

Feminizing the New Silk Road: Women Traders in Rural Kazakhstan

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For centuries, male caravan traders journeyed across the steppes and deserts of Central Asia along the legendary Silk Road. Precious commodities, such as silk, ivory, gold, and fur, exchanged hands numerous times as they traversed distances up to 7,000 miles. After declining in the fifteenth century,

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Silk Road trade was further disrupted in the twentieth century with the formation of the Soviet Union and its nearly impenetrable border with the outside world.¹ 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On the New Silk Road, the old commodities have been replaced by "modern" global commodities, such as ready-made clothing, packaged foods, and electronic goods. And the earlier forms of transportation—horses and camels—have been replaced by airplanes, trains, and buses.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 numerous hands before they reach their final destination, and the merchants gain exposure to other lifestyles through travel.

One of the more striking aspects of the New Silk Road trade is the predominance of Central Asian women in the marketplace. In particular, women dominate the exchange of cloth and clothing that are exchanged as gifts, and also of food products that are used to feed families and honor guests. The merchant women who sell these goods spend long hours outside the household, buying and selling goods in public marketplaces. The high visibility of merchant women, including Muslim women, stands in contrast to popular stereotypes of secluded Muslim women. Not only do these Muslim women work in public places; they also travel to markets in distant towns, where their activities are less likely to be observed by kinsmen and neighbors.

On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter explores the lives of Kazakh market women in rural Kazakhstan. The chapter begins with a review of the theoretical literature on women and work that addresses the factors that generally affect women's paid employment and the impact of women's earnings on patriarchal social structures. Next, the chapter turns to the village of Shauildir in the Southern Kazakhstan *oblast'* (region) and provides a description of the basic living conditions, the Soviet policies to emancipate women, and the impact of post-Soviet economic change.² Finally, the chapter discusses the development of small-scale trade as a household survival strategy, the role of women in the marketplace, and the impact of trade activities on women, their households, and their family relations.

Women, Work, and Theory

All societies have ideal gender roles that influence the activities and occupations of men and women. Although both men and women perform tasks

that contribute toward household well-being, female gender roles are typically formed around the practical realities of childbirth and child rearing. Unless alternative options exist for child care, women are responsible for tasks that are less likely to interfere with child-rearing activities. This includes domestic tasks, such as cooking food and cleaning the house, as well as tasks performed outside the household, such as gathering nuts or gardening.

Cross-cultural studies of women demonstrate that female-dominated tasks, such as child care, are rarely accorded as much prestige as male-dominated tasks, such as hunting. In modern industrial societies where individuals work for wages, income-earning "work" is valued more than unpaid "housework," men are viewed as the "primary breadwinners" in two-parent households, and the average income and prestige for occupations dominated by men is higher than those for occupations dominated by women.³

In modern societies, at least four factors influence women's prospects for wage employment. First, many societies have social norms that limit women's mobility outside the household and women's interactions with nonkin. For example, in Muslim and Asian societies where family honor is closely linked to women's behavior, women who work outside the home may compromise their family's reputation. Until recently, most Egyptian women perceived work outside the home as undesirable because it took them away from their housework, compromised their reputation, humiliated their husbands (who are expected to provide for their families), and changed the quality of their daily lives.⁴ Despite social restrictions on women's mobility in Muslim and Asian societies, women have cleverly managed to earn income without leaving the home.

For many women, earning income is less problematic than working outside the home, especially when the work is "invisible" (and thus does not diminish the importance of male wage earners) and when the work does not disrupt women's housework activities. In pre-Soviet Central Asia, women earned money by selling homemade bread, raising silkworms, sewing clothes, and trading goods. Women traders relied on their husbands or male relatives to serve as middlemen, or more rarely, a small group of women would sell goods on the edge of the bazaar.⁵ Similar situations can be found in contemporary Muslim societies. Among the Muslim Hausa of Nigeria, approximately two-thirds of the women earn money out of their homes by using their children as go-betweens to trade food, clothing, jewelry, and perfume.⁶ And in urban Turkey, working-class women sell leather and wool clothing, which they produce at home and market with the help of male relatives.⁷

Second, women's opportunities to work are constrained by the practical

issue of child care. For many jobs, including factory jobs and most office jobs, women cannot simultaneously care for their children and "work" outside the home. Some women choose to work until they marry and have children, and then again after their children reach a certain age. This has become a social norm among working-class families in Hong Kong, where unmarried daughters work in textile factories until they get married and stop working to become full-time mothers and housewives.⁸ In other contexts, women turn to family members, social networks, and day care facilities to provide child care while they work. In the Soviet context, subsidized day care encouraged women to enter the workforce, and post-Soviet structural adjustment policies have reduced these subsidies and thereby hindered women's ability to work for wages.⁹

Third, women's prospects for wage employment are affected by economic and political factors. In the United States, for example, middle-class women were encouraged to work during the World War II when there was a shortage of workers; and when the war was over, they were discouraged from working as their husbands and brothers returned home.¹⁰ In the Soviet Union, women were catapulted into the workforce to increase economic productivity *and* to fulfill ideological goals.¹¹ In other contexts, household needs, which are often affected by household composition, have a larger influence on an individual woman's decision to work than do national needs. In female-headed, single-parent households, for example, a woman is likely to seek wage employment, unless state welfare programs and/or inter-household transfers provide sufficient income for her family.

