



# Medium of Instruction, National Identity and Attitudes Towards Gender Roles in Kazakhstan

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## INTRODUCTION

Central Asian countries achieved independence relatively recently due to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which in turn brought the process of nation-building and the construction of national identity to the core of education processes. As a key institution of socialization directly controlled by the state, and one of the vital instruments involved in state-formation (Gellner, 2006), education might be viewed as one of the major vehicles for the construction of new national identities. A cross-national study involving 22 countries in Asia showed that Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, emphasize belonging to the country, patriotism and the love for the Motherland in educational policies and curricula (MGIEP, 2017).

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Since independence, several national identity discourses have been circulating in the country. These discourses include Kazakhness, Kazakhstanness and transnationalism (Laruelle, 2014). Certain social groups in the country might engage more with certain discourses (Aitymbetov et al., 2015). Particularly, the discourse of ethnic nationalism (Smith, 1991) with the narratives of ethnic nationhood based on ethnic attachment, pride and superiority might be more appealing to the Kazakh-language-dominant population. Similarly, the Russian-language-dominant population might favour the discourse of civic nationalism (Smith, 1991) with the narratives of inclusive nationhood based on citizenship, and respect for the country's laws and political institutions.

Language is one of the core elements of national identity. Whether civic or ethnic, national identity is always gendered (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989), and men and women are often allocated specific roles and functions in the context of nationalism. For instance, cultural and biological reproduction of the nation is viewed as a task for women, whereas men are expected to protect the nation. In contrast to existing literature, which has explored nation-building and language (Burkhanov, 2020; Eschment & De Cordier, 2021; Fedorenko, 2012; Kesici, 2011; Mkrtchyan, 2014; Sharipova et al., 2017), and nation-building and attitudes towards gender (Belafatti, 2019; Kudaibergenova, 2016b; Kudaibergenova, 2018; O'Neil, 2020; Salimjan, 2017) separately, this chapter attempts to explore all three—language, national identity and gender—in the context of education. The study examines if there is a difference in national identity and attitudes towards gender roles between university students studying in Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium groups. The study also explores students' experiences of encountering narratives of national identity and gender at both secondary and tertiary levels.

Although no literature exists on the relationship between attitudes towards gender roles and medium of instruction (MoI) in Kazakhstan, the research indicates that young people in Kazakhstan vary in their attitudes towards gender roles (Tatkeyeva, 2018; Urbayeva, 2019). Since attitudes towards gender roles are often shaped and maintained through education, classroom practices, textbooks and teacher beliefs (Arystanbek, 2021; Blumberg, 2009; Kollmayer et al., 2018; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008; Sunderland, 2000), students educated through different languages of instruction, involving different textbooks, classroom cultures

and teachers, might have different attitudes towards gender roles, as highlighted by international research (Corson, 1992; Forountan, 2012).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Nation-Building in Kazakhstan*

Existing scholarship on nation-building in Kazakhstan mainly discusses civic and ethnic nation-building policies and national identity narratives (Burkhanov, 2020; Eschment & De Cordier, 2021; Fedorenko, 2012; Kesici, 2011; Sharipova et al., 2017). As stated previously, civic nationhood is described here as inclusive nationhood based on citizenship, and respect for the country's laws and political institutions, whereas ethnic nationhood is based on ethnic attachment, pride and superiority (Smith, 1991).

Brubaker (2011) describes post-Soviet countries as “nationalizing states”, with the state policies being focused on “the distinction between core or titular nationality and others; the claim to titular primacy; and the diagnosis of titular weakness; the call for remedial state action; and the justification in terms of compensation” (p. 1788). After gaining independence, post-Soviet Central Asian countries are characterized by the introduction of new language policies, and the revival of Islam and national heritage (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Laruelle, 2007; Yerekeshova, 2020; Zhusipbek et al., 2020). However, as the most Russified of the Central Asian states, with a large number of ethnic Russians and other smaller ethnic minority groups, Kazakhstan adopted more cautious and ambiguous nation-building policies. Unlike Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which chose ethnic nation-building policies (Sharipova & Burkhanov, 2021), Kazakhstan established a civic “Kazakhstani” national identity that emphasizes multiculturalism, interethnic harmony and stability and belonging irrespective of ethnic background (Burkhanov, 2020). The Kazakh language as a state language is an essential component of this new supranational identity, and the government is strengthening the state language through Kazakhization, renaming streets and cities into the Kazakh language, ethnic repatriation, establishing a requirement for Kazakh language proficiency for civil service and increasing the number of Kazakh-medium schools (Mkrtychyan, 2014; Zeveleva, 2014). The Kazakhstani supranational identity model is borrowed from the Soviet-style national identity model, which promoted the identity of the “Soviet

people” in the USSR through the brotherhood of the Soviet Republics and the culture and language of the majority ethnic group (Tutumlu & Imyarova, 2021).

