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Being a woman inKazakhstan

By Salima I. Sadybekova

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As we in Kazakhstan celebrate the New Year, Qurban Ait (Eid al-Adha), both Catholic and Russian Orthodox Christmases and even Hanukkah, we look back at the year 2006 and see that our ties with the peoples of the world, including the Americans, have become stronger. We now know that millions of Americans became aware of Kazakhstan and the way we the Kazakhs live. While this may sound gratifying, one of the biggest reasons for this greater knowledge is the movie "Borat" by a British comedian released in November, which misrepresented my country as a country of backward misogynists.

This, of course, has nothing to do with the real Kazakhstan. While this truth sounds obvious, it seems that in America few people know of the role women play in the real Kazakhstan, or any other "stan," for that matter. What is more, this lack of knowledge may now be reinforced by a misrepresentation in "Borat." So I want to share my side of the story with the Americans because I believe there are reasons why they can benefit from knowing it.

I am a Kazakh professional woman living in today's independent and progressive Kazakhstan. Women in Kazakhstan are active in all fields and enjoy full privileges in a society that values our talents and ambitions. My own life as a Ph.D. (the first in my family) in philology and as an associate professor of foreign languages at Kyzylorda State University is a good example.

In the past, women were typically removed from Kazakh public life. Girls were not admitted to schools, women were refused medical assistance and employers preferred men.

The discrimination had its roots in the distant past and in an old view that a woman's duty was to stay at home, keep hearth, bring up kids and be a good wife. Relatives historically celebrated the birth of a son, not so much of a daughter. This was a source of great frustration for all women. Today, such a problem no longer exists. A Kazakh woman now needs only to believe in herself and build on her high level of education in order to be able to move mountains.

Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 brought new opportunities for us. The time when women were just cooks and kept away from running the country are long gone. In our secular and dynamic Muslim country, Kazakh men have learned to value the brainpower and ambitions of their female partners.

In reality, the "Kazakh" woman is hard to define. She could be an ethnic Kazakh or come from one of more than 100 ethnic groups of our nation, including Russians, Germans, Poles,

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Koreans and Tartars. She could be Muslim, like myself; Christian; Jewish; or even a Buddhist. We all live and work together.

Kazakh women are involved in both running the country and running their households. It is not rare to meet Kazakh female government ministers, members of parliament, akims (mayors), professors, judges and prosecutors, and executives at leading companies, including such industries as oil, construction, retail, real estate and banking.

The role of women in Kazakh homes has also changed drastically. We share with men responsibilities for our families' well-being, and are often the breadwinners. Half of the families' budgets are often provided by women who have to balance running their affairs outside the home with taking care of their elderly parents and children. That is my daily to-do list. I think most American women understand what I mean.

Having a paying job is not only a necessity for a modern Kazakh woman, but one of the main values in her life. Many women feel happy and independent only when they do productive work. Many of our women also enjoy spending their own money on themselves in the ever increasing number of boutiques. Today, we have our own Kazakh designers and there is even a fashion week in the capital. Women wearing concealing burkhas have never been widespread in a mostly nomadic Kazakhstan, and are now a thing of a very, very distant, almost forgotten past.

A Kazakh woman understands that her career is not the main thing. Our families, homes and children still come first.

I, along with many other women, believe the family is the core of our society, and it is our responsibility to bring up our children as good citizens. They will continue our work of building a better Kazakhstan. A lot will depend on their education, and we are proud that there are thousands of young Kazakh men and women who study abroad under the presidential scholarship, including hundreds in the United States.

If there is no tradition for education within a family, however, no university can help. Both at home and at my university I do my best to nurture a thirst for knowledge.

My life and the lives of many other Kazakh women show how vibrant a role we play in Kazakhstan. Many of our friends in Arvada, Colo., the twin city of Kyzylorda, already know that. I would like many more Americans to visit Kazakhstan, and see for themselves what we, the Kazakh women, can do and achieve in our country. Most American women will feel very comfortable in Kazakhstan. Come visit us in the new year. Until then, may your new year be peaceful and prosperous.

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