Online Male Sex Work in Kazakhstan: A Distinct Market?

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Abstract

In this article, I explore male sex-work in Kazakhstan and show that unlike male sex work around the world, the Kazakhstani market appears to be overwhelmingly heterosexual. Based on a sample of 200 online advertisements, this paper generates original data by providing an overview of male sex work in Kazakhstan's two largest cities, Almaty and Nur-Sultan. This data is analyzed through a gender lens that acknowledges a shift in local gender roles and expectations and I argue that a desire for sexual emancipation, which is constrained by conservative views surrounding female sexuality explains this particular phenomenon. More precisely, I suggest that women are likely to have discreet sex with anonymous professionals rather than indulge in casual sex with strangers or acquaintances to maintain their reputation. While most gender research in Central Asia focuses on issues of re-traditionalization, this article investigates women's sexuality and desires in Kazakhstan outside of the re-traditionalization paradigm.

Keywords

Kazakhstan – sex work – sexuality – gender norms – heteronormativity – ICTs

Introduction

In October 2020, Erlan Nurpeisov, a relatively well-known Kazakhstani businessman publicly defended a male sex worker who was briefly detained and fined by the police in Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) for providing sex work in

one of the capital's brothels. Nurseipov's Facebook post made it to national news and was reposted by several mainstream news outlets such as Tengri News and Caravan.[1] Nurpeisov argued that,

> such a service is needed in our society, when more and more men are *alkashi* (drunks), drug addicts and are unfit partners. In addition, an unhealthy diet, sedentary work and, as a result, early obesity, contribute to early impotence … So where do the wives of officials and businesswomen, who have long forgotten the affection of their alcoholic, addict and overweight husbands, should go? … If a healthy woman does not have regular sex for a long time, it will not take long before she gets gynecologic diseases. Therefore, it is better to call a professional once a week than, say, to invite a neighbor or a colleague with a bottle. This way, nobody's reputation is hurt.[2]

I use this incident to initiate a conversation about heterosexual male sex-work, that is, men offering sex services to women, an allegedly growing phenomenon in Kazakhstan.[3] This article seeks to answer the following questions: Why the sex market in Kazakhstan, where men occupy a large portion of the offer, appears so radically different than in other countries? Why do Kazakhstani women increasingly buy sexual services from men? Based on a review of the literature of male sex work and a survey of a Kazakhstani website advertising sex services, I highlight the particularities of the heterosexual male sex work and argue that a desire for sexual emancipation as well as conservative views surrounding female sexuality explain why Kazakhstani women buy sex from men. In the following paragraphs, I start by looking at the very limited body of academic literature on male sex work and attempt to make parallels with the phenomenon in Kazakhstan. Then, I define the particular legal context surrounding sex work in Kazakhstan, which is largely permissive, and provide an overview of male sex work in the two largest cities of Kazakhstan, Almaty

1 The publication of this post generated a lot of reactions from readers, which I will address later in the paper.

2 Tengri, 'V Seti Predlozhili Ne Nakazyvat Muzhshin, Okazyvaiiushchikh Seks-Uslugi (Proposals to Not Punish the Man Who Offered Sex Services Appeared on the Internet)', *Tengri News*, 23 October 2020, https://tengrinews.kz/life/seti-predlojili-nakazyivat-mujchin-okazyivayuschih-seks-417888/. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

3 Aksiniya Titova, 'Kazakhstanskii Rynok Seksual'nykh Uslug Rasshiyaraets (The Kazakhstani Sex Services' Market Is Widening)', *Moskovskii Komsololets KZ*, 7 October 2020, https://mk-kz.kz/social/2020/10/07/kazakhstanskiy-rynok-seksualnykh-uslug-rasshiryaetsya.html. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

and Nur-Sultan based on a sample of 200 advertisements. While not making a systematic comparison with women's profiles, I mention some of the contrasts between the two sets of advertisements as they reveal important gender differences. Finally, I highlight how the ongoing negotiation between local norms of female sexuality and a desire for a sexual emancipation might explain why women pay for sex and address the redefinition of masculinity standards and changing gender expectations.

Methodology and Limitations

Given that prostitution is not entirely legal in Kazakhstan and thus difficult to measure, I rely on a digital data collection of online advertisement of paid sex services on two different websites[4] that host advertisements posted by women, men, and transexuals. My investigation has been limited to online advertisements and therefore excludes sex workers who work the streets and/or in offline brothels, which certainly represent an important portion of paid sex work in Kazakhstan. Digital research also appears to be incredibly useful, in the context of a global pandemic. The use of online content also represents "a non-intrusive way to study taboo topics."[5,6] Living in Kazakhstan and having experience in conducting ethnographic fieldwork about sensitive topics such as polygyny, I hope to continue working on this project. Foreign researchers are often privileged when it comes to field access in Central Asia and my position as a foreign female scholar might facilitate future research including in-person interviews.[7]

4 Both site names refer to *kyzdar*, which in Kazakh translates as "girls" but despite their names, these two websites host advertisements posted by men and transexuals.

5 (Phua 2009, 252) cited in Matthew V. Pruitt, '"Just a Gigolo": Differences in Advertisements of Male-for-Female and Male-for-Male Online Escorts', *Deviant Behavior* 39, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 70.

6 Many of the attempts made by Kazakhstani journalist Daniya Emerkyzy to get in touch with escorts were met with refusals and insults but she nevertheless managed to interview two escorts, one male, one female.

7 While conducting interviews with polygynous individuals in Nur-Sultan last year, one male respondent declared at the end of the interview (which was booked through a local research organization): 'I was surprised and happy to see that you were a foreigner, I felt much more comfortable to talk to you than I would to a local researcher'. This can be explained by a postcolonial understanding of the superiority of the global North's knowledge production but also to the fact that communities in Central Asia are regulated by honor and shame and therefore, outsiders can be perceived as trustful confidents who will not gossip about their private life to others. Helene Thibault, '"Are You Married?": Gender and Faith in Political Ethnographic Research', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 27 January 2021.

Another issue related to digital research is that online sex-work tends to be less structured and more fluid and the difficulty of working with online advertisements is that the material often changes and/or gets deleted. This means that the data I looked at might be unavailable in the future for further investigation or verification purposes. The sites consulted do not require visitors to log in or create a profile. A simple confirmation that the visitor is at least 18 years of age is the only form of control exerted over entry into the sites. However, escorts advertising services do have profiles; this type of service is not simply a classified ads site where interactions are limited to the exchange of messages and customers may leave testimonies and rate the escorts' work.[8] Female profiles tend to receive many reviews, whereas I came across only one male profile with reviews. Despite multiple attempts, I have been unable to find other sites where there would be a significant number of male sex work advertisements, which could point out to the existence of a larger market for homosexual services.

Another limitation of this study is the absence of interviews conducted with escorts and their clients. It is therefore difficult to demonstrate that female customers actually use the services that male escorts advertise. However, given the important number of advertisements it is reasonable to assume that there is definitely a demand for male sex work in Kazakhstan. This assumption is also supported by newspapers articles and recent events exposing this emerging trend.[9] Given the scarcity of studies on the issue of prostitution[10] in Central Asia, the following discussion of online prostitution in Kazakhstan is the first attempt to study and understand male sex work in the region.

