal control. In the early 1970s, Dworkin argued that "in our culture not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification."[16] Institutions such as the State, family, education, and marriage became the sites where the material body was disciplined and socialized.

Several studies showed that, in many societies, women continued to be seen as the property of men and nations and their bodies – controlled by males.[17] Women's value continued to be measured by her conformity to the notion of "moral and sexual purity."[18] As a metaphor for a nation, the female body came to represent ethnic/national honor, cultural heritage, and traditions,[19] whereas women's honor connoted the honor of the nation and its distinctiveness from other ethnic groups. In many societies, women's bodies are interpreted through reproductive heteronormative paradigms and are targeted not only as cultural reproducers of the nation and community, but also as biological reproducers of the nation.[20] To qualify for the latter, however, a woman must (be careful to) produce male children within a legitimate marriage, otherwise, she becomes a source of societal, familial, and individual grievances. Idealized notions of womanhood promoted by nationalists cast women's bodies in terms such as shameful, embarrassing, barren, and dirty. The State defines and limits women's sexual and bodily autonomy through its population control policies.

University of California Press, 1993); Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York, Routledge, 1990).

14 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage 1979).

15 Bordo, Unbearable Weight, 91.

16 Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1974), 113–114.

17 Schlegel, "Status, property, and the value on virginity," *722*.

18 Rose McKeon Olson and Claudia Garcia-Moreno, "Virginity testing: a systematic review," *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 61 (2017): 1–10.

19 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

20 Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation. 26.

Examples include abortion bans, professional bans for women, and forced sterilization. Sexual violence against women in conflict-affected zones has become a weapon of war. Harmful traditional practices such as female genital cutting has been used to assert control over women's bodies and sexuality in the name of culture and tradition. The modern medical system is an extension of the patriarchal state that manipulates women's bodies to ensure their conformity to the dominant paradigm through invasive reproductive technologies such as invitro insemination, hormonal manipulation, and conversion therapy for LGBTI+ community. Women's bodies have been described as "used" and "abused"[21] but also as sources of certain kinds of pleasure and sense of control. The latter has brought attention to multiple meanings of body modification.[22] Our data also showed how a female virgin body carried social meanings; while such a body signaled respectability, morality, and desirability, it also had multiple meanings and abusive effects.

In contexts where virginity before marriage is prized, the idea prevails that, with the use of proper strategies, it is possible to establish whether a woman has experienced vaginal sexual intercourse. Methods vary and are not limited to the inspection of the hymen through a "two-finger vaginal insertion to measure size of the introitus or laxity of vaginal wall."[23] In Central Asian and Middle Eastern communities, a public demonstration of blood stains from a broken hymen on the bed sheet after the consummation of a marriage can serve as evidence of women's virginity status. Like in other places around the world, these practices assume that premarital virginity indicates a woman's moral character and social value.[24] Virginity testing in some African countries has been institutionalized as a preventive measure to deter sexual activity and HIV-spread.[25] In Indonesia, it is part of the application process for women seeking employment within law-enforcement institutions.[26] In Egypt, lawmakers proposed mandatory virginity tests for university entry.[27] Virginity testing is reported among

21 Meena Gopal Sabala, "Body, gender and sexuality: politics of being and belonging," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 17 (Spring 2010): 44.

22 Bordo, Unbearable Weight.

23 Olson and Garcia-Moreno, "Virginity testing," 2.

24 Ibid., 2.

25 Kevin Gary Behrens, "Why physicians ought not to perform virginity tests," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 41, no. 8 (2015): 691–5.

26 Phelim Kine, "Dispatches: Indonesia 'Virginity Test Rum Amok,'" *Human Rights Watch*, February 9, 2015, accessed January 15, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/09/dispatches-indonesia-virginity-tests-run-amok.

27 Sarah Sirgany, "Outcry in Egypt after lawmaker proposes 'virginity tests' for university entry," *CNN*, October 7, 2016, accessed January 15, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/07/africa/egypt-virginity-test-university/index.html.

migrant communities in areas not previously known for such practices like Canada, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands.[28] In Tajikistan, virginity testing became a part of the state-mandated pre-marital medical check-up without which the application for civil registering of a marriage will not be accepted. Such contextual understandings of reproductive anatomy and female sexuality inform the popularity of these examinations, which have been harmful to women and girls globally.[29] The World Health Organization,[30] the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,[31] and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, denounced virginity testing as a form of sexual violence and a violation of women's human rights.[32] In former-Soviet Central Asia, virginity practices are situated in the larger historical, political, economic, social, and cultural context of the "women's question."[33] They are central to the ideological underpinnings of national identity, statehood, citizenship, and gender. Hence, the routinized intrusion into women's bodies, in, for example Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, participates in establishing and maintaining state endorsed control aimed at securing claims of sovereignty.

In Kyrgyzstan, increasingly, virginity performance practice has acquired new agents, institutions, and discourses – the medical field, social and mass media, and the market – which have made the issue increasingly visible and contested. Kyrgyztani women themselves participate and use diverse narratives about virginity and deploy counter-discourses. They generate their own understanding of the issue and evaluate its implications on their daily lives. In the following sections of the paper, we use their accounts as entry points to

28 Kevin Gary Behrens, "Why physicians ought not to perform virginity tests," *Medical Ethics* 41, no. 8 (August 2015): 691–5.

29 Holzman and Kulish, *Nevermore*, *722*.

30 World Health Organization, Guidelines for the Medico-legal Care for Victims of Sexual Violence (World Health Organization: 2003).

31 Manfred Nowak, Promotion and Protection of All Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Including the Right to Development: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman Or Degrading Treatment Or Punishment. (United Nations: 2008 Jan. A/HRC/7/3.).

32 United Nations. Preliminary Report Submitted by the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Rashika Coomaraswamy, in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1994/45. (United Nations: 1994 Nov. E/CN.4/1995/42.).

33 The "women's question" refers to a set of policies undertaken by the central Soviet administration to liberate and empower women in Central Asia and beyond. These policies were seen as contributing to modernizing new Soviet republics which were considered "traditional" and to building socialist societies there.

explore the ways local women understand and strategize about their choices when it comes to virginity practices, through resistance and negotiations, and accommodation and acceptance.

Re-traditionalization and Its Implications for Women

Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet Socialist Republic in the USSR, has been transitioning to its localized version of sovereign liberal democracy since 1991. This transition entailed drastic reforms in economic and governance structures and social protection, which, in turn, affected local women in complex, ambivalent, and inconsistent ways.[34] While Kyrgyz women continued to work in both formal and informal economic sectors,[35] economic hardship coupled with the erosion of state-sponsored social support pushed them to the margins of society.[36] The major achievements of the Soviet project of women's emancipation such as universal education, engagement in productive labor, and active political participation were lost.[37] Moreover, the process of transition included a new state nationalism which produced highly pronounced gendered effects.[38] Nationalizing and re-traditionalizing defined the post-1991 national ideologies[39] that affected women's lives in particular gendered

34 Kathleen Kuehnast and Carol Nechemias, *Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition: Nation Building, Economic Survival, and Civic Activism* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), 1.