Fourth, women and households are affected by globalization. International organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, accelerate the pace of globalization by linking international aid and membership status to the reduction of price controls and other government subsidies in developing countries. Several scholars have noted how, in Egypt, these economic reforms have simultaneously raised the cost of living and brought new social attitudes toward women in the workplace.¹² By the early 1980s, large numbers of lower-class and middle-class women were starting to earn money by performing services in other people's homes and by working in factories and offices. New social attitudes do not represent a complete break from the past. When judging the appropriateness of a certain job for women, Egyptians consider whether or not a woman's honor can be protected at the workplace.¹³ To diminish concerns about their respectability, many working women have chosen to wear the veil (*hijab*) for the first time in their lives.

Throughout the world, globalization has also increased consumer desires by providing media images of alternative lifestyles and by supplying new consumer goods in local marketplaces. In Kazakhstan, for example, foreign soap operas and foreign consumer goods arrived at about the same time in the early 1990s. Although the soap operas help people imagine new material comforts and new fashions, the marketplace provides opportunities to purchase these things.¹⁴

Feminist scholars have addressed a number of issues concerning women and work. Cross-cultural studies of gender ideologies have demonstrated that much of the "work" that women perform, although vital to household maintenance, is not even regarded as work, and is therefore devalued in comparison with men's work. This includes housework in most societies, social networking activities in India, the maintenance of kinship ties in the United States, and the home production of clothing in Turkey.¹⁵

In situations where women start to work outside the home, feminist scholars are still debating whether or not wage employment improves women's lives and/or changes patriarchal gender ideologies.¹⁶ The jury is still out. In her study of working women in Hong Kong, Janet Salaff concludes that wage employment does allow women to enjoy some increased freedom and autonomy, but the benefits of wage employment are limited and temporary.¹⁷ In her study of women in the Soviet Union, Mary Buckley explains how the state went to great lengths to change attitudes toward working women and to increase women's participation in the workforce but did little to change gender relations at home. Thus, Buckley argues that Soviet women were stuck with the "double burden" of doing all the housework *and* working long hours outside the home.¹⁸

It is somewhat surprising that there have been so few anthropological studies of market women, because they can be found in so many different cultural settings.¹⁹ Market women provide an interesting case for addressing theoretical issues concerning women and work because their work is highly visible, fairly entrepreneurial, and relatively flexible when it comes to child care issues. In her study of women and development, Ester Boserup includes a fascinating cross-cultural look at market women.²⁰ She finds that women are not very active traders in the Middle East, especially in comparison with Africa and Latin America.²¹ As she notes, "In no other field do ideas about the proper role of women contrast more vividly than in the case of market trade."²²

Although trade may be viewed as inappropriate work for women in many Muslim societies, it is just as likely to be viewed as such for men in other

societies. In many (non-Muslim) Southeast Asian societies, for example, the traits of frugality and aggressiveness that are required for successful marketing are perceived to be undesirable in men yet admirable in women.²³ In the present study of market women in Kazakhstan, women are simply perceived to have better trading skills.

Fieldwork in Shauildir Village

This study of merchant women is based on ethnographic research in Shauildir village in Southern Kazakhstan *oblast'*, approximately 180 kilometers northwest of the city of Shymkent. More than 96 percent of the 8,300 residents of Shauildir are Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs.²⁴ Since 1930, Shauildir has served as the administrative center for Otyrar *raion* (district), which specializes in the husbandry of coat-producing Astrakhan sheep. As an administrative center, Shauildir has more government buildings, small enterprises, schools, and hospitals than the typical village, and thus it provides more diverse employment opportunities.²⁵

Most Shauildir residents live in permanent single-family houses made with mud-brick walls, wooden floors, and corrugated tin roofs.²⁶ For decades, the households of Shauildir have pursued complex strategies to make ends meet. Most households have combined the wages of at least one state employee with the domestic production of vegetables and livestock.²⁷

I lived with a Kazakh family in Shauildir while conducting doctoral research in 1994 and 1995, and then I returned for several additional months of research in 1998, 2000, and 2001. While conducting a survey of 100 households, including 25 "merchant" households, I became interested in market women and the ways in which their trade activities affect their family lives and gender roles. Most of the data for this chapter were collected during the summer of 1998, at which time I interviewed eighteen market women in Shauildir.

