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Kazakhstan: Interview with Zhanar Sekerbayeva

Thursday 11 May 2023, by [Feminist Anti-War Resistance/FAS \(Russia\)](#), [SEKERBAYEVA Zhanar](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2023).

We spoke with Zhanar Sekerbayeva, a feminist, human rights defender, LGBTIQ+ activist and co-founder of the “Feminita” Kazakhstan Feminist Initiative — <https://feminita.kz/author/janarsek/> . This year, Zhanar ran for election to Maslikhat (a regional parliament in Kazakhstan) and spoke openly with a feminist agenda. Zhanar is a lesbian and has faced several waves of harassment during the campaign for defending the rights of the queer community.

We discussed with Zhanar how the war in Ukraine and the flow of migrants from Russia are now affecting Kazakhstan, and about what residents and residents of Kazakhstan experienced a month before these events: in January 2022, powerful protests broke out in Kazakhstan, according to which the authorities opened fire. Feminists and human rights activists of Kazakhstan were witnesses and participants in the events of “Bloody January”.

In the interview, we also touch on the topic of transnational feminist solidarity – is it possible now? It is important for the Feminist Anti-War Resistance to continue talking and working with women activists from different countries and regions. With conservative governments isolating us and denying us access to agencies and resources, global networks of solidarity and mutual aid are what keep us hopeful for a different future.

Zhanar about herself

I am a co-founder of the Kazakh feminist initiative “Feminita”, a poet. I graduated from the Faculty of Philology for my pleasure (it was always my dream), so I also have such a diploma — this is a kinda relaxation for me.

I can't say that I write a lot of poems now, and even if I do, it happens very rarely: probably, this is due to what I do most of all now in the activist field. My background is academic - I am a doctor of social sciences. One of my recent achievements is the publication of a book based on my doctoral dissertation, which I devoted to the state policy in Kazakhstan regarding trans people. This policy is, in fact, the practice of torturing transhumans. When changing their gender marker, trans people in Kazakhstan must go through mandatory irreversible surgical correction if they want to change their documents and the marker in the documents.

This is a big problem, but not everyone feels it. Of course, the heterosexual cis-majority often doesn't give a damn about what happens to other groups. Therefore, when we even just say the word “LGBT” or wave the LGBT flag, people lose all the levers of patience, education, understanding and the desire to understand, the levers of empathy.

My first education is journalism. When I enrolled, I actually dreamed of going to the literary criticism faculty, but my parents took my choice a little aside and I entered journalism. Now I am an

activist and I am proud of my activism. I am proud that Guzada and I co-founded the Kazakh feminist group “Feminita”. Feminita protects, monitors and advocates for the rights of lesbians, bisexuals, queer and trans women in Kazakhstan. We are one of the most visible, bright and high-profile activist initiatives in Kazakhstan. And this is despite our status: the Department of Justice refuses to register our initiative.

Feminist in elections

I decided to take part in the elections because it is a continuation of our Purple Yurt project. This is a political education project that we started from Feminita in 2022. Three training modules have passed: two online modules with our lecturers, and one offline module in Almaty. The girls came to it, we all gathered in the conference room and made up our political manifesto together. The Political Manifesto is not just a document that will gladden our hearts. This is the future base for our political party. My election agenda was feminist — I talked about women’s rights, about one of our achievements which is the abolition of the list of prohibited professions for women in Kazakhstan. There were 219 of them. I often told potential voters about this case so that they would understand what level of achievement our team was working on.

With male voters, I was a little careful not to mention the feminist agenda, because some men might not react very positively or lecture about my short hair, not having children, or not having a heterosexual spouse. Therefore, of course, it was difficult to talk to them. They believe that women are made for the home and the traditional nuclear family. It’s hard to argue with these people. When I try to tell something to my interlocutors, who reproach me that I allegedly do not know the history of Kazakhstan or do not fulfill the role of an obedient Kazakh housewife, my arguments are recognized as resistance, as a protest. And they see me as someone who falls out of the idea of who a Kazakh woman is. I politely listened to this and thanked them for their opinion. And just went on to my voters. I note the sensitivity of women — they were more empathetic to me, they were interested, they took the phone more often.

