

## Between Family and Market: Women and the New Silk Road in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

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For centuries, caravan traders transported goods across the steppes and deserts of Central Asia in multiple directions along the legendary Silk Road. Precious commodities such as silk, ivory, gold, and fur exchanged hands numerous times as they traversed distances of up to 7,000 miles. The oasis towns of Central Asia profited greatly from such trade until the fifteenth century, when the decline of the Mongol empire and technological advances in shipbuilding brought political instability to the region and encouraged alternative trade routes. Within Central Asia, trade was further disrupted in the twentieth century with the formation of the Soviet Union and its nearly impenetrable border with the outside world. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the bazaars of Soviet Central Asia have once again filled with foreign goods. On the New Silk Road, the old commodities, such as silk and gold, have been replaced by “modern” global commodities, such as ready-made clothing, packaged foods, and electronic goods (Khasanova 1998). And, the earlier forms of transportation—horses and camels—have been replaced by “modern” ones, including airplanes, trains, and buses. Nevertheless, the nature of this trade is imbued with the spirit of the ancient Silk Road: the trade fills local markets with highly coveted luxury goods; the commodities cross through numerous middlemen before they reach their final destination; and the merchants gain exposure to other lifestyles through travel.

In a place where Marxist-inspired policies have long rankled patriarchal customs, one of the most striking aspects of the New Silk Road trade is the predominance of Central Asian women in the marketplace. In particular, they dominate the exchange of commodities that play a special role in women’s lives. This includes the cloth and clothing that women exchange as gifts, and the food products that women use to feed their families and honor their guests. The merchant women who sell these goods spend long hours outside of the household, buying and selling goods in public marketplaces. In

addition, they travel unsupervised to markets in distant towns where their activities are less constrained by local talk. Although the recent development in market trade is clearly a post-Soviet phenomenon, the mobility and freedom that these women now experience should be viewed as an important legacy of Soviet rule. For seventy years, the Soviet state tried to "emancipate" women by providing education and employment opportunities. These policies were relatively successful, yet Western scholars repeatedly point out the "double burden" of Soviet women (Buckley 1989, 1997). Although Soviet policies encouraged women's participation in the workplace, they did little to change gender roles at home. So, even after working long hours outside of the home, Central Asian women remained responsible for the domestic tasks of cleaning, cooking, and childcare.

This chapter examines the role of women in the New Silk Road trade and the impact of these activities on the merchant women and their families in southern Kazakhstan. In order to understand the rise of small-scale trade, it is first necessary to look at the economic transition in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Then, in order to illustrate the scope of trade that is managed and/or operated by women, the chapter turns to the history and organization of several small-scale businesses. And, finally, in order to explain the full impact of these trade activities, this chapter examines the gender roles, household economies, and family relationships of merchant women.

### THE ECONOMIC TRANSITION IN POST-SOVIET KAZAKHSTAN

Shortly after the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991, the leaders of newly independent Kazakhstan initiated the transition from a socialist planned economy to a capitalist market economy. In 1993, the government introduced a new national currency and a comprehensive structural reform program. The reforms include the liberalization of prices for consumer goods; the reduction of state subsidies for transportation, housing, and other services; the privatization of some state-owned enterprises; and the downsizing of other state-owned enterprises. Although Kazakhstan has great economic potential, with vast oil and mineral reserves and a small but educated population, the current economic situation in most households is not very good.

I conducted research in a small town that previously served as the administrative hub for nine state farms specializing in the production of the Astrakhan sheep. The town is located about three hours northwest of the city of Shymkent. There are currently about 8,300 people living in this town. More than 96 percent of the residents are Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs. They all live in homes with electricity, although none of the homes have running water and few have telephones, refrigerators, or automobiles. About half of the households could be described as nuclear family (two-generation) households, and the other half could be described as extended family (three- and four-generation) households. The extended family households are typically patrilocal.

As elsewhere, the transition process in this town has been characterized by a sharp decline in the average standard of living and a growing disparity between wealthy and poor households. In 1994, 1995, and 1998, most of the villagers I interviewed complained about increased unemployment, delayed payment of salaries, and high inflation. With the dissolution of several prominent state enterprises in the region, including the state farms, the nurseries, and the bread factory, many villagers lost their regular source of income. Those who are still employed by the remaining state enterprises are often paid six to eight months behind schedule. And, with rising costs, the value of these salaries rarely provides enough to offset basic expenses.