In the summer of 2001, I conducted follow-up interviews with twelve merchants, including several of the women interviewed in 1998. Some of the merchants interviewed for this study worked in the local bazaars; others sold goods in small street stands or in independent shops and kiosks. Most of the women interviewed for this study work in local marketplaces. Their experiences differ from those of migratory merchant women who regularly sell goods in large urban markets and then send wage remittances home to their village families.²⁸

Women's Lives in Shauildir

To explain how trade affects women's lives, it is important to present a picture of women's lives in Shauildir. The recent expansion of market trade is clearly a post-Soviet phenomenon. However, the mobility and freedom that Kazakh women now enjoy should be viewed as an important legacy of Soviet rule. Before the Soviet era, Kazakh women did not receive any formal education, they did not work outside of the home, and their marriages were arranged by their parents. Kazakh society corresponded to Deniz Kandiyoti's notion of "classic patriarchy," which she defined as a situation in which women live in patrilocally extended households where they are subordinate both to all the men *and* the more senior women.²⁹

Beginning in the late 1920s, the Soviet state made a zealous attempt to "emancipate" Central Asian women by providing education and employment opportunities. In her study of rural Uzbek women, Elizabeth Constantine argues that Soviet policies were relatively effective in changing women's status *and* women's expectations.³⁰ Similar observation can be made for the village of Shauildir. With very few exceptions, women under the age of 50 years have completed high school or technical school (*teknikum*).

According to the 1989 census, 48 percent of the women working in Otyrar *raion* had completed high school (as their highest achievement), 25 percent had completed a technical school, and 13 percent had completed an institute of higher education. All education is coeducational, so young Kazakh girls have plenty of social interaction with nonrelated boys. Employment outside of the home is also very common. In 1992, 89.9 percent of the working-age women in Shauildir were employed in the public sector (including those on maternity leave), and women represented 48.5 percent of the workforce in Shauildir.³¹

Although women frequently work outside of the household, their domestic responsibilities reflect more "traditional" gender roles. From the age of 5 or 6 years, girls are socialized to help with the housework. Women's household chores include a number of daily tasks: caring for children, preparing meals, serving tea to guests, cleaning the house, washing clothes, arranging the daily bedding, milking cows and horses, working in the household garden, and assisting men with the care of domestic livestock. Many women also bake their own bread, prepare a variety of dairy products, and sew clothes for their family.

Meanwhile, men also perform several household tasks. They take care of the domestic livestock, the help out with the garden work, and they help

with child care. In comparison with men, women have very little leisure time at home. To complete their household chores, many women rely on the help of their children and their daughters-in-law. For children, the boundaries between "female" and "male" household chores is much more flexible. With the exception of preparing food and washing clothes, boys are known to help out with household chores, especially in households that have a shortage of female labor. The expectations for boys' help, however, is lower than that for girls' help.

Women also work hard to maintain household networks by serving guests, helping others serve guests, and preparing gifts for various occasions. With hospitality as one of the central elements of Kazakh culture, households frequently host dinner parties to socialize with friends, and they occasionally sponsor large feasts to celebrate new marriages and male circumcision.³² These events are enjoyed by women, yet they also burden women with additional responsibilities. Gift exchange is another aspect of women's role in household networking. Different occasions call for different gifts, and women are responsible for selecting and presenting most gifts on behalf of their household.³³

Concerning marriage, Kazakh women have more control over the selection of spouses than they did in pre-Soviet times, though this freedom has been on the decline during the past decade with the rise of nonconsensual bride kidnappings. In the 1990s, in Southern Kazakhstan *oblast'*, approximately 60 percent of surveyed couples were married through the practice of bride kidnapping, and of those, nearly 20 percent involved minimal consent from the bride.³⁴ Although some brides are kidnapped with their consent, others are kidnapped with neither their prior knowledge nor consent.³⁵

In addition to bride kidnapping, some couples are married through what is being called an "arranged marriage," a tradition that is being revived and recreated in the post-Soviet period. Today, arranged marriages are frequently initiated by young couples yet formally arranged by consenting parents. With few exceptions, marriages take place only after the bride and the groom have finished high school. Village girls typically marry between the ages of 17 and 22 years; boys marry at slightly later ages. Depending on household priorities and family resources, women may or may not live with their husband's parents after marriage.³⁶

Upon marriage, a woman takes on several new social roles. In addition to becoming a wife (*ayeil*) and an eventual mother (*sheshe*), a married woman becomes a daughter-in-law (*kelin*). A good *kelin* is expected to respect her in-laws by providing unpaid household services for them. The expectations

for daughters-in-law are higher if they are "in hand" (i.e., living in the same household). Nevertheless, expectations exist whether or not the young couple lives with the groom's parents. Further, the English term "daughter-in-law" is somewhat misleading because the social role of a *kelin* is not limited to a woman's relationship with her husband's parents. In other words, the services of a *kelin* can be requested by other relatives on her husband's side. For example, a woman may "invite" her husband's brother's *kelin* to come help her prepare food for guests or to perform other tasks.