Our political program is published on our Instagram. I note that the program of a Maslikhat candidate should be different from the program of a candidate for the Mazhelis, because the Mazhelis is the legislative branch of power and it is necessary to talk about laws there, and the Maslikhat level is the level of solving urban problems. Therefore, we decided that we would not get too carried away with the program, this is not the level when it is necessary to debate over the program, to present this program in a very diverse and broad way. We decided to start from the problems of the residents of the 14th district — Bostandyk district, where they live. These are the problems of bad roads, poor lighting, garbage, lack of kindergartens, and frequent changes of specialists in medical institutions. Women complained that when they come to the hospital, they cannot understand where their doctor is. If I went to Maslikhat, I would rely on these problems voiced by my voters and voters.

Kazakhstan, the war in Ukraine and the wave of Russian migrants

The war in Ukraine had a strong impact on Kazakhstan, especially economically. We have raised all the prices for products, for services, for renting apartments. After the second or third wave of mobilization in the Russian Federation, we still do not drop prices, high prices for rental housing.

I myself have been moving for the last 6 months for the third time, to those apartments where it is cheaper. My apartment is not just my personal space, but also our workspace, Feminita’s office is located there. There are safe meetings with our colleagues, with feminists. Meetings that are important and necessary for us, where we could retire, because in a cafe or co-working you always need to pay money for a stay. Therefore, it is important for us to preserve this space. April 23, I

moved to another apartment again.

How do the citizens of Kazakhstan relate to the flow of Russian emigrants? Differently. When there was the first flow, I think they were treated very wary and cautiously. We have our own national patriots who speak out, often with no understanding of human rights, when you are in an emergency situation and must leave your country. Or when you are forced, yes, they can induce you to leave. Not all of us are familiar with human rights and not everyone understands what it is when you need to run so urgently. Personally, I feel exactly like a human rights defender, a feminist, an activist. I understand that if people are forced to flee and look for temporary housing, then we, as a state of law, cannot close the borders. But it is necessary to rectify economic problems so that inflation, which is now more than 30%, if not all 40% in Kazakhstan, does not hit ordinary citizens and women, and so that prices for rental housing do not increase due to the influx of people who came here temporarily or for a longer time. It is necessary to protect sensitive groups of people (I don't want to say "vulnerable"), who are the first to suffer during economic upheavals. This situation happened this year, we still feel it.

Do Russian migrants broadcast chauvinist and imperialist ideas about the country they are now in? Yes unfortunately. There were such posts, people don't understand a little where they ended up, they don't know at all that Kazakhstan declared itself an independent state a long time ago, and that we had tribes before the tsarist empire. The borders of Central Asia (I repeat, Central, not Middle) were drawn in Soviet times, that is, by another empire, completely ignoring how the Central Asian tribes themselves would see it. Such imperialist, chauvinistic posts, unfortunately, were observed on social networks, they were immediately condemned by Kazakhs, talked about, and through this act of speaking and public shaming, the problem itself became more public. Therefore, perhaps, the dissatisfaction of Kazakhstanis and Kazakh women gradually disappeared, as it became a public fact. This situation is, of course, very difficult. People who are urgently looking for shelter, hideout, or asylum need to understand that when we are looking for shelter in another land, this other land has a history, context, background — there are things that needs to be treated very carefully, you shouldn't speak stereotypes and show absolute ignorance about the people, about the language, about the culture, about the traditions of the country where a person is looking for a temporary or long term refuge.

Economic problems are now being discussed more and more: fuel prices are rising again, which means that protest moods are rising, so the discussion above has come to naught for now. But this does not mean that it has completely disappeared, it can, unfortunately, reappear. Unfortunately, because I sometimes see such appeals from the side of Kazakhstanians that I would not call humane. Everything must be done within the framework of human rights and try to understand why the fate of a person develops this way. Try to be empathetic towards people who are in trouble. Rich people probably found a haven in another country, but those who came to Kazakhstan are not rich people.

About the bloody January 2022 and the political regime of Tokayev

How has the political regime in Kazakhstan changed? Since January last year, there has been practically nothing: we have no reform, neither political system, neither economic, nor socio-cultural, so it's not worth talking about reforms at all. The President of Kazakhstan, Tokayev, deceived the residents of our country, because what he stated turned out to be untrue. The recent elections (and I could observe them from inside) show that the authorities are trying to maintain the same authoritarian regime that Nazarbayev handed over to them. And that Tokayev even tries to surpass his teacher in this. And we're scared. We are afraid that now we have a new dictator. He is more educated, more diplomatic, but this absolutely does not negate his qualities of a dictator, which we recognized after that Bloody January 2022. Attempts to deceive us failed and we all need a change of power.