Different discourses of this complex model circulate in Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking media (Burkhanov, 2020; Kudaibergenova, 2016a, 2019; Tussupova, 2010), with the discourse of ethnic nationalism, particularly dominant in the Kazakh language aimed at Kazakh-speaking audience, whereas the discourse of civic nationalism prominent in the Russian language, targeting the Russian-speaking audience (Burkhanov, 2013).

### *Nation-Building and Gender in Kazakhstan*

One of the criticisms of the scholarship on nationalism and nationhood is the missing dimension of gender that is invisible in the scholarly literature on this topic (Hylland, 2019). Yet, nationalist narratives tend to portray men and women differently (Mayer, 2000; McClintock, 1993; Peterson, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). The main social role of women is to be able to “reproduce nations, biologically, culturally and symbolically” (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 2), whereas the major social role of men is to protect the country during the times of war and be active social players during peace times. Ethnonationalist discourses not only valorize caring and nurturing women, expect women to preserve traditions and speak the ethnic language, but also control women’s bodies by insisting on biological purity. Furthermore, in contrast to the more active image of men, gendered nationalist discourses tend to produce images of women as victims, passive, weak and subordinate to men. Similar to women, the feminine image of the motherland is also often seen as fertile and in need of protection.

The scholarship on gendered nationalism in Central Asia discusses the narratives both during the Soviet times and during the independence of the states in the region (Cleuziou & Dierenberger, 2016; Kandiyoti, 2007; Peshkova & Thibault, 2022). A recent study based on the discourses of feminist activists revealed several contesting discourses that touched upon “nationalism and decolonization” as well as “oppressive and emancipatory” Soviet legacy (Kravtsova, 2022, p. 83). Many scholars agree that independence and national awakening brought re-traditionalization and more conservative gender roles in Central Asia (Kudaibergenova, 2018; Suyarkulova, 2016; Werner, 2004, 2009).

While educational (Durrani et al., 2022; Palandjian et al., 2018) and media (O'Neil, 2020) discourses emphasize traditional gendered images that entertain more limiting patriarchal gender roles for women, alternative competing gendered narratives exist in cinematography, art and poetry in Central Asia (Belafatti, 2019; Kudaibergenova, 2016b; Salimjan, 2017). Unlike Uzbekistan, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, women are occasionally portrayed as strong characters and agents in state-sponsored movies and videos imbued with nationalist discourses (Belafatti, 2019).

### *Language, National Identity and Gender in Education*

The presence of civic and ethnic nationalism as well as gendered nationalism is also reflected in education. Existing scholarship primarily explores civic and ethnic nationalism and gendered nationalist discourses and narratives in Kazakhstani textbooks (Durrani et al., 2022; Mun, 2014; Palandjian et al., 2018).

Durrani et al. (2022) reported on the absence of ethnic minorities from textbooks. Mun's (2014) study on discourses on national identity in early literacy textbooks used in Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium schools reported similar findings, with textbooks used in Russian-medium schools representing slightly more ethnic and cultural diversity than the textbooks for Kazakh MoI (see also Bekzhanova's chapter in this volume).

Textbooks in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, contain gendered nationalist narratives that reinforce traditional gender roles (Durrani et al., 2022; Palandjian et al., 2018). Thus, early literacy textbooks in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan present women mainly in the home domain and men in the professional and public domains (Palandjian et al., 2018). Men in early literacy textbooks in Kazakhstan are portrayed as warriors and heroes, who are the central topic of the textbooks, whereas women tend to be depicted wearing traditional clothes and cradling babies, with the professional representations being limited to women teachers or nurses. Likewise, secondary school textbooks in Kazakhstan depicted gendered power relationships through a more frequent representation of men than women in imagery and texts, more importance given to men over women, biased gendered language and portraying stereotypical gender roles (Durrani et al., 2022). Similar to the gendered representations of men and women in early literacy textbooks (Palandjian et al., 2018), men in secondary school textbooks were portrayed as defenders of the nation, leaders, STEM experts, and knowledgeable

and wise characters, whereas women were mostly depicted as mothers, preserving culture and traditions, or women of idealized feminine beauty, and in need of protection (Durrani et al., 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods embedded design as it allows to complement quantitative data with qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). The data from the survey and the interviews were used to answer the following research question: “Is there a difference in the strength of national identity and attitudes towards gender roles between students’ from Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium groups?”