This portrayal of women's lives in Shauldir is far from complete, but it should provide some background for understanding the position of market women in Shauldir. The following section describes how village lives have been transformed by post-Soviet changes.

Poverty and the Post-Soviet Economy

Shortly after independence was achieved in December 1991, the leaders of 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 adjustment reform program. The structural 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.

Similar policies were launched throughout other countries of the former Soviet Union as a "shock therapy" approach to economic transition.³⁷ Although these policies are intended to increase a country's gross domestic product by reducing governmental expenses and liberalizing the economy, they often have the unintended consequence of increasing poverty, especially among women.³⁸

Structural adjustment policies have had a definite impact on Shauldir, not unlike other rural communities throughout the former Soviet Union. There has been a sharp decline in the average standard of living, and there is a growing disparity between wealthy and poor households. Throughout the 1990s, villagers complained about extremely high inflation, increased unemployment, and reduced state income. With the dissolution of several prominent state-owned enterprises in the region, including the state farms, the nurseries, and the bread factory, many villagers lost their regular source of income. Until the late 1990s, those still employed by the remaining state-

owned enterprises were often paid 6 to 8 months behind schedule. With rising costs, these salaries rarely provide enough to offset basic expenses for food, clothing, and energy.

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), women lost more jobs during the initial transition years.³⁹ Second, as Tatiana Zhurzhenko explains in chapter 1 of this volume, the post-Soviet state has terminated its social contract with women and transferred the costs of social reproduction to households. In Kazakhstan, this is vividly illustrated by cutbacks to the heavily subsidized day care programs.⁴⁰ As a result, working women have to become more dependent on social networks for child care and/or find jobs, such as trading, that allow them to bring their children to the workplace.⁴¹

Kazakh households in Shauldir have developed new strategies to cope with these new post-Soviet strains on household economies. Before the transition, most 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. Similar to the Viliui Sakha described by Susan Crate in chapter 6 of this volume, most Kazakh households have increased the production of food for domestic consumption in the post-Soviet period.

In addition, many households have turned to new sources of income from private farming, handicraft production, or small-scale trade. Both men and women have become more entrepreneurial. Though men may earn money as videographers at wedding feasts or truck drivers for private livestock sale, women may earn money as seamstresses or weavers. Small-scale trade, the focus of this chapter, is an entrepreneurial activity pursued by both men and women.⁴²

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 most goods. Although small neighborhood and village bazaars did operate in the past, they were primarily limited to fresh produce, livestock, and secondhand goods. There was also an active "black market" for coveted goods, including banned imports. Anyone who was involved in the black market trade was either

profiting at the expense of the state or illegally selling goods from abroad. In contrast, many Kazakhs today view small-scale trade as one of their most viable options for survival.⁴³

In rural areas, this is especially true for the towns and villages that have central marketplaces and easy access to railways and larger cities. For these reasons, Shauldir is ideally situated. As an administrative region, there were already two semiweekly, state-run bazaars in place, one specializing in livestock and one in food products and household goods. A third privately owned daily bazaar was opened in 1994 to accommodate the increased volume of trade. Shauldir also benefits from its relative proximity to several cities with large trade centers. Turkestan, Shymkent, and Tashkent are 2, 3, and 6 hours away by bus or train.

Because the marketplace attracts individuals from various backgrounds, it is somewhat difficult to characterize the new class of village merchants. Some of them are displaced shopkeepers with sales experience, whereas others are displaced workers from other fields, such as nursing and teaching. In Shauldir, one can find merchants in three local bazaars, dozens of independent kiosks, and numerous street corners. Some merchants work daily, and 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, and others exclusively buy and resell consumer goods. Most village traders buy goods in nearby cities within Kazakhstan, but a few travel across national borders to buy goods in Uzbekistan or Iran.

With the exception of the semiweekly livestock bazaar, which is dominated by men, women outnumber men in the local marketplace, especially when it comes to older and elderly merchants. On one day in 1998, I counted seventy-five merchants working in the daily bazaar where food products, clothing, and household goods can be purchased. Fifty-six percent of them were adult women, 16 percent were girls, 19 percent were adult men, and 9 percent were boys. Although merchants typically specialize in either food or clothing, most merchants sell a variety of goods. 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. Unlike some marketplaces, the merchants are not organized into any association or organization. Prices are set informally by each trader, depending on initial cost, local availability, and local demand. Though merchants do not work together to establish prices, they

do cooperate informally, for example, by watching a neighboring merchant's goods while she runs an errand.

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, especially during the early transition years.⁴⁴ Alternative, cultural explanations for women's dominance in the marketplace emerge in interviews with both men and women. According to some informants, Kazakh men just do not handle money as well as women. They are more capricious when it comes to cash, either spending it on alcohol or loaning it to undeserving friends. They say that this is why women usually manage the household income and why women belong in the marketplace. From their perspective, men simply do not have the patience to sit at the bazaar for long hours. Some explain this lack of patience in connection with the "fact" that men are better suited for "hard" manual work, and others suggest that men are just too lazy to sit at the bazaar.