35 Ibid.

36 Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Direnberger, "Gender and nation in post-Soviet Central Asia: from national narratives to women's practices," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 195–206.

37 Aksana Ismailbekova, "Constructing the Authority of Women Through Custom: Bulak Village, Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 266–280; Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, Nor Modern?" *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 601–623.

38 Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, 86; Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*; Cleuziou and Direnberger, "Gender and nation," 198; Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, and Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

39 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Annette Bohr, "The Central Asian States as Nationalizing Regimes," in *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities*, eds. Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr, and Edward Allworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 139–164; Erica Marat, *National Ideology and State-building in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Paper, 2008), accessed September 21, 2019, https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_01_SRP_Marat_National-Ideology.pdf.

ways. The ideological invocation of imminent and primordial ethnic traditions informed fierce desires to excavate and reestablish the order believed to be authentic.[40] In the process, the sacredness of traditions and the responsibility of passing traditional forms and patterns of life were delegated to women, who, subsequently, became the symbols of Kyrgyz culture, traditions, and the intimate fabric of ethnic identity.[41] Increasingly, men started being depicted as agents of modernization,[42] while women came to represent an unmoving, stable, ahistorical domestic space, where women were meant to provide certainty, familiarity, and comfort to their men as mothers, wives, and daughters.[43] The desired rupture from the Soviet women's liberation project required a return to women's "more natural" roles within the family[44] bolstering gender- and age-based discrimination in all social realms.[45] Re-traditionalizing discourses about women, their roles in the Kyrgyz nation-building, and physical and political spaces they occupy led to restrictive body politics.[46] For instance, Suyarkulova demonstrates how and in what areas of social life local nationalism utilized the female body as a symbol of the nation and denied women their humanity and individuality by granting men (and the larger society) the power and legitimacy to act in the name of the family, community, and national honor.[47]

Retraditionalizing narratives have already been shown to instigate painfully discriminatory consequences for Kyrgyz women. In 2012, groups of male Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia mobilized to severely torture ethnic Kyrgyz women for their alleged associating with non-Kyrgyz men. Some of

40 Marat, *National Ideology*, 42; Cleuziou and Direnberger, "Gender and nation," 198.

41 Mohira Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the nation: gender and politics of dress in contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 247–265.

42 Meghan Simpson, "Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women's Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2006): 9–31.

43 Mohira Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the nation," 195.

44 Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan, *Gender Politics in Post-Communist Eurasia* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

45 Cleuziou and Direnberger, "Gender and nation," 205.

46 Anara Tabyshalieva, "Revival of Traditions in Post-Soviet Central Asia," in *Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia*, ed. by Marnia Lazreg, World Bank Discussion Paper no. 411, Europe and Central Asia Gender and Development Series (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2000); Kuehnast and Nechemias, *Post-Soviet Women*, 2; Cynthia Werner, "Feminizing the New Silk Road: Women Traders in Rural Kazakhstan," in *Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition: Nation Building, Economic Survival, and Civic Activism*, eds. Kathleen Kuehnast and Carol Nechemias (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004); Julie McBrien, "Mukadas's struggle: Veils and modernity in Kyrgyzstan," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 127–144.

47 Mohira Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the nation," 201.

the women were raped and one was beaten to death.[48] Back in Kyrgyzstan, in public debates about these incidences, many sympathized with the perpetrators because they were "fighting for the honor of the nation."[49] In July 2020, similar groups of Kyrgyz men shared new videos on social media in which they threatened to kill ethnic Kyrgyz women if they are seen behaving "inappropriately" and encouraged "every Kyrgyz pal to wake up their men's honor."[50] None of the perpetrators have been prosecuted, while public view shifted the blame entirely on women.

In mid-September 2019, local news channels broadcasted a short amateur video of a young woman strolling in her underwear in one of the shopping malls in Bishkek. The video showed her wearing a black bra, black panties, and pantyhose with her face turned away from the camera. In the busy shopping mall, bystanders looked at her with amusement, but towards the end of the video, a group of angry Kyrgyz men tried to attack her. When the video was shared via Instagram,[51] it collected more than twenty thousand views within just one day. The users' comments expressed support for the attackers, suggested calling the police on her, and proposed shooting her with a gun. Some users saw her behavior as a "degradation," "European influence," and "perversion." Commentators emphasized the "non-Kyrgyzness" of her show, "dishonoring Kyrgyzstan" and deserving "a severe punishment." One particularly angry user suggested to "burn her on an open fire and slowly spill water on the fire to make the torture lasts really long." Others called on the "black patriots" mentioned above to punish the girl. The girls' parents were also shamed for not properly educating their daughter. Appeals to the Kyrgyzstan's president were made to fix this girl's behavior.

In these and other similar cases, such public responses called for the policing of women's bodies in the name of the nation. In Kyrgyzstan, idea(l)s of national identity, gender, and sexuality continue to intertwine and instigate public discourse, and the emotions surrounding ideas of collective ethnic

48 Ibid., 251.

49 Gulnara Ibraeva, Anara Moldosheva, and Mehrigul Ablezova, "'We Will Kill You and We Will Be Acquitted!' – Critical Discourse Analysis of a Media Case of Violence Against Female Migrants from Kyrgyzstan," in *Gender in Modern Central Asia*, ed. Thomas Kruessmann (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2015): 3–26.

50 Islam Roziev, "Video: In Moscow, the Kyrgyz called to attack Kyrgyz girls who are seen together with foreigners," *Kloop.kg*, July 22, 2020, accessed January 15, 2021, https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/07/22/video-v-moskve-kyrgyzstantsy-prizvali-napadat-na-kyrgyzskih-devushek-kotoryh-vidyat-s-inostrantsami/.

51 Kaktus Media (@kaktus_media), "In one of Bishkek shopping malls a young man and a young woman had a walk while wearing underwear only", Instagram video, September 16, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B2ev1vbgMki/?igshid=oxpz8uh6cos.

honor and dignity continue to be centered on the necessity to regulate women's bodies, public appearances, and behaviors through various means, including violence. In the context of rigid social control over women's bodies, an individual's transgression of the established norms presents serious risks to one's life. This is not a natural development, as "this field of conflict is also the product of a specific history (colonial, Soviet, and independent periods), of colonial encounters, and of post-Soviet construction of national independence."[52] Below, we demonstrate how these issues are reflected in the discourses and practices regarding women's pre-marital virginity in Kyrgyzstan.