To collect quantitative data on national identity and attitudes towards gender roles, a questionnaire available in Kazakh and Russian was elaborated. The questionnaire included questions on demographics (seven items), and six-point Likert scales on national identity (fifteen items) and attitudes towards gender roles (twenty-one items). The items on demography included information about students’ gender, year of study, home region, MoI in school, MoI at the university, fluency in the Russian language and fluency in the Kazakh language.

Scales for the national identity (fifteen items) included subscales on the strength of national identity in general (seven items), and two subscales on civic (four items) and ethnic (four items) conceptualizations of national identity. The first subscale was adapted from the existing survey instrument designed by Der-Karabetian and Ruiz (1993) and asked the students to rate the extent of their agreement with such statements as “Being a Kazakhstani plays an important part of my life”, “My destiny is closely connected to the destiny of Kazakhstan”, etc. The two subscales on the conceptualizations of national identity were built by borrowing some items from the existing instrument used by Sharipova et al. (2017) and developing new items. The subscales asked the students to rate how important each of the eight statements was to be Kazakhstani. Civic national identity included the following four items: “To have citizenship of Kazakhstan”, “To respect political institutions and laws of the country”, “To have lived in Kazakhstan for most of one’s life” and “To feel Kazakhstani”. The four items for ethnic national identity were: “To be able to speak Kazakh”, “To be a Muslim”, “To have ancestry from Kazakhstan”, and “To respect Kazakh culture and uphold traditions”.

To measure attitudes towards gender roles, a scale was created that borrowed items from two existing survey instruments designed by García-Cueto et al. (2015) and Lomazzi (2017), respectively. The students were asked to rate the extent of their agreement with such statements as “Women are naturally better at taking care of children than men”, “Men have more rights to work amid the lack of jobs as they are primary breadwinners in their families”, “Men and women should play equally important parts in politics”, etc.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected during December 2022 and January 2023, once ethical approval from Ulster University and Nazarbayev University was gained. Three different universities in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, were contacted to assist with the distribution of information about the study along with the link to the questionnaire. Since the contacted universities had groups that received instruction in the Kazakh language and groups with Russian language instruction, both students from Kazakh-medium groups and students from Russian-medium groups could be reached. The responses used for analysis had at least 70% of the survey completed and important demographics items answered. To control for the impact of ethnicity, only data from ethnic Kazakh students was analyzed.

Overall, 102 responses were used for the analysis (see Table 8.1). Internal consistency of all the scales and subscales was measured using Cronbach alpha. The data was considered reliable as Cronbach alpha comprised 0.88 for the strength of national identity, 0.77 for civic national identity, 0.79 for ethnic national identity and 0.90 for attitudes towards gender roles.

From the survey respondents, 24 students interested in sharing their experiences with the research team were selected to participate in individual semi-structured interviews (see Table 8.1). Each participant was given a unique code that contained information of the participant’s MoI and gender. For instance, the six male participants with Kazakh language of instruction were given the following codes: Kz\_m\_1, Kz\_m\_2, Kz\_m\_3, Kz\_m\_4, Kz\_m\_5 and Kz\_m\_6. The interviews were used to collect qualitative data on students’ national identity and attitudes towards gender roles as well as students’ experiences of encountering narratives of national identity and gender roles in school environments, teachers’ and students’ beliefs, educational institutions or classroom culture and textbooks and materials.

**Table 8.1** Socio-demographics of the research participants

	<i>Kazakh MoI</i>		<i>Russian MoI</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Survey (undergraduate students, 1–4 year)	56	100	46	100	102	100
Males	23	41.07	21	45.65	44	43.14
Females	33	58.92	25	54.35	58	56.86
Interviews (undergraduate students, 3–4 year)	12	100	12	100	24	100
Males	6	50	6	50	12	50
Females	6	50	6	50	12	50

## FINDINGS

### *Quantitative Analysis*

Independent samples t-test revealed that the scores of the students from Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium groups differed for: (a) Knowledge of languages, (b) strength of national identity and (c) attitudes towards gender roles (Table 8.2).