One female informant believes that Kazakh men simply do not have the ability to be aggressive or pushy with customers: "You can't sell things without talking to your customers. You need to say something to get people to look at your goods and you must be able to convince customers that a product has certain desirable features. The men who work in the bazaar can't do this as well as the women." Some of my informants provide another explanation for why there are fewer men in the bazaar. They explained that men are involved with bazaar trade, but they work behind the scenes doing the tasks that require less time but more physical effort. For example, in some family-run operations, the men go to buy goods in other bazaars and they help carry goods to the marketplace, while the women sit in the bazaar and sell things.

Case Studies of Merchant Women and Their Businesses

Portrayals of four merchant women are presented here to explore the nature and dynamics of the bazaar trade in Shauldir. The first, "Zhanar," a 56-year-old wife and mother of four, provides an example of a full-time merchant woman who has expanded her business as a way to compensate for reduced income in the post-Soviet period. She sells a small assortment of home-produced and retail goods in front of the central bazaar. She was trained as a nurse, and she is now on an extended maternity leave from the local hos-

pital, where she is still officially employed. She started working as a merchant in the Shauldir bazaar in 1995 with the sale of homemade dumplings.

For a while, Zhanar received a lot of business from local offices that would contract her services for special events, such as birthday parties and holidays. By 1997, local organizations could no longer afford such luxuries. Now her business is limited to the sale of eggs, candy, soap, socks, tea, and *kozha* (a chilled drink made by boiling corn, sour cream, and other ingredients). She produces the *kozha* herself and buys the eggs from a neighboring family, but the other goods come from the nearby city of Turkestan.

Because 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 7 days a week, unless she has a social obligation, in which case one of her older children will sit at the bazaar for her. In comparison with other merchants, her expenses are relatively low. She has no transportation costs because 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 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 her business is successful, although her profits only cover a small percentage of her household expenses.

The second woman, "Gulnara," a 55-year-old mother of eight, provides an example of a temporary merchant woman who turned to trade to pay for unplanned expenses. She works full time as a schoolteacher and part time as a merchant. In addition to receiving her income from the school and her husband's income from the Department of Culture, her family manages to save money by producing its own fruit and vegetables. Gulnara started to engage in trade shortly after her first daughter eloped with her boyfriend in 1994 and the family found themselves unprepared to pay for all of the gift and dowry expenses.

Following the lead of neighbors, Gulnara decided to try her luck selling things at the bazaar. In her first effort, she bought a sheep in town and she had her husband slaughter it. Then she got on an overnight train to Tashkent, where she sold the meat in the central bazaar. In one day, she managed to make about \$10. This amount represented one-quarter of her monthly salary, a salary she had not received for several months due to government delays. The profits were great, but the work was difficult and time consuming, so 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 recruited her teenage daughters to sell these items in the town bazaar, while she continued to work in the school.

Gulnara's profits, however, were only trickling in. So she eventually 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 friends and relatives and then used this capital and reliance on informal exchanges of knowledge to buy goods that were known to sell at favorable prices in these distant bazaars. 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 (about \$25). Her participation in the bazaar economy ended after her daughter's wedding.

The third woman, "Raikhan," a 66-year-old wife and mother of six, provides an example of an elderly merchant woman who makes a vital contribution to her household's income by working as a merchant. She sells a wide array of goods 7 days a week from an isolated stand that is situated across the main street from the central bazaar in Shauildir. For decades, she was a full-time mother and housewife. She started her business in 1995 by selling rice in the bazaar. By 1998, her business had expanded to include tea, preserved fruit, 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 everyday. 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," which means that she can pass much of the housework off 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 (used to heat houses in the winter), two of the most crucial expenses for basic survival.

The fourth woman, "Maira," a 17-year-old girl, provides an example of a younger girl who works together with her mother in the local bazaar. She sells fruit, vegetables, and toys with her mother in the daily bazaar.⁴⁵ As an

unmarried girl, she still lives with her parents and siblings, where she helps with household chores. She has been working with her mother as a merchant for 2 years. Her mother goes to Shymkent or Turkestan twice a week to buy products, while Maira sells things 7 days a week in the village 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. Because both of her parents are now unemployed, the only source of household income is the profit from market trade. Her family manages to reduce household expenses by producing some vegetables, but they no longer provide their own meat because they gradually slaughtered all their livestock for food and cash.

The Impact of Trade on Women and Their Families

Taken together, the stories of these four merchant women illustrate the nature and scope of small-scale trade in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Each of these merchant women is bringing in significant amounts of income, which they generally contribute to the household pool. All of the women with whom I spoke started their businesses because their household needed more money for basic survival. Some households rely exclusively on the income derived from small-scale trade, whereas 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.