Male Sex Workers: A Relatively Unexplored Field

An overwhelming number of studies focusing on prostitution approach it from a public health perspective, which is understandable given the threat that HIV poses to many societies. However, after new treatments emerged and prevention campaigns bore fruit, the literature started to shift its focus. For instance, whereas Aggelton and Parker's 2009 edition was called *Men who Sell Sex:*

8 For instance, Craigslist in North America or OLX in the Russian-speaking world.

9 Titova, 'Kazakhstanskii Rynok Seksual'nykh Uslug Rasshiyaraets (The Kazakhstani Sex Services' Market Is Widening)'.

10 In order to avoid too many repetitions in the text, I use the terms sex work/prostitution and sex worker/escorts interchangeably.

International Perspectives on Male Prostitution and HIV/AIDS, the 2014 one simply read *Male sex work: Global Perspectives*.[11]

In general, male sex work, both heterosexual and homosexual, is a topic that has been neglected by scholars. For instance, in 2008, Dennis' meta-analysis of the global sex trade found that 75% of the research dedicated to sex work focused on women and neglected men.[12] This can be explained by the fact that male sex work is not that significant in scale in comparison to females'. A 2009 study conducted in the Netherlands concluded that about 5% of sex workers were male and almost the same percentage were transsexuals.[13] However, in 2014, a French organization estimated that the overall number of prostitutes worldwide was of 42 million and that men made 20% of this number.[14] A huge proportion of the sex work performed by men is homosexual,[15] even if the sex workers themselves do not necessarily identify as gay.[16] In 2015, while researching a popular escort website called Rentaboy, MacPhail and al. observed that there were very few ads targeting women and the existing ads advertised non-sexual services.[17] In 2017, a study of online sex work in 60 countries revealed that of the 499 websites observed, 57% catered to male customers only, 11% to female clients and 10% to heterosexual couples.[18] Of all the profiles, they found that there were about two times more male escorts for men (72,106) than for women or couples (32,948).[19]

Within this limited body of literature on male sex work, heterosexual sex work is even more neglected. In Aggleton's 2009 edited volume about male sex work around the world, male heterosexual sex work is mentioned only once

11 Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker, *Men Who Sell Sex: Global Perspectives* (Routledge, 2014).

12 Jeffery Dennis, 'Women Are Victims, Men Make Choices: The Invisibility of Men and Boys in the Global Sex Trade', *Gender Issues* 25 (1 March 2008): 11–25.

13 TAMPEP 2009 cited in Ine Vanwesenbeeck, 'Prostitution Push and Pull: Male and Female Perspectives', *The Journal of Sex Research* 50, no. 1 (1 January 2013): 13.

14 Scelles, 'Rapport Mondial Sur l'exploitation Sexuelle – La Prostitution Au Cœur Du Crime Organisé' (World report on sexual exploitation – Prostitution at the heart of organized crime), Economica (Paris: Fondation Scelles, 2014).

15 John Scott, 'Masculinities and Sex Work', in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, ed. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer, 2020, 272.

16 Pruitt, '"Just a Gigolo"', 66.

17 Catherine MacPhail, John Scott, and Victor Minichiello, 'Technology, Normalisation and Male Sex Work', *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17, no. 4 (21 April 2015): 6.

18 Navin Kumar et al., 'A Global Overview of Male Escort Websites', *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 12 (15 October 2017): 1736.

19 Suzanne Dowey, 'Research Shows Distribution of Online Male Escorts, by Nation', post, *Me, Us and Male Escorting* (blog) (Queensland University of Technology, 31 October 2017), https://research.qut.edu.au/aboutmaleescorting/2017/11/01/number-of-online-male-escorts-by-nation-2/. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

by one author to indicate that men catering for women will be excluded from the study.[20] More recently, none of the 15 chapters of the 2014 edited volume dedicated to male sex work around the world evoke men offering services to women. While referring to the case of Turkey, Özbay wrote: "Although there have been sensational stories in the gossip columns of newspapers, I have not come across men who sell sex to women in exchange for money, gifts, or other reward in the course of a decade's long research".[21] One reason that could explain the lack of knowledge is that female clients are harder to reach since that they are more likely to hide this behavior, fearing to appear too sexually active or promiscuous.[22] When male sex work is considered, it is often studied in the context of sex tourism[23] when foreign women (mostly from the global North) get involved in sexual or paid romantic relationships with local young men. These studies reveal that men often reaffirm their masculinity in bragging about sexual prowess[24] or establishing their superiority over Western men in a form of postcolonial revenge.[25] Acknowledging the gap in the literature, scholars recently started to pay more attention to the world of escorts *for* women. The works of Pruitt[26] and Kumar and al.[27] reveal that men escorts are increasingly visible online and that there is a smaller but growing market for female clients who seek paid sexual services with men. Studies tend to focus on Western women and the body of literature exploring non-Western female customers is very limited.[28]

The literature on male-sex work in the former Soviet space is extremely limited, particularly when it comes to Central Asia. A research published by

20 P. Aggleton, *Men Who Sell Sex: International Perspectives on Male Prostitution and HIV/AIDS*, Social Aspects of AIDS (Temple University Press, 1999), 57.

21 Cenk Özbay, "'Straight'rent boys and gays who sell sex in Istanbul." In *Men Who Sell Sex*, eds. Peter Aggleton, Richard Parker (Routledge, 2014), 54.

22 Alexandra Oliveira and Marie-Louise Janssen, 'Introduction: Special Section "Female Clients of Commercial Sex"', Sexualities 24, no. 4 (1 June 2021), 519.

23 H. Dahles, 'Gigolos and Rastamen: Tourism, Sex and Changing Gender Identities', *Gender/Tourism/Fun (?)*, 2002, 180–94; Tony DeMoya, Rafael Garcia, and Edward Herold, 'Female Tourists and Beach Boys: Romance or Sex Tourism?', *Annals of Tourism Research* 28, no. 4 (1 January 2001): 978–97; Jessica Jacobs, *Sex, Tourism and the Postcolonial Encounter: Landscapes of Longing in Egypt* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2012).

24 DeMoya, Garcia, and Herold, 'Female Tourists and Beach Boys', 988.

25 Jacobs, *Sex, Tourism and the Postcolonial Encounter*, 79.

26 Pruitt, '"Just a Gigolo"'.

27 Kumar et al., 'A Global Overview of Male Escort Websites'.

28 Berg, Rigmor C., Sol-Britt Molin, and Julie Nanavati. "Women who trade sexual services from men: A systematic mapping review." *The Journal of Sex Research* (2019), 104–118.

Takeyama, Akiko. "Marriage, Aging, and Women's Pursuit of Commercial Sex in Japan." *Sexualities* 24, no. 4 (June 2021), 592–613.

Niccolai[29] studies male escorts in Russia but, like many studies focusing on sex work, it is addressed from a public health and HIV prevention perspective. The existence of male sex-workers has been documented sparsely by local Kazakhstani media since at least 2012.[30] However, the topic started receiving more media attention in 2020.[31] In terms of research, a recent 2019 study conducted by an independent research center in Kazakhstan seems to be the only available study about male sex work in Central Asia. In this study, Aigazin and Tuleuov provided a remarkably detailed portrait of sex services in Kazakhstan.[32] However, their study is strictly empirical and does not help to understand the provision of sex-services. The most noteworthy aspect of male sex work in Kazakhstan is that it appears to be overwhelmingly heterosexual and local. Like theirs, my own investigation has been limited to online advertisements but in addition to the quantitative information provided, I add a qualitative assessment of the services in light of gender roles and expectations.

