RESEARCH ARTICLE

Framing feminism in Eurasia: bottom–up strategies of depoliticisation and repoliticisation

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Worldwide, feminist politics is increasingly marginalised and faces resistance from governments and societies. In post-socialist Eurasia, gender discourses are dominated by international donors promoting a neoliberal approach, as well as states mobilising patriarchal norms for nation building. Focusing on three grassroots feminist initiatives in Eurasia, this article explores alternative gender visions emerging from the ground up, which are oriented towards social justice. Drawing on critical frame analysis, literature on creativity and gender, and intersectionality, we examine the framing strategies deployed by feminist groups to advance their agendas and translate feminist thinking into local contexts. Analysing both discursive and visual forms of expression, we identify two framing strategies: depoliticisation (to reach broader audiences and avoid backlash) and repoliticisation (to disrupt dominant discourses). By discussing the dilemmas arising from each strategy, the article contributes to ongoing debates on feminist organising in contexts that are hostile to feminism.

Keywords creativity • Eurasia • feminism • framing • social justice • translation

Key messages
- In post-socialist Eurasia, gender discourses are dominated by international donors who promote a neoliberal approach to women's empowerment and governments that mobilise patriarchal norms to support nation building.
- Grassroots feminist activists advance alternative gender visions centred on social justice.
- Feminist activists in Eurasia deploy two main framing strategies: depoliticisation, which allows them to reach broader audiences and avoid backlash, and repoliticisation, which aims at disrupting hegemonic discourses.
- Each framing strategy entails drawbacks and trade-offs related to the outreach, solidarity and sustainability options available to activists.

Introduction

In many countries around the world, feminist politics faces resistance from governments and societies. The rise of conservative values worldwide testifies to the mounting opposition to feminist and queer agendas (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022), which is also visible in post-socialist Eurasia.[1] Significant attention has been devoted to Russia's 'traditional values' discourse, which is also used as a geopolitical tool to maintain influence over the region, as demonstrated by Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 (Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan, 2023). Nonetheless, struggles around gender in Eurasia have a longer history that can be traced back to the Soviet project of women's emancipation. After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the region underwent a gendered transition to neoliberal capitalism. Along with international development aid, gender equality became one of the international norms that were used to 'develop' the former socialist region in the Western image while also justifying donors' interventions in these countries' domestic governance. Until now, gender discourses in this region have been shaped by a twofold dynamic: on the one hand, they are dominated by international donors that promote a one-size-fits-all, neoliberal approach based on universal human rights and view gender equality as a means for democracy promotion (Ishkanian, 2008); on the other hand, state-sponsored gender orders have been consolidating across Eurasia. If states in the region were receptive to international norms and accompanying funding in the 1990s, in recent years, we see more explicit attempts by national authorities to regulate gender as part of nation-building processes. Gender has become a tool to justify nationalist and centralising projects (Cleuziou and Direnberger, 2016). Under such state visions, women are attributed the ambiguous role of 'bearers of tradition and modernity' (Krebs, 2020: 39), merging motherhood with nation building.

Amid these complex dynamics involving gender visions promoted by donors from outside and by governments from above, we argue that there is a third way emerging from the ground up. We suggest shifting the focus towards a new generation of small-scale, grassroots feminist initiatives in Eurasia as an analytical move to uncover emerging interpretations of gender relations that challenge both the dominant donor- and state-sponsored orders. As we demonstrate, these groups are developing their own unique feminist visions that are oriented towards social justice. This article asks: what framing strategies do grassroots feminist initiatives in Eurasia deploy to advance their agendas, and what are the implications of these strategies? Focusing on discursive and visual forms of expression, we reveal activists' agency in crafting their agendas by drawing on multiple visions of gender equality, which are shaped by the dominant discourses (donors and states) while, at the same time, reinterpreting, subverting or challenging them in creative ways. Furthermore, we reflect on the practical consequences of these choices in terms of opportunities for coalition building, solidarity and sustainability that they open or preclude.

This article contributes to ongoing discussions about the localisation of feminism in post-socialist Eurasia, a context that has been neglected in transnational feminist histories (Cerwonka, 2008; Suchland, 2011; Koobak et al, 2020; Peshkova and Thibault, 2022).[2] Feminist politics in the region is often disregarded due to hostile state and societal perceptions, the absence of an organised feminist 'movement', and the NGO-isation of donor-funded women's activism. Adding nuance to the understanding of the contemporary feminist landscapes in Eurasia, we show how small-scale grassroots groups navigate between the state and international donors, possibly charting a third way.

Empirically, the article investigates how grassroots feminist groups re-imagine gender roles in challenging sociocultural and political contexts of Eurasia, where the gender lens is not popular (Ziemer, 2020; Peshkova and Thibault, 2022). Due to Soviet legacies, national governments and most local academics continue focusing on women's emancipation, which was defined in Soviet times as the 'women's question'. Under Soviet modernisation policies, the liberation of the so-called 'women of the East' in Muslim parts of the Soviet Union was of particular importance to the state (Shurko, 2016). Consequently, in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the term 'gender' is still widely associated with Western donors, who introduced it in the region in the 1990s through development projects. In Muslim-majority countries of the region, donor-sponsored programmes for gender equality viewed Muslim women as in need of 'extra saving', not only from communism and poverty but also from Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2002). The concept of gender lacks resonance among the general population, who tend to view categories of male and female as biological rather than sociocultural. The gender lens, however, provides an important analytical category to examine social change in the region because of the pronounced gendered nature of both people's socialisation and post-Soviet nation-building processes. It is in this context that grassroots feminist groups develop their agendas.

Within Eurasia, we focus on three initiatives: UyatEmes.kz, whose goal is to change attitudes on sexual education in Kazakhstan; Tell Me Sister, which denounces sexual harassment in Tajikistan; and the Feminist Peace Collective, which spreads a feminist peace discourse in Azerbaijan. These groups represent a new wave of activism, which distinguishes itself from the 'first wave' of women's rights activism originating around Western donors' funding in the 1990s. This younger generation relies on informal structures and a strong social media presence, spontaneous rather than project-based actions and is more sceptical of donor funding and agendas (Aliyeva, 2020; Namazov, 2021; Dall'Agnola, 2022). Considering the socio-political context in which they operate, not all these groups describe themselves as feminist. Nevertheless, we analyse their agendas as such, given that they all challenge the dominant gender norms in their respective societies. Following an interpretivist standpoint, we do not approach them as selected 'cases' that would be representative of all feminist groups in these countries. However, we consider them as illustrative of this new generation of feminist activism – a trend that can be observed across Eurasia (Kudaibergenova, 2019). Moreover, we privileged access over case selection due to our familiarity with the context and proximity to these groups. Taken together, these three initiatives allow us to foreground the emergence of bottom-up gender visions, which differ from the dominant donor- and state-sponsored ones. As we demonstrate, in contrast with donors and governments, these groups are more sensitive to local contexts and oriented towards social justice in that they advocate for a fairer distribution of resources, power and privileges in society across gender and other interlocking axes of oppression.