Methods

Our analysis is based on the findings from a seven-month virtual ethnographic fieldwork[53] and in-depth interviews with women, men, and medical professionals. Recognizing the important role of online spaces in the everyday lives of people,[54] we monitored three local news media channels[55] and social media pages[56] for material related to virginity and followed the comment feeds published between 2015 and 2020. These media outlets were known as more "progressive" in their content than other information channels in Kyrgyzstan. Agreeing that ethnographic exploration of people in their "natural habitat" now includes their "online habitat,"[57] we treated the comments written in these newsgroups as primary data reflecting public discourses and representing popular perspectives in relation to our research focus. In winter – spring 2019, we interviewed sixteen individuals: four gynecologists, eight self-identified women, and four men residents of Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). At the time of the interviews, all respondents had university degrees and self-identified as ethnic Kyrgyz. These respondents were selected through a convenience

52 Cleuziou and Direnberger, "Gender and nation," 202.

53 Virtual ethnography here refers to an adaptation of ethnographic methodology to the online settings where interactions among humans are technologically mediated under the assumption that online community can and do create a shared culture facilitated and mediated by the internet.

54 Angela Cora Garcia, Alecea I. Standlee, Jennifer Bechkoff, and Yan Cui, "Ethnographic approaches to the internet and computer-mediated communication," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38 (2009): 52–84.

55 These media channels included the kloop.kg, azattyk.kg, and kaktus_media.kg. All were known to produce more "progressive" content than their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan.

56 Such as Instagram, Facebook, and VKontakte.

57 Ronald E. Hallett and Kristen Barber, "Ethnographic research in a cyber era," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 43 no. 3 (2014): 308.

sampling method.[58] We understand the limitations of our research and are aware that what we analyze and present is a snapshot that is not representative across such factors such as age, religion, ethnicity, urban/rural divide, economic standing, and educational levels. Nevertheless, we believe that these real people's personal accounts and an in-depth analysis of specific cases provide important insights into how virginity practices in Kyrgyzstan are located at the intersection of body, gender, nation, and economics. Understanding the location of such practices is important in thinking about possible local interventions.

Virginity and Marriage in Kyrgyzstan

Our data demonstrated that virginity and marriage were linked. The discussions about virginity were synonymous with a successful marriage, and their conflation suggested that practices, narratives, and beliefs about the former acquired significance within the broader discussion of the latter. Marriage served as a physical and symbolic space for testing virginity and celebrating or grieving over its absence. Systematic representation of women at home with family inform ideological preference for marriage by young women; it is prestigious to be married.[59] The institution of marriage became a way for women to "protect their bodies and their honor from accusations and violence."[60] Our analysis suggests that young women in Kyrgyzstan were also incentivized to maximize their resources, seek strategies to improve their economic standing, and gain a sense of (economic and social) security through marriage. For some of these women, marriage was a "contract between two parties and is likely to be the single most important economic arrangement that a woman enters into in her entire life."[61] For many, however, being a wife was a form of employment which, as we demonstrate below, was honorable but precarious.

58 Convenience sampling is a method of selecting participants in which not all members of the population have an equal non-zero chance of being selected to participate in the study. Instead, data are collected from the population members who are available and willing to participate. More can be found in Greg Guest, Emily, E. Namey, and Marilyn l. Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013).

59 Kuehnast and Nechemias, Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition, 2.

60 Diana Kudaibergenova, "Project Kelin. Marriage, Women, and Re-Traditionalization in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," in *Women of Asia Globalization, Development, and Gender Equity*, eds. Mehrangiz Najafizadeh and Linda Lindsey (New York: Routledge, 2018): 383.

61 Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer, "The political economy of women's support for fundamentalist Islam," *World Politics* 60, no. 4 (July 2008): 583.

Ismailbekova's ethnographic research in Kyrgyzstan demonstrated how being married constituted a "career" for many Kyrgyz women.[62] Such careers had a linear trajectory, whereby new brides, called *kelins*, after they arrived as new wives into the extended patrilocal families of their spouses and fully submitted to the authority of their mothers-in-law began from the lowest position in a family. The rigid vector of their careers followed the successive stages: from a new bride/wife, to a mother, and then to a mother-in-law. Ismailbekova states,

> First, a woman's position slowly advances upwards by producing progeny. Second, she can fully gain respect and identification with her husband's family when her sons marry and bring new brides into the family. […] Only after that can women take over the management of large households, enjoy making particular decisions, and command obedience.[63]

Achievement of the last life-cycle milestone allowed women to negotiate, strategize, and optimize their positions. But first, they must become "morally accepted wives, credible daughters-in-law, and respected grandmothers" in the eyes of the woman's spousal family and kin.[64] The *kelin*'s role was perceived to provide young women with honor, social status, and economic wellbeing. *Kelins* assumed reproductive roles and housekeeping tasks with, notably, a devote demonstration of respect and obedience to their in-laws and other relatives of their new family.[65]

Virginity as Performance

In this paragraphs, we focus on the power of the narratives about women's chastity associated with the pre-marital virginity and a continuous strengthening and legitimization of related beliefs and practices. We add virginity as another important step of a woman's lifecycle and their "corporal" and "corporate careers." The dominant socio-cultural expectation is that new *kelins* must (necessarily) be virgins. The material evidence of women's virginity – blood stains – is a source of joy, satisfaction, pride, but also relief and fear for all

62 Ismailbekova, "Constructing the Authority of Women Through Custom," 269.
63 Ibid., 266–267.
64 Ibid., 269.
65 Diana Kudaibergenova, "Project Kelin," 383; Ismailbekova, "Constructing the Authority of Women Through Custom," 268.

the actors: the bride, the groom, the parents of both, the relatives, friends, and neighbors. Below is a typical scenario, which we call "performing virginity," compiled from our primary data:[66]

> A virgin is brought to the home of her groom's parents. From now on, this will be her place of residence, if the rest of the wedding rituals go well. Guests and relatives participate in the celebratory festivities, which continue after the formal reception in the groom's house. Often, they stay overnight, and the festivities continue the following day. When the couple retires to the bedroom to consummate their marriage, at least one, but more often two, female relatives, typically the wives of older male relatives, called *dzhenes*, would stay close to the room. They are allowed to enter the (bed)room, but their main responsibility is to collect the bed sheet with blood stains, slightly rinse the stains with water, and then display this bedsheet to the audience. When this is done, it is time for the bride's family to bask in glory and pride. They are present at the festive tables when the groom's mother shyly announces to the desperately awaiting crowd a phrase "*uuldu Boldunar*," which semantically means "be proud of your daughter," but literally translates as "a son was made." The phrase signifies that the marriage is now finalized, that the final pledge was successfully passed, and that the groom's family happily accepts the new *kelin*. Guests come to glance at the bedsheet and when satisfied with its look, they give cash rewards, called *korumduk*, to the bride's mother and the bride's own *dzhenes*. This is a symbol of appreciation for "the proper upbringing of their daughter," a thankful acceptance of the gift of her chastity, and yet another reason to celebrate the successful passage of their daughter to becoming a *kelin*. The amount will vary depending on the financial standing of the groom's family and may reach more than two hundred U.S. dollars (fifteen thousand Kyrgyz *som* [local monitory units]). One of our respondents, a married thirty-three-year-old woman remembered her awe at seeing a bride's mother's receipt of "fifteen thousand som! Sometimes people give one thousand or two thousand but that time I thought 'wow, fifteen thousand!'" Importantly, *korumduk* does not replace *kalym*, which is the bride price still to be paid to the brides' family by the groom's parents.