A Topography of Online Male Sex in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan decriminalized prostitution in 2001. While it is no longer a crime, it is an administrative offence. It is considered a crime only if it involves minors, is coerced, and if it occurs in brothels.[33] The young man mentioned in the introduction was fined 30,000 tenge (approximately $US90) by the police, because

29 'Male-Sex Work in Post-Soviet Russia', in *Male Sex Work and Society*, ed. Victor Minichiello and John Scott (Columbia University Press, 2014), 343–61.

30 Dina Blinova, 'Kak rabotaiut "muzhsniny po vyzovu" v Kazakhstane (How "call-guys" work in Kazakhstan)', *Nur.kz*, 21 November 2012, sec. https://www.nur.kz/239261-kak-rabotayut-muzhchiny-po-vyzovu-v-kazahstane.html?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=article-fragment. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

31 Pervii Kanal Evrazia, *Muzhchin-Prostitutok Stalo Bol'she v Kazakhstane (There Are More Male Prostitutes in Kazakhstan)*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vFZsjb0yAQ&feature=emb_title; Daniya Ermekkyzy, 'Zarazitsa ili vizhit': chto proiskhodit s rinkom seksual'nikh uslug v mire i Kazakhstane? Get infected or survive: what is happening in the sex market in the world and in Kazakhstan?', *The Steppe*, 5 November 2020, https://the-steppe.com/obshestvo/zarazitsya-ili-vyzhit-chto-proishodit-s-rynkom-seksualnyh-uslug-v-mire-i-kazahstane; Titova, 'Kazakhstanskii Rynok Seksual'nykh Uslug Rasshiyaraets (The Kazakhstani Sex Services' Market Is Widening)'. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

32 Zhanibek Aigazin and Olzhas Tuleuov, 'Ekonomika Grekha: Empiricheskiy Analiz Rynka Seks-Uslug v Kazakhstane (The Economy of Sin: Empirical Analysis of the Sex-Service Market in Kazakhstan)', Economic Research (Center for Research in Applied Economics, 2019), https://aerc.org.kz/articles/ekonomicheskie-issledovanija/ekonomika-greha-empiricheskij-analiz-rynka-seks-uslug-v-kazahstane. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

33 Republic of Kazakhstan, 'Criminal Codex of the Republic of Kazakhstan' (2014), https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=31575252&doc_id2=31575252#activate_doc=2&pos=349;-98&pos2=4446;-88. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

he was found working in a brothel and not independently. Although it is difficult to measure the scale of sex work given its shadowy character, because it is also *not illegal*, it is fair to assume that it is not uncommon and anyone living in Kazakhstan can testify of that. For instance, whereas public *banyas* (saunas) are part of the local everyday culture and people of all ages visit them to relax, private *banyas* are known to be places where individual men or group of men bring prostitutes to. Many saunas are equipped with private, fully furbished bedrooms and condoms can be purchased on the spot.[34] The website that I looked at also had a built-in category for escorts to list the price they demand for meeting customers at the *banya*, for which they usually charge a supplement. Anecdotal evidence coming from my experience of living in Kazakhstan for four years shows that it is also not uncommon for taxi drivers to advertise escort agencies to single male customers. Nightclubs in the large cities are also known as places where sex workers seek customers. In July 2019, the police detained and fined 500 sex workers in one Almaty district alone, which gives an idea of the very large scale of sex work in the country.[35] It seems however, that in accordance with trends observed in other parts of the world, a large proportion of the sex industry is now operating online. For instance, a 2017 study accounted for the increase in the online presence of male sex work and found that largest number of male sex websites were located in Asia,[36] which is not that surprising giving the size of local populations. Asia was followed by Europe and South America. Beyond statistics, this study reveals that rather than being seen as a 'deviant' activity associated with criminal activity, male sex work is increasingly presented as an everyday commodity. This might as well be the case in Kazakhstan.

In October 2018, Aigazin and Tuleuov looked at 2081 female and 656 male profiles on the same popular website I collected data from. I sampled 100 profiles for each of the two largest cities in Kazakhstan, Almaty and Nur-Sultan, because they had by far the highest number of advertisements, respectively 840 and 648. In comparison, there were 264 profiles in Karaganda, 360 in Shymkent, and 99 in Oskemen. The data Aigazin and Tuleuov have collected

34 A friend of mine who is a foreigner rented a private sauna for himself while on a business trip. When he arrived alone, the employee at the reception asked him where his 'escort' was. She was surprised and amused that he rented the sauna for himself, as if those things never happened.

35 'Pochti 500 «nochnykh babochek» zaderzhali s nachala iyulya v odnom rayone Almaty (Almost 500 "night butterflies" have been detained since the beginning of July in one Almaty district)', *almaty.tv*, 15 July 2019, https://almaty.tv/news/obschestvo/1808-pochti-500-nochnykh-babochek-zaderdgali-s-nachala-iyulya-v-odnom-rayone-almaty. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

36 Kumar et al., 'A Global Overview of Male Escort Websites'.

Table 1 Distribution of escort ads based on gender

City	Феи/Fei (Females)	Парни/parni (Males)	Транс/Trans (Trans)
Almaty*	51,5%	38,2%	10,3%
Nur-Sultan**	56,9%	35,3%	7,8%

* Based on a total of 1632 ads as of January 15, 2021.
** Based on a total of 1224 ads as of January 15, 2021.

was pre-pandemic. My observations made in January 2021 indicate a significant increase in the offer of male sex services as some news outlets suggested. Though not providing actual numbers, local media reported an increase in male sex work. In a rare interview, one male escort reported starting offering sexual services after losing his job as a construction worker.[37]

On the site, escorts are divided in three categories, females are called *Fei*, which means "fairies", *Parni*, which translates as "guys or young men" and *Trans* which is literally "trans". Table 1 above demonstrates that the proportion of male escorts on the overall site is very high, which is at odds with previous studies that have shown that the percentage of male sex workers around the world is estimated at 20%[38] and in many countries, it does not go beyond 5%.[39] In December 2020, I also looked at another (less popular) website where I found that *parni* posted the majority of ads: 17 from *parni*, 15 from *fei*, and four from trans. When I looked again in January 2021, the number of ads increased to 29 for *parni*, 21 for *fei*, and 6 for *trans*. This growing number of offers for sex work stresses the particularity of male sex work in Kazakhstan. As the numbers in Table 2 demonstrate, and contrary to what male sex-work looks like around the globe, the Kazakhstani market is in great proportion, heterosexual.

Whereas the literature shows that a majority of the sex work in poorer countries involves local men and foreign women,[40] it appears that the market in Kazakhstan is tailored for local women only. First, Kazakhstan is not a holiday destination like the cases of Egypt and the Barbados evoked in the literature, and the number of single female tourists in Kazakhstan is definitely negligible. These websites also function entirely in Russian, making it difficult

37 Titova, 'Kazakhstanskii Rynok Seksual'nykh Uslug Rasshiyaraets (The Kazakhstani Sex Services' Market Is Widening)'; Ermekkyzy, 'Zarazitsa ili vizhit'.
38 Scelles, 'Rapport Mondial Sur l'exploitation Sexuelle – La Prostitution Au Cœur Du Crime Organisé'.
39 Vanwesenbeeck, 'Prostitution Push and Pull', 13.
40 DeMoya, Garcia, and Herold, 'Female Tourists and Beach Boys'; Jacobs, *Sex, Tourism and the Postcolonial Encounter*; Dahles, 'Gigolos and Rastamen'.