Theoretically, our analysis is inspired by feminist conceptualisations of frames, which have been deployed to explore multiple interpretations of gender equality advanced by activists (Ferree, 2003; Ciccia and Roggeband, 2021). Originating in social movement theory, framing literature mostly focuses on organised campaigns and (transnational) protest actions. In our analysis, however, we look at three small-scale initiatives operating at a very local level. In Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, which are characterised by highly centralised forms of governance and top-down state ideologies, open protests would be a risky endeavour. Moreover, while analyses of social movements in post-socialist Eurasia tend to focus on so-called 'colour revolutions' and demonstrations aimed at regime change, we zoom in on grassroots activists whose claims are marginalised and who largely rely on online communication (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Dall'Agnola, 2022). The online nature of feminist politics requires activists to develop multifaceted forms of expression, which include not only texts but also visual artefacts (illustrations, videos, graphic design and so on). Therefore, besides examining activists' discursive frames, we integrate an analysis of these groups' artistic practices, as they also reflect frames. To do so, we draw on literature on gender and creativity, which stresses that art is not only aesthetics but also a political practice. Finally, we examine these groups' strategies through the lens of intersectionality 'as a normative and empirical paradigm' that illuminates intersecting axes of oppression and subordination (Hancock, 2007). This allows us to identify which constituencies are (not) addressed by these groups, as well as the practical and normative implications of these choices (Ciccia and Roggeband, 2021).

We argue that feminist activists in Eurasia deploy two framing strategies. One is depoliticisation, which means framing their claims in line with dominant social norms by removing the political (feminist) character of a particular gender issue. This allows these groups to avoid societal backlash, reach broader audiences and even build consensus. As we show, the depoliticising strategy is largely subversive. It seemingly conforms to the dominant values while also endowing them with new meanings. Another strategy is repoliticisation: activists choose radical frames to disrupt the existing consensus around an issue and attribute it with a new, feminist meaning. Each strategy comes with costs, as each vision of gender equality that is pursued has consequences for the scale of representation, outreach and solidarity that can be achieved. Our analysis provides original insights into the dilemmas that activists face when choosing particular frames to advance a feminist agenda in contexts that are hostile to feminism, both politically and socially.

In what follows, we outline the article's conceptual framework, combining insights from scholarship on framing and on gender and creativity. The methodological and analytical framework, which relies on an intersectional lens, is then explained. In the empirical sections, we discuss each feminist initiative by examining the main frames deployed, both discursively and in artistic expression practices, and the consequences thereof. The conclusion reflects on the social justice vision that feminist groups create and the main takeaways from this article.

Framing, gender and creativity

Framing is a productive lens to explore feminist claims, as activists need to position themselves towards target audiences by presenting their demands in specific ways. We approach frames as interpretation schemes that structure the meaning of reality

by organising experiences and guiding action (Goffman, 1974). Frames allow activists to organise their agendas, identify a problem and call for action. Original conceptualisations of frames in social movement theory assumed that 'frame resonance', that is, a congruence with society's dominant values and principles, is necessary for a movement to be successful. In other words, frames need to be credible, culturally consistent and experientially commensurable. Feminist scholars challenged this assumption, arguing that not all activists or groups within the feminist movement aspire for resonance when framing their agendas. Some purposefully mobilise frames that go beyond the acceptable spectrum of values to disrupt common sense. Moreover, the choice between more 'resonant' or 'radical' frames is shaped by and reflects power relations, discursive hegemony and political acceptability (Ferree, 2003). What is radical or resonant about feminism is context specific, both in space and time: frames that seem 'radical' in one context may be 'resonant' in another, and vice versa.

In Eurasia, marked by Soviet legacies and the Cold War rivalry between the Eastern and Western blocs, using the word 'feminism' can be a radical practice. Soviet authorities viewed feminism as a Western, bourgeois ideology, whereas equality between men and women was considered as already achieved under state socialism. Even as communism collapsed in the 1990s, societal reactions towards Western(-promoted) understandings of feminism remained mostly negative (Heitlinger, 1996). Among the population, feminism was perceived as anti-male and feminists as 'men-haters'. Once communist approaches to women's empowerment became irrelevant with the transition to a free-market economy and liberal democracy, which entailed the rollback of welfare states, new visions of gender relations appeared. Post-Soviet leaders mobilised patriarchal norms to legitimise nation-building projects, recasting women into 'traditional' roles of mothers and carers (Ziemer, 2020). In this context, activists working on gender issues are still reluctant to call themselves 'feminists'.

While acknowledging the role of discursive hegemony in marginalising feminist discourses, thus dictating the boundaries within which certain claims are seen as acceptable, this article foregrounds activists' agency in strategically navigating this context and choosing among available frames to advance their agendas. We identify two main framing strategies: depoliticisation and repoliticisation. In the first case, activists frame their claims in line with the accepted social values and norms in order not to seem radical. Depoliticisation entails removing the political character of an issue (Edkins, 1999). For instance, this occurs when activists frame a gender issue as a matter of technical knowledge or expertise. In the second case, activists consciously choose radical frames over resonant ones. Repoliticisation means unsettling the established order around a certain phenomenon (Edkins, 1999). By making visible the values and ideologies informing political decisions, activists seek to disrupt what is 'common sense'. Rather than treating depoliticisation and repoliticisation as a binary, we acknowledge that activists might play with frames to push the discursive boundaries of what is acceptable in a given context through subversion. This implies that rather than directly confronting discursive hegemony, activists may follow the patriarchal 'rules of the game' while simultaneously infusing them with new meanings (see Kandiyoti, 1988). Eventually, subversion may create new ways of perceiving the world.

Framing is an interactive process that is inherently about the inclusion and exclusion of ideas (Ferree, 2003). The decision to reduce feminist claims to frames that are most resonant with societal norms can bring gains in terms of influence on political actors, garnering public support and preventing countermovements. However, resonant

frames may exclude other feminist interests and needs that are radical (thus less defensible in a given context) but that may imply more fundamental social changes. Framing is a costly choice and implies trade-offs on several levels, including whose voice is represented, what vision of gender equality is pursued and what the scale of outreach and collaborations that can be achieved is. This is why, in line with critical frame analysis (CFA) principles, our analysis focuses not only on what is included in activists' frames but also on what remains excluded, whether intentionally or unintendedly (Bacchi, 2005; Verloo, 2007). The identification of silences in activists' discourses allows us to reveal the operations of power and to critically reflect on the nature of gender equality that these groups create in relation to dominant discourses.