66 This narrative is inferred from and based on our research materials; this is our reconstruction of a possible and often typical scenario.

The absence of blood on the bed sheet is severely punished and may entail grave consequences for the brides. Kudaibergenova also noted how the so-called "lost souls," the young non-virgins, were shamed for "dishonoring themselves and their bodies."[67] (The scholar was specifically worried about suicidal comments among those who were publicly shamed.) Similarly, in a Kyrgyz educational portal for the youth, *bilesinbi.kg*, the most popular question has been: "I have lost my virginity and then we broke up. How will I ever get married?"[68]

In April 2018, a reproductive health expert we interviewed argued in an article published in a popular Kyrgyz news website that men cannot physically "feel" if a girl is a virgin. The public comments to the article were polarized. One reader wrote that the article was a good one "only not for our society. Our men's heads are full of these. You are not likely to get through them. They will not understand no matter what you say."[69] The link between ethnicity and appreciation of virginity appeared systematically in the online space. When an article criticizing societal stigmatization of non-virgin women was published under the title "Virginity as a criterion for purity. Sad stories of women victims," one commentator under the nickname of "Kyrgyz" connected this issue to foreign influence. The "Kyrgyz" wrote, "I wonder who pushes this topic forward? Virginity is important. It is an indicator. Period."[70] A commentator, Zamir Sadykov, disagreed with the article and rationalized stigmatization of non-virgins through a eugenics argument. Sadykov wrote, "The Kyrgyz people are doing it right. Virginity is a sign of purity. They take care of the purity of their genus. He [the Kyrgyz man] takes a pure girl to be his wife and not just any kind of girl."[71] This article ended with a quote from a local reproductive health expert who said, "if we are talking about blood on the bedsheets, we will not go very far with these kinds of values, for sure." One commentator by the name Daniyar replied, "Maybe You [refereeing to the non-Kyrgyz ethnicity of the author of the article and the expert herself] will not go very far, but the Kyrgyz will go very far exactly because of this cult. Or, do you want to say, premarital relations are normal???"[72]

67 Diana Kudaibergenova, "Project Kelin," 383.

68 Marina Miroshnik, "Expert: muzhchini ne sposobni ponyat, devstvenna li zhenshina" [Men are not able to understand if a woman is a virgin], *Kaktus.media*, April 6, 2018, accessed February 9, 2019, https://kaktus.media/doc/372764_ekspert:_myjchiny_ne_sposobny_poniat_devstvenna_li_jenshina.html.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Aleksandra Titova, "'Devstvennost – Tovar Semiyi'. Kak Kyrgyzskih Devushek Stydyat iz-za Stereotipov o 'Neporochnosti'," ("Virginity is a family's commodity". How Kyrgyz girls are being shamed because of stereotypes about "purity") *Kloop.kg*, January 22, 1019,

The above illustrations are a few among many in which premarital virginity is moralized in public and private discourses as an important component of national traditions associated with the role of women vis-à-vis their families and wider communities. These discourses are popularized through the (social and mass) media and work to naturalize practices that facilitate the social reproduction of discourse on premarital virginity. Our research showed that opinions about premarital virginity varied. There seemed to be no consensus among Internet users. Yet, despite differences, virginity's loss was repeatedly described as a risk when it came to life opportunities. Being a virgin, hence, became a source of pride among the women themselves. The stories presented below share a common narrative about its significance. Young women were subjected to humiliating social surveillance by their own families to ensure that their virginity was preserved long enough. In one media outlet, a young girl shared her conversation with her mother. She wrote that her "mom often tells me that my character, my qualities or my intellect will not be important if my future husband and his mother if they find out that I am not a virgin."[73] One woman proudly announced on her social media that she was "Twenty-eight (years old) and I grew up with my strict grandmother. *Alhamdullilah* (thank God) I am fine."[74] Being "fine" meant that she was a virgin. She boasted about her proper upbringing due to her grandmother's strictness whose older age and association with traditions provided legitimacy to this woman's opinions about the importance of virginity. She later stated that her continued self-reserved sexual behavior was her unwillingness to "become an 'entrance yard' for men's [sexual] joy." The content of such comments was full of ambivalences and dissonances within and across their contributors. On the one hand, this 28-year-old woman criticized men's predatory behavior and resisted being reduced to an object for male sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, she embraced the value of virginity as part of the gendered model for "a good woman."

Ideas about virginity also affected behavioral choices among women themselves and the people around them. In an interview to one news channel,[75] a middle-aged woman told a story attributing her unsuccessful marriage and failed motherhood to how the issue of her virginity was handled by the family of her ex-husband. After her marriage had been consummated, the bed sheets

accessed February 9, 2019, https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/01/22/devstvennost-tovar-semi-kak-kyrgyzskih-devushek-stydyat-iz-za-stereotipov-o-neporochnosti/.

73 Ibid.

74 Anonymized user's personal Instagram page.

75 Lazat Zhanybek Kyzy and Kanymgul Elkeeva, "Dorogaya 'chest' devushki…," [The cherished girl's "honor" …] *Radio Azattyk*, October 28, 2015, accessed February 9, 2019. https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27330890.html.

did not bear blood stains to the great frustration of the groom and her own petrification of what would come next. She said,

> My husband just could not forget our first wedding night. To satisfy the relatives, he had to cut his finger and stain the bed with his own blood. I still want to forget the day when the relatives burst into our bedroom, and all his friend who gathered outside to see the bedsheet with marks of blood.[76]

While her chastity was proven in the public eye of their families, her relationships with her husband became defined by her continued attempts to compensate for her "flaw" and his perpetual dissatisfaction and accusations. This woman continued,

> I tried to do everything for him to forget about it. I always looked up at him, I did everything he told me to do. To avoid these conversations [him accusing her of "tricking" him], I quit my job after we had a child. But my husband at any smallest quarrel would recall this situation. Then he began to make friends with other girls. In the end we divorced. He took our child and does not allow me to see him (the child).

The repercussions of pre-marital loss of virginity concerned not only young women themselves but also their family members. The reputation of "impure" women may have led to her being seen as having a negative influence on children, and, as a result, limited her parenting rights.