It is the change of the president, parliament, senate, Maslikhat, the complete reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the National Security Committee. Without reforms, without lustrations, without an open and transparent referendum, we cannot build democracy and elect honest people who could come to manage the affairs of the state. Including women.

The results of these elections are very sad. Party people who were supported by the government passed, businessmen who have a lot of money passed there. So now these people are in power. There is a rearrangement of the ruling elites, but we do not see people who would really promote human rights and improve the general situation in the country. It is very difficult and sad to talk about how the head of state is deceiving you.

When Bloody January happened last year, I also went to the square, but did not get into the epicenter of events at first, I was a witness. I collected these empty shells from stun grenades, bullets, rubber bullets. All this was on the pavement and has not yet been removed. There were a lot of them. We also went on the day when they were shooting at people, it's good that we just didn't reach the place where the shots had already been fired. Then a man ran to us and shouted that there was a body lying there, that it was better not to go there. He ran straight to us, and we turned back.

Feminists took a very big part in these protests, we tried to unite with the human rights community, tried to call on Tokayev to solve the problem not through the path he chose — to shoot to kill, but through a different path, because ordinary, innocent people were dying, people who protested. I remember how we tried to solidarize during the internet blackout. It was very difficult, but I know that people met at each other's apartments, came to visit, and discussed what we could do. We also discussed this together with other human rights activists: at that time we wanted to build an action plan, but all this failed — we were very busy helping the initiatives that registered the victims who suffered during the Bloody January, people threw all their strength into it.

Until now, those who suffered during the Bloody January do not receive state support — they receive mainly support from the ordinary people, from those who make voluntary contributions. All the registration of victims — it was done by women, feminists and human rights activists. This still allows us to understand the full scale of the tragedy and the attempted political coup. Feminists went out to meet the protesters, on the square and said that they needed to write their slogans on the posters so that they would not be mistaken for those provocateurs referred to by the police. At the same time, the poster "Do not shoot at the people, we are ordinary people, we are not terrorists" was created. And then, literally with a pencil on paper, the protesters were able to write down their demands. Before that, to be honest, most of the protesters did not have a single poster, and, of course, this crowd could easily be mistaken for provocateurs, that is, there were several groups of protesters — peaceful and those who tried to discredit these protesters. When you don't have posters in hand, these two groups merge. I think, thanks to feminists, a lot of people realized that actually these protesters who went out were peaceful protesters.

And our role as lesbian, bisexual or trans women was quite like that. We wrote posts, we tried to understand what was happening. There was a queer woman in one of the southern cities of Kazakhstan who personally helped the victims and those who were taken under arrest in the pre-trial detention center, she helped mothers of large families and thanks to her (her name is Zhamilya), many of these women were released from prison — under house arrest, unfortunately but at least they returned to their children. Because they had many children, and often they were the only breadwinner for their children. Gulzada and I also took part, we tried to help as much as we could, even though we were under a lot of stress, depression, because it was not clear where the country was going towards and what would happen to us. We experienced this shock before the war in Ukraine, because it was in January 2022, and we felt this sense of helplessness back then, in January. And it weighed, it took a lot of strength.

About feminist solidarity and the fem agenda in Kazakhstan

Do I believe in feminist transnational solidarity across national borders? I do. Do I now consider it possible to interact with Russian feminist movements? Theoretically, I think it is possible, but now we are experiencing a new round of decolonization, and through the prism of decolonization, of course, it is very difficult to make decisions right away. But with feminist movements it is necessary to keep in touch. This is my point of view, because feminists have always promoted the principles of human rights, kindness, empathy, anti-militarism. I understand, of course, that it sounds completely meaningless to those on the other side of the war — to the side that defends itself.

Right now, as Feminita, we do not have any specific project or collaboration with Russian feminists, but we have acquaintances, comrades and colleagues from Russia or in Russia, whom I still consider to be my friends and sisters, and that's why I don't refuse.

The agenda of feminism and LGBTIQ activism in Kazakhstan is the observance of women's rights, the signing of the Istanbul Convention and its ratification. We connect both the feminist and LGBT+ agendas. For many people, this seems strange and completely incomprehensible, so we are always attacked, suffer from hate speech, hounding, bullying. They are always trying to find something in our address, they are rummaging, looking for how to denigrate me or feminists in general.