We analyse frames as manifested in both discursive and visual forms of expression. On the level of discourse, we pay attention to activists' multi-level translation of feminist vocabulary. We understand translation in a twofold way. First, we refer to the act of linguistic translation of feminist concepts, which is linked to activists' choice of a specific language to articulate their agendas. This is relevant in the post-Soviet context characterised by multilingualism. In Central Asia, this involves hierarchies between languages, with Russian being an urban and elitist language.[3] Moreover, the discourses that we examine are influenced by transnational flows of ideas. These include not only international donors' jargon related to gender norms but also global trends in feminist politics to which activists are exposed, both via the transnational online space and through their own international mobility. Second, we understand translation as an act of reshaping feminist concepts (Zwingel and Doerr, 2024), for instance, through the creative adaptation or reframing of gender norms to fit local contexts or particular goals. Just like the act of choosing one frame over another, the translation of feminist politics also comes with costs, as it implies a choice over the inclusion and exclusion of meanings.

On the level of visual forms of expression, we acknowledge the role of activists in tapping into a society's visual knowledge to voice a critique and call for collective action (Doerr et al, 2013). The groups use creative practices as one tool to advance their agendas, alongside research, advocacy and education. Since they operate mostly online, their social media presence requires the strategic use of visual elements, such as symbols, graphic design and the use of colours that evoke particular meanings or emotions. Moreover, these groups actively produce visual artefacts (original illustrations or videos) as a medium to engage the public. These either serve to strengthen the message conveyed through texts or constitute expressive means on their own. Social media blurs the boundaries between art users and producers, a phenomenon described as 'convergence culture' (Oates-Indruchová and Mikats, 2022). This enables a multidirectional communication between these activists and target audiences: the latter can not only comment on posts but also participate in content production by sharing first-person stories or reappropriating the creative work to further spread a feminist agenda. In the article's conclusions, we reflect on how social media both enables and limits the strategies of feminist activists in Eurasia.

By focusing on groups that operate at a micro level and mostly online, we highlight ordinary locations of creativity, as opposed to elitist and exclusive artistic practices (Oates-Indruchová and Mikats, 2022; Burgess, 2006). To examine them, we draw on literature on art as a political practice, which stresses that art is not only an aesthetic experience but also bound to the promise of a better world (Sommer, 2014). For all groups that we investigate, art has an 'intervention effect' (Sommer, 2014): it is used to generate

a reaction in society, aiming to contribute to social change. We also acknowledge the role of artistic production in fostering social relations and civic engagement. For socially engaged artists, creative practices are inevitably linked to care because they 'care about and/or care for the communities they are working with' (Alacovska, 2020: 733). The social role of art is related to the everyday, gendered experiences of oppression that activists face in their respective communities: lack of sex education in Kazakhstan, sexual harassment in Tajikistan and militarisation in Azerbaijan.

The framing strategies of depoliticisation and repoliticisation are visible not only in discourses but also in artistic practices. Repoliticising strategies – such as the one we discuss in the case of the Feminist Peace Collective – align with Mouffe's (2007) concept of 'critical art', which directly challenges the dominant consensus and hegemony. In contrast, when activists depoliticise their struggles, as in the cases of UyatEmes.kz and Tell Me Sister, their creative practices tap into the shared visual knowledge of their respective societies while simultaneously subverting and reframing pre-existing imaginaries to foster social change.

Methodological and analytical framework

This article adopts an interpretivist methodology, which is meaning centred and requires reflexivity. It focuses on interpretations of values and beliefs, highlights normative variations, and unveils alternatives (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014). As per requirements at Belgian universities, where the two authors were based when this research was conducted, ethical approval from the ethics committee of Ghent University was obtained on 18 January 2022. The corresponding data management plan was approved by the Research Foundation-Flanders on 23 May 2022. We conducted three online, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the founders of the groups between March 2022 and 2023. They were audio-recorded and conducted in English, which was chosen by the activists, who are multilingual. Informed consent to record the interviews and use names in publications was obtained orally. Interviews are complemented by long-term observations and dialogue with activists from the three initiatives, as well as social media posts, publications and visual materials issued by these groups. Our analysis is also informed by extensive fieldwork experience, allowing us to contextualise the developments under study. Both authors have conducted long-term research on political and social dynamics in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, examining, among other things, gender politics as a field of contestation between international donors, governments and civil society (Kluczewska, 2022; Luciani, 2023). This article is inspired by our encounters with activists who are attempting to redefine gender orders in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. It is key to acknowledge our positionality as researchers embedded in Western neoliberal academia and as outsiders vis-à-vis feminist activism in Eurasia and how this has shaped the research process. First, the scope of this analysis has been affected by our access to feminist groups, which has been mediated by existing academic and personal networks. Second, our positionality influenced our analytical framework and choices, also reflecting our own 'politics of translation' (Zwingel and Doerr, 2024). We have interpreted and framed feminist activism in non-Western contexts for a specific audience: English-language political science and gender scholars. For instance, the intersectionality lens was, to some extent, 'imposed' by us as researchers to frame the groups' activism rather than originating from their

own thinking. Only the Feminist Peace Collective mobilises intersectionality in their agenda, whereas the other two groups do not use it explicitly. The decision to foreground intersectionality reflects our positionality as scholars rather than the groups' self-articulations. At the same time, we recognise that our positionality does not simply reproduce the separation between feminist activism and academia: we remain attentive to knowledge produced outside of academia and through struggles (Ackerly and True, 2010). This commitment shaped our methodological choice to centre activists' interpretations through in-depth interviews and to cite activists' own academic works and analyses (Kabatova, 2022; Samadzade, 2022), which provide key insights into their groups' strategies, challenges and frames.

To analyse the data, we rely on CFA, which is a methodology designed to address discursive power dynamics connected to the representation that socio–political actors offer about gender equality (Verloo and Lombardo, 2007; Van Den Haar and Verloo, 2016). While this framework was developed to analyse the multiple meanings of gender equality in policymaking, we apply it to examine feminist groups' strategies of mainstreaming their ideas to the public and the visions of gender equality that they advance. We use CFA as an analytical guide to illuminate certain aspects of these groups' discourse: how activists define the problem that they tackle; what solutions or actions are proposed to address it; whose voices or perspectives are included and/ or excluded in the framing of the problem/solution; and intersectionality, meaning whether and how the intersection of gender with other forms of oppression is included as part of the definition of the problem/solution.

As explained earlier, while we use intersectionality as an analytical tool to analyse activist discourses,[4] not all the groups explicitly mobilise this concept. However, as will be seen, their framing strategies reflect an intersectional approach to the social phenomena at the core of their activism because they recognise that it is not one but multiple traits of identity that shape women's oppression. For example, intersecting vectors of gender and other axes of marginalisation shape women's experiences of domestic violence, which is an important topic for all three groups, as gender inequality intersects with class–based oppression and homo/transphobia. In Eurasia, the most vulnerable social groups are women from disadvantaged socio–economic backgrounds and with low levels of education who are financially dependent on their husbands, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals (Cleuziou and Direnberger, 2016; Ziemer, 2020). This further justifies our use of intersectionality as part of our interpretive framework.