When so much was vested in the ability to demonstrate virginity, many families resorted to practices ensuring its proof. A gynecologist from the capital city of Bishkek reported numerous requests for virginity tests among "women who bring their teenage daughters with a request to check if they were still virgins. These moms tend to be very hysterical and very aggressive." This gynecologist would speak with the girls who were brought for testing and they would agree on the official version that would be told to their mothers. She said, "Of course, I ask to talk to the girl alone and then I ask her what we would say to her mom. Of course, it is not [clinically] possible to determine whether a girl is a virgin or not." In this situation, where medical ethics allows parents to access their underaged children's medical information and where the gynecologist mistrusted the validity of such tests, this doctor sided with the young girls and consulted with them about the information communicated to their parents

76 Ibid.

(caregivers). In other cases, the clinical discourse has little authority for the families concerned with their daughter's virginity. As a result, virginity continues to be discursively linked not only to the marriage per se (as an event) but also to the latter's success (as a process of staying a couple). A sixty-four-year-old respondent, a medical doctor herself, offered her opinion in an interview:

> If a girl gets married while not being a virgin, this can affect the entire family's well-being. The husband will continue blaming her for her entire life. There is a woman who is now forty years old, she married at nineteen. For twenty years her husband has been mourning that he married a non-virgin.[77]

Virginity and the Medical Field

The medical field, the market economy, and social media have become increasingly involved in making virginity not only articulated and privatized but also medicalized and commercialized.[78] If a woman's virginity serves as a guarantee of a successful marriage, the lack of it is seen as a disaster. Hence, the hymenoplasty (temporary surgical restoration of the hymen) becomes one strategy of addressing the risk. This tactic can fix the problem, but it must be thoroughly disguised.

Hymenoplasty surgeries are believed to grant women new opportunities for a "normal" marriage and happy life. A Kyrgyz labor migrant, Perishte, told her story to one of the Kyrgyz news channels in 2015. She said,

> I came to Moscow five–six years go. I had a boyfriend, but he ditched me later. It was difficult but once I met another boy. I told him I was a virgin. When he proposed, I consulted with my girlfriends and had hymenoplasty done. This was a Kyrgyz medical center and I paid nine thousand rubles. I did it three days before the wedding. Well, I got married. Now I am expecting our second child. We live a good life. My husband did not notice anything.[79]

Like Perishte, by retaining or reconstructing their hymens, some local women acquired a level of independence from their environments. Hymen

77 Interview, a 38-year-old gynecologist, February 1, 2019, Bishkek.
78 Temkina, "Premarital virginity: Cultural code," 130.
79 Zhanybek Kyzy and Elkeeva, "Dorogaya 'chest' devushki…."

reconstruction allowed them to control their life circumstances, while maintaining the existing symbolical system of reference. Hence, the hymenoplasty gave women an opportunity to "manipulate virginity in their own interests" and "privatize their sexual experience and evade external control over their sexual life."[80] A gynecologist, Gulzat Akmatova, who lived and worked in Moscow, described this procedure in the following way:

> This is a plastic surgery. It is done at the wish of the girls. If she wants to have hymenoplasty done, she signs an anonymity agreement, pays the money and has the operation done. Girls go for these operations to avoid humiliation. Many girls come to our clinic. The Russians [ethnic Russian and other Slavic groups living in Russia] don't even pay attention to these things.[81]

Hymenoplasty thus, becomes a strategic action which Kyrgyz women actively use not only abroad, but also locally. An interviewee, Asel, a thirty-three-year-old woman from Bishkek, talked about her sister Tamara who "married her current husband only because they have had sex before marriage." Asel continued,

> She did not tell me at first and later confessed to me. She is absolutely not happy with him; she regrets marrying him. But she married him because of her fear before our parents, society and her husband. She was afraid that she would not become married at all. She is so unhappy that I advised her to divorce him.

Tamara's story is about the guilt, shame, and fear that forced her into an unwanted marriage. The societal prohibition of premarital sex shaped her decision. Asel, however, considered herself lucky because her virginity was never questioned. She and her current husband dated since high school and were deeply in love when they married, both virgins. Yet, her expected romantic wedding night did not come to fruition. She continued,

> Everything was under such a pressure. There was about one hundred and fifty people in our house. All those guests, rooms full of drunk people. We could only go to bed in the early morning only. […] I knew I did not have to worry about anything but still I could not fall asleep in fear that *dzhenes* would come in. […] I got up at around seven in the morning and just sat there for an hour until *dzhene* woke up and came to me saying

80 Natalia Yargomskaya, "Transformaziya szenaria zhenskogo," 297.
81 Zhanybek Kyzy and Elkeeva, "Dorogaya 'chest' devushki…."

> "good morning". She showed me the house, the kitchen, this and that and then carefully asked to give her our bed sheet.

Tamara's story had a strong influence on Asel, who started helping her other female relatives to not fall into the same trap. She advised these women to resort to hymenoplasty, if no other choice was available. Asel said,

> My husband's cousin met this guy, and he was from the South and it was very important for him. She was not a virgin, she said, because of an "unfortunate" visit to a gynecologist. She asked me to recommend a good gynecologist. So, I talked to my gynecologist and asked if she could do such an operation. She said she would. It was about eight or nine years and it cost one hundred dollars. She had the operation and then had sex with him, and he assumed he was her first man. They now live very well; their third child is on the way. This is now a very good family, an exemplary family, she is a very good wife, and he is a very good husband.

Asel had few other stories where she knew hymenoplasty helped women to gain confidence because it "raised their value." According to her, the hymenoplasty had firmly established itself in the landscape of available cosmetic fixtures in the capital Bishkek and became financially much more affordable to its residents. The price ranged from $8–$40 USD.[82] Women from all over the country could travel to Bishkek to undergo such a surgery. This surgery was generally not prestigious and respected gynecologists prefer doing it undercover, literally at night and/or in private hospitals. The gynecologist we interviewed expressed a concern that such procedures became a form of punishment for premarital sex: "A mom brought her pregnant teenage daughter with a request to abort the pregnancy and conduct a hymenoplasty surgery to prevent her from 'walking astray and ever using that hole.'"[83] Hence, hymenoplasty can be conceptualized as a tool in the contemporary market in Kyrgyzstan that women use to navigate between the patriarchal demands of their society, economic insecurities of their countries, their personal sexual desires, and their aspirations to achieve stability and security. At the same time, surgical reconstruction of virginity is embedded deeply within the culture characterized by gender asymmetries and hierarchies. Perishte, for example, admitted that she had perpetual fears that her spouse would learn the truth one day and would never forgive her.

