

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Unequal Burdens of Repatriation: A Gendered View of the Transnational Migration of Mongolia's Kazakh Population

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**ABSTRACT** Beginning in 1992, the newly independent government of Kazakhstan has facilitated the in-migration of 944,000 Kazakhs from neighboring countries, with the majority migrating as family units. Using the post-Soviet repatriation of Kazakhs as an example, we illustrate in this article how socially constituted notions about gender and kinship help reinforce institutional and informal power structures that favor men at three different points in the migration process: in making the decision to migrate, in dealing with the bureaucratic aspects of migration, and in facing the consequences of migration. First, patriarchal power dynamics often mean that women have less influence than men on the decision to migrate. Second, the legal framework for repatriation is based on an implicit assumption that Kazakh households correspond to a patriarchal model, and this has financial consequences for women. Third, transnational migration widens the physical separations from natal kin that women already experience due to Kazakh kinship practices that emphasize patrilineal descent, clan-based exogamy, and patrilocal marriage. [*gender, migration, kinship, transnational, Central Asia*]

**RESUMEN** Empezando en 1992, el nuevo gobierno independiente de Kazajstán ha facilitado la in-migración de 944.000 kazajos de países vecinos, con la mayoría migrando como unidades familiares. Usando la repatriación postsoviética de kazajos como un ejemplo, ilustramos en este artículo cómo nociones socialmente constituidas sobre género y parentesco ayudan a reforzar estructuras institucionales e informales de poder que favorecen a los hombres en tres puntos diferentes del proceso de migración: en tomar la decisión para migrar, en hacer frente a los aspectos burocráticos de la migración, y en enfrentar las consecuencias de la migración. Primero, la dinámica de poder patriarcal a menudo significa que las mujeres tienen menos influencia que los hombres sobre la decisión de migrar. Segundo, el marco legal para la repatriación se basa en una asunción implícita que los hogares kazajos corresponden a un modelo patriarcal y esto tiene consecuencias financieras para las mujeres. Tercero, la migración transnacional amplía las separaciones físicas de los parientes natales que las mujeres ya sufren debido a las prácticas de parentesco Kazajo que enfatiza el linaje patrilineal, la exogamia basada en clan, y el matrimonio patrilocal. [*género, migración, parentesco, transnacional, Asia Central*]

In 2008, we were sipping tea in Mongolia with Damira, a 48-year-old Kazakh woman who was married to a prominent local businessman.<sup>1</sup> She and her husband enjoyed a relatively high standard of living in the town of Ulgii, as

evidenced by their spacious two-story home and a newly purchased Land Cruiser. At the time of our conversation, Damira had recently returned from a furniture-shopping trip to western China, another sign of the family's relative

wealth. Her family had clearly benefitted economically from postsocialist economic changes, so we were somewhat surprised to hear her express great sadness as she replied to our question about her family's overall experience with post-socialism: "I'm all alone here" (conversation with authors, June 16, 2008). The poignancy of her statement was clear as we knew she had recently had a conflict with her husband. Rather than relying on her own kin as she worked through the conflict, she spent a few days at a friend's house. After all, Damira's male and female siblings had all migrated to Kazakhstan in the early 1990s, when the local economy in western Mongolia was in a state of chaos due to the breakup of the Soviet Union, the disruption of regional trade routes, and the dismantling of the socialist system in Mongolia. Her siblings and parents took advantage of a repatriation program introduced by the newly independent government of Kazakhstan that facilitated the return migration of ethnic Kazakhs from around the world by providing free transportation, free housing, job opportunities, and other benefits (Barcus and Werner 2007, 2010; Diener 2009).

Damira explained how the separation from her kin was especially hard when her mother died in Kazakhstan in 1998. She told us that she had really wanted to migrate with her siblings in the early 1990s, but her husband Nurbek was reluctant to leave. In contrast to her siblings, Nurbek and his younger brothers all decided to stay in Mongolia. Of his ten siblings, only two sisters lived in Kazakhstan, having moved there with their husbands' kin groups. With a Russian education and an entrepreneurial spirit, Nurbek chose to cope with the postsocialist economic crisis by buying consumer goods in Russia and then selling them in Ulgii. Although western Mongolia can be described as a remote region of a remote country, the town of Ulgii is situated near borders with the Xinjiang province of China and the Altai province of Russia, and thus it serves as a bustling trade center between these two major countries (see Figure 1). Today, Nurbek and Damira control a large share of a basic food commodity that they purchase in Russia and distribute throughout Bayan-Ulgii province.

Through their financial success, Nurbek and Damira have strengthened their roots in Mongolia, and this makes it highly unlikely that Damira will ever live near her natal kin, who themselves are now comfortably established as teachers and traders in Kazakhstan. Although Damira doubts that she would ever migrate to Kazakhstan, she is fortunate to have the financial ability to visit her kin in Kazakhstan on a regular basis and thus maintain strong transnational linkages.