Our analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of intersecting axes of oppression specific to the Eurasian context. Besides the intersections of gender with class and sexual orientation/gender identity, we highlight the role of age, ethnicity and linguistic diversity. Age is relevant because in many Eurasian countries, young women are deprived of power, resources and autonomy. For instance, family settings where young women live with parents–in–law (common in Central Asia and the South Caucasus) limit these women's abilities to make independent choices and are often linked to emotional abuse by mothers–in–law (Turaeva and Becker, 2022). The role of ethnicity as an intersecting axis of oppression requires further contextualisation. While ethnicity is often meant to refer to people with a migration background in Western contexts, in the Eurasian context, it is linked to Soviet migration and ethnicity policies, which significantly shaped the demographic landscape in Central Asia (Rahmonova–Schwarz, 2010). Nowadays, Russians are an ethnic minority, representing 15 per cent

of the population in Kazakhstan and 0.3 per cent in Tajikistan. While not formally a privileged group, they enjoy a favourable socio-economic status, as the Russian language and ethnicity maintain a hegemonic position in the region. In Azerbaijan, ethnicity matters because of a 30-year-long conflict against Armenia over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh, which originates in inter-ethnic conflicts within the Russian empire, later aggravated by Soviet nationality policies. As a result, ethno–nationalism stands at the basis of the ruling elites' ideology, whereby the Armenian nation plays the role of the 'Other'. Linguistic diversity also plays a role as an intersecting axis of oppression because it is linked to social status and class.

Overall, we argue that using an intersectional analytical framework to examine feminist politics in Eurasia presents several advantages. First, as opposed to single-axis lenses of analysis, the concept of intersectionality captures structural complexity. It allows for the revelation of the co-constitution of sources of oppression, based on multiple traits of one's identity that lead to marginalisation (Carastathis, 2014). Second, an intersectional lens allows us to grasp instances of cooperation (or lack thereof) occurring between groups, 'mobilising different constituencies defined by gender, sexuality, ethnicity/race, class and other divisions' (Ciccia and Roggeband, 2021: 183).

Depoliticising strategy

The first strategy used by feminist groups in Eurasia is depoliticisation through the use of societally resonant frames instead of disrupting ones. In Kazakhstan, UyatEmes.kz presents sex education as an issue of medical and biological knowledge rather than making a feminist claim. In Tajikistan, Tell Me Sister tackles harassment by creating a safe space for women to share experiences with and comfort each other rather than through direct confrontation with male abusers.

UyatEmes.kz: de-shaming sex, reclaiming 'shame'

UyatEmes.kz is an online platform on sex education, comprising a website, chatbot and Facebook and Instagram accounts. It was launched in 2017 by Karlygash Kabatova, who noticed multiple news articles about teenage mothers who abandoned their newborns. Together with a colleague, she conducted research in schools, which confirmed that teenagers had scarce knowledge about sexual reproduction and revealed several misconceptions concerning periods, wet dreams and pregnancy (Kabatova and Marinin, 2018).

Kabatova links the lack of sex education to gender-based violence, which is a widespread phenomenon in Kazakhstan, especially among young women.[5] Gender-based violence was not included in the country's criminal code until 2024 and is legitimised by societal attitudes that subordinate women's bodies to nation building and restrict their autonomy, including reproductive self-determination (Arystanbek, 2023). UyatEmes.kz focuses on normalising discussions about sexuality among the youth, which, in the long term, is a means to reshape collectively shared gender norms and foster gender equality. The initiative targets teenagers who start puberty and parents who are embarrassed to discuss sex with their children but would like them to have reliable knowledge on sexuality and reproduction. UyatEmes.kz's resources feature articles that explain to adolescents what consent for sex is and why it is needed, as well as how to use condoms and choose the best sanitary pads. It also

helps teenagers navigate their first romantic and sexual relationships by encouraging them to be both self-confident and respectful towards others.

UyatEmes.kz is loosely linked to Kazakhstan's Y-PEER, a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)–founded international peer–to–peer education network on sexually transmitted diseases. UyatEmes.kz includes seven women who are social activists, researchers and designers who are active in several domains simultaneously. Through the related activities of its members, UyatEmes.kz organises in–person meetings and training sessions for teenagers and produces research on sexuality and gender norms in Kazakhstan (for example, Kabatova, 2022). It relies on the voluntary work of members and periodically receives funding from international organisations, such as UNFPA and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). These collaborations are not easy because donors often want the group to implement their agendas rather than support UyatEmes.kz's mission.[6]

Although some members identify as feminists, UyatEmes.kz consciously does not present itself as a feminist initiative. Instead, UyatEmes.kz relies on a depoliticised communicative strategy and defines itself neutrally as a resource about sexuality, puberty and safety. Three central frames can be identified. First, the group plays with the notion of shame ('*uyat*' in Kazakh), which refers to the Kazakh value system regulating ethical conduct. *Uyat* is used by traditionalists to condemn what they see as immoral behaviour, and adhering to it 'can build one's positive reputation and approval on the part of others' (Kabylova, 2022: 43). *Uyat* serves to control women's performance through the purity lens and punish deviation (Kudaibergenova, 2019: 375). UyatEmes.kz translates as '[It's] not a shame, Kazakhstan'. The group reclaims *uyat* by arguing that it is shameful to lack basic knowledge about sex and the reproductive system rather than to discuss sex aloud. Second, to avoid social backlash and bring the topic of sex education to the public sphere, UyatEmes.kz does not discuss sexuality through the lens of individual rights and freedom. It does not advocate for young people's decision–making autonomy from, for instance, their parents or in–laws. Instead, as Kabatova argues, the group talks about 'the reproductive system and healthy relationships'.[7] It thus uses the education frame, which relies on presenting the issue as a matter of biological and medical knowledge: it focuses on the functioning and regulating of the genital system, as well as socialisation, stressing that understanding the reproductive system is necessary for young people to become fully fledged members of society. Third, UyatEmes.kz uses a pedagogical rather than an argumentative tone to discuss sexual life and relationships. The narrative style relies on simple and technically precise language and a warm and appealing tone. As Kabatova posits:

> I knew that [the resource] had to speak to parents; it had to appeal to these values that we all agree on, that we want our children to be safe. I often tell parents: 'If you can't talk to your child, read our website, and if you like it, share the link with them.'[8]

In the cultural context of Kazakhstan, it was important for the group that parents would approve of the website so that they would allow their children to use it.

UyatEmes.kz actively engages in translations. The resources are available in Kazakh and Russian, the two official languages in Kazakhstan. However, the content is usually first prepared in Russian, as the group leaders are predominantly Russophone, and

then translated into Kazakh. The group sees this as a weakness because the translated content does not sound natural and convincing. Moreover, there are significant cultural differences between the two languages. Often, translation from Russian poses a challenge because much of the Kazakh language vocabulary around sexuality either has a pejorative, vulgar meaning or is too literary and seems too disconnected from everyday language. As Kabatova summarises: 'If you don't talk about sex in society, then you don't have words for it.'[9] To handle this challenge, the collective produces more descriptive content in Kazakh that explains the situation and context rather than using precise vocabulary.