82 About five hundred Kyrgyz som to 3000 Kyrgyz som.
83 Interview, February 1, 2019, Bishkek.

Dissent to and Bargains over Virginity

At the same time, the discourse on virginity was not adopted wholesale. There were vivid counter-narratives present in the digital space and personal interviews. The review of cyber spaces revealed that discussions about virginity as natural were protested by some of the interlocutors. For example, one of the online participants noted,

> If Kyrgyz women are not cattle, then why is the dignity of any young Kyrgyz woman, from a shepherd's daughter to a refined urban student, is measured by the presence or absence of a hymen in her crotch? If Kyrgyz women are not cattle, then, why, every single woman over the age of twenty is compelled to marriage. Old maids, that is, 30-year-old full-fledged women, are mourned as lepers – as if the only purpose for a woman is to get married and fertilized by some, even the meanest stallion?[84]

Our other interviews confirmed a growing dissent to the significance of virginity. We also found that the dissent could co-exist with practices that undermine any such dissent. One of our respondents, Zarina, a 24-year-old female inhabitant of Bishkek, stated the following,[85]

> Since the childhood we have seen it (behavior around virginity), have heard about it. And every girl strives to have it. Even if we realize that we leave home as a merchandize. We then try to leave our homes as expensively as possible. You have relatives who will talk about it behind your back. And, in any way, you want your mother to be proud of successfully marrying off her daughter.

Kudaibergenova argued that the "widespread discourse of the new 'traditions' and values in the familial ties, and the importance of saving her virginity before marriage have commodified the position of *kelin* [sic.] within the family, society, and nation."[86] But attitudes like Zarina's point out her particular relation to the issue of virginity. While she has clearly understood the practice's inherent commodification of the women's bodies, unjust treatment of brides, their objectification and humiliation, women like her choose not

84 An anonymous participant's personal Facebook page post, accessed October 23, 2019.
85 All names of the respondents are pseudonyms.
86 Diana Kudaibergenova, "Project Kelin," 379.

to resist the power of the established norm and the social calamity it may entail if they deviate from it. At the same time, Zarina intended to maximize her benefit from the system by "leaving home as expensively as possible." Navigating within the social system of virginity, Zarina realized that she could play by the rules of the game and monetize the value of her hymen, if not for herself, for her mother.

We found more evidence of individuals strategizing when it came to virginity's personal and social value. In an interview, Azima, a twenty-two-year-old urban female student, described her strategy as abstaining entirely from having sex with her boyfriend, whom she had been dating for four years. She defined herself as a "good girl" and planned to marry her boyfriend sometime in the future. When Azima met him, he asked her if she was a virgin: "It was not embarrassing at all. Every boy asks this question. The boy who plans to marry you someday […]." She added, "I, of course, asked him why such question and he said that he saw a wife in me and wanted to be the first." She then tricked him to test his "real feelings." Azima described this as follows:

> Well, first I told him I was not a virgin anymore and he went silent for half or a minute and then said "well, if that has happened so, it's ok. Ok, this is not important. The main thing now is that you have me." I then said that it was a joke and I just wanted to see his reaction. I think if a boy loves a girl, he will accept her anyways. I told him it was a joke and that I was a maiden and he said that it was important for him and what happened in my life before I met him and that I was a maiden. I saw that he loved me, valued me and respected me and it would not be important for him if I wasn't. I tested him.

Azima's behavior was also strictly sanctioned by her older brother who has kept on insisting that she and her boyfriend must "behave themselves," because "her future husband will value it. And in the future, even if the two of you have a fight, he will not be throwing at you phrases like 'I took you as a non-maiden.'" Azima's brother was apparently concerned with her diminishing negotiating power in the new family and her ability to climb up the career of a *kelin*, if she failed to stay a virgin. Azima's interview demonstrated that a preoccupation with virginity works to delimit and regulate sexual behavior among young women and men. The anxiety supports the social relations policing the youth behavior and forcing them to evaluate their possible strategies and consequences, preferring, often, to follow the rules. To illustrate, Azima reported that she and her boyfriend were desiring to have sex, but "we both know that … what if they will check … what will his mom or dad say? His mom told him that

it was very important that the *kelin* came as a maiden. And he listens to his parents." She explains that he had to "restrain himself. Well, he tries to."

The trick of the "patriarchal bargain"[87] is that the bargain can regulate men's behavior by warning males against pressuring young females for sex: the cultural significance of virginity forces young men to police their own conduct. For example, a 25-year-old unmarried male participant from Bishkek refused to have any sexual relations with virgins. He stated,

> I am twenty-five years old. I have never touched a virgin. I will never touch virgins. I myself am not a virgin. […] I asked my girlfriend if she was a virgin. She said 'yes'. A girl must be a virgin. Virginity is your face. Regardless of anything, she must keep her virginity. It is important for me.[88]

In a similar fashion, a 29-year-old married male participant, Sultan, explained how he navigated sexual life depending on the virginity status of his female partners. He noted,

> If I want not just sex, but serious relationships and that she becomes my spouse till the end of my days and that I want to continue my genus with her – she needs to be a virgin. She needs to be innocent and pure, morally and physically. This is better for the family and the children.[89]

Thus, premarital virginity among young girls delimits women's sexuality by the expectation of marriage to their potential spouses. Ownership of their bodies belongs to their male spouses and families. Sultan's comments on the idea that he owns his wife's body were especially glaring:

> For me personally, [it is important] that nobody has ever seen, except for me, my wife naked, during sex in different poses. For me, this is my property and, in the first place, her purity. You love this person, and you don't want to share her with anybody. If you know she had, it is uncomfortable. It is disappointment and irritation. More of irritation. It is not a competition. You need to know that what you love has not been touched, that it is yours fully and nobody has tasted it. When you are the first [sexual partner] for a girl, this does not bring any [sexual] pleasure to me, but it does

87 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," 279.
88 Interview, February 2, 2019, Bishkek.
89 Interview, February 3, 2019, Bishkek.

> bring consolation. I am not trying to prove myself, there is no ecstasy. This is just important for me.

Similarly, another forty-year-old male interviewee described his first sexual encounter with his virgin-wife as a celebration and a way to claim his ownership of her body. He said, "I don't even know how to formulate this feeling … at the moment when you tear hymen, she screams in pain, it hurts, but you feel good … not good … not as if invasion … you burst in … you feel yourself as the master of the situation."[90]

Narratives that incorporate religion also proposed regulations of male sexual behavior; these regulations were presented as faith based. Comments like the ones below were frequent responses to local news material dealing with the issues of sexuality:

> I did not say that men can [have sex before marriage] and women cannot. Men can't either. What can be better if both are clean, before God and before their own conscience[91]
>
> ***
>
> In Islam any premarital relationships are forbidden between the man and for woman. Sexual relations are all the more.[92]

The convergence of virginity with ideas about purity, morality, and femininity forced the young men to adjust their premarital sexual behavior if they believe their partners were and had to be "untouched." These adjustments ranged from staying away from virgins entirely to complete abstinence till marriage.