**Table 8.2** Independent samples T-test

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Kazakh MOI</i>		<i>Russian MOI</i>		<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Knowledge of the Kazakh language	99	5.78	0.50	4.43	1.19	7.66	0.000
Knowledge of the Russian language	99	5.09	1.02	5.80	0.45	-4.38	0.000
Strength of national identity	98	33.55	6.19	28.04	6.87	5.50	0.000
Civic	100	16.21	4.40	13.23	3.94	3.56	0.001
Ethnic	100	16.14	4.89	11.41	3.99	5.27	0.000
Attitudes towards gender roles	86	64.69	14.74	55.29	15.75	2.95	0.004

**Table 8.3** Paired samples T-test

<i>Language of instruction</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Civic national identity</i>		<i>Ethnic national identity</i>		<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Kazakh	55	16.21	4.40	16.14	4.89	0.14	0.887
Russian	45	13.23	3.95	11.41	3.99	3.09	0.003

The scores for self-reported knowledge of Kazakh were higher for students studying at the university in Kazakh-medium groups than the scores of students from Russian-medium groups,  $t(99) = 7.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Similarly, students who studied at the university in Kazakh-medium groups reported lower knowledge of the Russian language compared to students from Russian-medium groups,  $t(99) = -.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

Participants from Kazakh-medium groups felt stronger about national identity, compared to participants from Russian-medium groups,  $t(98) = 5.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Students from Kazakh-medium groups also attached significantly more importance to both civic and ethnic components of national identity than students from Russian-medium groups,  $t(100) = 3.56$ ,  $p = 0.001$  and  $t(100) = 5.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , respectively. Furthermore, paired samples t-test (Table 8.3) revealed that students in Russian-medium groups attached more importance to the civic rather than ethnic component of national identity,  $t(45) = 3.09$ ,  $p = 0.003$ .

Finally, significant differences were found between Kazakh and Russian MoI in attitudes towards gender roles,  $t(86) = 2.95$ ,  $p = 0.004$ . Students studying at the university in Kazakh had more traditional gender roles attitudes than students studying in the Russian language.

### *Qualitative Analysis*

#### *National Identity in School and University*

When asked about events on patriotism and national identity at school and at university, participants from Kazakh-medium groups reported having a variety of patriotic events at school and mentioned a few at the university. Most of these events were related to the Kazakh language and poetry and included performances, plays, contests, and events devoted to commemorating important historical events and Kazakh poets. For

instance, one of the girls (Kz\_f\_4) who is receiving her education in the Kazakh language shared:

For example, we wrote a lot of essays devoted to Abay [Kazakh poet]. At that time, I participated in different contests, such as expressive readings, essay writing, and reading monologues. When I won, I felt patriotic because I won something in Kazakh. If I read a monologue in Kazakh, write a poem in Kazakh, and receive a certificate reading it, I gain a special feeling.

Later in the interview, the participant also said: “At school, patriotism was linked to language. It is necessary to know the Kazakh language, Kazakh poets. It is necessary to learn the vocabulary of the Kazakh language well”. A male student from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_m\_3) even said that he had written his own poem devoted to patriotism and cited a verse from it during the interview. Another male participant from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_m\_4) added: “I consider it patriotic to teach glorifying the Kazakh language for those studying in Kazakh. I also consider it important to conduct classes in this way for Russian speakers and ethnic Russians. I mean to conduct classes that foster patriotism”.

Interestingly, when asked about events devoted to patriotism, participants from Russian-medium groups talked mostly only about classroom hours, except for one female student from a Russian-medium group (Ru\_f\_5), who gave a bigger range of events such as concerts, exhibitions, charity work and round tables. The content of classroom hours that students from Russian-medium groups discussed with their teachers was less focused on language and more on civic attributes such as national currency, constitution and inclusivity of other ethnicities. For instance, a female student from a Russian-medium group (Ru\_f\_3) said: “During the classroom hours there was a short summary of how we gained independence, how many ethnicities overall live in the country”. Another female student from a Russian-medium group (Ru\_f\_1) shared: “We had classroom hours. We remembered important dates, connected to the independence, transitioning to using national currency”.

Several participants stated that students from Kazakh-medium groups are more patriotic than students from Russian-medium groups. For instance, a female student from Russian MoI (Ru\_f\_1) shared:

At the university, it [patriotism] is discussed more in Kazakh-medium groups. And our teachers also told us that Kazakh-medium groups are more active in terms of this. Roughly speaking, Kazakh-medium groups are more patriotic. They tend to be involved in this type of activities and so on.