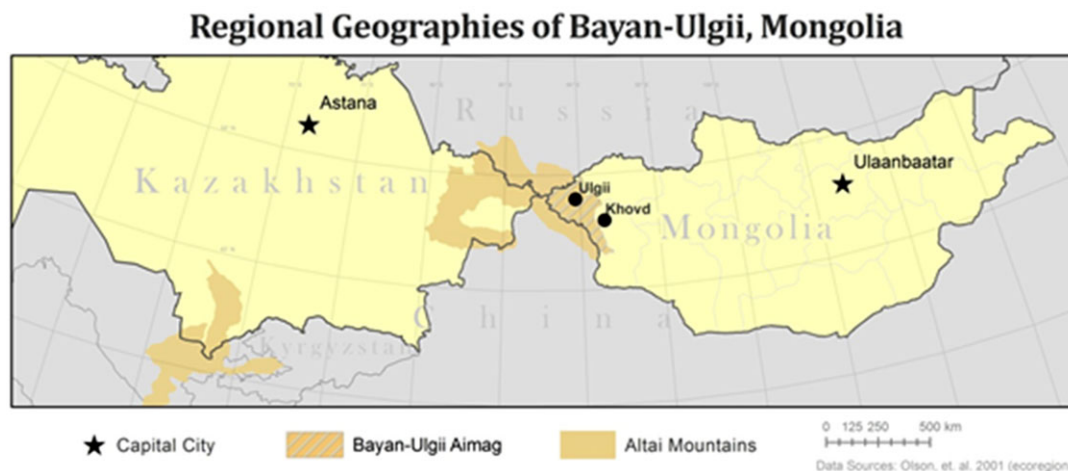
Damira's story is representative of larger gendered patterns associated with the repatriation program. Not only do Kazakh women typically have less influence than men in decisions about migration due to patriarchal power dynamics, they are also more likely than men to experience significant geographical separations from kin because migration flows are shaped by two key principles of Kazakh kinship: patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence. This means that women often migrate and settle with their husband's kin group,

leaving their own kin group behind. In this article, we build on previous scholarship that demonstrates that "gender matters" when it comes to migration (Jones 2008; Mahler and Pessar 2006). This is most obvious in contexts in which migration is dominated by one gender, but gender also matters in contexts like this, where women and men are migrating together as family units. Luin Goldring (2001), for example, argues that Mexican migrant men have privileged access to transnational social spaces, such as transmigrant organizations, and this allows them to practice forms of citizenship that enhance their social status relative to the women who migrate with them.

With this article, we add to the existing literature by illustrating how the transnational migration of Mongolia's Kazakh population is placing unequal burdens on Kazakh women along multiple points in the process of migration, including when making the decision to migrate, in dealing with the bureaucratic aspects of migration, and in facing the consequences of migration. Socially constituted notions about gender and kinship help reinforce institutional and informal power structures that favor men along each of these three points in the migration process. First, gendered power relations within households and larger family units limit the extent to which women are able to influence migration decisions. Second, women in male-headed households can be disadvantaged financially because the household head collects repatriation benefits on behalf of the household. Finally, women are more likely than men to experience significant geographical separations from kin due to cultural preferences for clan-based exogamy and patrilocal residence, and women are likely to spend more money than men on transnational visits because of gendered expectations about gift giving. By examining these different aspects of migration, we here illustrate the value of integrating gender and kinship more fully into a critical analysis of transnational migration.

## **TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND GENDER**

Stephen Castles and Mark Miller (2009) view the expansion of the global economy as a primary driver for what they refer to as the "age of migration," in which international migration is increasingly affecting all countries of the world as either sending or receiving countries. The interdisciplinary literature on international migration has become increasingly focused on the economic, cultural, and political impacts of transnational migration (see, e.g., Basch et al. 1994; Brettell 2002; Glick-Schiller et al. 1995; Kearney 1995; Levitt and Waters 2002; Trager 2005). Transnational migration leads to "dispersed family networks" (Trager 1988:182), as international migrants retain strong ties to their homeland and develop hybridized or "transnational" social identities (Diener 2009). Migrants call upon their kin networks in the receiving country to find employment, navigate new bureaucracies, and cope with local differences (Massey et al. 1994) while maintaining ties with kin in their home country through remittances, phone calls, and visits (Basch et al. 1994:4–8).



**FIGURE 1.** *Regional Geographies of Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia.* (Map by Holly Barcus)

These aspects of transnational migration can be viewed through the lens of gender, as gender is an important part of individual identity that defines, constrains, and expands life opportunities and experiences. Gender involves a full range of socially constructed ideas about the differences between men and women (and transgendered persons) that imbue meaning to individual life experiences. For the past two decades, migration scholars have frequently acknowledged that women were neglected in early studies of migration, largely because there was a male bias in the literature that assumed that most migrants were male and that the women who migrated did so in passive roles as dependents and companions of young male migrants (Morokvašić 1984; Pedraza 1991). Scholars have also noted that early attempts to address this gap either focused exclusively on women or inserted sex as a variable in quantitative studies without fully appreciating the complexity of gender (Pessar and Mahler 2003). More recent studies have taken important steps to address these earlier biases (see, e.g., Curran and Saguy 2001; Curran et al. 2006; Donnato et al. 2006; Jones 2008; Lutz 2010; Mahler and Pessar 2006; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Silvey 2006; Thieme and Siegmann 2010). Some studies have examined contexts in which migration flows tend to be dominated by one gender or another. This includes studies of women who remain behind when men migrate (see, e.g., Brettell 1986; Reeves 2011) as well as studies that examine the “feminization” of migration in contexts where women are migrating for domestic labor and service jobs (see, e.g., Dannecker 2005; Jones 2008; Pratt 2012; Shaw 2004; Tacoli 1999). The new literature on gender and migration also includes a handful of studies in which a significant percent of migrants are migrating as part of a family (e.g., Charsley 2005; Goldring 2001).

Migration experiences vary widely around the world, so it is not surprising that the collective body of work on gender and migration does not lead to any simple conclusions that women’s lives are better or worse because of migration. These new approaches do, however, demonstrate the need

to study how labor markets can be feminized and masculinized, how state discourses and practices can have gendered consequences, and how gender relations are best understood as “expressions of asymmetry, inequality, domination and power not only between the genders but also within one gender category” (Lutz 2010:1651).

In a recent series of articles, Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar (Mahler and Pessar 2001, 2006; Pessar and Mahler 2003) propose a new theoretical framework that they refer to as “gendered geographies of power.” This model emphasizes the need to understand how social constructions of gender can affect the migration process at multiple geographic scales. We extend this idea to consider the intersection of gender and migration along multiple points in the process of migration.