Given that UyatEmes.kz targets the youth, visuals constitute an important part of its communicative strategy. As a general rule, the illustrations are bright, simple and playful to appeal to adolescents, but not too sexually explicit or even flirtatious, which might worry their parents. They feature gender stereotypes and simultaneously mock them. Figure 1 exemplifies humorously that contemporary boys enjoy many freedoms and are allowed to shine, whereas girls are continuously disciplined and tied to the domestic space. UyatEmes.kz's drawings often reflect the reality of Generation Z, which is largely mediated through the screen. This is why several images depict teenagers dating through smartphones, which, on the one hand, offers them anonymity but, on the other, exposes them to cyberbullying and the danger of miscommunication. These resonating everyday scenes demonstrate the depoliticising approach. But UyatEmes.kz's visual strategy evolved over time and became slightly more politicised, as the group has gradually tested the boundaries of socially acceptable messaging about sex education. Once it received support from various environments, the designs became more explicit by featuring sanitary pads

Figure 1: UyatEmes.kz's illustration designed by Daria Sazanovich

Source: Courtesy of Karlygash Kabatova.

or body parts, for example, female breasts, yet still in a way that conveys a sense of warmth and playfulness rather than providing realistic details.

The depoliticising strategy of UyatEmes.kz has benefits but also implies trade-offs. Framing sex education as a matter of knowledge about the reproductive system allows the collective to increase outreach among teenagers and appease their parents, but it does not directly challenge the culture of shame that legitimises gender-based violence. Moreover, it is important to identify silences in framing strategies, that is, topics that become omitted to avoid disruption (Bacchi, 2005). Although UyatEmes. kz published some content on sexual orientation, it does not discuss LGBTQ issues. According to Kabatova:

> We are sometimes criticised by more progressive [local] activists for not talking enough about LGBTQ rights. No, we don't, because we want to reach more people. If we focus too much on sensitive topics, we risk losing the majority of readers who may not be ready to talk about LGBTQ issues.[10]

Overall, the depoliticising strategy allowed UyatEmes.kz to build a broad readership and obtain donor funding for its activities. However, even if the initiative has faced less reproval than the founders expected, it has been criticised by conservative circles for 'spoiling children'.[11]

Tell Me Sister: bargaining with patriarchy, reclaiming sisterhood

Tell Me Sister ('Rasskazhi mne, sestra' in Russian) is an Instagram page that publishes anonymised accounts of various forms of sexually charged, unwanted behaviour that women in Tajikistan have experienced on the streets, in workplaces and in families. This social phenomenon is locally surrounded by widespread silence and acceptance. Psychological and physical forms of violence against women are common in the country, particularly towards young wives and daughters-in-law. Besides its gendered nature, violence often has an intergenerational character in that it is perpetuated by mothers-in-law (Turaeva and Becker, 2022).

Like UyatEmes.kz, Tell Me Sister represents a new type of informal initiatives in Central Asia that operate largely online (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Dall'Agnola, 2022). Since its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan's civil society has been dominated by donor-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the field of gender equality and women's rights, these NGOs have mainly implemented projects funded by Western international organisations, which tackle domestic violence through the provision of legal and psychological help for women in rural areas, in addition to microfinance initiatives to foster women's economic independence (Kluczewska, 2022). While promoting the individual rights of women, these initiatives ignored structural inequalities and the collective societal culture that prioritises the group over the individual. Tell Me Sister instead advances its own understanding of gender relations that is related to social justice. This vision goes beyond both donor-promoted liberal and neoliberal frames and the conservative state agenda, which attributes women-mothers ('*zan-modar*') the role of raising the nation (see Cleuziou and Direnberger, 2016).

Tell Me Sister relies on a depoliticising framing strategy that does not directly denounce men who are the perpetrators of harassment. Rather, the group aims to

highlight the scale of the phenomenon and foster solidarity among women who have experienced it.[12] However, such a strategy has a subversive character because it reappropriates the local custom to address women as 'sisters' ('*hohar*' in Tajik; '*sestra*' in Russian), which denotes care but is also used to patronise and discipline young women. Referring to Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy', it can be argued that Tell Me Sister plays by the societal rules of the game in that it does not challenge them directly. Simultaneously, it reclaims the local concept of sisterhood and attributes it with new meanings, ultimately advancing a new type of women's agency based on solidarity with other women who face similar problems.

Tell Me Sister was launched in 2020 by friends Elena Nazhmetdinova and Farzona Saidzoda, back then in their mid-20s, who were later joined by designer Nazokat Davlatshoeva. That year, Nazhmetdinova watched a video online that featured a group of local women who openly discussed their experiences of harassment. She was struck that many Internet users posted comments dismissing the women's accounts, accusing

Figure 2: Tell Me Sister's illustration designed by Nazokat Davlatshoeva

Source: Courtesy of Elena Nazhmetdinova.

them of exaggeration and claiming that harassment is not part of Tajik culture. They implied that the women themselves must have provoked men through their revealing outfits or behaviour and deserved to be harassed. Inspired by the MeToo movement against sexual abuse, harassment and the rape culture, which emerged in 2017 in the US and spread to other countries in the West, Nazhmetdinova and Saidzoda launched a small-scale Tajik version of MeToo. As Nazhmetdinova explains, through their Instagram page, they wanted to 'tell the world that harassment exists in Tajikistan and the problem is much bigger than people think'.[13] They invited women who experienced catcalling, stalking and physical assaults to share their stories and were overwhelmed with the scale of the response, as they received over 200 stories in two days. Since then, Tell Me Sister has published nearly 200 first-hand accounts, in addition to organising online discussions with psychologists and activists. The initiative is run on a voluntary basis as a side project of its founders, next to their unrelated jobs and family obligations, and does not have ambitions to expand.[14] Periodically, the group collaborates with international organisations like UN Women and UNFPA, which provide it with one-off funding to organise live campaigns and exhibitions around women's stories. These collaborations, however, are not easy because international organisations often object that the group's language is too direct and demand it to be toned down.[15] This shows that a depoliticised framing strategy by feminist activists is still too political for donors that avoid any risk of antagonising the government.[16]

The collective does not position itself as feminist because this would be locally perceived as a provocation and could result in backlash. According to Nazhmetdinova, this is a conscious choice:

> Tajik society is not well prepared for feminism. Tajik men, and often women too, see the word 'feminism' as a red flag.… They get angry when you even pronounce it, no matter the context and the content. You need to find the right approach to make people admit, 'Yes, you're right'.[17]

Correspondingly, four main frames can be identified in the group's approach. First, Tell Me Sister subversively reclaims the term 'sister', which is often used by men and older women to discipline young women. As Nazhmetdinova explains: 'Some people justify harassment by saying, "Sister, you can complain about harassment, but look at yourself, how you dress, this is probably your fault." By using this word, they seem to care about you, but it is a manipulative technique.'[18] The initiative attributes 'sisters' a new meaning: an active rather than a passive one. It turns sisterhood into a collective safe space to share experiences of harassment and fosters a new collective culture based on understanding and mutual support rather than judgement. Second, Tell Me Sister focuses on the individual stories of women, encouraging them to speak up about their experiences, often for the first time. It detaboos the topic of harassment and violence by focusing on individual, emotional stories that others can relate to on a personal level rather than providing 'objective' descriptions or dry statistical data concerning the phenomenon. The page is not meant as a platform for debate but as a space for women to express support and heal together. Any other comments are deleted. Third, Tell Me Sister stresses that women's outfit is not the reason for harassment. To pre-emptively rebut victim blaming, women often start their accounts by saying that they did not wear any revealing clothes on the day they were harassed but baggy T-shirts or the Tajik national dress. Fourth, Tell Me Sister nuances the discourse on gender-based violence

in Tajikistan by showing that it is not related to poor socio-economic issues. While the middle and upper-middle classes living in Tajikistan's urban centres share a prejudice that harassment is perpetuated by less educated people from rural areas, the posts reveal that it constitutes an endemic problem regardless of location, education, age and language.