The transition process has delivered several serious blows to Kazakh women in particular. First, although women have experienced high rates of employment in Soviet Kazakhstan (up to 49 percent of the registered labor force), the post-Soviet state has eliminated more jobs in female-dominated sectors than in male-dominated sectors. Between 1990 and 1994, the number of jobs occupied by women decreased by 22.7 percent, compared to only 10.2 percent for men. Approximately 700,000 women were laid off during this period. This figure does not even include the number of women who have been placed on part-time status or who have difficulty returning from maternity leave (Bauer, Boschmann, and Green 1997). Second, the post-Soviet transition has brought serious cutbacks to the heavily subsidized system of nurseries. From 1989 to 1994, the total enrollment in Kazakhstan's nurseries declined from 52 percent to 28 percent of preschool children (Klugman et al. 1997). The employability of women is strongly influenced by the existence of childcare options. As nurseries become less available and more expensive in the post-Soviet period, working women have to become more dependent on social networks for childcare and/or find jobs such as trading, in which they can bring their children to the workplace.

In the post-Soviet period, rural Kazakhs have been developing new strategies to cope with these new strains on household economies and women's lives. Before the transition, most rural households were already pursuing complex survival strategies by combining the wages of at least one state employee with the domestic production of vegetables and livestock. In the post-Soviet period, most households have tried to cut expenses by further increasing the production of food for domestic consumption. In addition, many households have turned to new sources of income from private farming, handicraft production, or small-scale trade.

### PATTERNS OF TRADE ON THE NEW SILK ROAD

The expansion of bazaar trade signifies a sharp break with the Soviet period when the state controlled the production and distribution of almost all goods. Although small neighborhood and village bazaars did operate in the past, they were largely limited to fresh produce or used consumer goods. Anybody who

was involved with the speculative trade of other goods was either profiting at the expense of the state or illegally selling goods from abroad. In contrast, many Kazakhs view small-scale trade as the most viable option for survival in the post-Soviet period.

In rural areas, this is especially true for the towns and villages that have central marketplaces and have easy access to railways and big cities. The town where I worked was ideally situated for the development of trade. As an administrative center, there were already two semiweekly, state-run bazaars in place, one specializing in livestock and one specializing in food products and household goods. A third privately owned daily bazaar was opened in 1994 to accommodate the increased volume of trade. The town also benefited from its relative proximity to several cities; the cities of Turkestan, Shymkent, and Tashkent are two, three, and six hours away by bus, respectively. Each of these cities can also be reached by train, as the main railway connecting Moscow and Tashkent conveniently stops in a smaller village about ten miles away.

As the lure of the bazaar attracts individuals from various backgrounds, it is difficult to characterize the new class of village merchants. In the town where I worked, one could find merchants in three local bazaars, dozens of kiosks, and numerous street corners. Some merchants work daily, but others resort to trade on those occasions when they need some extra cash. Many of the part-time merchants in particular are still full-time employees in other sectors. Some merchants sell home-produced goods, such as fermented horse milk, but others exclusively buy and resell consumer goods. Among the speculative traders, a few travel across national borders to buy goods in Uzbekistan or Iran, while most buy goods in the wholesale markets of nearby cities in Kazakhstan.

Although men can be found selling things in the local bazaars, they are clearly outnumbered by women, especially when it comes to older and elderly merchants. One day, I counted the number of merchants sitting in one of the three town bazaars. On that particular day, there were seventy-five merchants working in the daily bazaar. Fifty-six percent of them were adult women, 16 percent were girls, 19 percent were adult men, and 9 percent were boys. It is important to point out that these figures do not include the merchants who work exclusively at the semiweekly livestock bazaar, which is dominated by men. In contrast to the livestock bazaar, this daily bazaar contains a wide variety of food products and household goods, the trade of which is dominated by women. Although merchants typically specialize in either food or clothing, most merchants sell a variety of goods within their particular specialty. On that particular day, 40 percent of the merchants were selling fruits and vegetables, 32 percent were selling clothing, 30 percent were selling rice and pasta, 28 percent were selling candy and cookies, 20 percent were selling home-produced goods, and 4 percent were selling meat.