Adding to this framework, we stress the need to also consider the way that gender intersects with kinship. Previously at the core of anthropology, studies of kinship declined with the fall of structural functionalism and its assumption that kinship establishes and maintains social order by defining rights and duties for individuals within a society. Our understanding of kinship is based on more dynamic readings of kinship (Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Kandiyoti 1988; Wilk 1989) that acknowledge that kinship is culturally constructed and thus is flexible and can change over time. Rather than focusing on how kinship systems maintain order and stability, we agree with Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako (1987:39) that the social and symbolic processes that serve to reproduce kinships systems also serve to reproduce systems of inequality.

Prominent features of the Kazakh kinship system include a strong emphasis on patrilineal descent, a commitment to clan-based exogamy, and the predominance of postmarital patrilocal residence. In practice, there is some flexibility to these principles, especially the principle regarding postmarital residence. Each aspect of the kinship system has differential consequences for men and women, which has further significance for understanding gendered impacts of

transnational migration. We view Kazakh understandings of these kinship principles as “kinship knowledge,” an element that operates in a similar way to what Sünne Andresen and Irene Dölling (Schwenken 2008:772) have described as “gender knowledge”: the “tacit and unreflected everyday knowledge and knowledge of experience.”

One aspect of this kinship knowledge is a shared understanding of the importance of patrilineal descent. Kazakhs trace their ancestry primarily through their father’s side and identify as members of their father’s descent group. These groups are frequently referred to as “clans” in Western scholarship (Collins 2009; Schatz 2004). Clan, or lineage, identities are ascribed at birth and are shared with one’s father, one’s siblings, and one’s father’s relatives. Kazakh kinship terms make strong distinctions between three sets of relatives: (1) one’s own relatives (*tuyskandar*), who are understood to be members of the same clan; (2) one’s mother’s relatives (*nagashylar*), who are always members of another clan because of clan-based exogamy; and (3) one’s spouse’s relatives (*qaiyn zhurt*). Typically, these three sets of relatives represent three different clans.

Strong cultural preferences for exogamy and patrilocal residence are key features of kinship knowledge that are particularly relevant for understanding how migration affects men and women differently. Among Kazakhs, the cultural preference for exogamy means that individuals marry somebody who is from another clan and therefore presumed to be separated by at least seven generations on one’s father’s side. In the nomadic past, the cultural emphasis on patrilocal residence meant that a newly married Kazakh couple either lived in the same yurt as the groom’s parents or in a separate yurt in the same settlement. This pattern is not uncommon among urban residents, and it is particularly strong among herding households in which clusters of related households typically assemble their yurts near each other (see Figure 2). Taken together, this kinship knowledge can have significant impacts on the lives of women: women are born into one lineage, they marry into a second lineage, and they typically move away from their own kin upon marriage to be closer to their husband’s kin.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Our field research was conducted among the Kazakhs of western Mongolia over the course of three summers (2006, 2008, and 2009). We conducted interviews in multiple locations as a way to capture the diverse experiences of rural and urban Kazakhs. Most of our interviews and ethnographically informed surveys took place in Bayan-Ulgii province, in the central town of Ulgii (with a population of approximately 28,000), in three villages that serve as district centers (with populations ranging from 800 to 1,700), and in three mountain pastures used by seminomadic herders. During the summer of 2006, we also conducted preliminary interviews in Khovd province and one additional summer pasture location in Bayan-Ulgii province. In each location, we employed local research assistants and participated in the daily lives of



**FIGURE 2.** A seminomadic family uses a truck to transport their yurt and household belongings to their summer pasture, June 6, 2009. (Photo by Holly Barcus)

Kazakh families while conducting semistructured interviews and structured face-to-face surveys with their relatives and neighbors. Altogether, we conducted 38 semistructured interviews, 28 life history interviews, and 184 structured survey interviews with an equal number of women and men, of different ages and different occupations, including seminomadic herders, traders, teachers, and textile seamstresses (see Figure 3). Our sample included migrants who returned to Mongolia as well as aspiring migrants. Due to the magnitude of this migration, all of the individuals we interviewed had relatives living in Kazakhstan.

## THE KAZAKHS OF MONGOLIA AND KAZAKHSTAN’S REPATRIATION PROGRAM

For several centuries, the Kazakhs lived as nomadic pastoralists across the steppes and mountains of central Eurasia where they raised mixed herds of livestock. Historically, the Kazakhs had a gendered division of labor, where men were expected to herd livestock and defend the territory while women cooked, cleaned, took care of children, served guests, and prepared domestic textiles (Bacon 1966). Like several other Central Asian ethnic groups, most Kazakhs today self-identify as Muslims. The Kazakhs have a



**FIGURE 3.** *These women earn money through the sale of textiles to international tourists, July 24, 2008. (Photo by Cynthia Werner)*

Turkic-based language, and many Kazakhstani Kazakhs are bilingual (to varying degrees) in Kazakh and Russian.

Fleeing a series of conflicts in the region, several different groups of Kazakhs moved into the mountainous region of western Mongolia between the 1860s and the 1940s (Finke 1999:109–110). In the 1940s, the Mongolian Kazakhs became isolated from other populations of Kazakhs as the Soviet Union, China, and Mongolia established strict national borders. Although the Kazakhs of Mongolia had very limited ties with Kazakhs in neighboring countries, they were affected by a remarkably similar set of economic and social policies between the 1940s and the 1990s. Following the Soviet model, the Mongolian state incorporated nomadic pastoralists into a socialist system and diversified the economy. As new opportunities emerged under socialist rule, many Mongolian Kazakhs abandoned nomadic pastoralism and settled in towns where they worked for the state and enjoyed greater access to healthcare, education, and consumer goods. In an effort to reduce gender inequities, the socialist state encouraged the education and employment of women.