Table 2 Clientele targeted by gender

City	Women only	Men and women	Men only
Almaty	75	20	5
Nur-Sultan	70	21	9

for foreigners to navigate them. It is likely that the escorts themselves do not speak English. In fact, I have come across only one profile in which the escort mentioned that he knew English.

The literature also shows that male escorts are more likely to work independently than their female counterparts, who are more reliant on pimps and brothels.[41] This tendency is confirmed in the case of Kazakhstan. I have not come across any male ads that might suggest that their activities were associated with some kind of brothel or escort agency. However, as the story of the male escort's arrest in the introduction shows, male sex workers also work in brothels in Kazakhstan. Often, profiles contain the personal number where escorts can be reached using the WhatsApp messenger app. None of the trans' profiles appear to be associated with professional agencies either, whereas a small portion of the female profiles appear to be from agencies or companies that offer diverse massage and sexual services.

Like in the findings of Aigazin and Tuleuov, the average age of men was between 25- and 26-year-old as shown in Table 3.

The oldest profile I observed was a 39-year-old man of Russian origin, but there were overall very few men in their thirties. The *anketa* (questionnaire) to register an ad has built-in categories that escorts have to fill out. Some are optional given the wide range of variations with information displayed from one *anketa* to the other, but some appear mandatory since they were present in 100% of the profile. Those include age, height, nationality, location, and penis size. The same mandatory categories are present for women but include breast size instead.

Table 4 shows the ethnic composition of male escorts, which more or less matches the country's ethnic diversity according the CIA World Factbook's estimates: Kazakh 68%, Russian 19.3%, Uzbek 3.2%, Ukrainian 1.5%, Uighur 1.5%, Tatar 1.1%, German 1%, other 4.4%.[42] While these identities are constructed and can easily be contested, I find this tool useful. Because even if nationality

41 Scott, 'Masculinities and Sex Work', 276.

42 CIA, 'Kazakhstan – The World Factbook', 2021, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kazakhstan/#people-and-society. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

Table 3 Basic demographics

City	Average age	Average price	Presence of explicit photo of genitals
Almaty	25	17,000	88%
Nur-Sultan	26	15,000	64%

Table 4 Ethnic composition

City	Kazakh	Metis	Russian	Asian	European	Tatar	Slavic	Others
Almaty	46	25	10	5	2	0	1	11
Nur-Sultan	44	17	8	9	4	3	2	13

is a social construct, the stereotypes and behavioral boundaries are real in a sense that they affect peoples' daily life and are reproduced by the individuals. For instance, Aigazin and Tuleulov's survey of the same website reveals that prices of services vary according to gender, especially for Metis (someone of mixed ethnicity) who tend to have higher rates. It is possible that some users that declared to be "Metis" or "Asian" could be counted as Kazakhs in official documents.

The Kazakhstani *Pervii Kanal* (First Channel) tv report[43] about the increasing visibility of male sex work on 15 September 2020, included a commentary of one sexologist who suggested that male escorts serve the needs of dominant women who are unable to find submissive partners, so I decided to explore that claim. On the main website, there is a specific built-in option that users can click if they want to provide *Uslugi Gospazhe* (Services to a Mistress). The term *Gospozha* is to be understood as part of the Bondage Discipline Sado-Masochism (BDSM)'s parlance and refers to a dominant female seeking partners to engage in consensual sexual, physical and/or psychological domination. For such services, the numbers are quite similar in Nur-Sultan and in Almaty, with only 10% and 12% of male escorts offering these services

43 Pervii Kanal Evrazia, *Muzhchin-Prostitutok Stalo Bol'she v Kazakhstane (There Are More Male Prostitutes in Kazakhstan*). (Accessed 02-03-2021).

Table 5 Type of services offered

City	Services to Mistresses	Services to couples	Cunilingus
Almaty	12%	56%	61%
Nur-Sultan	10%	53%	65%

respectively. It appears to be a very marginal practice, which is not surprising given that the country's BDSM scene is small.[44]

Men's photos tend to look amateurish, and the great majority of profiles include a single close-up picture of the escort's penis as indicated in Table 3, up to 88% in Nur-Sultan. In contrast, in a study comparing male escorts' advertisements to men and women Pruitt found that 20.1% of male for female and 65.1% of male for male escorts posted penis pictures.[45] The data from Kazakhstan appear singular. In comparison, not all but many of the advertisements posted by females had photos that were of professional quality. In contrast to men's profiles, women never appear fully naked but wear lingerie and adopt suggestive poses. It is consistent, however, with Aigazin and Tuleuov's conclusion that the female market is more influenced by the fairies' physical personal attributes (height, weight, age), while in the male market what matters is the size of the penis and the ability to provide additional services.[46]

Reporting about male-to-male services, Logan found that men who advertise masculine behavior will have higher prices than men who appear more feminine.[47] In the case of Kazakhstan, it is difficult to assess this because few men offered services to other men. However, in the few ads dedicated to men the escorts seem to adopt submissive poses, sometimes wearing lingerie. This local practice again at odds with the existing literature. Scott mentions that male sex workers are less likely to advertise themselves as submissive "due to hegemonic or misogynistic social constructs of masculinity,[48] which favors males who appear strong and dominant.[49]

44 Ulan Ramazanova, '"BDSM Kazakhstan" – Uchastniki o Boli, Devaysakh i Lyubimykh Praktikakh ("BDSM Kazakhstan" – Participants about Pain, Devices and Favorite Practices)', *The Village Казахстан*, 23 October 2017, sec. Люди, https://www.the-village-kz.com/village/people/people/405-safe-sane-consensual. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

45 Pruitt, '"Just a Gigolo"', 73.

46 Aigazin and Tuleuov, 13.

47 Trevon D. Logan, 'Personal Characteristics, Sexual Behaviors, and Male Sex Work: A Quantitative Approach', *American Sociological Review*, 8 October 2010, 695.

48 For a discussion about portrayals of femininity and masculinity standards, see Peshkova, Jenrbekova, and Vilkovisky in this special issue.

49 Scott, 'Masculinities and Sex Work', 275.

In addition, men who have an athletic physique charge more than thin or overweight men, which Logan claims conforms to hegemonic masculinity. In many ways, rejection of large men and thin men may be seen as the rejection (subjugation) of feminizing features. For example, excess weight in a man visually minimizes the relative size of male genitals and produces larger (and, importantly, non-muscular) male breasts; thin men may appear slight, waifish, and physically weak. These appearances emphasize feminizing traits that are actively discouraged in mainstream media.[50] In the ads of the Kazakhstani website I observed, male escorts appeared to be rather slim, but not necessarily athletic. Many photos do not reveal what type of body the escort has because a great number of profiles photos only show the penis.[51] Face photos are also rare: six of the 200 profiles I looked at included face photos. The absence of face photos also contrasts with Pruitt's finding, which show that despite the fact that they are involved in a stigmatized, illegal activity, 56% of the males-for-females escorts had face photos.[52] The escorts' efforts to keep their identity private reveals something interesting about the stigma associated with sex work in Kazakhstan, whether male or female.