The gender differences in the marketplace can be explained from both economic and cultural perspectives. From an economic perspective, there are more women in the bazaars because more women have been laid off in the post-Soviet period, and they were laid off earlier (Bauer, Boschmann, and Green 1997). In interviews with both male and female merchants, however, an alternative, cultural explanation emerges. According to some informants, Kazakh men just don't handle money as well as women. They say men are more capricious when it comes to cash, either spending it on alcohol or loaning it to undeserving friends. In their opinion, this is why women usually manage the household income and why women belong in the marketplace.

### CASE STUDIES OF MERCHANT WOMEN AND THEIR BUSINESSES

The following portrayals of merchant women illustrate the nature and dynamics of bazaar trade in rural Kazakhstan:

"Zhanar," a fifty-six-year-old wife and mother of four, sells a small assortment of home-produced and retail goods in front of the central bazaar. Trained as a nurse, she is now on an extended leave with the local hospital, where she is still officially employed. She started working as a merchant in 1995 with the sale of homemade dumplings in the town bazaar. For a while, Zhanar received a lot of business from local organizations that would contract her services for special events, such as birthday parties and holidays. By 1997, none of the local organizations could afford such luxuries anymore. Now, her business is limited to the sale of eggs, candy, soap, socks, tea, and *kozha*, a local drink made by adding corn and sour cream to boiling water. Although she produces the *kozha* herself and buys the eggs from a neighboring family, the other goods come from the nearby city of Turkestan. As her volume of trade is so small, Zhanar generally relies on her merchant friends to purchase goods for her. They do not charge her for this service. Her children also help out with the business, by helping her carry things by foot from her house to the bazaar and by running home for extra goods when necessary. Zhanar works at the bazaar seven days per week, unless she has a social obligation, in which case one of her older children will sit at the bazaar for her. Compared to other merchants, her expenses are relatively low. She has no transportation costs, as she lives so close to the bazaar and does not travel herself to the other bazaars. She also does not have to pay for a license because of the small volume of her trade. Like the other merchants, however, she does pay a daily fee to the bazaar manager and a retail tax to the tax collector. She claims that the business is successful, although the profits only cover a small percent of her household expenses.

"Gulnara," a fifty-five-year old wife and mother of eight, works full-time as a schoolteacher and part-time as a merchant. Gulnara started to engage in trade shortly after her first daughter "eloped" with her boyfriend in 1994. (In

Kazakhstan, elopements, which are typically ritualized as kidnappings, are generally followed by exchanges of in-law gifts and payments of bridewealth and dowry.) In addition to Gulnara's teacher income, her husband receives a good salary from the department of culture where he works, and her family manages to save money by producing their own fruit and vegetables. They are generally well off compared to others in the town. However, she and her husband were completely surprised by their daughter's elopement, and they simply did not have enough cash to buy the expensive gift and dowry items. So, Gulnara decided to try her luck selling things at the bazaar. In her first effort, she bought a sheep in town, had her husband slaughter it, then got on an overnight train to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where she sold the meat in the central bazaar. In one day, she managed to make one-fourth of her monthly salary, which had not even been paid for several months. But as the work was difficult and time-consuming, she decided to change tactics. Using a portion of the profits as capital, she traveled to the nearby city of Turkestan and purchased an array of inexpensive clothing. She then recruited her teenage daughters to sell these items in the town bazaar, while she continued to work in the school. The profits, however, were only trickling in. So, eventually, she decided to turn to a third strategy: she decided to travel with several other merchant women to Almaty and then to Baikonyr, two cities that are each a full day's train ride away. She borrowed money from friend and relatives. She was gone for more than a month. Unfortunately, after subtracting expenses for housing and transportation and paying back her loans, Gulnara only received a small profit (1,500 *tenge*), about three times the profit of the first sheep that she was able to sell in just one day. After her daughter's wedding, she stopped trading goods.