Economic Market and Virginity

The existing economic market also offers strategies for women to manage their circumstances and help them avoid stigmatization due to the loss of virginity. Azima, one of our respondents, reported paying close attention to her coquettish ways to capitalize on her virginity. These flirtatious ways were not limited to

90 Interview, 40-year-old married man, February 4, 2019, Bishkek.

91 User under the name of Daniyar, accessed February 9, 2019, https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/01/22/devstvennost-tovar-semi-kak-kyrgyzskih-devushek-stydyat-iz-za-stereotipov-o-neporochnosti/.

92 User under the name of Danyro Reagan Vulk, accessed February 9, 2019, https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/01/22/devstvennost-tovar-semi-kak-kyrgyzskih-devushek-stydyat-iz-za-stereotipov-o-neporochnosti/.

her "tricking" her boyfriend. Towards the end of the interview, Azima admitted that she would be ready and willing to sell her virginity for the specific price of two million dollars. She said, "For two million, yes, I would go ahead. It is easy money. Even if it is some oldster, it is not important. The main thing is two million. Nothing is more important." Azima was ready to reduce the price, but not as little as ten thousand dollars because that amount "well, this is only enough to start a business…. I also need a car, my own apartment. May be fifty thousand is ok."[93] She quickly brought herself back to reality and said with regret, "But I think no one would buy it for fifty thousand. If I had two million dollars now, I would not live here. I would leave." Azima's account represents a typical ambivalence in young women's attitudes to the social construction of virginity. Her concept of virginity was at odds with how she was expected to live her life. She understood the constructed (not natural or ontological) significance of women's virginity and strongly opposed virginity testing. Yet, she abided by the social expectations. As a result, in the immediate context of her daily life, Azima chose to restrain her opinions, life perspectives, sexual freedom, and pleasure. For her, this restraint was a coping mechanism that allowed her not only to manipulate, test, and play with her boyfriend, but also to pave her way into a successful marriage as a "morally acceptable wife" and "credible daughter-in-law." Her virginity was, then, the main initial buy-in in this patriarchal bargain where her chastity was exchanged for a vague promise of social and economic security by her prospective patrilocal household. Later on, her daily performance of subservience was expected.

Azima was strategic and understood that the social contract she was to enter lacked guarantees. The sacrifices she was willing to make and had made to preserve her virginity were simply not proportional to the opaque prospects of a better life allegedly provided by her husband's family. It was then not surprising yet logical that when presented with an alternative mode of relating to her virginity providing a hypothetically financial resource, Azima was eager to accept the deal, but not after a negotiation. The two-million-dollar deal or the fifty-thousand-dollar deal presented a more certain profitability on her virginity, enough for her to establish a stable basis for an independent and secure life. But these prospects were unrealistic and remain largely in the imagination of Azima, and other women like her.

Young women's economic vulnerability in Kyrgyzstan and their low social status often made marriage a lucrative option for themselves and for their families. Drastic changes in economic opportunity, labor force participation,

93 According to our observations, Azima was sincere and serious in making these calculations.

education, and conservative ideas about femininity incentivized young women to see and to seek marriage as a lucrative option. As a result, women had to engage in lifestyles, choices, and behaviors to ensure the kind of a social contract where their chastity was the main commodity for exchange.

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, important cultural meanings ascribed to women's virtue have only been increasing. They produced social practices, body politics, and new markets which claimed to help women to adapt to the requirements. One such practice is illustrated by online advertisements where young Kyrgyz girls offer their virginity for a price. In July 2018, two young Kyrgyz girls posted such an ad in "Vkontakte"[94] and received about forty offers ranging from $4,000 USD to 5,000 Kyrgyz som from various users.[95] We do not know what happened to them or these contracts, but the mere presence of such advertisements illustrates that there is a market where virginity is in demand, and there is supply for this kind of commodity. Such choices are not only women's responses to the socially approved customary practices which interfere with women's body and oppress them. More importantly, these choices to commodify themselves are meaningful to these women because, for them, this can be a way to reinstate their own power and control over their bodies. This is how they endeavor to heighten their stakes and empower themselves, even if these strategies can be seen as framed in "non-liberatory political terms."[96]

Through the strategies we have described, young Kyrgyz women and girls continue to be active in creating understanding and meanings around the issue of virginity. They demonstrate their agency through such strategic actions, including acceptance, resistance, and accommodation to the normative behaviors and bodies. Re-traditionalizing national discourses and precarious economic conditions jointly produce social practices that are reinforced and maintained by the popularized narratives about Kyrgyz women, in general, and young women and virginal brides, in particular. In such context, an oversimplified explanation that Kyrgyz women are victimized by the virginity-related practices and the culture of shaming around it, is no longer sufficient. Our analysis demonstrates that, in the context of the post-Soviet nation building, virginity-related practices are forged and embodied within a particular socio-historical context in which Kyrgyz women actively seek and find forms of relating to these socially institutionalized forms of violence. They use counter-discourses, they identify sources of their humiliation, and some openly criticize the cult

94 A Russian online social media and social network.

95 Anonymous users' personal pages.

96 Svetlana Peshkova, "A post-Soviet subject in Uzbekistan: Islam, rights, gender, and other desires," *Women's Studies* 42 (2013): 672.

of virginity. The kinds of strategies described in this article – marrying the first sexual partner and/or abstaining from sexual engagement entirely, using hymenoplasty or selling virginity as a merchandize – are all forms of resistance that are different from a public political action. These are important ways of reestablishing women's autonomy wherein they use the symbolic resources they possess to "negotiate in order to maximize power and options within a constraining patriarchal structure."[97] These forms of relating, we argued, must be analyzed as reflective of particular socio-historic and political-economic context, rather than as merely reflecting any particular "regime of truth, power and authority"[98] as tradition or modernity. Our attempts to understand the practices were "forged through a contextually specific mutual constitutions of these regimes."[99]

The existing discourses on virginity, including the oppositional ones, have discursive links to the nationalist project of the post-Soviet modernization elaborated by the ruling elites. Views which may look antagonistic to the discourse on virginity occupy the space within the same paradigm and constitute what Collier[100] has called, "the conceptual opposition embraced by all nationalist discourse," in which national difference is constructed through creating ethnic traditions while at the same time forming similarities with the western standards of development used as evidence of modernization.

Conclusions

On some level, maintaining premarital virginity can decrease the level of women's dependence upon men; at the same time, it also further marginalizes women's position by minimizing opportunities for any negotiations and partnerships. Such decisions, we argue, lead to affirming the position of young women in Central Asia as "marginalized and suppressed yet accepted."[101] Our concern is that the compliance to patriarchal views about women's virginity reflects an internalization of neo-familial values that establish women's marginality within their families, their kin, and in the Kyrgyz society, in general.