All around the world, sex workers continue to face stigma for their activities[53] and Kazakhstan is no exception. News of police raids in brothels are frequent in the Kazakhstani media landscape and generate intense discussions when they are reported in online newspapers.[54] While some of the discussants propose to fully legalize prostitution, others deplore that people engage in this type of work. Local norms of morality are often evoked by the respondents. For instance, one woman interviewed by Almaty tv after a raid was conducted in her neighborhood commented: "Well, of course, you need to fight with such girls, is it possible? It's a shame, such a shame, and in general it has a bad effect on our youth, they see all this easy work, if you can call it work, but it's still ugly. We need to fight that, I think. It messes up our society."[55] Several

50 Trevon D. Logan, 'Personal Characteristics, Sexual Behaviors, and Male Sex Work: A Quantitative Approach', *American Sociological Review*, 8 October 2010, 684–85.

51 Interestingly, one male who was clearly overweight and 34 years old (much older than the majority of other escorts) was charging 20,000 tenge/hour (approximately US$47), whereas the average is around 15,000 tenge (approximately US$35).

52 Pruitt, '"Just a Gigolo"', 74.

53 Kumar et al., 'A Global Overview of Male Escort Websites', 3.

54 'Bordel' s elitnymi prostitutkami vyyavili v osobnyake v Almaty (Brothel with elite prostitutes uncovered in a mansion in Almaty)', *Tengri News*, 22 December 2020, https://tengrinews.kz/accidents/bordel-elitnyimi-prostitutkami-vyiyavili-osobnyake-almatyi-423744/. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

55 'Pochti 500 «nochnykh babochek» zaderzhali s nachala iyulya v odnom rayone Almaty (Almost 500 "night butterflies" have been detained since the beginning of July in one Almaty district)'.

other respondents associated prostitution with social decadence and/or un-Islamic behavior.[56]

As reported in Table 1, there are different prices listed on the site, depending on the location where the meeting will take place. *Vyezd* (which can be translated as departure) means that the escort will travel someplace else to meet the client. This is the most common arrangement, and this is the number that I have used to calculate the average price of services. The site also offers built-on options for meetings taking place in the sauna and inside cars. These tend to be slightly more expensive. The extra costs around 5000 tenge more (the equivalent of approximately US$12).

Aigazin and Tuleuov found that in 2018, the average prices for male sex services were of 14,943 tenge (approximately US$40)[57] in Nur-Sultan and 13,286 (approximately US$36) in Almaty, which was cheaper than female services of respectively 17,650 (approximately US$47) and 18,464 (approximately US$50).[58] My observations indicate slightly higher prices, which could be a result of inflation in the two years that separate our data collection. The average price in Nur-Sultan for male sex services was 15,000 tenge per hour and 17,000 tenge in Almaty (approximately US$35–40). Those who offer services to men only and to both men and women tend to charge more per/hour. I came across two profiles which were outliers in terms of prices, respectively charging 60,000 and 70,000 tenge (approximately US$142–166) but these two were heterosexual couples' profiles who were offering services to females only.

Male Sex Work Is Different

It is well documented that some sex workers around the world engage in prostitution out of economic necessity, just like any other worker. Recent news coverage in Kazakhstan, however, featured interviews with male sex workers who said that the difficult economic situation during the Covid-19 pandemic pushed them to look for additional sources of income.[59] Monetary gain is not always the sole motivation for some of the men who advertise their services on this site. In the same interview, one man who works as an escort, despite having

56 Tengri, 'V Seti Predlozhili Ne Nakazyvat Muzhshin, Okazyvaiiushchikh Seks-Uslugi (Proposals to Not Punish the Man Who Offered Sex Services Appeared on the Internet)'.

57 All prices calculated based on the exchange rate of September 01, 2018.

58 Aigazin and Tuleuov, 'Ekonomika Grekha: Empiricheskiy Analiz Rynka Seks-Uslug v Kazakhstane (The Economy of Sin: Empirical Analysis of the Sex-Service Market in Kazakhstan)', 13.

59 Titova, 'Kazakhstanskii Rynok Seksual'nykh Uslug Rasshiyaraets (The Kazakhstani Sex Services' Market Is Widening)'.

a degree in medicine, mentioned that he started because his wife was "too shy," and he wanted "to fulfil his fantasies". What started as a fantasy became a permanent job, about which his family knows nothing.[60]

The desire to fulfil fantasies is something I noticed in profiles advertising services for women. Of the 200 profiles I sampled, I found six in Nur-Sultan and three in Almaty which indicated that the men did not seem primarily interested in money, but sex. For instance, one ad posted by a 22-year-old man from Nur-Sultan whose nickname was "Slave for ladies", described himself as a "cuckold"[61] and mentioned that he would provide cunnilingus for free. Another user, a 34-year-old man listed in Almaty wrote the following in his description: "I will take you out of your depression, discomfort. I guarantee you good mood and pleasure! Cunilingus without payment, really for free! Pizza is on me!" Other escorts were charging money but were more selective and indicated that they would only serve a specific category of customers.

Age seemed to be determinant in most cases. Another user, a 24-year-old Metis from Nur-Sultan, who required money for services nevertheless mentioned that he was doing this for his "own interests" and only accepted *ukhozhenie* (well-maintained) female customers not older than 45 years old but could make an exception and go up to 50 years old if the woman was *very* well maintained. One ad posted by a 25-year-old user in Nur-Sultan listed a price of 8,000 tenge per hour (approximately $US9) but stated that he would "fuck beautiful women for free". I extrapolate from this material that some of the escorts who propose prices as low as 5000 tenge/hour (approximately $US12) are interested in both making (few) extra bucks and having sexual experiences. These examples are in accordance with some previous findings.

An interesting aspect of heterosexual male work is that men tend to report more enjoyment from their activities than women. Vanwesenbeeck explains that it is because "their gigs felt more like entertainment than a job" since this is often not their primary income and they served far fewer customers than typical female sex workers. Finally, men also reported less early experiences of sexual victimization, which suggests that their involvement in sex work is not related to an "unhealthy" relationship to sex.[62] However, it's important to underline that economic vulnerability, especially since the pandemic started, plays a vital role in the choice of engaging in sex work; both, the increase in the number of ads on the website and news reports, point out such trend.

60 Titova.
61 These two terms were written in English, but the rest of the profile was in Russian.
62 Vanwesenbeeck, 'Prostitution Push and Pull', 13.

Shifting Gender Norms in Central Asia

Male-sex work in Kazakhstan, though informed by financial vulnerability, is not simply a manifestation of dire economic conditions. In fact, among all the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is by far the richest state and its middle-class has been increasing steadily in the last few years, especially in urban centers.[63] Male-sex work is also part of a larger economic transformation and contestation of the gender order in Central Asia informed by decolonizing processes[64] and public's growing exposure to alternative liberal lifestyles through information technologies.[65]

This special issue on gender demonstrates that the Soviet project of female emancipation was grounded in strong heteronormative norms that favored monogamy and a conservative approach to sexuality. Sukotovaya poignantly notes that the Soviet ideals of masculinity took its origins in the Eastern Slavic cultures and the Christian ascetic ideology, which prescribed sexual activity only for the sake of childbearing and rejected the pleasures of the body.[66] The scholar argues that the political and economic emancipation after 1991 led to a change in moral standards, sexual liberation in the public sphere, and redefinition of masculinity into a "neurotic masculinity", which allowed to compensate for the desires suppressed during the Soviet period, by overcoming "trauma" and finding new sources of identity. However, as the papers in this special issue point out, because of the retraditionalizing regimes that emerged in former Soviet Central Asia after its independence in 1991, we can hardly talk about a sexual revolution because the term fails to account for increasing authoritarianism and the conservative backlash concomitant to a growing awareness of sexual diversity in the region.