Patriotism at the universities was often linked to language and several participants also mentioned that Kazakh-medium groups are better at teaching and transferring Kazakh culture and language. For instance, a male student from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_m\_6) said: “For Kazakhs, living on their own land, talking in their native language is already patriotism. I don’t notice it much among students from Russian-medium groups”.

#### *Gender Roles Attitudes at School and University*

The majority of participants noticed more expectations from girls in terms of academic achievement, effort, diligence and attendance at universities and schools. Interestingly, four female students also mentioned restrictions for girls in terms of appearance such as clothes and hair in Kazakh-medium schools. Thus, a female participant from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_f\_1) said: “There were moments in primary school, when we [girls] were not allowed to wear *shalbar* [trousers]”. Another female participant from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_f\_4) also shared her experience studying at school:

Girls were very strongly judged. We wore skirts, and they had to be below our knees. Girls also wore collared shirts, which sometimes had shiny stones on them. Then they [teachers] said: “Why are you wearing a shiny shirt? Why are you plucking your eyebrows? They are already adults, they need a guy.” Honestly, that’s what they said in our school. Girls were forced to stand in front of everyone, and they said: “This girl wore a short skirt, shiny tights. Her hair is not in two braids. Her hair is in a bun.”

Two girls who studied in Kazakh-medium groups in school also talked about how teachers expect girls to behave in relation to the concept of purity of blood and nationalism. For instance, one of these participants (Kz\_f\_2) shared: “Mostly at school patriotism was like this: ‘You need to speak Kazakh’, ‘You need to interact only with Kazakhs’, ‘You are Kazakh girls, you should marry Kazakh guys.’ And at home it is the same”.

Similarly, only participants from Kazakh-medium groups talked about the use of *uyat*, or shame, used by teachers to regulate girls' behaviour in schools. Thus, one of the male students from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_m\_6) remembered what he heard teachers saying to girls: "It's *uyat* [shame] for girls. Do not go out too much. Do not do this or that. Study well. Do not date guys".

Eight participants stated that they noticed more freedom and gender equality in Russian-medium classrooms compared to Kazakh-medium classrooms. For instance, a female student from a Russian-medium group (Ru\_f\_1) shared: "Well, in Kazakh-medium groups, boys, they somehow feel a certain superiority in the group, they put themselves above girls. And they demonstrate this attitude, maybe consciously, maybe unconsciously". A male student from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_m\_3) also said:

In Russian groups, girls talk openly, they can talk about anything that is on their mind. And in Kazakh-medium groups, it's not that they are reserved, but some things are not talked about, some topics are not touched, and they don't talk about it. In Russian-medium groups, girls... feminism... how to explain... they openly express their opinion.

Six participants reported having more discussions about gender equality at the universities than at schools. The participants mentioned courses about gender, and conversations about gender with their classmates. Although most participants reported instances of gendered treatment of students at the universities, there were more occasions mentioned by students from Kazakh-medium groups. For instance, one of the male students from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_m\_1) shared the following when talking about university teachers grading his task at the university:

I completed two tasks correctly, but I could not fully complete one of the tasks. I was told they would give me 75 points. Then, when I was on my way to my seat, they said, "Wait. You look like a guy who will become a leader". So, just like that, they gave me 90 points. On my way back to my seat, the girls devoured me with their eyes. [with anger]

A similar example of university teachers not expecting much from female students was provided by a female student from a Kazakh-medium group (Kz\_f\_2). Here, she is talking about teachers and their expectations from girls at her university: "... they talk about work, but not so much

about success in a career or school. They say, ‘study, get a job close to your home’, that’s about it. More realistic, but not particularly motivating. Not much is expected”. A student from a Russian-medium group (Ru\_f\_5) also noticed: “In Russian-medium groups, mostly there’s equality between boys and girls. In the Kazakh-medium groups there was a power imbalance in favor of boys, because they... how to put it, teachers liked them more”.