Until the fall of the Soviet Union, the Kazakhs lived as an ethnic minority group in a number of states, including the Soviet Union, China, and Mongolia. Each state introduced a mix of assimilationist and accommodative policies toward the Kazakhs and other ethnic minorities (Schatz 2000: 73–74). Inspired by Marxist ideology, the state simultaneously sought to reduce social inequities and to promote interethnic solidarity under the rhetoric of “international-

ism.” Some aspects of Kazakh culture that did not align with Marxist ideals, such as religion and marriage, became targets of change, while other cultural features, such as music and food, were used to distinguish the Kazakhs from other Central Asian groups. In Mongolia and the other socialist states, the state helped to maintain the Kazakh culture and language by opening schools in which Kazakh was the language of instruction. Despite these “affirmative-action” policies, Kazakh culture was overshadowed by the dominant culture. For example, in the Soviet Union, elite Kazakhs often sent their children to Russian-language schools because the quality of instruction was considered better and because Russian language skills were essential for social mobility. By the time of independence, nearly 40 percent of Kazakhstani Kazakhs had very low levels of proficiency in Kazakh (Davé 2007; Fierman 2005:405).

In Mongolia, the Kazakhs only represented about 5.9 percent of Mongolia’s total population, yet they were the largest ethnic minority group. According to the 1989 census, there were approximately 120,000 Kazakhs in Mongolia, and they constituted 87 percent of the population in Bayan-Ulgii province (National Statistics Office of Mongolia 2000). Despite the small population size, the Kazakhs of Mongolia have remained a distinct cultural group. In Bayan-Ulgii province, Kazakh is the language of instruction in all rural schools, and Kazakh-language schooling is an option in Ulgii, the provincial center (Portisch 2012:389).

The fall of the Soviet Union transformed the Kazakh Republic of the Soviet Union into a new multiethnic

nation-state. Parallel to the other Soviet successor states, the newly independent Kazakhstani state initiated a variety of nation-building projects, including the repatriation program, in an effort to create a new post-Soviet national identity. Kazakhstan faced several distinct challenges with its nation-building project. In 1991, Kazakhstan was the only post-Soviet republic in which the titular ethnic group did not represent the majority of the population. The country's population of 16.5 million was nearly evenly divided between the two largest groups, with Kazakhs at 39.3 percent and Russians at 37.5 percent (Svanberg 1999:11). Responding to this demographic reality, nationalist-minded Kazakh intellectuals and politicians felt that Kazakhs needed to achieve a demographic majority (Davé 2004; Kolstø 1998). They also expressed concerns about the linguistic decline and cultural survival, given that so many "Russophone" Kazakhs had adopted "Russified" lifestyles, especially in urban areas with large Russian populations (Davé 2007; Fierman 2005; Kolstø 1998; Surucu 2002).

From an ethnonationalist perspective, a single solution to all of these issues existed: designate Kazakhstan as the "homeland" of all Kazakhs and use state funds to assist ethnic Kazakhs living abroad who were interested in "returning" to the newly independent country of Kazakhstan (Diener 2009; Kuşçu 2008). When the repatriation program was first introduced in the early 1990s, one of the unstated objectives was to bolster the number of ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. The government set an annual quota for the number of ethnic return migrants, who would receive benefits. Over a 20-year period (1992–2012), the repatriation program provided government assistance to at least 944,000 ethnic return migrants, known locally as *oralman*, including over 50,000 Kazakhs from Mongolia (Barcus and Werner 2010; Diener 2009; Lillis 2014; Mendikulova 2012:20; Werner and Barcus 2009).

Kazakhstani society is divided between "nation-statists," who value the traditional knowledge and practices preserved by Kazakh repatriates from Mongolia and China, and "civic-statists," who feel that the repatriates are "not suitable for Kazakhstan's modern society" (Kuşçu 2008:182). Politicians who view Kazakhstan in civic terms place greater emphasis on projects that portray Kazakhstan as a "modern," "Eurasian" state—for example, construction of the new capital Astana—(Bissenova 2014). Local views toward the *oralman* vary in a social context in which nation-statist and civic-statist perspectives serve as competing models for the state. In the past decade, the *oralman* have been increasingly depicted in the media as immoral actors who use fake documents to illegally acquire benefits. In 2011, a regional political actor publicly accused the *oralman* of instigating the labor strikes and violent riots that took place in the oil-boom town of Zhanozen in December of 2011. A few months later, the repatriation program was suspended. Some scholars suspect that the suspension is also related to a new demographic reality in which the Kazakhs now represent about 63 percent of the population (Oka 2013). The Kazakhstani government

reinstated the program in July of 2014 after the recent Russian conflicts with Ukraine renewed the urgency to increase the Kazakh population (Lillis 2014).

The government of Kazakhstan encourages families to migrate as households, so the migration flow is not dominated by one gender or another, such as the movement of Filipina and Indonesian women to Hong Kong for domestic labor jobs (Constable 2007). According to official statistics, 48 percent of the repatriated Kazakhs are male and 52 percent are female (United Nations Development Programme 2006:13). Much of the existing literature has considered how the repatriation of Mongolian Kazakhs has led to shifting and ambiguous identities, without focusing on the gendered aspects of this migration (see, e.g., Diener 2005, 2007, 2009; Dubuisson and Genina 2011; Kuşçu 2008; Post 2007; Sancak and Finke 2005). This does not mean that gender—or kinship for that matter—is irrelevant. Migration experiences are shaped by gender. While migration to Kazakhstan can provide educational and economic opportunities, as well as adjustment challenges, for both men and women, we argue that women experience unequal burdens along multiple points in the migration process. Although we highlight several disproportionate challenges that most women are likely to encounter through this particular migration, we recognize that most women have a mix of positive and negative experiences with migration. Further, women's experiences are always shaped by the intersection of gender and other aspects of social identity. In other words, an inequity that applies to Kazakh women in general is likely to be amplified, for example, in the case of a woman with less education, a limited knowledge of the Russian language, or fewer economic resources.