Like UyatEmes.kz, Tell Me Sister has its own visual communicative strategy that consists of easily relatable images. The illustrations lack facial features, which is to suggest that the woman who shared the story of harassment might be anyone, including someone we know. As Figure 2 shows, the characters often wear a traditional Tajik dress, which symbolises purity and modesty, unlike so-called 'Western' clothing, which is more revealing. This counters the common opinion that women provoke men through their outfits.

Concerning the audience, the eight thousand followers are mostly young women who can relate to shared stories of harassment and do so by posting comments. Tell Me Sister is an example of the convergence culture, which bridges the roles of users and producers (see Oates-Indruchová and Mikats, 2022: 702). Language constitutes an important factor of access, as the founders are predominantly Russophone and publish most of the content in Russian. This brings about challenges for reaching wider and more heterogeneous social groups, as it narrows down the target audience to the upper-middle-class, Russian-speaking urban youth, mainly from the capital city Dushanbe, who are active social media users.

Tell Me Sister's depoliticising framing strategy, which aims at normalising the discussion about harassment, has visible trade-offs. Unlike the MeToo movement in the West, which denounces perpetrators, Tell Me Sister, as the Tajik translation of this movement, tackles the consequences of violence by fostering a culture of solidarity among and with victims. Yet, it does not directly challenge men who perpetuate violence and older women who legitimise it. Despite such a depoliticised strategy, the group sporadically faces backlash from haters, who leave odious comments under posts, insult the founders and even threaten them with violence.[19]

Repoliticising strategy

Having presented two illustrations of why and how feminist groups in Eurasia adopt depoliticised strategies, the next section explores the opposite strategy of repoliticisation. The Feminist Peace Collective frames conflict resolution as a feminist rather than an ethno-nationalist issue. By opting for radical frames, it seeks to unsettle the dominant militarist ideology.

The Feminist Peace Collective: repoliticising peace, disrupting militarism

The Feminist Peace Collective ('Feminist Sülh Kollektivi' in Azerbaijani) is an online platform and decentralised network established by three Azerbaijani feminists to link efforts across feminist and peacebuilding communities. It was founded in 2020 in response to the second Nagorno-Karabakh war to explore key issues related to gender, peace and conflict, with the goal to convey a feminist peace discourse to society. The 30-year-long unresolved conflict with neighbouring Armenia over contested Nagorno-Karabakh and the resulting militarisation of society have reinforced patriarchal and heteronormative structures in Azerbaijan (Walsh, 2023). Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 war has further cemented the nationalist discourse promoted by the government.

Like in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, civil society in independent Azerbaijan has been characterised by structural dependency on Western donors' financial support and liberal paradigms. The peacebuilding field saw a proliferation of institutionalised projects that rarely centred local needs and the grievances of conflict-affected people. In the gender field, efforts concentrated on training sessions for 'gender education', combating domestic violence and increasing women's participation in political processes, including conflict resolution. The patriarchal nature of the systems in which women were expected to participate was not questioned. Starting from 2013, the political context for civil society in Azerbaijan became more repressive as the authorities restricted donor funding to NGOs. Simultaneously, these restrictions spurred less institutionalised forms of civic engagement, articulating alternative visions (Luciani, 2023). The Feminist Peace Collective belongs to this new generation of activism: it can be assimilated to a 'second wave' of Azerbaijani feminism, as opposed to a first wave of (mostly scholarly and donor-driven) engagement with gender topics that emerged after the Soviet Union's collapse. Unlike the older 'hesitant feminists' who preferred the more neutral denomination of 'gender experts', the younger generation has actively reclaimed the 'feminist' label (Aliyeva, 2020: 225).

In contrast with UyatEmes.kz and Tell Me Sister, the Feminist Peace Collective explicitly positions itself not only as a feminist but also as a 'political group' driven by a left-wing ideology.[20] By advancing a leftist view of conflict resolution and political developments in the country, the group seeks to promote alternative narratives to the dominant militaristic one. Moreover, as co-founder Lala Darchinova explains, the Feminist Peace Collective wants to 'interrupt the Western liberal or neoliberal peacebuilding and gender activist – if we can call it activist – approach'.[21] Darchinova argues that the lack of a clear political and ideological agenda for peace led to a situation where 'people in peacebuilding were calling for war' during the 2020 hostilities.[22] The strategy pursued by the Feminist Peace Collective is one of repoliticisation: the group endows peace and conflict resolution with a political (feminist) meaning, mobilising frames that disrupt mainstream state- and donor-sponsored narratives and crafting a third way.

The Feminist Peace Collective addresses local audiences by producing and translating feminist peace resources into the Azerbaijani language. Through collaboration with a network of Azerbaijani researchers and activists, it publishes essays, academic and analytical pieces, and political statements regarding current developments in the region. The following main frames can be discerned in the Feminist Peace Collective's agenda, which respectively guide its understanding of the problem it tackles and the solutions proposed. First, it frames intersectional feminist activism as indissociable from the context of war and nationalism, which (re)produces violence, oppressive gender roles and class-based domination: women are turned into mothers and men into soldiers through the celebration of masculine heroism while the working class bears the brunt of militarism. In this context, Darchinova argues, feminism is necessary as 'an umbrella of protection for everyone who wants to go beyond the hegemonic, masculine lifestyle'.[23] Second, the Feminist Peace Collective articulates a critique of how patriarchal authoritarian governance fuels the state of permanent war while also reinforcing its power through this process. For instance, it exposes the paradox whereby 'while Baku engages in so-called "normalisation" talks with Yerevan, those who champion peace with Armenia are persecuted, branded as traitors' (Feminist Peace Collective, 2024).[24] Third, the group's agenda is pronouncedly

anti-imperialistic: it denounces how geopolitical interests and neoliberal capital overlap with domestic authoritarianism to perpetuate the conflict. As Samadzade (2022) writes, the 'deployment of Russian military units to Karabakh as soon as the ceasefire was signed, and the entry of Turkish and British companies into the region, made it clear how imperialist and capitalist powers protect their interests at the cost of thousands of lives'. Fourth, the Feminist Peace Collective (nd) calls for feminist peace as 'an approach aimed at ending the patriarchal structure and its other micro- and macro-level support systems that pose a threat to people, certain groups and nature, based on positive peace'. It advocates for demilitarisation and grassroots-led peacebuilding that transcends state-centric frameworks.