## DISCUSSION

Quantitative findings revealed that students from Kazakh-medium groups were more proficient in the Kazakh language and had a stronger sense of national identity than students from Russian-medium groups. Qualitative analysis complemented this data, showing that students from Kazakh-medium groups reported having a lot of events on patriotism, most of which were focused on elements of ethnic national identity such as language, poetry and literature. Students from Russian-medium groups reported much fewer events on patriotism in school, with the content of these events primarily focused on civic elements of national identity. This also explains the quantitative finding that students from Russian-medium groups had attached more importance to civic conceptualization of national identity compared to ethnic elements of national identity. The results on national identity reflect the findings of the studies that reported more ethnically inclusive textbooks for Russian-medium groups compared to Kazakh-medium groups (Mun, 2014), and ethnonationalist discourse in literature textbooks for Kazakh-medium groups (Asanova, 2007). The results also go in line with the scholarship on different national identity discourses circulating in Kazakh- and Russian-speaking environments (Burkhanov, 2013, 2020; Kudaibergenova, 2016a, 2019; Tussupova, 2010). Strong attachment to both civic and ethnic national identity components for students from Kazakh-medium groups might be explained by Kazakhness and Kazakhstaniness being intertwined (Laruelle, 2014). Weaker attachment of Russian-medium students compared to Kazakh-medium students to the civic component of national identity might also be explained by the fact that Kazakh as a state language is an important symbolic marker of “Kazakhstani” civic national identity.

Quantitative findings showed that students from Kazakh-medium groups had more traditional attitudes towards gender roles than students

from Russian-medium groups. Qualitative analysis complemented quantitative data, showing that students perceived Russian-medium groups to have more freedom for female students to express their opinions and a better classroom climate regarding gender equality. More restrictions for girls regarding dress code and hair were reported in Kazakh-medium schools. Some of these restrictions were related to the concept of purity of blood central to ethnic nationalism. Another qualitative finding was the use of *uyat*, or shaming in Kazakh-medium schools, which was used to regulate behaviour of students, including female students' behaviour, in the educational settings. The finding goes in line with the literature that states that the culture of shame in Central Asian countries is often used to regulate individual's behaviour to ensure their compliance to conservative gender norms (Thibault & Caron, 2022). More gender-equal classroom environment in Russian-medium educational settings might be explained by greater ethnic diversity in classrooms that allow more contact with Slavic ethnicities. According to Urbayeva (2019), Slavic ethnic groups in Central Asia have more egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles than titular ethnic groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed differences in the strength of national identity and its conceptualizations as well as attitudes towards gender roles reported by participants from Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium groups. These finding was also reflected in students' experiences in relation to the narratives of national identity and gender at school and university. Bridging the gap between two languages of instruction in terms of conceptualizations of national identity and attitudes towards gender roles might be useful for creating a more cohesive Kazakhstani society. Education is a powerful instrument to achieve greater gender equality and a stronger sense of national identity that reflects the governmental discourse of multiculturalism and inclusivity by means and through the common state language.

For Russian-medium institutions and classrooms, it could be achieved by providing better quality Kazakh language teaching that will provide better outcomes in terms of fluency in the language, and introducing different perspectives including decolonial ones in the classrooms, and history and literature textbooks. Better proficiency in the Kazakh language might create more room, opportunities and motivation for

Russian-medium students to participate more actively in events related to the Kazakh language, poetry and literature. Better quality teaching of the Kazakh language might also be important not only for the students of titular ethnicity in Russian-medium classrooms, but also for ethnic minority students who mainly learn the national language only in educational institutions and are not exposed to the language in their homes. Ethnic minorities have weaker feelings of pride for the country (Sharipova, 2020), possibly due to low proficiency in the Kazakh language. Providing more quality teaching of the Kazakh language in Russian-medium schools might increase the strength of belonging for this group of students in Kazakhstan and allow them to connect strongly with the national identity model introduced by the government. Decolonial perspectives might also allow students of titular ethnicity to connect closer to their ethnic core, whereas a variety of perspectives offered in the classrooms could enhance students' critical thinking.

For Kazakh-medium institutions and classrooms to adequately reflect nation-building policy, more multiculturalism and ethnic diversity might be represented in textbooks. Gender equality could be improved through indigenous Kazakh culture, portraying strong images of women such as brave and heroic female characters or the image of a woman that is contributing to the country's well-being and is not seen as inferior to men. More agency and power given to female students might allow girls to conceptualize gender and Kazakhness from a more gender-balanced lens and allow them to create a more empowered image of a woman through art, poetry, literature or filmmaking. For instance, schools might involve female students into positions where they can contest existing gender norms through cultural and literary events, or connecting to the nomadic past and highlight traditions and narratives that empower women. Teacher training for gender-sensitive teaching might also touch upon cultural elements that might ensure gender equality.

The limitation of this small-scale research is that it employed a small sample and did not consider regional differences. The differences between urban and rural schools, language in the family and language of consuming content were also not considered. Further research could continue exploring how the MoI might influence national identity and gender in education through school landscape analysis, classroom observations and collecting data from teachers and school administration.

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