## MALE AUTHORITY AND THE DECISION TO MIGRATE

### *Contemplating Migration: A Gendered Perspective*

The migration literature includes multiple models for understanding how people make decisions to migrate. Push–pull factors are used to explain how potential migrants compare social, economic, and political conditions in both origin and destination locations (Boyle et al. 1998; De Jong 1999). Labor markets in receiving countries can be gender specific, such as construction and domestic labor sectors that "pull" men or women to a greater extent (Lutz 2010:1658). Among Mongolian Kazakhs, migration trends have shifted during the past 20 years, from an earlier phase during which most migrants moved as members of a large kin group to the current phase in which migrants, travelling as individuals or families, are often migrating to join existing kin in Kazakhstan (Barcus and Werner 2010). Decisions to migrate are rarely made alone. Even in cases of individual migration, a young adult is likely to consult with his or her parents before migrating to Kazakhstan and to rely on kin networks upon arrival in Kazakhstan. For example, a 19-year-old female migrant named Akmaral lived with her aunt while completing an undergraduate degree in Russian language at

East-Kazakhstan State University. Similarly, Aslan, a young man in his early twenties, lived with relatives in Kazakhstan for two years while making furniture for a Turkish-owned company.

In Kazakhstan, there has been a slightly greater “pull” for male migrants because of the high demand for migrant labor in male-dominated fields such as construction, agriculture, and the oil industry. This type of “black work” (*qara zhymyz*) is considered to be more culturally acceptable for men. In contrast, the occupations that are considered to be more appropriate for women—such as teaching, accounting, and medicine—usually require a university degree. Culturally preferred jobs for women without college degrees include retail trade and service work. During our interviews, Mongolian Kazakhs used these culturally informed attitudes about work to explain why young women, including rural women from seminomadic households, are more likely than young men to migrate to Kazakhstan to study at a university. Throughout Mongolia, there is an “inverse gender gap at all levels of education” because boys are more likely than girls to be kept home to work instead of sent to school (United Nations Children’s Fund 2013; Yano 2012).

Attitudes toward migration are influenced by how people perceive opportunities and daily life in the destination country, and these views often differ by gender as well as other aspects of identity. In some regards, men and women share views about life in Kazakhstan. For example, in our interviews, there is a shared belief that children who receive diplomas from high schools and universities in Kazakhstan will have greater work opportunities in Kazakhstan. One of the legacies of socialism in both Kazakhstan and Mongolia is a strong educational infrastructure combined with a strong belief that education can lead to social mobility. In our survey, 63 percent of men and 69 percent of women felt that educational opportunities would be better in Kazakhstan. The views of rural residents were even stronger, with 78.4 percent of rural respondents (of both sexes) agreeing that Kazakhstan could offer better educational opportunities than Mongolia. For herding families, migration to Kazakhstan provides an obvious advantage because parents are likely to pursue new occupations that will allow children to live at home while attending school. In Mongolia, most herding families selectively keep some children at home to help with the livestock rather than sending them to attend school in villages known as *som* centers (Portisch 2012).

On some issues, attitudes toward migration vary based on a person’s gender as well as the intersection of gender and other aspects of their social location. This does not mean that women or men are more likely to view the decision to migrate positively, but it does mean that women and men are likely to take different things into account while considering how migration will affect their lives. For example, several herding women told us that they expected daily life to be easier in Kazakhstan because Kazakhstani women are less likely to be raising livestock and more likely to have access to modern conveniences, such as running water for cooking

and cleaning (see Figure 4). A number of young, unmarried women who had previously visited Kazakhstan told us that they do not feel as comfortable walking alone on the streets in Kazakhstan. There is a significant difference between living in western Mongolia, where the largest town has approximately 30,000 residents, and living in Kazakhstan, where urban populations of Almaty and Astana exceed one million residents. Kazakh women are likely to feel safer in western Mongolia because they are surrounded by members of the same ethnic group, and they are more likely to encounter acquaintances when they go out in public in western Mongolia. Similarly, men might be more concerned than women about whether they can earn enough income to support their families. These are just a few examples of the way that gender can shape the way individuals think about migration and thus factor into a migration decision.

### **Deciding to Migrate: Gender and Power**

Women contribute to family discussions about migration, yet the women we interviewed consistently described a decision-making process in which men had more authority when it came to the final decision. In Damira’s case, for example, her husband’s preference prevailed when they disagreed about whether or not to migrate. We also encountered cases where the decision to migrate was dominated by an elderly male on behalf of multiple households. For example, Lazzat, a middle-aged widow, told us that she and her husband migrated to Kazakhstan in the early 1990s after her father-in-law convinced all of his relatives to migrate together. Economic conditions in western Mongolia were poor at that time, so her father-in-law set off on a short reconnaissance visit to Kazakhstan. During his visit, he was able to confirm that the government was upholding its promises to provide assistance to migrants. After he returned, he convinced his brothers, sons, and cousins to migrate together. As Lazzat explained, the wives of these men did not have much of a choice. Altogether, 20 households packed up all of their belongings onto the large trucks that Kazakhstan provided for migrants, and they started a new life together in Kazakhstan.

Not all situations are so extreme. Sometimes, an elder male simply plays an influential role in a migration decision. In the summer of 2008, we met an older man named Olzhas while visiting herding families in a high mountain pasture. Olzhas and his family lived in Kazakhstan, where he worked as a hydroengineer. He and his wife Akmaral regularly returned to Mongolia to visit relatives, such as his wife’s brother Talgat. Talgat and his wife Gulzhan had four young children, and they made a livelihood by raising a mixed herd of sheep, goats, horses, yaks, and camels. During our visit, we observed Olzhas and Akmaral encouraging Talgat and Gulzhan to migrate to Kazakhstan so that their children would have a better future. Olzhas promised to help them find jobs and complete the necessary paperwork. He also generously offered to provide them with money and a place to stay until they got settled. They initially declined his offer.



