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WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN KAZAKHSTAN AS A DRIVER OF SOCIAL MATURATION

Studies of women's leadership in Kazakhstan suggest that there are informal leaders who are firmly associated with real activities aimed at solving specific problems of society, especially in the social sphere. The purpose of this article is to identify the factors, characteristics and specific forms of informal female leadership that have influenced the maturation of civil society in Kazakhstan in recent decades, defining the strategies that they use to establish cooperation with decision-making government agencies and individuals. Our hypothesis is that the participation of women activists expands the opportunities and scope of the civil sector in providing assistance to the most vulnerable members of the community, if they use strategies and tools that change the attitudes and approaches of state structures to these social problems. During our case study, as research methods we used observation and analysis of the activities of several women leaders, initiators of social and charitable movements. The primary and secondary sources used were interviews, media materials, and reports on performance results, ongoing projects, as well as official information on a number of issues affecting our theme. We tested the theories of transformational and adaptive leadership, as well as the concept of social capital, put forward by foreign scientists to practice female leadership in Kazakhstan, and concluded

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that they can be applied with certain adjustments for local conditions. We believe that in certain areas, the activities of non-governmental organizations led by women leaders are becoming more effective than the work of official bodies, which indicates an increase in the potential of civil society.

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The topic of women's leadership in research is an integral component of gender studies, which in turn, monitors society testing its social maturity and social justice. The idea of female leadership in the 1980s was actively studied in political science and business studies under the influence of foreign, in particular, US academics, and much of the research is focused on positive changes in legislation in favour of the equal rights of women and men and increased opportunities for female entrepreneurship in various fields. The study of women's leadership in Kazakhstan was usually carried out from this very same perspective as part of gender research projects where the objects of study were either women politicians and their role in Kazakhstan society (Abdykalikova 2018), or women entrepreneurs (Kakabadse et al. 2018), or the unequal status of women, aggravated by local traditions and stereotypes (Kuzhabekova, Almukhambetova 2017). The main direction of these studies, as a rule, is the identification of female underrepresentation in the structures of government and business, which leads, according to the researchers, to a violation of the gender balance in Kazakhstani society. However, the general context of these articles and reports suggests that Kazakhstan has not escaped the common global trend in the field of women's leadership, which is that the gender imbalance and 'glass ceiling' exist objectively and that no country in the world is free from these phenomena.

In this article we present the different forms of social leadership of women leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and structures in the context of contemporary Kazakhstan from a different perspective, analysing their attempts to increase the effectiveness of their work by seeking out new opportunities. Conceptually, we offer our model of women's leadership development within NGOs as an attempt aimed at overcoming existing social and political barriers in their desire to protect and support groups of citizens of contemporary Kazakhstan that are in need of care and attention. Some steps taken by the state apparatus in response to these processes initiated 'from below,' give us reasons to hope that the space for interaction between government and NGOs could be restructured and expanded.

The purpose of the article is to show the various ways in which women leaders of NGOs try to influence society and state structures in order to promote social change and improve the situation of vulnerable groups, such as orphans,

children with disabilities, single mothers and other disadvantaged citizens. In doing this, NGO leaders gradually go beyond ordinary charitable activities and rising to a higher level of responsibility, such as the implementation of social justice, humanization of society and the improvement of the legislative base.

Leadership as a Process

Current theories view leadership from two perspectives: leadership as a specific personality trait and leadership as a process; in our framework, we focus on the latter approach. Our case study was carried out by observing and analysing the activities of women leaders who initiate and participate in social and charitable movements that emerged in Kazakhstan in the first decades of the 21st century. We emphasize that the efforts of women leaders are directed towards the community as a whole and that their goal is to engage actively in social work in cases where the formal structures of power and influence are ineffective. Our interviews allow us to conclude that none of the interviewees has a desire for power, a successful career, or material reward. The surrounding reality is pushing them to take responsibility for the social well-being of people who are outside the scope of state interests, because in these phenomena and specific cases they see manifestations of social injustice.

There are several definitions of leadership, in which the focus is not on the personal traits and characteristics of a leader, but on leadership as 'the process of influence, through which those who use it, support or mobilize people to think and/or act in a new way, achieving the goals they value' (Sinclair 2014: 19). A similar definition was formulated in other studies (Uhl Bien 2006: 655). Thus, in the process of leadership, firstly, the inconsistency of the existing situation with the established goals or values is fixed, and, secondly, there is a desire to create new conditions in all possible ways or to obtain significantly different results.