Central Asian scholars have documented retraditionalizing Central Asian societies; and how this process solidifies specific gender roles and limits the range of life options for both males and females who become increasingly

63 OECD, 'The Emergence of the Middle Class in Kazakhstan: Size of Income Groups as Share of the Population, Selected Years', Text, 2016, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/multi-dimensional-review-of-kazakhstan/the-emergence-of-the-middle-class-in-kazakhstan_9789264246768-graph10-en. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

64 Svetlana Peshkova, 'Gender Structure', in *Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding*, ed. David Montgomery (Pittsburgh University Press, 2021), 21.

65 Jasmin Dall'Agnola, 'Patriots or World Citizens: The Identity of Post-Soviet People in a Globalised World', *Europe-Asia Studies* 0, no. 0 (9 February 2021): 1–21.

66 Viktoriya A Sukovataya, '"Ot 'maskulinnosti Travmy" – k "Maskulinnosti Nevroza", Gendernyye Politiki v Sovetskoy i Postsovetskoy Massovoy Kul'ture ("From the Masculinity of Trauma" to the "Masculinity of Neurosis": Gender Politics in Soviet and Post-Soviet Mass Culture)', *Labirint*, no. 5 (2012): 40.

pressured by their communities.[67] In this issue, the articles by Nozimova and Kim, Molchanova and Orozalieva show how women's virtue and sexuality is increasingly questioned and monitored by local societies and sates. Although, in Central Asia, increasing levels of religiosity are often associated with the prevalence and progression of conservative values, Nozimova reminds that the nationalist secular ideologies of Central Asia's secular regimes are pushing traditional values.

Female modesty and obedience are also part of the official narrative on gender in Kazakhstan. For instance, in October 2017, two female representatives of the mayor's office in Nur-Sultan invited themselves to Nazarbayev University (a state university international in character) to conduct a seminar entitled: 'The Moral Upbringing of Ladies' which emphasized modesty and family values." They were met with fierce resistance from the female students.[68] There are also moral vigilantes, the Uyatmen (a combination of the words 'shame' in Kazakh and 'men' in English),[69] who shame women who use their sex appeal on social media.[70] This kind of public shaming of women is sometimes perpetuated by the state authorities[71] despite an official narrative that emphasizes the historical egalitarian character of the Kazakh tribes.[72] Such so-called feminine values are also strongly encouraged and enforced within families. For

67 Elena Kim, 'Re-Feminizing the Post-Soviet Women: Identity, Politics and Virginity Ceremonies in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan', *Journal of Gender Studies* 29, no. 6 (17 August 2020): 706–16; 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 (3 March 2016): 195–206; Colette Harris, 'State Business: Gender, Sex and Marriage in Tajikistan', *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011): 97–111; Diana T. Kudaibergenova, 'Project "Kelin": Marriage, Women and Re-Traditionalization in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan', in *Women of Asia: Globalization, Development, and Social Change*, ed. M. Najafizadeh and L. Lindsay (Routledge, 2018), 379–90.

68 It was filmed by attendees and added to Youtube. *Nravstvennoe Vospitanie Devushek (The Moral Upbringing of Ladies)* (Nazarbayev University, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5O_fJ3yVkw. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

69 Kudaibergenova, 'The Body Global and the Body Traditional'.

70 Almaz Kumenov, 'Kazakhstan: Morality Mavens Monitoring Women', *EurasiaNet*, 25 January 2028, https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-morality-mavens-monitoring-women. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

71 Rabiga Diusengulova, 'Video o devushke v mini-yubke vyzvalo spory v Kaznete (A video about a girl in a miniskirt caused controversy on the Kaznet)', *Tengrinews*, 5 June 2020, sec. Новости, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/video-o-devushke-v-mini-yubke-vyizvalo-sporyi-v-kaznete-404548/. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

72 *Nursultan Nazarbayev Explains Why Kazakh Women Are so Beautiful* (Washington, 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jegIieWPHYw. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

instance, a Kazakhstani *kelin* (bride) is expected to care for her husband and his parents.[73]

Sexuality is often thought of and discussed in its relation to marriage, which is a near compulsory milestone in Kazakhstan. An overwhelming majority of young Kazakhstanis (14–29) imagine their future as married with a family: 83,8% of male respondents and 81,2% of female respondents.[74] Kudaibergenova has documented how women discuss, and appear to increasingly support the idea that women should keep their virginity before marriage.[75] In 2016, Uskembaeva's survey found that 53.3% of women and 42.8% of men aged between 18 and 60 years old, considered premarital sexual relations unacceptable.[76] Sex remains a taboo topic.

When it comes to gender norms and practices, pre-marital sexuality is often tolerated for boys but condemned for girls. Kabatova's report on sexual awareness among youth shows how the topic of sexual education is seldom discussed within families and at school and is something that is considered shameful to talk about, especially sensitive in Kazakh-speaking communities.[77] In a series of focus groups conducted all over Kazakhstan with teenagers, Kabatova observed gender differences when it came to gendered expectations of appropriate behavior for girls and boys. One dialogue was particularly revealing. One female teenager remarked that "if a girl has a couple of partners, she is called a whore. But if a boy does, then nobody says anything". One boy added: "Well, boys can do anything."[78] Kabatova's report also revealed the striking absence of sex education in Kazakhstan and youth's misconception of sexuality, which has negative consequences from a gender equality and public health perspective.[79]

73 Diana T. Kudaibergenova, 'Project "Kelin": Marriage, Women and Re-Traditionalization in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan', in *Women of Asia: Globalization, Development, and Social Change*, ed. M Najafizadeh and L Lindsay (Routledge, 2018), 379–90.

74 'Tsennosti Kazakhstanskovo Obshestva v Sotsiologicheskom Izmerenii (Values of the Kazakhstani Society in Social Measurements)' (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019), 50.

75 Kudaibergenova, 'Project "Kelin": Marriage, Women and Re-Traditionalization in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan'.

76 M.A. Uskembaeva, 'Politika v Otnoshenii Zhenshchin i Muzhchin v Sovremennom Kazakhstane: Gendernoe Issledovanie (Politics towards Women and Men in Modern Kazakhstan: A Gender Research)' (Institute of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Kazakhstan, 2016), 112.

77 Karlygash Kabatova, 'V Poiskakh Zdravogo Smysla Kakaya Sistema Polovogo Prosvesh-cheniya Nuzhna Kazakhstanu? (In Search of Common Sense What System of Sexual Education Does Kazakhstan Need?)' (Soros Foundation Kazakhstan, 2019), 15.