We also promote the right to peaceful assembly. The authorities react very badly to marches, they do not approve anything for us, and we sue. We try to promote the freedom and autonomy of the body, the autonomy of decisions specifically for women and girls, the fight against violence is part of the focus of many women's organizations, since this problem has not yet been solved and the indicators are deteriorating. Incest and pedophilia have become very frequent in the south of the country, which, of course, is associated with a drop in the level of education, unemployment and other economic factors. Therefore, there is also education on our agenda: we cannot simply mobilize the feminist and LGBTIQ+ community, it is important for us to always educate and talk about human rights, about women's rights, about the rights of LGBTIQ+ people.

Before we say or do something, we study the issue, that is, we try to do it on the basis of research carried out by grassroots initiatives. This year we are conducting a study on the anti-gender movement in Central Asia. It is attended by activists from other Central Asian countries. I think it will be a very important and high-quality work that all initiatives in Central Asia, researchers, human rights activists, journalists, public figures and so on could use.

On the agenda of feminism and LGBTIQ activism, violence sometimes overshadows other issues, but we always talk about the political agenda as well - we need to register parties. We need to participate in the management of the affairs of the state, to be represented by at least 50% in all government bodies. Since 2006, the representation figure never reached even 30%. At the moment, in 2023, this figure is 18%. Therefore, another problem is the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation. We are also working on this, because we don't even have a concept in any law what discrimination is.

On the connection between gender and state violence

Of course, I see a connection between gender and state violence. We have a lot of female political prisoners — activists of the "Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan" are constantly being arrested, some of them are still punished, and the party itself is recognized as extremist in Kazakhstan, although it did not declare anything extremist. It was just an opposition party to Nazarbayev, the ex-president of Kazakhstan. Our state can be imagined as a big patriarch who puts his foot on women's necks — it doesn't matter how the state oppresses them, through the political system or through gender,

through cultural or economic prisms. This is oppression — and it is felt at all levels. Maybe it is not recognized and little is written about it, but it's everywhere.

State violence is very brutal, and activists who try to fight it are stigmatized and often do not find a place to speak, can't find a platform to raise their voice. It's a pity that not all women's movements are in solidarity with them, because they consider them marginalized. Many women have gone through the millstones of state violence, because this is also manifested in reproductive practices: because of the idea that a Kazakh woman should be surrounded by a patriarchal family, many women die from childbirth, moreover, from unwanted or from the first birth. Or then she is forced to give birth a second, third time. There are a lot of such women, we're being crippled.

This is the state that considers itself a father, a patriarch — it not only rapes us, puts us in prison, stigmatizes, marginalizes, but also maim us for life.

And we are angry, the state directly sets up part of the population against itself. Therefore, our anti-gender (conservative) movement has absorbed the largest number of women activists. Because they do not trust the state and its undertakings, they are united against the state, but they often bring both anti-LGBT and anti-women issues to the agenda. For example, they stopped the draft law on combating domestic violence only because other women activists tried to introduce it, and it seems that the state was trying to take a counter step in this direction. But this reciprocal step was made inaccurately, absurdly, without a broad discussion, so there was no confidence in the initiative. Gender and state violence reinforce each other. They amplify, not just giving a double effect, but I would say that you can generally multiply by 10 there.

Words of support for anti-war activists

I support those activists who resist war and dictatorship, whether they are on the territory of the Russian Federation or not. The value of activism — all sorts of it — is very high. We also try to resist: we don't wage a war, but we also take these hidden forms of resistance, they exist, and we get very tired of them. I perfectly understand how difficult it is psychologically to continue the actions that the activists have begun. I wish you much strength and health. I am sure that the moment will come when all this evil will be defeated, when there will be no Putin, when the war will be stopped and it will be necessary to rebuild a new society. It will be necessary to rebuild new meanings, because everything seems to have been reset to zero. People denounce each other — and these are terrible times. Therefore, you are to do a very big, difficult, incredible, painful work, and a wish for strength is the least I can make for you.

I thank you for your political activist work, for supporting your colleagues and other sisters. Yes, for now there will be very difficult relations between Russian and Ukrainian activists, but I believe that this issue will someday be reflected on so much that common ground will be found. And when both the Ukrainian and Russian feminist sisters can at least walk together, side by side.

Feminist Anti-War Resistance

Zhanar Sekerbayeva

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