Theories of transformational, authentic and situational leadership partly help to explain the phenomenon of female leadership, which is the object of our study. The study of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus showed that transformational leaders 'can create a social architecture that supports them... can move followers to higher levels of consciousness, such as freedom, justice, and self-realization' (Bennis, Nanus 2003: 203). On the other hand, Peter Northouse describes the moral component of authentic leadership, arguing that such leaders can develop genuine values and behaviour, as well as necessary skills and relationships over time (Northouse 2016). Northouse also notes that situational leadership theory recognizes the reality of environmental change and the need to adapt to these external changes and pressures. Moreover, civil activists should be able to influence those on whom the solution of the problem depends. At the same time, they need strong support from the public and a skillfully built campaign in the media, social networks and large public forums

with the presence of a substantial number of government functionaries. As our case study shows, this strategy can bring results.

The concept of social capital is helpful in furthering the understanding of situational leadership. The simplest and therefore most universal definition of this concept is that social capital is 'potential willingness of citizens to cooperate with each other and to engage in civic endeavors collectively' (Stolle 2003: 19). Even closer to our research in meaning is the conceptualization of social capital as 'a long-lived asset into which other resources can be invested, with the expectation of a future (albeit uncertain) flow of benefits' (Adler, Kwon 2002: 21).

Robert Putnam's definition below complements and concretizes his concept of social capital, which he describes as the 'features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1995: 67). Based on the above and transferring it our context, we conclude that formal and informal communication with governmental agencies, the ability to mobilize support from various actors, including the media and large public groups, can cause changes and, if these connections are successfully implemented, will be able to improve individual and/or collective social well-being. The strategy and dynamics of female leadership lie in its ability to use political opportunities, emotional work and the production of certain public goods to increase the social capital – trust, connections, communication and adherence to moral standards. As a result, significant social capital helps to reduce bureaucratic resistance among political and public servants in decision-making.

It is clear that theories developed in other political and social contexts may not fully correspond to local reality and always require rethinking and verification of their practical applicability. The most acceptable and in-demand local approaches and ways of organizational, ideological and practical activities are formed gradually, aimed at creating and improving social structures and ideas that would contribute to the formation of the modern type of society. However, in some areas, informal structures work most effectively to eliminate social injustice, to solve the problems of citizens that have been overlooked but urgently need special care. The social form of leadership, that is, the representation of women in leadership positions in the field of civil society, to some extent develops in parallel and independently of political leadership.

On the other hand, this sometimes may intersect with economic leadership, because women who lead business and professional associations can often perform social work. Although the representation of women in government in Kazakhstan remains low and leadership opportunities are limited (Kurmanbaeva 2016), women's leadership finds other areas in which to achieve its goals, and also uses the strategy of formal and informal activism in charities, the socialization of marginalized groups of people, monitoring local politics, and promoting social reforms. Such participation leads to the fact that social activity based on a civil stance is becoming relevant and those leadership

qualities that we mentioned in connection with adaptive and transformational models and the theory of social capital are especially in demand.

Women NGO Leaders

Our hypothesis is that civil society represented by women leaders is moving or striving to move towards dialogue and effective interaction with the authorities. In this case study, we focused on the activities of several well-known and widely recognized women-heads of organizations, foundations and social movements. An analytical review of materials related to their activities contributed to an understanding of what approaches, initiatives, projects and practices already exist or are in the process of development. The primary sources were written interviews that we took from activists and members of their teams, assessment reports, documentaries, websites of public organizations, life stories, interviews published in the media, materials from copyright programs and news agency channels. In the interviews conducted via email, we asked three questions: Is the cooperation of NGOs with governmental agencies possible from the point of view of the interviewee? Did the NGOs' leader personally resort to help from the state structures? If so, in what form, and with what results?

The women we examined have become active in their fields in different ways. Pensioner Nelya Steinbrener has been helping homeless people in the Kazakhstan city of Petropavlovsk for five years. Having overcome cancer, in 2015 she decided to open a public fund *Hope. Trust. Mercy*. In her small house, she first sheltered a lonely old woman, then a legless old man, after which other strangers began to turn to her and ask her for shelter. Some of them could not receive pension coverage due to the loss of documents. Steinbrener helped them restore the documents and receive a minimum social allowance, which, however, is not enough to provide them with housing. She has a small store, the income from which helps her to support herself and her wards. There is a *Centre for Social Adaptation for the Homeless* in Petropavlovsk, and her fund cooperates with it, but there is not enough space for everyone who needs it. Meanwhile, Steinbrener believes that having somewhere to stay overnight and a free lunch will not change anything in the lives of homeless old people. Society and the state should do something more fundamental. Her idea is that these people can live in a house specially designated for them in rural areas and work on the farm. The main thing is that in such a situation they will not be dependents.