78 Kabatova, 18.

79 New cases of heterosexual transmission of HIV increased 60 percent from 2010 to 2016, and sex work accounted for only six percent of these cases, which shows that sex education and awareness is greatly lacking. Carolina Vélez-Grau et al., '"I Never Hoped for

Finally, the dominant gender narrative also emphasizes heteronormativity and suppresses the manifestation of homosexual desires. If homosexuality is not illegal in Kazakhstan, it is not socially tolerated, and queer communities continue to face widespread discrimination and harassment. In 2019, a Kazakhstani survey found that a great majority of respondents mentioned that "representatives of the LGBT community" were the second less desirable type of people one would like to have as a neighbor after "drug addicts." The results were particularly high (70,2%) among the 18–29 age group. Unexpectedly, the most tolerant age group was the 61 years old and up.[80] This could be explained by a "Don't ask don't tell" attitude cultivated in the Soviet Union. The discrimination extends to individuals and groups who are not openly queer but do not conform to the hegemonic gender models for masculinity and femininity. For instance, a Kazakhstani boys band called 91 whose music and looks is inspired by Korean pop (K-Pop), faced serious backlash because they appeared too feminine with their bright clothes, blond hair, and make-up. They received threats and some of their shows were cancelled as authorities feared demonstrations in some cities of Southern Kazakhstan.[81] However, the mere fact that they exist, continue to make music and remain hugely popular in Kazakhstan tells us something about competing gender models in the country.

Revolutions of Intimacy

Given the prevalence of the hegemonic discourse on gender, I use the concept of "revolutions of intimacy" to explain why female customers' decision to buy sex from male escorts. Gradskova, Kondakov and Shevtsova mention the concept of revolutions of intimacy "does not imply public claims or political demands".[82] If one's sexual life in the USSR was the matter of the state,[83] the

Anything … Now I Have Other Plans": The Role of Microfinance in HIV Intervention for Women Who Use Drugs and Engage in Sex Work in Kazakhstan', *International Social Work*, 29 May 2020, 2.

80 'Tsennosti Kazakhstanskovo Obshestva v Sotsiologicheskom Izmerenii (Values of the Kazakhstani Society in Social Measurements)', 84.

81 Yvette Tan, 'The K-Pop Inspired Band That Challenged Gender Norms in Kazakhstan', *BBC*, 4 January 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55359772 (Accessed 02-03-2021). (Accessed 02-03-2021).

82 Yulia Gradskova, Alexander Kondakov, and Maryna Shevtsova, 'Post-Socialist Revolutions of Intimacy: An Introduction', *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 24, no. 2 (2020): 362.

83 Elena Omel'chenko, '"My Body, My Friend?" Provincial Youth between the Sexual and the Gender Revolutions', in *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Sarah Ashwin (Routledge, 2012), 149.

post-Soviet gender order has enabled people to explore alternative existences and sexuality became a possible discourse. Local desires for liberalization of social norms and sexual emancipation are informed by globalization and information exchange and people's exposure to other-than-their-own lifestyles that emphasize self-care and indulgence.[84] The extent of male sex-work in Kazakhstan manifests such dynamics. Yet, these desires are equally informed by local morality standards, including the fear of shame associated with casual sex with strangers. Such combination of socio-cultural factors in Kazakhstan, I argue, explains the popularity of discreet encounters of male escorts who do not threaten one's reputation.

The common stereotype that former-Soviet Central Asia is socially conservative, has been proven wrong in many of the region's urban centers. Despite conservative views on pre-marital sexuality, a 2018 study showed that about a third of the Kazakhstani adolescents (15–19 years old) surveyed had sexual experience and 57% of 19-year-olds were sexually active.[85] In Kazakhstan's urban centers, a great proportion of the youth behaves in ways similar to their counterparts found in any European or North American capital: clubbing, drinking, engaging in casual sex and dating. At the same time, local communities appear to be animated by a number of simultaneous, perhaps conflicting, social processes that create a divide between urban and rural youth.[86] Further, Tlostanova poignantly argues that,

> There is one more group of Caucasus and Central Asian women that does not fit the usual discrimination dichotomies. I define them as tricksters and border dwellers who switch codes and identities as a way to survive and resist. These people often belong to the middle-class educated strata of the post-Soviet societies; they are the postcolonial products of the Soviet multicultural policies who often grew up in the metropolis, and, through their linguistic and cultural competence, can easily belong to mainstream society, yet are constantly reminded of their inferiority and

84 Kudaibergenova, 'The Body Global and the Body Traditional'; Daniyar Kosnazarov, '#Hashtag Activism: Youth, Social Media, and Politics', in *The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lexington, 2019), 247–68.

85 Zharda Zhulmukhametova, 'Issledovanie: 2% devushek do 19 let v Kazakhstane delali aborty v domashnikh usloviyakh (Research: 2% of girls under 19 years old in Kazakhstan had abortions at home)', *Informburo*, 4 December 2018, https://informburo.kz/novosti/issledovanie-2-kazahstanskih-devushek-do-19-let-delali-aborty-v-domashnih-usloviyah.html (Accessed 02-03-2021). (Accessed 02-03-2021).

86 Galym Zhussipbek and Zhanar Nagayeva, '"Cognitive Unconscious," "Modern Conservatism," and "Core Liberal Values" in the Context of Youth's National Identity', in *The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lexington, 2019), 133–52.

> eventually choose not to assimilate. Such people experience discrimination in subtler but no less profound ways.[87]

Despite existing taboos around female sexuality and the dominant narrative about female modesty, urban educated Kazakhstani women are sexually active, in and outside marriage. The fact that Kazakhstan has a very high rate of divorce, close to 35%,[88] might explain why so many women seek the services of male escorts. A 2020 survey showed that 61% of the participants evoked the interference of relatives/in-laws, 41% the fact that they just could, 36% that there was a family values crisis in Kazakhstan, as the main reasons for this divorce rate. Next came selfishness (28%), the influence of social networks (28%), and the easiness of divorce procedures (25%).[89] The second reason – they just could – is intriguing and leaves space for interpretation. It could be connected to the fact that people tend to marry early in Kazakhstan and that after few years of marriage, couples realize that they are not made for each other and divorce. After marriage, people are interested in exploring other avenues. Based on anecdotal evidence taken from the observation of a public Instagram page called *Happy Wife and Mom Kazakhstan*, where women discuss private life issues anonymously, one could argue that sexual dissatisfaction pushes women to seek and have uninhibited sex with escorts.[90] Nurpeisov's negative comments about the impotency of many Kazakhstani men in the beginning of the article also hints in this direction. However, as the businessman noted, if a woman is perceived to have casual sex with strangers, it can be shameful. Kudaiberganova's research on the backlash created by young Kazakhstani women exposing their liberated sexuality on Instagram is also revealing. These women were subjected to intense criticism and threats.[91] The news about the detention of the male escort and the businessman's support generated multiple and different public reactions on the webpage of Tengri News. Out of

87 Madina Tlostanova, 'Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories and Intersectional Coalitions', *Baltic Worlds*, no. 1–2 (2015): 40.

88 Rabiga Nurbai, 'Razvody v Kazakhstane: Prichiny, Tendentsii i Vyplata Alimentov (Divorces in Kazakhstan: Reasons, Trends and Payment of Alimony)' (Strategy 2050, 22 July 2020), https://strategy2050.kz/ru/news/razvody-v-kazakhstane-prichiny-tendentsii-i-vyplata-alimentov-/#:~:text=%D0%92%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%205%20%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%82%20%D0%B2,%25%20%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%88%D0%B5%2C%20%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BC%20%D0%B2%202017. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

89 Nurbai.

90 In particular, the topic of oral sex is often brought up and it seems that it is uncommon for women to receive oral sex from their partner.