By establishing collaborations inside and outside the country, the Feminist Peace Collective aims to connect with counterparts in the region and create 'an anti-war or peace movement, a resistance group' (interview with Lala Darchinova, 13 October 2022, online). In cooperation with the platform CaucasusTalks, the group has started to publish anonymous first-person stories of Caucasian women*[24] who have endured sexual violence. The texts are available in the official languages of the three South Caucasus countries (Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian) to foster transnational feminist solidarity by talking about shared problems in a region where these are confined within nation-state borders. In March 2024, the Feminist Peace Collective published a joint statement by Armenian and Azerbaijani feminists titled 'Down with your patriarchal peace', which is available in the Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, as well as in Turkish (since Turkey was instrumental in Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 war and the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict also affects the Turkish–Armenian reconciliation process). Translation politics plays an important role in the collective's efforts to challenge ethno-nationalism, build grassroots coalitions and increase their outreach.

Artistic practices, such as multimedia content and graphic identity, are key to the Feminist Peace Collective's communication strategies. The illustrations that accompany articles and essays published on the group's website are the work of queer artivist Lili Nazarov, a member of the Feminist Peace Collective living in exile. They reflect the messages conveyed by the group's writing, evoking the collective vulnerability of people living in/with war and their resistance. A powerful example is Nazarov's illustration accompanying the essay titled, '"Fighting for peace" is over, but the war is not', published amid deadly border clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2022 (see Figure 3). Fingers are pointed at Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, surrounded by fellow warmongering, male leaders from the region. If the autocrats are recognisable, the people looking at them are almost faceless. As the essay suggests, 'while people have no voice in domestic politics, there is obviously no room for avoiding being an instrument in the big geopolitical games' (Samadzade, 2022). The more it approaches the political leaders, the more the peace symbol in the background gets distorted, meaning that the peace discourse is manipulated by governments to ensure authoritarian stability while violence continues.

The colour palette in the Feminist Peace Collective's logo and website also conveys a political message, as purple has been historically tied to lesbian and queer struggles, while purple and black evoke the anarchafeminist flag and movement, which is of inspiration to the group. Anarchafeminism is a radical philosophy that supports 'an articulation of women's liberation that does not create further hierarchies' (Bottici, 2021: 217). Rather than explaining the oppression of women based on a single factor (their gender), anarchafeminism is intersectional. It fights patriarchy and 'the
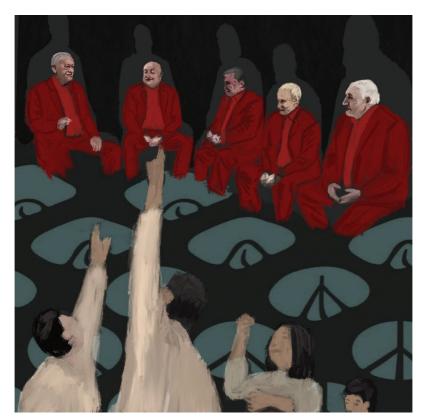
Figure 3: Illustration by Lili Nazarov for the Feminist Peace Collective

multifaceted ways in which multiple factors – economic, cultural, racial, political, etc. – converge to uphold it' (Bottici, 2021: 217). By drawing upon transnational feminist concepts and activism, the Feminist Peace Collective performs an act of translation (Zwingel and Doerr, 2024). It puts Eurasia in dialogue with broader trends, such as the global opposition to feminist and queer politics, to bring new ideas to local struggles.

Differently from UyatEmes.kz activists, who frame their agenda in simple and pedagogical tones, the Feminist Peace Collective's frames are grounded in feminist scholarship and theorising. There is a risk that the chosen frames may resonate only with a small circle of educated people who share similar world views and understand academic concepts. At the same time, the group makes efforts to connect specialised discourses with ordinary people's experiences of violence, including through art-based work. For instance, the documentary movie 'Behind 44 days', shot by co-founder Sevinj Samadzade, foregrounds a social worker's painful account of the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the 2020 war. While people in border communities suffer all around her, the president and cheering crowds celebrate the heroes of the 'patriotic war'. The documentary seeks to link the geopolitical with the personal while exposing the disjuncture between state-centric and feminist understandings of security. This is in line with Mouffe's (2007) notion of 'critical art' as one that seeks to make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obliterate.

The Feminist Peace Collective remains marginal in Azerbaijan, where feminist and, even more so, leftist ideas do not have political influence. Still, their radicality has engendered backlash, meaning that the group's strategy of repoliticisation has effectively disrupted the hegemonic discourse: following the publication of a statement in solidarity with the Armenian people of Nagorno-Karabakh in August 2023, the collective was targeted by a government-sponsored smear campaign, and at the time of writing, their website remains blocked in Azerbaijan.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has analysed grassroots feminist organising in contexts that are politically and socially hostile to feminist activism, as demonstrated by the case of Eurasia. We have argued that in such contexts, activists rely on two framing strategies to advance their agendas. The first one is to depoliticise their claims by removing their political (feminist) character and deploying frames that resonate with dominant discourses in society. The second one is to repoliticise a given issue by disrupting 'common sense' through radical frames. Rather than seeing the two strategies as binary opposites, we recognise fluidity and the possibility of subversion. Instead of overtly challenging patriarchal norms, activists can play with frames to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in a given context.

Our CFA of activists' framing strategies has revealed a vision of gender equality that is oriented towards social justice. While we do not mean to homogenise these groups, which are diverse and context specific, we want to highlight how their agendas go beyond the two dominant gender visions in the region. The first vision is the liberal and neoliberal gender equality agenda promoted by international donors. The second, state-led vision mobilises patriarchal norms as part of post-Soviet nation building. As we have argued, the social justice vision of grassroots feminist activists offers a third way and includes the following three components. First, these groups make claims for a fairer redistribution of resources, both materially and epistemically. On the material level, the Feminist Peace Collective articulates a critique of the concentration of wealth in the hands of ruling elites while society is left in poverty, while UyatEmes.kz exposes the socio-economic disparities that determine (lack of) access to education. On the epistemic level, the fairer production and distribution of knowledge is a driving concern for all three groups. This is visible in their practices of translation of feminist concepts, both across local languages (Tell Me Sister) and from the transnational to the local level (Feminist Peace Collective), as well as in activists' pedagogical work to inform the public about reproductive health (UyatEmes. kz). Second, the social justice vision criticises power relations and favours bodily autonomy. It advocates for women's ability to decide independently on such issues as the use of contraception (UyatEmes.kz) or the choice of outfit (Tell Me Sister) and to refuse the roles that the state imposes on them, such as being mothers for new soldiers (Feminist Peace Collective). Overall, these groups support women's self-determination from multiple − family, society and state − structures. Third, all three groups denounce privileges linked to the dominant position of certain social groups, including parents and in-laws, men, older women, and political elites.