The municipality refused to support this project (Prokopenko 2019). Nevertheless, Steinbrener still believes that *'there should be active charity in society, and not the indifference or hatred that separates people, the community needs such humanistic values as understanding, human sympathy in all circumstances and support'*. Although her experience of communicating with government agencies is hardly successful, she rarely gives interviews in the media and does not make speeches at forums and conferences, she is known in

the city. Moreover, employees of some departments of the city municipality and representatives of youth organizations occasionally participate in various events organized by her foundation.

Asiya Akhtanova, chair of the *Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities* (ARDI), is critical of the position of state structures. She believes that people with special needs require an integrated approach to their problems, not one-time actions: '*If significant changes in the lives of people with disabilities occur, albeit very slowly, it is only thanks to the initiatives of non-governmental organizations.*' In 2004, ARDI opened a comprehensive rehabilitation centre for children and young people under thirty with cerebral palsy and other mental disorders for their creative development, education, and social adaptation. However, such a centre does not solve all the problems. For children with disabilities, it is important not to break away from the rest of the society. To advance her ideas, Akhtanova joined the *Coordinating Council on Disabled Issues* at the municipality of Almaty, she takes part in a large number of events and conferences, meets with parliamentarians, organizes exhibitions of art by disabled children and film festivals at the ARDI art studio, attracts sponsors not only from Kazakhstan, but also from abroad, and organizes consultations with famous doctors and specialists from different countries. The activities of this woman have a huge resonance in the public sphere, as evidenced by the media, Internet resources and social networks. However, in practice, barriers often arise at various levels of the bureaucratic system, when the activities of foundations or individual social activists are aimed at changing the existing order, established models and distribution of functions, and, finally, jeopardizing the existing financing schemes.

Another very important and perhaps the most successful activity in which non-governmental organizations and their female leaders engage is care for children from orphanages. It is precisely in this area of activity that important proposals aimed at bringing about radical change in the situation have been implemented. Moreover, there was a positive impact on state policy in this matter. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that 'a child, for the full and harmonious development of his personality, must grow in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness' (United Nations 1989). This right applies equally to orphans and children left without parental care. However, so far only NGOs have been concerned about the realization of this group of children's right to a family, while the official structures were in favour of preserving the system of orphanages and state care for them. Now, in this situation, a certain turning point has come.

In 2006, the *Aruzhan Sain Foundation Voluntary Relief Society*, which aimed to help orphanages as well as sick children in Kazakhstan, initiated the *Kazakhstan without Orphans* project. The goal of the project was the gradual elimination of orphanages so that children would be brought up in a family, even if they were left without parental care. Over the past 12 years, thanks to the work

of this foundation and other NGOs, the number of children in orphanages has decreased. The activities of those organizations and individual public activists who promoted solutions to this problem succeeded in overcoming the strong resistance on the part of certain officials and the bureaucratic system. It was necessary to change the law, and the group of like-minded social activists managed to do this, although with great difficulty, and each time the leaders of public foundations had to contact the President of Kazakhstan directly to initiate the necessary changes, since their proposals were not accepted at the parliamentary level.

Nevertheless, thanks to the efforts of the civil sector in Kazakhstan, measures were taken to prevent social orphanhood and deinstitutionalize orphanages. As a result, the number of orphans in orphanages, as well as the number of specialized institutions, has decreased. Currently, all four forms of family organization – adoption, patronage, custody and family upbringing – are legally established and financially supported by the state. In 2017, the Republican database on orphans and children left without parents was finally created, thanks to which in the same year more than 3000 children were adopted, received custody or guardianship. Thus, according to the Ministry of Education and Science, out of approximately 5 million children living in Kazakhstan, 26,000 are orphans or are left without parental care, 78% of which (20,375) are already under the care, patronage, and upbringing in families. About 5,000 orphans remain in specialized institutions. These positive changes became possible thanks to the joint efforts of NGOs. In October 2018, at the Civil Forum, former president Nursultan Nazarbayev supported the initiative of NGOs and Kazakhstani businesspersons of replacing the system of orphanages with a system of foster families by creating a non-governmental agency for adopting orphans (Ivanov 2018). In January 2019, he signed a decree on the creation of a National Adoption Agency, which ended the discussions on orphanages.

It is important to note that neither the *Aruzhan Sain Foundation* nor businessmen are asking for any subsidy from the state, promising to do everything on their own account. As a preliminary step, the project *Adoption Support Centre* was created, for which more than 5,000 people applied for participation in its activities in various forms, including consulting, volunteer, sponsorship, etc. More than 1,000 people visited schools for foster parents, who are planning to adopt a child and, as a result, more than 800 children were adopted. The enormous purposeful work of informal leaders over the past few years has not only helped to change the attitude of society towards orphanages, but their activities have shown how to help unprotected people, what mechanisms and strategies should be used to introduce new approaches and reforms in the consciousness and reality of the society.