"Raikhan," a sixty-six-year-old wife and mother of six, operates a relatively large business across the street from the central bazaar. She sits there with her goods seven days per week. Depending on what direction they are coming from, villagers might reach her small kiosk before they arrive at the central bazaar. For decades, Raikhan was a full-time mother and housewife. She started her business in 1995 by selling rice in the daily bazaar. But, now her business has expanded to include tea, preserved fruits, butter, cigarettes, matches, soap, and laundry detergent. Her husband helps her with the business by purchasing goods at the wholesale bazaar in Turkestan and by driving her and her things to work every day. At home, she lives with her husband, her grown son, his wife, and her six grandchildren. Unlike some of the other women, Raikhan has the advantage of having a "daughter-in-law in hand" (*kelin kolynda*), which means that she can pass a lot of the housework on to her daughter-in-law. In fact, she admits that the merchant lifestyle is much more peaceful than her home life, because the young children are always fighting with each other and running underfoot. At work, she enjoys gossiping with friends and passersby while making a decent amount of money. Her business

income, however, only makes up a portion of the household income, which also includes her husband's salary, her pension, and her son's income as a private taxi driver. Like most merchants, she was unwilling to specify her net profit, yet notes that her trade income provides her household with enough money to buy food and coal.

Finally, "Maira," a seventeen-year-old girl, sells fruits, vegetables, and toys in the daily bazaar. As an unmarried girl, she still lives with her parents and siblings where she helps with household chores. She has been working as a merchant for two years with her mother. Her mother is responsible for going to Shymkent or Turkestan twice per week to buy products, while Maira is responsible for sitting in the town bazaar seven days per week to sell things. Sometimes her mother sits with her in the bazaar. In addition to paying taxes and bazaar fees, she and her mother pay a small fee to store their products in a locker every night. In general, Maira is satisfied with her job, especially on the days that she sells a lot of things, but she gets bored sitting at the bazaar day after day. In the future, she hopes to attend the university, but for now her family cannot afford the "bribe" that is necessary for admission. Since both of her parents are now unemployed, the only source of household income is the profit from speculative trade. Her family manages to reduce household expenses by producing some of their food in their garden, but they no longer provide their own meat, as they have gradually slaughtered all of their livestock for food and cash.

#### IMPACT OF TRADE ON WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Taken together, the stories of these four merchant women and their families illustrate the nature and scope of small-scale trade in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. I now want to highlight some of the ways in which this trade is affecting gender roles and family relationships. I have borrowed several insights from the literature on "working women" and "working daughters" in Asia and the Middle East. Authors such as Janet Salaff (1995), Diane Wolf (1992), Homa Hoodfar (1997), and Jenny White (1994) have examined the extent to which wage employment improves women's position within the household and transforms patriarchal gender roles. As these authors cautiously point out, women's income may benefit other household members, but income alone does not necessarily transform women's status within the household.

In the case of rural Kazakhstan, merchant women are bringing in significant amounts of income, which they generally contribute to the household pool. All of the women I spoke to started their businesses because their household needed more money for basic survival and networking expenses. Some households rely exclusively on the income derived from small-scale trade, but others receive income from multiple sources. Regardless, the income from small-scale trade represents a significant portion of household

income, especially at a time when state salaries and state pensions are delayed for months. The majority of merchant women, however, rely on other household members to help them with their work. Their husbands and children provide assistance with the purchasing, transporting, and selling of goods. Thus, although the women who sit daily in the bazaar do the most time-consuming aspect of the job, the business itself is viewed within the family as a collaborative venture.

Although trading is a time-consuming and tiring job, Kazakh merchant women do report several perceived benefits. First, many of the women enjoy the social atmosphere of the bazaar. The social isolation of nonworking women varies from family to family. Although some women socialize regularly with friends and relatives and share household tasks with daughters and daughters-in-law, others are much more socially isolated at home. In particular, young wives who grew up in different towns from where they currently live have fewer social contacts. In contrast, merchant women are anything but isolated. During nonpeak hours, they have plenty of time to catch up on local news with other merchants and their customers.