As we have argued, framing is a costly strategy that implies exclusions and silences. Therefore, despite a social justice orientation, the visions of gender equality that these groups propose have limitations. A depoliticising framing strategy allows

groups to reach broader audiences and gradually reshape dominant gender norms. Simultaneously, it prevents them from articulating oppositional feminist demands (to hold male perpetrators of violence accountable in the case of Tell Me Sister) or from defending the interests of socially disadvantaged groups (LGBTQ people in the case of UyatEmes.kz). A repoliticising strategy, on the contrary, has the potential to foster more fundamental social change by unsettling hegemonic gender norms and power relations. However, radical frames that are inclusive of marginalised perspectives can be politically dangerous for feminist activists, who may eventually be silenced (see Ferree, 2003). Moreover, although these three feminist groups operate in countries that are predominantly Muslim and in which retraditionalisation trends are ongoing, we have noted that the intersection of religion and gender is absent in their activism. This may be explained both by positionality, as the activists come from privileged socio-economic backgrounds, and by the role of religion in state politics in contexts where the secular state controls and even represses religious expressions.

Examining grassroots feminist activism in Eurasia reveals interesting links between framing strategies and social media. Using social media as the main means of communication further cements the pre-chosen strategy. For instance, from the beginning, the Feminist Peace Collective chose a repoliticising strategy, and social media became a tool to amplify it. In contrast, UyatEmes.kz and Tell Me Sister opted for a depoliticising strategy, meaning that their social media communication needed to be carefully managed to avoid backlash. However, regardless of specific strategies, social media exposure has similar implications for feminist groups; it allows them to reach broader audiences with few financial resources. Still, this exposure comes with unwanted implications, such as cyberbullying, online harassment or even crackdowns (see Namazov, 2024). Moreover, our analysis casts light on the transformative potential of 'translation' in feminist politics (Zwingel and Doerr, 2024), notably its capacity to foster social and political change. Translation politics is a key strategy for the Feminist Peace Collective to build coalitions across conflict divides, thus disrupting the ethno-nationalist consensus. In the case of Tell Me Sister, translation operates by reclaiming gendered concepts (*hohar*, *sestra*) and endowing them with a new meaning that creates a safe space for unheard voices. We have shown that the feminist politics of translation in Eurasia is both shaped by hegemonic power relations and key to activists' efforts in challenging them, be it through the repoliticisation or the subversion of dominant norms.

By reflecting on the drawbacks and trade-offs of the framing strategies chosen by activists, we offer takeaways for feminist politics beyond the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Dilemmas linked to donor dependency, affecting the available frames for activists, are common to feminist struggles in wider post-socialist and post-conflict settings (Ishkanian, 2008; Aliyeva, 2020; Kluczewska, 2022). Similarly, given that conservative values are on the rise worldwide, not only in newly independent nationalising states, the entanglement of gender and nation building is becoming a common concern for feminist groups. Feminist activists under attack often resort to depoliticising strategies or self-marginalisation. However, our analysis raises the question of whether the depoliticisation of feminist claims can effectively prevent social and political backlash. Although groups like UyatEmes.kz and Tell Me Sister chose to frame their claims in ways that resonate with dominant gender norms, they are still attacked for raising sensitive topics. Our analysis confirms Ferree's (2003) claim that attempts to be 'successful' through resonance with dominant norms and

power structures will always carry costs for feminist movements (for example, in marginalising certain frames and related needs). This may explain why some groups in Eurasia and beyond still prefer to be radical, even despite – or possibly against – global mounting opposition to feminist agendas. We hope that these reflections show that analysing grassroots feminist activism in Eurasia has an added value for both understanding global tendencies and advancing academic debates in the field.

Notes

[1] We use 'post-socialist' Eurasia as a more normatively neutral denominator than 'post-Soviet', which is subject to epistemic criticism. We use 'post-Soviet' to describe the characteristics of states that emerged after the Soviet Union's collapse rather than their subjects.

[2] Several feminist scholars have addressed the absence of post-socialist perspectives from transnational feminist theorising, highlighting the region's particularities and its subalternisation within Western-centric feminist histories and exploring the resonances and dissonances between postcolonial and post-socialist feminisms (Koobak et al, 2020).

[3] In Soviet times, the Kazakh and Tajik languages were considered inferior to Russian and associated with rural communities and lifestyles. Since 1991, Kazakh, Tajik and Azerbaijani have been revived as part of nation building. In today's Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, Russian is the main second language. However, some parts of the population (ethnic Russians and cultural elites) speak only Russian: a small one in Tajikistan and a significant one in Kazakhstan. Azerbaijan has historically been less Russified than Central Asia and hosts a small number of ethnic Russians. Still, the Russian language remains embedded within schooling and the elite.

[4] Rather than a theory that explains why oppression happens, as Crenshaw (1989) first formulated it, in the field of political science, intersectionality came to be used as an interpretive framework allowing researchers to pay attention to intersecting axes of oppression (Hancock, 2007; Mügge et al, 2018). The latter is the approach we follow.

[5] Interview with Karlygash Kabatova, 9 March 2023, online.

[6] Interview with Karlygash Kabatova, 9 March 2023, online.

[7] Interview with Karlygash Kabatova, 9 March 2023, online.

[8] Interview with Karlygash Kabatova, 9 March 2023, online.

[9] Interview with Karlygash Kabatova, 9 March 2023, online.

[10] Interview with Karlygash Kabatova, 9 March 2023, online.

[11] Interview with Karlygash Kabatova, 9 March 2023, online.

[12] Interview with Elena Nazhmetdinova, 25 March 2022, online.

[13] Interview with Elena Nazhmetdinova, 25 March 2022, online.

[14] Interview with Elena Nazhmetdinova, 25 March 2022, online.

[15] Interview with Elena Nazhmetdinova, 25 March 2022, online.

[16] For this reason, international donors in Tajikistan mostly collaborate with NGOs that are dependent on international funding and thus more receptive to (neo)liberal frameworks than grassroots, informal groups (see Kluczewska, 2022).

[17] Interview with Elena Nazhmetdinova, 25 March 2022, online.

[18] Interview with Elena Nazhmetdinova, 25 March 2022, online.

[19] Interview with Elena Nazhmetdinova, 25 March 2022, online.

[20] Interview with Lala Darchinova, 13 October 2022, online.

[21] Interview with Lala Darchinova, 13 October 2022, online.

[22] Interview with Lala Darchinova, 13 October 2022, online.

[23] Interview with Lala Darchinova, 13 October 2022, online.

24 This refers to the crackdown on dissent that preceded the holding of COP29 in Baku in 2024, targeting outspoken anti-war activists.

25 This includes all people who identify as women.

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