In 2013, one more measure to prevent orphanhood, the *Moms' House* charity project was launched, which is a crisis centre for young mothers with new-born children who have found themselves in difficult life situations. Anar Rakhimbayeva, with the support of her husband, Aydin, opened the first cen-

tre in the capital of Kazakhstan. Famous Kazakhstani entrepreneurs and patrons supported this idea by opening twenty-five such centres in nineteen cities of Kazakhstan. Young women, whose relatives and the biological fathers of their children turned them away, can come there for help. Women receive housing, food, care, as well as the opportunity to complete their studies or master a new profession, which means that new-born children will not become orphans left in the maternity hospital, transferred to orphanages or abandoned on the street (as has sometimes happened) but rather stay with their mothers. Thanks to this project, more than 3,600 children did not become orphans and did not end up in specialized institutions (Suleimenova 2017).

The notions of high human morality and responsibility crystallize in the interviews of women leaders. The head and founder of the *Voluntary Relief Society*, Aruzhan Sain, a transformational leader, according to the definition of the modern theory of leadership, frankly declares that she does not seek to achieve political power. First, she feels like an autonomous citizen, a person, and a professional rather than a politician who appears dependent on the state:

My civil right is to help people as much as I can. I implement this through our organization. We also have founders, there are trustees, there are partners, and together we do things for which I don't need permission, we don't need someone's approval, order, decree, position, titles. We need it to make our life just a little better (Kruglova 2018).

The NGO has never received funding from the state and did not apply for any international grant. This is a fundamental position of the fund. Sain is convinced that non-governmental organizations should not accept government funding in order to have the right to criticize the state. Moreover, grants from international organizations are often linked with the pursuit of political goals, too, as she argues:

We are not engaged in politics, we are engaged in concrete assistance to specific citizens of our state. Kazakhstan can cope with its difficulties on its own. And our goals and objectives are to achieve systematic changes to the situation. Kazakhstani people supported the foundation and saved more than 1,637 children through the project *Give Children Life* (Interview with Aruzhan Sain).

However, people turn to the NGO and specifically to Aruzhan not only in connection with illness but also when the rights of a child with disabilities are violated, a certain state service is not provided, they cannot defend the rights of the child in court, or the property rights of children left without parental care are violated. Fund leaders are trying to help in these matters, including those of a criminal nature, such as violence and/or rape. When people cannot get justice in their regions, in the prosecutor's offices and the court, they turn to the NGO, whose employees help show them the legal way of applying to regional and republican authorities. Many people do not know their rights, and

lawyers, volunteers, and fund coordinators support them. As a leader who can adapt to reality, Sain is convinced that people can make their own contribution to preserve human values; they just need to find like-minded individuals among those who live nearby. If today you help someone, then tomorrow you will be confident in the society in which you live (mind the theory of social capital). Now the Internet provides tremendous opportunities: through any search on social networks, it is easy to find people who are already doing something, find volunteers and connect with them:

We found people who can do, for example, a massage that is needed for children with cerebral palsy, surgeons who circumcise boys from poor families, orphanages, children with disabilities, oculists, dentists, lawyers, psychologists, teachers. Here everyone just does what he can and wants (Kruglova 2018).

People, besides their duties to pay taxes, do very important work, which is ultimately aimed to build a fair system of social assistance and improve the standard of living. Thus, the activities of NGOs, headed and inspired by women leaders, generated by their desire to serve, help and benefit others, play an important role in helping Kazakhstani society function. Transformational leaders can be defined by the influence that they exert on followers (Bass, Bass 2009). Transformational leaders inspire public trust, respect, and admiration. All these traits can be fully attributed to the women we have mentioned and the number of women leaders in the civil sector of Kazakhstan is increasing.

Unfortunately, not all activists were able to find like-minded people and help to overcome bureaucratic barriers in the power structures. There is a complex process of building a bridge between the civil society and the state. Social capital is growing faster where there is widespread media support, citizens' trust in local authorities, and government trust in citizens, where a high level of bureaucracy is involved to lobby for the interests of civil society. Anar Rakhimbayeva, Aruzhan Sain and Asiya Akhtanova managed to do this in the central cities of the country, but Nelly Steinerbrener and the local mayor in Petropavlovsk, far from the Presidential Residences, have not enjoyed effective cooperation.