91 Kudaibergenova, 'The Body Global and the Body Traditional'.

105 comments left by users, 34 comments strongly opposed prostitution and condemned the person and/or his lack of morals, two blamed the West for an ongoing moral degeneration and a few indicated that this was un-Islamic. However, at least 34 comments were in support of Nurpeisov. Amused users supported women's right to pleasure, called other users hypocrites for judging the others' morals, while some argued for the full legalization of prostitution.[92]

With the "new technologies of sexual exchange"[93] such as dating apps, specialized websites and online classified ads, it becomes easier for women to have a more active and diverse sexual life. Yet, due to the fear of public shaming, women might refrain from using regular dating apps such as Tinder and its local pendant, Mamba. Indeed, a 2020 research about online dating showed that female users feared of being seen as interested in sex and being seen as sexually appealing on Tinder, a concern that none of the male respondents raised.[94] Young women also reported keeping as much anonymity on these sites as possible because of the fear of being ridiculed by their social circles, which was reported by some interviewees,[95] as well as fear of sexual assault and harassment.[96]

The presence of advertisements for male sex services does not necessarily mean that there are female customers who are ready to pay for that. This is one of the limitations of my research; I cannot ascertain whether anybody buys these services or not. But given the information that I found in the Kazakhstani media, and recent research, we can reasonably assume that the hundreds of advertisements respond to a demand. Ideally, research on the provision of male sex services to women would include interviews and testimonies of female customers. Given the difficulty to identifying women who would be willing to share their experiences, I rely on secondary data.

One possible way to assess the motivations of female customers would be to read the comments that customers can leave on the escort's profile, something similar to a Google review, since the website offers customers the possibility of leaving reviews under profiles. This practice of reviewing sex as service, is in line with research analyzing online sex work in other parts of the world which

92 Tengri, 'V Seti Predlozhili Ne Nakazyvat Muzhshin, Okazyvaiiushchikh Seks-Uslugi (Proposals to Not Punish the Man Who Offered Sex Services Appeared on the Internet)'. (Accessed 02-03-2021).

93 Vanwesenbeeck, 'Prostitution Push and Pull', 13.

94 Makhabbat Boranbay, 'To Swipe or Not to Swipe? Impression Management and Privacy Concerns of Dating Application Tinder Users in Astana (Nur-Sultan), Kazakhstan' (Nazarbayev University, 2020), 29.

95 Boranbay, 32.

96 Boranbay, 34.

argues that sex-work is being normalized.[97] The commodification and professionalization of sex-work also appears to characterize the market of sexual services in Kazakhstan. One difference between the men and women's profiles is the number of reviews the profiles get. I have found only one man's profile where there were reviews, a total of eight. The comments about the 29-year-old escort from Almaty were very positive. Although it is impossible to know for certain, given that pseudonyms are used, it seems that half the reviews were actually written by couples who hired the escort for the wife.[98] In contrast, most *fei*'s profiles have reviews; some up to 230 reviews. Most of these reviews written allegedly male customers are very positive and provide extended feedback, such as the escort's skills, her shape, cleanliness, and/or friendliness. The fact that female customers rarely leave comments shows a sharp contrast between men and women. Men are not afraid to share details and brag about their sexual experiences while women remain very discrete, even if the site provides full anonymity. I use this difference between the online behavior of male and female customers to return to an idea evoked by our businessman in the introduction and base my argument explaining the magnitude of male escort services in Kazakhstan on this difference as well: women are likely to have sex with anonymous male prostitutes to maintain their reputation rather than indulge in casual sex with strangers or acquaintances. In other words: a woman's sex life should remain hidden if her reputation is to remain intact.

In Nurpeisov's comments, sex is associated with pleasure and seen as an important part of someone's well-being. Nurpeisov goes further, arguing that the absence of sexual activity can lead to gynecological diseases for women, which appears to be a common belief in the post-Soviet world.[99] This belief is often evoked by doctors[100] even though there is no supporting scientific evidence. Put this way, sexual activity appears to be not only hedonistic,[101] but also necessary for the maintenance of good health, making it more socially acceptable.

97 Kumar et al., 'A Global Overview of Male Escort Websites'.

98 It should be noted that the escort indicated that he served only women and couples so we can imagine a threesome scenario where men do not engage or a cuckold fantasy.

99 This is also based on many discussions I've had over years of living in Central Asia where women are often told by doctors that the absence of sexual activity will make them sick.

100 Oksana Ermolova, 'Bolezni monashek: vazhen li seks dlya zdorov'ya? (Nuns' diseases: is sex important for health?)', *Passion*, 25 October 2017, https://www.passion.ru/health/zhenskoe-zdorove/bolezni-monashek-mozhno-li-byt-zdorovoi-bez-seksa.htm (Accessed 02-03-2021). (Accessed 02-03-2021).

101 In Central Asia, men's sexual needs are often used to justify adultery and polygyny. See Helene Thibault, 'Labour Migration, Sex, and Polygyny: Negotiating Patriarchy in Tajikistan', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 15 (8 December 2018): 2809–26.

Conclusion

The significant presence of male sex workers in Kazakhstan represents a contrast with the nature of male sex work in other parts of the world. Kazakhstan may be a unique case in Central Asia, since the country has higher levels of economic development and material well-being than the other Central Asian states. The degree of sexual liberalism is also clashing with the more conservative societies of neighboring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as discussed by Commercio, Nozimova and Kim, Molchanova and Orozalieva in this special issue. I have argued that the significant presence of male sex workers can be explained by the combination of conservative outlooks about women's sexuality and a desire for sexual emancipation. Therefore, women are more likely to have sex with an anonymous escort than risk to have their sex life exposed by casual hookups.

The fact that the topic of male sex-work makes the headlines in mainstream Kazakhstani media in itself reveals that in the information age, taboo topics find their way into the public arena. Discussions about female sexuality and emancipation in mainstream media might indeed indicate that we are witnessing a revolution of intimacy. Male sex-work is also gender-bending in a way because seduction is likely to be included in the ethos of femininity and/or considered to be a feminine trait. In reaction to the news article concerning Nurpeisov's Facebook post, one user commented: "It's obvious from the comments that we have many gigolos Kazakhstan. It's unfortunate. Men, be men". Yet, male escorts catering for female clients "may experience commercial sex as least deviating from norms of masculinity, and therefore least threatening of their reputation"[102] because it conforms to the dominant heteronormative masculine identity. Other commentators were amused and sympathetic or acknowledged that this was commercial activity that should be legalized. We can speculate that the comments would be radically different if the issue was homosexual sex work.

Finally, the topic of male sex work allows to investigate women's desires and men's perceived inadequacies. Nurpeisov's bold and harsh judgements about fat impotent Kazakh men reveals something about gender expectations that applies to men. He criticizes them for their unhealthy habits and neglectful manners, since they were the ones responsible for the dissatisfaction of their wives and partners. In a recent series of televised interviews, First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, gave advices to men to stay fit and healthy. He shared his diet and the details of his daily routine: "The physical

102 Vanwesenbeeck, 'Prostitution Push and Pull', 14.

capabilities of a person's musculature can be trained at any age – there is no limit. I constantly work on myself and my muscles are in good shape, the brain is in order, and everything works as it should. It all depends on the person, it depends on our laziness."[103] These narratives about men's health might signal an increasingly patronizing discourse towards men in light of the redefinition of gender ideals.

103 'Nazarbaev Dal Sovety Muzhshinam (Nazarbayev Gave Advices to Men)', *Tengri News*, 8 January 2021, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nazarbaev-dal-sovetyi-mujchinam-425377/ (Accessed 02-03-2021).