**FIGURE 4.** A woman prepares goats for milking with the help of her two daughters, July 26, 2006. (Photo by Cynthia Werner)

The following summer, after losing approximately 30 percent of their livestock in a bad winter freeze (*zhut*), Talgat and Gulzhan lamented that life in Mongolia had simply worn them down. Olzhas's continued declaration to provide help upon their arrival in Kazakhstan was a critical factor in their eventual decision to migrate. These examples illustrate how men and women have different desires, expectations, and opportunities in regard to migration and how older men in particular have more authority and influence when it comes to decisions to migrate.

#### **GENDERED ENCOUNTERS WITH THE STATE**

Gender is often erased in macrolevel analyses of global processes, such as migration, and models of global processes are implicitly gendered masculine through metaphors of globalization, such as "market penetration" and "virgin markets" (Freeman 2001). Feminist scholars have also pointed out several ways in which male and female immigrants and refugees are treated differently by the state through border-control procedures, passport regulations, and immigration laws that "police inclusion and exclusion" (Mahler and Pessar 2006:39). For example, in the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968 ensured that men from the former colonies could enter the UK on work permits and invite their wives to join them, but women did not have the same option. This law served to reinforce patriarchal familial arrangements until subsequent immigration legislation was adopted in the UK (Mohanty 1991:26). Patriarchal practices continue to exist in states that prohibit the outmigration of women, such as Bangladesh (Schwenken 2008:770).

Further, in Poland and Ukraine, state discourses and practices normalize the migration of men who are perceived as household breadwinners while problematizing the migration of women, especially married women who leave children behind (Lutz 2010:1656–1657). Some state practices disadvantage men. For example, Muslim men entering North America and Europe are more likely than women to be viewed with suspicion by border patrol officers who are operating in the name of national security (Mahler and Pessar 2006:39).

The legal framework for the repatriation program represents another way in which women are disadvantaged in the migration process. The state encourages the in-migration of both men and women, preferably in household units. Although the repatriation program does not favor the migration of men, the legal framework for repatriation does contain subtle forms of gender discrimination that are mirrored in bureaucratic documents and procedures. Each year, the Kazakhstani government sets an annual quota on the number of households that will receive benefits from the repatriation program. The policy states that "an adult of legal age, *on behalf of a household*, shall submit a claim" (Kuşçu 2008:135, emphasis added). When submitting this claim, the household head is required to list all adult and nonadult household members who plan to migrate on an application form and to submit a packet of documents on behalf of these household members to the migration officials.

The Mongolian government maintains statistics on a variety of social and economic indicators at the individual and household level, yet it does not delineate between male-headed and female-headed households. Instead, the government counts the number of single mothers who have



nonadult children, and this statistic can be used as an imperfect substitute for the number of female-headed households. In 2006, there were 21,463 households and 1,517 single mothers in Bayan-Ulgii province (Bayan-Ulgii Annual Statistics 2006). If all single mothers were living as the heads of their own household, then this would mean that approximately 7.1 percent of households in the province are female-headed households. This figure is consistent with our survey of 184 households, which contained 12 households headed by women. This included two households in which the female household head lived alone, one household consisting of a mother and child, and nine households with multiple adults and children. One mother-child household was headed by a 36-year-old woman who lived in an apartment with her young son after her husband migrated to Kazakhstan and then divorced her. One of the largest female-headed households was headed by a 56-year-old widow who lived with four of her own children (including three adults and one child), her son's wife, and two grandchildren. This was a household in transition: two of the adult children were college-aged students, and the married son and daughter-in-law were likely to establish their own household in the future.

The language used by the repatriation program disproportionately disadvantages women, whether they live in male-headed households or female-headed households. The small percent of women who head their own household are potentially affected by the gender-exclusive, or sexist, assumptions that each household that participates in the program corresponds to a "traditional," patriarchal, heteronormative model of a Kazakh household headed by a man. Because Kazakh pronouns are not gendered, the gender of the household head is not explicitly stated in the repatriation-program policies. However, an expectation that the household head is male can be unmistakably inferred from the detailed list of potential members of a household: the household head, spouse, children, parents, siblings, grandchildren, and great grandchildren (Kuşçu 2008:139). Extended family households headed by men are likely to include this particular combination of relatives. In contrast, a female-headed household would be very unlikely to include certain categories of relations, such as a woman's married siblings or parents. A female household head therefore might look at the gender-marked sample household configuration depicted in the repatriation documents and conclude that the program excludes her own household because it does not match the traditional patriarchal household model that is described by the program.

The gender bias of the repatriation program is more obvious for male-headed households, where the male household head serves as the legal representative for all other household members during encounters with Kazakhstani migration officials. Among other things, this means that he submits migration documents to government officials on behalf of other household members and receives financial benefits on their behalf as well. In Mongolia, we spent a week with one family that was in the process of migrating. In addition

to selling household livestock and other assets, the male household head, Jibek, was in the process of gathering all of the documents necessary to collect migration benefits and eventually acquire citizenship in Kazakhstan. These documents included new passports for all six family members, birth certificates, a marriage license, documents confirming that they do not have debt or criminal records in Mongolia, a household application for the repatriation program, and a household application for residency in Kazakhstan. In this case, Jibek would also be the designated recipient of any bonus amounts that are provided to the household head. In the most recent iteration of oralman benefits, each oralman household receives a one-time lump sum of cash based on the number of household members intended to help offset the costs of resettlement. The per capita rate for the household head is twice the base rate per household member. In 2008, for example, the payment included approximately US\$1,700 for the household head, plus US\$850 per household member (Tusupbekova 2008). Studies of households within economic anthropology remind us that we cannot assume that all household members have shared ideas about how to manage and invest household resources and that the management of household resources can vary considerably from one household to the next within the same community (Wilk 1989:24). The fact that the household head receives the one-time payout on behalf of all household members and his own portion is twice that of other household members puts him in a position of power. Although one could argue that other adult men in the household are at a similar disadvantage as the adult women in the household, a greater percent of women are negatively affected by this policy because the majority of households are male-headed households.