Recently, changes have begun to take place in the country, which largely confirm our conclusions about the gradual civil maturation of the society. After the resignation of President Nazarbayev and the transfer of power to Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, for whom the need for social change was urgent, Aruzhan Sain was invited to become a children's ombudsman to further advance her vision in the field of supporting childhood and motherhood in Kazakhstani society, which can be regarded as a step towards actors from the informal sector (President of Kazakhstan 2019). The Institute of the Ombudsman for Children was established by the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and carries out its activities on a voluntary basis. However, the previous ombudsmen, nomenclatura-style political figures, did not realize their potential in guaranteeing the rights and legitimate interests of children,

nor in restoring their violated rights and freedoms, for which they were repeatedly criticized by civil organizations. Given that the new Commissioner for Children's Rights has extensive experience working with state and public institutions, initiatives to introduce recommendations for improving legislation and an active civic position, there is hope that the trends we note will strengthen and will further transform women's leadership towards understanding its mission as effective force and active factor in strengthening the principles of civil society and social justice.

Conclusion

We conclude that women's leadership has gone through various stages in its formation. If at the initial stage there comes an awareness of the existence of problems and the need to solve them independently, in terms of emotional empathy, physical and material capabilities, then further attempts are made to find support from the business community. However, the most important stage from the point of view of the maturation of civil society is the attempt to radically change the situation, initiate dialogue with the state, introduce changes at the institutional level, to remind government officials of their functions and responsibilities under existing legislation, and, if necessary, insist on reforming the imperfect laws. Obviously, the struggle of interests, loopholes in laws, the reluctance of the bureaucrats to leave the comfort zone, change their functions and jeopardize their statuses – these and other factors hinder the implementation of initiatives, projects and proposals of women leaders to government organizations. The inefficiency of social work, insufficient information, the immaturity of society in the legal field and, possibly, the disbelief of some groups of the population in the desire and ability of the state to take care of vulnerable layers of society, force women leaders to resort to such mechanisms as mobilizing state bureaucratic structures to achieve better results.

Thus, although the relations between the state and civil society, which are quite controversial, should not be idealized, the dynamic and political potential of cooperation between the government and NGOs should not be downplayed. We have demonstrated that women's leadership can drive new strategies of care. However, it should be taken into account that the results of the implementation of such strategies are formed in the framework of the Kazakhstani socio-political context. It is hardly possible to characterize the mechanism of interaction between civil society and the state apparatus as a powerful and effective driver. As we have seen, not everyone and not everywhere succeeds in implementing leadership strategies and accumulating social capital. And although some problems are solved directly by lobbying the country's president and ministers, it is still difficult to find understanding and support from local officials and civil servants in the regions. Our observations show the increasing influence of the activities of NGOs and their ideas not only on the social capital,

the gradual acquisition of people's trust and support, but also on the policies of the authorities and the legislative framework, which indicates a rethinking and reassessment of the role and functions of NGOs 'from above'. The confidence, authority, and support acquired by women leaders in society positively affect the possibility of cooperation between activists and administrative structures, which is facilitated by trust, a complex of controlled emotions, friendliness and a positive attitude. These components come together to form social capital and increase the degree of collaboration between all parties.

We argue that the Kazakhstan model of female leadership is closest to situational and transformational leadership in solving social problems and relies on social capital, where appropriate conditions arise (strong social connections, media support, resonance in social networks, personal contacts and response reaction of high-level officials, etc.). Women's leadership in Kazakhstan works within the framework of existing institutional mechanisms and structures, but at the same time it forms new ways of transforming society. The political power of civil servants and bureaucrats rarely provides the space for effective work under the conditions of the modern system of government in Kazakhstan for other actors. In other words, this is not the area where women could carry out real activities for achieving social justice. It is in this sense that foreign models of women's leadership do not always correlate with local models, where the nature of leadership is more complex, adapted to the local situation and the system of authoritarian governance. Answering the main question of research, we argue that the growth of social capital helps women leaders to gain influence over authorities, legitimacy and the trust of state actors and a large part of society.

The analysed stories show that the civil sector is becoming an increasingly active and influential force in Kazakhstani society, it contributes to humanization, changes in the legal framework and other positive changes in the state's social policy. At the same time, a broader gradual transformation of people's consciousness also occurs, which encourages them to support vulnerable groups of society. Civil society, thanks to the active role of women leaders, is becoming stronger and more effective in some areas of humanitarian activity than official structures, even if it is the latter that have been specially created to solve social problems. Nevertheless, even if bureaucratic obstacles and barriers hamper the development of civil society, they apparently cannot stop the process of its maturation.

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