97 Aksana Ismailbekova, "Constructing the Authority of Women Through Custom," 269.

98 Saba Mahmood, "Rehearsed spontaneity and the conventionality of ritual: Disciplines of Salat," *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 4 (2001): 845, quoted in Peshkova, "A post-Soviet subject," 673.

99 Peshkova, "A post-Soviet subject," 673.

100 Jane Collier, *From Duty to Desire: Remaking Families in a Spanish Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

101 Kudaibergenova, "Project Kelin," 380.

Like internalized tenets of colonialism and racism, internalizing the necessity of preserving one's virginity embeds individuals and society into an array of state and social disciplining techniques.

The gender order in Kyrgyzstan, as in other Central Asian states, is "enmeshed with changing political regimes, precarious economy, and national struggles for cultural authenticity."[102] We are yet to fully understand how this order is reflected in the everyday lives of local people. In this article, we aimed to provide a glimpse into such processes by using a specific example of the social construction of virginity in Kyrgyzstan. The stories we offered illustrate a peculiar amalgamation of contradictory attitudes to women's roles in contemporary Kyrgyz society and personal strategies to ensure security, stability, and intimacy in marriage. Even when the women we interviewed disagreed and resisted their marginalization, they also agreed and accepted the conditions offered by the existential context of their lives. They reacted against societal violation of their bodies but did so within the framework and on the terms established by the existing patriarchal gender order. Theirs are the responses which constitute "flows of various historical and contextual gendered discourses in the region"[103] which are not necessarily expressed in terms of overt "resistance to and subversion of normative patriarchal culture"[104] but are articulated in non-liberatory political terms."[105] For participants like Azima, Asel, and Tamara, abiding by the restrictive rules around virginity was their choice to exchange such observance with their family status as morally legitimate *kelins*; it was inefficient to violate these norms. Marriage, as legitimized and celebrated through women's virginal status, promises women protected and respectable roles as new brides so they can start their "careers" as *kelins*. Anticipation of social and economic security associated with a chaste marriage – the one built on the bride's virginity – facilitate a "thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves."[106] When women like them, make rational choices to come to clinics for hymen restoration or when they sell their virginity on the market, they do maximize their autonomy and act against the regime they disagree with. Even if these choices are informed by patriarchal bargains and located within patriarchal paradigms, they still signal women's strategic use of their virginity as an area of struggle and renegotiations within the neo-familial systems of ethno-national/ist Kyrgyzstan.

102 Svetlana Peshkova, "Gender structure," *Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding*, ed. David Montgomery (Pittsburgh: Pittsburg University Press, 2022]).
103 Peshkova, "A post-Soviet subject," 692.
104 Ibid., 672.
105 Ibid., 672.
106 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," 279.

Patriarchal bargains "exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression."[107] For instance, a hymenoplasty can be seen as a patriarchal commercialized invention, the same way virginity auctions and markets are. These bargains are asymmetrical for young women and costly. The costs include social condemnation and isolation, everyday suffering in an unhappy marriage, and/or a lack of sexual freedom. But on a larger scale, the costs are more far-fetched. These strategies allow local women to take control over their bodies by modifying their hymens, put their hymens on the market, and/or save them for marriage. And yet, whatever they do, we argue, perpetuates the system that oppresses them.

Our analysis of virginity testing does not suggest the Kyrgyz state's failure of modernization, but exposes that which has been obscured, namely a dubious nature – as in only through their hymen – of women's claims to citizenship in the context of ethnic nationalism. In the context of this 30-year-old country's different-from-the Soviet's clearly gendered modes of social control and disciplining bodies, a controversial virginity practice must be discussed not only within the framework of family and marriage but as embedded in and engendered by broader socio-political and economic considerations. Virginity performance in Kyrgyzstan is a logical extension of what Parla called "the appropriation of what is identified as the 'traditional' preoccupation with women's virginity into the broader framework of the regulatory mechanisms of the 'modern nation-state.'"[108] As such, these practices represent the state-endorsed intrusion into the (lives and) bodies of its female citizens; they represent a gynecological state. The post-independence (post-Soviet) gendered citizenship was, hence, a transfiguration form of Soviet Socialist Kyrgyz womanhood into the nationalist construction of "the new Kyrgyz woman." These new parameters of citizenship created tensions for women who were now expected to retain traits associated with gender equality and concurrently conform to the public image associated with essentialist understanding of femininity – femininity as motherhood, domesticity, and, indeed, hymenhood. These markers became quintessential signs of womanhood rearticulated in the nationalist discourse.

Since independence from the Soviet Union thirty years ago, Kyrgyzstan has adopted progressive legislation such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the

107 Ibid., 275.
108 Parla, "The 'honor' of the state," 70.

Beijing Platform for Action, it has established national women's machineries, and it has also criminalized domestic violence. Kyrgyz women's heroines such as Kurmandzhan Datka and Urkuya Salieva have been celebrated and recognized as important actors in the past national struggles. National quotas have been introduced to ensure women's representation in the government. But all of those developments have not become effective grounds for women to claim equal worth as full citizens of the new Kyrgyzstan. Women's exclusion has already manifested in various ways; women do not seem to fit into the formal proclamation of citizenship if not only as a biological object. Under the Soviet rule and carried into the post-USSR era, the law's gender-neutral language (at least ideologically) declared women and men equal with no distinction between sexes. Such "degenderization"of citizenship[109] worked to disguise how traditional forms of femininity became re-articulated in the nationalist construction of women. Before 1991, women's public emancipated lives were meant to co-exist with productive and reproductive labor creating multiple burdens and putting under question the nature of such emancipation. Kandiyoti called it the "Soviet paradox of gender."[110] In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the paradox became reconfigured with notions of womanhood redefined in terms of the aspired democratic development and re-traditionalization of political and cultural lives. A collation of this kind effectively constrained women's sexuality – its experience and expression – and marked women's bodies as a nationalist vision of femininity, virtue, and chastity of the nation. Women's occupying public spaces, their adoption of feminist legislation, and their economic activities necessitated a different set of strategies required for women to communicate their respectability as dictated by the new retraditionalizing order. In this article, we observed a preoccupation with women's chastity and virginity as explained by a dominance of the discourse on the national honor and shame, which acquired a new significance by its incorporation into nationalist modernizing ideology. As Parla states, "the new woman was to be 'modern' in appearance and intellect but was still required to preserve the 'traditional' virtue of chastity and to affirm it constantly."[111] For many women, daily life in contemporary Kyrgyzstan requires negotiating such contradictory claims. And the personal failures of these compounded official constructions are treated as threatening the system and the nation.

109 Ibid., 70.
110 Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox," 601.
111 Parla, "The 'honor' of the state," 75.