## THE UNEQUAL BURDENS OF REPATRIATION

Previous studies have demonstrated that migration experiences can vary by gender, yet no universal patterns emerge in comparative analyses. For example, it is clear that gender can influence migrant remittances, but specific gender differences vary from one case to the next. After migrating to a new location, women from the Dominican Republic are more likely to invest their earnings in their destination country as compared to men, who are more likely to take their earnings back to the home country. Remittances also vary by gender in Thailand, with daughters expected to provide their parents with a larger portion of their salary than sons (Curran and Saguy 2001).

### ***Gendered Differences Regarding Physical Separations***

Damira's experience of being isolated from her siblings illustrates one of several ways that transnational migration places an unequal burden on Mongolian Kazakh women. Damira's story is not exceptional. With nearly 50 percent of the population migrating to Kazakhstan, all families have been touched by migration. Over and over again, we

encountered women who told us that the increased physical separation from their closest family members has been one of the most negative consequences of transnational migration. A woman named Raikhan, for example, told us that her three brothers and parents migrated to two different cities in Kazakhstan in the early 1990s, while she and her two sisters all stayed in Mongolia with their husbands.

The Kazakh emphasis on patrilineal kinship has led to a common, but not universal, pattern in which brothers and parents either migrate together or stay together. Transnational migration widens the physical separation between women and their natal kin because women are connected to their husband's kin group. In our survey, 35.3 percent of women living in Mongolia indicated that they had over 50 close relatives living in Kazakhstan. In contrast, only 21.7 percent of men gave the same response. The emotional challenges of these separations are shared by female migrants around the world, including those who leave young children behind to improve their financial well-being (Pratt 2012). On a practical level, transnational migration means that Kazakh women are more likely than men to be separated from primary links in their social networks. Women rely on these links, for example, for things like small loans, household labor, and other favors (Werner 1998). Without these links, women are forced to become more dependent on their husband's kin networks.

Separations affect women of all ages: younger women are often separated from their siblings and parents, and older women are frequently separated from their daughters. Some older women have developed a unique and creative coping strategy for these separations. Bakytgul and Aizhan, for example, can be described as "transnational grandmothers" who divide their time between households in Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Bakytgul is a widow with six sons and one daughter in Kazakhstan, yet she returns to Mongolia for three to four months every summer to visit her daughter who lives in Ulgii. This gives her an opportunity to catch up with her daughter and to spend time in the place that "feels more like home." She has lived in Kazakhstan for over a decade but feels much more comfortable in Mongolia. She laments that the store-bought dairy and meat products found in Kazakhstani markets simply do not compare to the fresh dairy and meat that she consumes in Mongolia. Unlike Bakytgul, Aizhan, a retired teacher and widow, prefers life in Kazakhstan. Of her six children, one son and one daughter migrated to Kazakhstan with their families. Although Aizhan's official residence is in Mongolia, where she resides with her youngest son and his family (according to Kazakh tradition), she lives with her daughter's family in Kazakhstan for about nine months a year.

The option of becoming a transnational grandmother only exists for women who have the financial means to travel back and forth on a regular basis. It costs approximately \$300 to visit relatives in Kazakhstan, including the cost of transportation and gifts. Saule, an 80-year-old mother of

ten, told us that she would like to visit her daughter who lives in Kazakhstan someday, but she cannot afford the cost to travel there and back. During our fieldwork, we did not encounter a male equivalent of transnational grandfathers, though it is possible that some Kazakh men are also spending large periods of time in both countries.

### **Gendered Expectations Regarding Transnational Visits**

Gendered expectations regarding transnational visits represent yet another aspect of the migration process that puts women at a disadvantage relative to men. Both men and women visit kin living in other countries if they can afford to do so (see Figure 5). Some women travel alone, while others travel with family members or with friends. The cost of travel can vary by gender due to gendered aspects of gift giving and guesting, two central aspects of daily life among Kazakhs in both Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Kazakhs generally exchange gifts for a variety of occasions, including during social visits. Kazakhs also take great pride in their hospitality and treatment of guests, and "going guesting" (*konakka baru*) is one of the primary ways that Kazakhs spend their leisure time. During our fieldwork, we observed how transnational visitors, such as Olzhas and Akmaral, would spend most of their time in Mongolia travelling from one relative's home to the next. Each day, before they set off to visit their relatives, Akmaral would prepare bags of gifts that she had brought with her from Kazakhstan. After presenting these gifts to the hostess of each household, she and Olzhas would stay for several hours, exchanging gossip while drinking hot tea, fermented mare's milk, assorted cheeses, and a hot meal.

On one level, these visits are enjoyable social events, and the gifts that are exchanged during these visits help cement bonds of kinship (and friendship) while demonstrating that transnational Kazakhs are still connected to their birth country. On another level, the gifts that are presented to hosts, as well as the home-cooked meals that are prepared for guests, require investments of time and money. Micaela di Leonardo (1987) argues that U.S. women tend to do more of the "work of kinship," such as writing holiday cards, organizing holiday gatherings, and making telephone calls. Similarly, among Kazakhs, gift exchange is a highly gendered activity, with women performing most of the unrecognized and uncompensated "work" of preparing, selecting, and presenting gifts on behalf of the household during culturally appropriate occasions. Hosting guests is also a highly gendered activity, and women also do much of the hospitality "work" for their households, such as preparing and serving elaborate meals (Werner 1998). Kazakh women also worry about the "shame" (*uyat*) that might result if they fail to provide an appropriate gift or provide a suitable meal.