A second perceived benefit, acknowledged by several merchant women, is that they have fewer responsibilities at home because of their work responsibilities. This is also the case for women who are employed in other sectors. And, this is especially true in nuclear family households with older children and in extended family households with other adult women. In these types of households, the nonworking women and older children do the bulk of the cleaning, cooking, and childcare. Although nonadult sons are unlikely to perform certain "female" tasks, they do help with child supervision and general housecleaning. Adult men, on the other hand, are much less willing to cross these gender boundaries, even if they are completely unoccupied with other tasks and there is nobody else at home to do these things.

Finally, some merchant women relish the travel and shopping opportunities involved with this line of work. This is especially true for those women who have traveled across national borders to purchase goods in Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkey, and Iran. Just as international tourists boast about their experiences, these transnational traders benefit socially from their firsthand knowledge of distant places. But, even those who don't travel so far can benefit socially from their knowledge of and frequent access to consumer markets in nearby cities. Merchant women often have the opportunity to gain social credits by purchasing consumer goods for their nonmerchant friends and relatives. Depending on their relationship with the intended recipient, they may provide these goods at reduced or no cost. As I have written in other papers (Werner 1998), social networks, which are critical in Kazakhstan, are often maintained through the exchange of women's labor, such as food production. Since merchant women have less time to devote to these traditional exchanges

of labor, supplying friends with consumer goods provides them with one alternative means to maintain their social networks.

In addition to these perceived benefits, women's involvement in small-scale trade sometimes comes with social costs. In particular, as women spend long hours outside of the home, this trade can have negative effects on children, who may receive less supervision, and on marital relations, which may become strained. The case of Jazira, a thirty-five-year-old mother of four, illustrates both of these social costs. When I met her in 1998, she was ready to end her marriage and take away two of her four children. In her own explanation of the events leading up to this, her problems had started five or six years earlier when the economic situation in her village changed for the worse. She was living with her husband and his parents in a small village where almost all of the adult men and more than half of the adult women were employed by the state farm. In the early 1990s, everybody in the village was finding it more difficult to make ends meet. Then, in 1996, things got even worse when the state farm privatized; her household lost its primary source of income. Having received a small parcel of land from privatization, her husband and father-in-law started to increase the production of subsistence crops. Meanwhile, Jazira herself started to bring extra income into the household by engaging in small-scale trade. At first, she traded clothing and packaged goods in the local bazaar.

After earning small profits for a few months, Jazira decided that she should temporarily move to the city of Almaty where she could earn greater profits. Although Almaty was a twelve-hour train ride away, she made arrangements to share an inexpensive apartment with friends who were resorting to similar tactics. Her husband and her in-laws were not sure if this was a good idea. They were all concerned that her children would miss their mother. Although they knew that there was no guarantee of financial profit, they agreed that they could use any extra money. With some reluctance, her mother-in-law agreed to take care of her grandchildren while Jazira worked in Almaty. Every few weeks, Jazira returned to the village to visit her family and to bring home a portion of her profits. Things were going fine until one day, when her husband unexpectedly showed up at her bazaar stall in Almaty and harshly announced that he knew she was having an affair with another man. He yelled at her in front of her friends and then beat her for the first time ever. As she retold these events, she insisted that the accusation was a lie and that she was seeking a divorce because she refused to live with a man who did not trust her and who beat her after hearing such a rumor.

She had thought seriously about all of the consequences of this divorce. She would have to move permanently to Almaty. She could only afford to take her two school-age children, as the cost of daycare was too high to take the others. And, given her "family situation," she knew she would have some problems

getting remarried. For these reasons, her parents were giving her a very hard time. Despite the beating, her husband was a good man, they argued, and besides that, he was the son of their close friends and this would put a strain on their friendship. Although nobody in her family supported her, Jazira did go ahead with the divorce proceedings and moved permanently to Almaty with the two children.

In conclusion, the impact of the New Silk Road trade on women and their families varies. For the women, benefits include greater social interaction, reduced household chores, and increased physical mobility. For most families, the income that a merchant woman brings into a household to pay for basic foodstuffs outweighs the strains that these activities place on family relationships. In other families, such as Jazira's, the cost of trade can extend as far as family dissolution.

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### III

## LOVE AND ENTITLEMENTS