I turn now to 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. Scholars in the field have examined the extent to which wage employment improves women's position within the household and transforms patriarchal gender roles.⁴⁶ As these researchers 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, the majority of merchant women rely on other household members to help them with their work. Their husbands and children provide assistance in purchasing, transporting and selling 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 three 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 have fewer social contacts. In contrast, merchant women are anything but isolated. During nonpeak hours, there is plenty of time to catch up on gossip with other merchants and their customers.

A second perceived benefit is that merchant women have fewer responsibilities at home because of their responsibilities at work. This is also the case for women who are employed in other sectors, 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 child care. Though non-adult sons are unlikely to perform certain "female" tasks, they do help with child care and general housecleaning. Adult men, however, are much less willing to cross these gender boundaries, even if they are completely unoccupied with other tasks and there is no one else to do these things.

Third, 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 gain social capital from their firsthand knowledge of distant places. Even those who do not travel so far can benefit socially from their knowledge of and frequent access to consumer markets in nearby cities. For example, merchant women often have the opportunity to gain social credits by purchasing consumer goods for their nonmerchant friends and relatives. Depending on the relationship, they may provide these goods at reduced or no cost. Because merchant women have less time to devote to these traditional exchanges, supplying friends with consumer goods provides them with an 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 the home, this trade can have negative effects on children,

who may receive less supervision, and on marital relations, which may become strained. To illustrate both of these social costs, I will now turn to the case of Jazira, a 35-year-old mother of four.

Jazira started to engage in small-scale trade when her household lost its primary source of income due to the dissolution of the state farm. After earning small profits for a few months, Jazira decided to move temporarily to Almaty, where she could earn greater profits. Although Almaty was a 12-hour train ride away, she made arrangements to share an inexpensive apartment with friends who were also involved in trade. Her husband and her in-laws were not sure if this was a good idea, but her mother-in-law agreed to take care of her grandchildren.⁴⁷ Every few weeks, Jazira returned to the village to visit her family and to bring home a portion of her profits. Then, one day, 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 Jazira retold these events, she insisted that the accusation was a lie and that she pursued a divorce because she refused to live with a man who did not trust her and who beat her after hearing such a rumor.⁴⁸ This example demonstrates that the costs of trade, most notably the time away from the family, occasionally outweigh the perceived benefits, such as the exciting social atmosphere, reduced responsibilities at home, and the opportunity to travel outside the village.

Conclusion

In the post-Soviet period, the number of Kazakh merchant women has increased dramatically. Most have been catapulted into the marketplace due to the rising cost of living. Some market women have lost their public sector jobs; others combine public sector employment with trade. In addition to providing income for food and clothing, some women turn to trade in order to afford household networking activities, such as the exchange of gifts and the entertaining of guests.

There is no single demographic characteristic that defines Kazakh market women; the market is filled with young and old, married and unmarried, rich and poor. Some women manage to make large profits, but others barely break even. In Kazakhstan, the trade in certain goods (cloth, clothing, and packaged goods) is dominated by women. Although men are reluctant to

sell these goods in the bazaar, they do help their wives and mothers by providing transportation and purchasing goods in other bazaars.

Despite traditional values that limit women's mobility, the idea of Kazakh women in the marketplace is not so farfetched given Soviet policies to emancipate women. As the result of Soviet emancipation campaigns in Central Asia, Kazakh women have already been visible in the workplace for decades. However, compared with other occupations, market women do put themselves in slightly compromising positions by traveling to other cities to buy goods. One of the ways they mitigate this potential problem is to travel in small groups, or to travel with male relatives.

Finally, the impact of the New Silk Road trade on women and their families varies greatly. The benefits for women include greater social interaction, reduced household chores, and increased physical mobility. In some families, the cost of trade extends as far as family dissolution. For most families, however, 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. As market women continue to occupy a central position in the marketplace, future researchers might want to consider the long-term impact of this work on gender relations within the household, on the extent to which women's income contributes to overall income, and on the degree to which this work is redefined as women's work.

Notes

1. The Silk Road Trade decreased in the fifteenth century, when the decline of the Mongol empire brought political instability to the region and technological advances in shipbuilding encouraged alternative routes.
2. In previous publications, I have referred to this village with the pseudonym "Kyzylkum." I now use its actual name, Shauldir.
3. Nancy Bonvillain, *Women and Men: Cultural Constructions of Gender*, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 1-12, 160-76.
4. Andrea Rugh, "Women and Work: Strategies and Choices in a Lower-Class Quarter of Cairo," in *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*, ed. Elizabeth Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).
5. Vladimir Petrovich Nalivkina and M. Nalivkina, *Ocherk bita zhenscheni osedlogo tuzemnago nacelniia fergani* [Essay on the daily life of the women of the settled indigenous population of Ferghana] (Kazan: Tipografiia Imperatorskago Universita, 1886), 110-12. I would like to thank Elizabeth Constantine for referring me to this source.
6. Catherine VerEecke, "Muslim Women Traders of Northern Nigeria: Perspectives from the City of Yola," *Ethnology* 3 (fall 1993): 217-36.