During transnational visits, men and women typically visit all of their close kin. These visits, however, can be more expensive for women. As one of our research assistants explained, a man is not responsible for handling gifts if he is



**FIGURE 5.** Family members wait for the arrival of the weekly flights from Almaty and Ustkamen, Kazakhstan, to Ulgii, Mongolia, July 8, 2009. (Photo by Celia Emmelhainz, used with permission)

travelling with his wife, and a man is only expected to bring gifts to his closest relatives if he is travelling alone. In comparison, women are expected to bring a gift to every household that they visit, whether or not they are travelling with their husband. So, women who can afford a transnational visit are either burdened with the higher cost of providing more gifts or burdened with the shame of not fulfilling cultural expectations. These examples illustrate how migration outcomes and experiences vary by gender. Several features of the Kazakh kinship system influence the migration process in a way that often widens the physical separation between women and their natal kin. Further, gendered expectations about guesting and gifting can increase the cost of return visits for women.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although gender continues to be overlooked in some studies of migration, gendered discourses, practices, and policies in sending countries and receiving countries influence lived experiences with migration. Migration experiences vary so widely around the world that it is impossible to reach any general conclusions about women's experiences with migration. The specific context of migration, however, is crucial for understanding the intersection of gender and migration. There are myriad ways in which institutions and individuals can challenge, or reinforce, gendered practices and gendered ideals within a migratory context. For example, patriarchal practices might be contested if a new setting has

more progressive legislation ensuring equal opportunities for employment and education or if individuals take on new occupations that were previously viewed as unacceptable for their gender. Alternatively, patriarchal practices might receive further support if a state places gender-specific restrictions on mobility or if the members of a transnational community institute protective measures toward girls and women in a new setting.

Throughout this article, we have illustrated how socially constituted notions of gender and kinship have put Kazakh women at a disadvantage along multiple points in the migration process. These gendered outcomes are best explained by considering how this migration context has been embedded within a larger nation-building project. Gender issues are always central to the formation of national identity issues, and throughout post-Soviet Central Asia, national identity construction has been characterized by processes that glorify male national heroes, reinforce women's roles as reproducers and homemakers, and retraditionalize gender relations (Megoran 1999). Simultaneously, Central Asian states have reduced social-welfare entitlements that previously enabled women to participate more broadly in the economy (Kandiyoti 2007). It is therefore not surprising that this particular migration context has led to a situation in which it has been more challenging for women to resist locally constituted forms of patriarchy. The repatriation program was designed to address nationalist concerns that ethnic Kazakhs were under-represented in Kazakhstan's population and that many

Kazakhs had lost their knowledge of Kazakh language and cultural traditions. The program was especially targeted toward countries like Mongolia, where Kazakhs continued to speak Kazakh as their primary language and where Kazakhs were believed to maintain cultural “traditions” associated with nomadic pastoralism. From the beginning, there was an implicit assumption that the families that participated in the program would increase the population (by migrating to Kazakhstan and reproducing) and revitalize national culture by sharing their “traditional” knowledge with the broader society. Participants were encouraged to migrate as family units, ensuring that communities of migrants included multiple generations. Although the program included employment and educational opportunities for women, it never prioritized measures to ensure gender equality among repatriates.

This study may be instructive for understanding how specific features of a migration context can influence the extent to which significant gender transformations are likely to occur. We suggest that gender constructs are more likely to be resisted or to change more quickly in settings in which one gender dominates the migration process, migrants are not settling as extended kin units, or migrants are settling in an environment with more distinctive gender expectations. None of this is to say that Kazakh women are passive victims in this process, incapable of challenging cultural expectations regarding their gender. Women may be challenging gender constructs in subtle ways, such as the way Damira has voiced her frustration with a migration decision that has kept her apart from her own kin. Both men and women have had a mix of positive and negative experiences with migration to Kazakhstan. Olzhas and Akmaral, for example, illustrate how migration has led to improved economic standards for some migrants.

There are several dimensions of this migration process that merit further investigation, and there are several new developments that might be more likely to transform gendered discourses and practices in the near future. The repatriation program has survived into the present, and Russia’s recent annexation of the Crimea has generated a renewed interest in increasing the relative size of the Kazakh population. At the same time, the Kazakhstani government has continued to balance ethnonationalist visions and civic models of the state and to aggressively develop an image of Kazakhstan as a “modern” nation-state. Recently, as more Kazakhs start to migrate to Kazakhstan on an individual basis, research is needed to understand whether young migrants may be in a better position than their predecessors to challenge gender ideals, even if they live with relatives in Kazakhstan. Further research is also needed to understand women’s experiences with bureaucratic institutions in Kazakhstan and Mongolia and to examine whether women are challenging gendered practices in indirect ways, such as making strategic decisions about which social ties to maintain through these gift-giving practices.

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## NOTES

**Acknowledgments.** We are grateful to editor-in-chief Michael Chibnik and all the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. This final article has benefited greatly from this critical feedback. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of several individuals who have contributed to various stages of this research project: Celia Emmelhainz, Hülya Doğan, Namara Brede, Amangul Shugatai, Nurshash Shugatai, Bazargul Myeiram, and Canat Cheryiasdaa. We thank all of the people who were willing to participate in our research project and share their lives with us. We are also grateful for the financial support that funded several research trips to Mongolia and Kazakhstan. This research was funded by the National Science Foundation (BCS-0752411 and BCS-0752471), the Association of American Geographers Research Grant, Texas A&M University’s Melburn G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research Stipendiary Fellowship and Internal Faculty Fellowship, Texas A&M University’s Women’s and Gender Studies’ Interdisciplinary Seed Grant, Texas A&M University’s Office of International Programs’ International Research and Travel Grant, and Macalester College’s Wallace Travel and Research Grant. All of the opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of the institutions that funded our research.

1. We have used pseudonyms throughout this article to protect the confidentiality of the people who participated in our interviews.

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