7. Jenny White, *Money Makes Us Relatives: Women's Labor in Urban Turkey* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

8. Janet W. Salaff, *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

9. This is one of the factors that affects the lives of working women in the Former Soviet Union. See Jeni Klugman, Sheila Marnie, John Micklewright, and Philip O'Keefe, "The Impact of Kindergarten Divestiture on Household Welfare in Central Asia," in *Household Welfare in Central Asia*, ed. Jane Falkingham, Jeni Klugman, Sheila Marnie, and John Micklewright (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1997).

10. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

11. Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989).

12. Rugh, "Women and Work"; Arlene MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Homa Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

13. Rugh, "Women and Work," 282-83.

14. In a recent article, Kathleen Kuehnast examines how these new global images and market opportunities affect the identities and attitudes of young Kyrgyz women. See Kuehnast, "From Pioneers to Entrepreneurs: Young Women, Consumerism, and the 'World Picture' in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 4 (December 1998): 639-54.

15. Ursula Sharma, *Women's Work, Class, and the Urban Household: A Study of Shimla, North India* (London: Tavistock Press, 1986); Micaela di Leonardo, "The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship," in *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, ed. Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltis Garey (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); White, *Money Makes Us Relatives*.

16. Salaff, *Working Daughters*; Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market*; Diane Wolf, *Factory Daughters: Gender, Household Dynamics, and Rural Industrialization in Java* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

17. Because parents control the bulk of their daughters' income and working daughters return to subordinate positions upon marriage, Salaff argues that women's participation in wage employment has not changed patriarchal gender relations in any fundamental way. See Salaff, *Working Daughters*.

18. Buckley, *Women and Ideology*.

19. Gracia Clark's study of market women in Ghana and Florence Babb's study of market women in Peru represent two of the more detailed case studies in anthropology. Gracia Clark, *Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Florence Babb, *Between Field and Cooking Pot: The Political Economy of Marketwomen in Peru*, rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). A recent volume, edited by Linda Seligmann, provides additional resources for studying women traders; see Seligmann, ed., *Women Traders in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Mediating Identities, Marketing Wares* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

20. Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1970).

21. In Ghana, the country with the highest percent of women traders, women represent 80 percent of all workers in trade and commerce. In comparison, the proportion of

traders who are women is 1 percent in Turkey, 2 percent in Iraq, 18 percent in Hong Kong, 13 percent in Taiwan, 29 percent in Mexico, 56 percent in Thailand, 59 percent in Nicaragua, and 65 percent in Jamaica.

22. Boserup, *Women's Role*, 87.

23. Robert Hefner, *Market Cultures: Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 24; Boserup, *Women's Role*, 92. Hefner's volume shows that these perceptions of male market activity are changing in some regions of Southeast Asia.

24. This is high compared with the national average in Kazakhstan of about 50 percent Kazakhs, many of whom do not speak Kazakh well. The minority ethnic groups include Russians, Tatars, and Uzbeks.

25. Shauldir has several administration buildings, a post office, a police station, a fire station, a library, a pharmacy, three 10-year schools, two specialty schools (for sports and music), two nurseries, a technical institute, a central department store, a produce bazaar, a livestock bazaar, several bread and vegetables shops, a bread factory, an all-purpose hospital, a tuberculosis hospital, two museums (for history and literature), a cultural palace (with a large auditorium), a movie theatre, a hotel, and several restaurants.

26. Basic living conditions vary from household to household. A typical house has four to six rooms, including an indoor kitchen, a wide hallway, and a formal guestroom. Most houses are situated within a fenced compound that typically include livestock and poultry pens, a vegetable garden, an outdoor kitchen, one or more wooden platforms (for sleeping and eating outside during the hot summer months), an outhouse, and a bathroom. The homes have electricity but no running water. Some homes have telephones. A small percentage of families live in the two-story apartment buildings that line the central village roads.

27. Throughout rural Kazakhstan, livestock and poultry have been an important indicator of household wealth and well-being. In addition to providing food, livestock can be sold for cash and exchanged in the gift economy. At the end of 1993, the average household in Otyrar *raion* had 8.73 privately owned sheep and goats, 1.45 cows, 0.33 horses, 0.03 camels, and 5.82 chickens. The average vegetable garden consists of tomatoes, cucumbers, green onions, peppers, and eggplant. Some households also produce grapes, apples, and melons.

28. I approached all of the women in the workplace, and asked them if they would be willing to answer some questions about their work. A few women declined to be interviewed, including one woman who belligerently asked how she could possibly benefit from the study. The majority of women I approached were more than willing to help me with my research. I quickly learned that they were much more willing to talk to me during the weekdays, when the mornings and afternoons passed slowly with little trade activity. During each interview, I asked the women to describe how and why they started their businesses, how they deal with the costs and difficulties associated with trade, who helps them with their market activities, and how their work affects their family life.

29. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," in *The Women, Gender, and Development Reader*, ed. Nalini Visvanathan, Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff, and Nan Wiegiersma (London: Zed Books, 1997).

30. Elizabeth Constantine, "Public Discourse and Private Lives: Uzbek Women under Soviet Rule," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2001.

31. Women dominate the occupations of day care workers, bread factory workers, state shopkeepers, secretaries, nurses, and janitors. Meanwhile, both men and women

work as doctors, teachers, economists, state farm employees, shepherds, and cultural palace employees and performers. Finally, there are a few positions that rarely if ever are filled by women in Shauldir: policeman, fireman, state farm administrator, and village administrator (at the highest level).

32. With few exceptions (such as funerals), Kazakh social events are not gender segregated. Men and women sit together and women actively participate in the conversation and toasting.

33. Gift exchange may seem like a trivial task, but it is not when one considers the number of gifting occasions and the financial constraints on household budgets. See Werner, "Household Networks and the Security of Mutual Indebtedness in Rural Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 4 (December 1998): 597-612.

34. For more information on bride kidnapping, see Werner, "Women, Marriage, and the Nation-State: The Rise of Non-Consensual Bride Kidnapping in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," in *Reconceptualizing Central Asia: States and Societies in Formation*, ed. Pauline Jones Luong and John Schoberlein (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003). In this paper, I argue that nonconsensual bride kidnapping has been on the rise since the late 1980s because young men have less financial security to offer potential mates. In addition, men do not fear legal repercussions in the context of post-Soviet nation building, which emphasizes the re-traditionalization of Kazakh women. Chapters 1 and 2 of this volume by, respectively, Tatiana Zhurzhenko and Katherine Graney similarly discuss the re-traditionalization of women. For a comparative case of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, see Russell Kleinbach and Sarah Amsler, "Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan," *International Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4 (1999): 185-216.

35. In the middle, there are bride kidnapping cases that involve the boy's perception of *implicit* consent from the bride. E.g., a girl may express interest in a boy either by going on dates with him or appearing to be interested; although the boy senses that the girl might want to marry him and he gets the approval of his parents, he does not ask her if she wants to marry him and he does not announce when he plans to kidnap her.

36. Most families prefer to have at least one daughter-in-law at home, but in households with many sons, families prefer to limit the number of sons living at home.

37. For a critique of these policies and the role of international development agencies, see Janine Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1998).

38. Lourdes Benería and Shelly Feldman, eds., *Unequal Burden. Economic Crisis, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

39. Between 1990 and 1994, the number of jobs occupied by women decreased by 22.7 percent, compared with 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. See Armin Bauer, Nina Boschmann, and David Green, *Women and Gender Relations in Kazakhstan* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1997).

40. From 1989 to 1994, the total enrollment in Kazakhstan's nurseries has declined from 52 to 28 percent of preschool children. See Klugman et al., "Impact of Kindergarten Divestiture," 188.

41. Zoya Khotkina's work provides a parallel account of how the transition to a market economy has affected Russian women. Zoya Khotkina, "Women in the Labour Market: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," in *Women in Russia: A New Era in Russian Feminism*, ed. Anastasia Posadskaya (London: Verso Press, 1994).

42. Chapter 8 of this volume by Ludmilla Popkova mentions that the percentage of women in politics decreases as the level of power increases. The same can be said for women in trade—women are active traders in local bazaars, but there are few women who own large-scale trade businesses.

43. This phenomenon is not limited to rural Kazakhstan. For a discussion of woman entrepreneurs in urban Kazakhstan, see Bauer et al., *Women and Gender Relations*, 35–42. For Ukraine, see Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Gender and Identity Formation in Post-Socialist Ukraine: The Case of Women in the Shuttle Business,” in *Feminist Fields: Ethnographic Insights*, ed. Rae Anderson, Sally Cole, and Heather Howard-Bobiwash (Orchard Park, N.Y.: Broadview Press, 1999). For Siberia, see Alexia Bloch, “Global Capitalism and Fallen Socialists: Women Traders Reflect on New Meanings Around ‘Work’ in Russia,” paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., November 28–December 2, 2001.

44. Bauer et al., *Women and Gender Relations*, 21–28.

45. I use the word “girl” rather than “woman” here in accord with Kazakh usage where the word for girl is used to describe all unmarried females, regardless of age.

46. Salaff, *Working Daughters*; Wolf, *Factory Daughters*; Hoodfar, *Between Market and Family*; White, *Money Makes Us Relatives*.

47. This was not out of line with Kazakh cultural norms, whereby parents frequently rely on grandparents and other relatives for long-term child care.

48. She 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 school-age child, because the cost of day care 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.