5. Interview with Nazik Abylgazieva

conducted by Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk: Can you introduce yourself?

Nazik Abylgazieva: I am Nazik and I live in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where I was born and raised. Currently, I identify as a queer human rights defender and activist, and as a pansexual individual. I'm also deeply aligned with narcofeminism, a concept that Alla Bessonova introduced me to. I actively use natural psychoactive substances, enjoy smoking cannabinoids, and have had various experiences with other substances.

Queer is an umbrella term used by individuals whose sexual orientation or gender identity falls outside the traditional norms of heterosexuality and cisgender identity. It can refer to people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, or other gender and sexual minorities. The term is broad and flexible, and its use can vary from person to person.

Pansexual refers to someone who is attracted to people regardless of their gender or gender identity. Unlike bisexuality, which is sometimes understood as an attraction to two or more genders (though this definition can vary and often includes attraction to people of all genders), pansexuality encompasses attraction to people across the full spectrum of genders, including non-binary and transgender individuals.

Narcofeminism is a movement at the intersection of feminism, harm reduction, and drug policy advocacy, specifically focusing on the experiences and rights of women who use drugs. The core idea of narcofeminism is to challenge both the patriarchal structures and oppressive drug policies that disproportionately affect women.

The movement began in 2016 through the European Harm Reduction Association's collaboration with AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) during a meeting in Brazil. This partnership continued with a follow-up meeting in Berlin in 2018, titled "Strengthening Feminist

Movement-Building and Engagement of Women Working in Drug Policy in Eastern Europe and Central Asia," where discussions focused on how feminists and women-who-use-drugs movements could support each other. Subsequent global meetings took place in Barcelona and Portugal in 2019, bringing together representatives from women-who-use-drug networks worldwide. These gatherings also included visits to harm reduction services focused on women. Naming the movement posed challenges, but the term "narcofeminism" was embraced in the EECA region because of its lack of negative connotations. In Kyrgyzstan, the local branch launched in 2019 by joining the "16 Days Against Violence Against Women" campaign (Bessonova et al. 2023).

By profession, I'm a teacher and a former professional athlete. I hold the title of Master of Sports in football and rugby. I graduated from a sports academy and taught for some time, but I wasn't satisfied with the salary, so I had to explore other areas. That's how I ended up in human rights and activism. I spent over 10 years working in an LGBT organization, one of the first in Kyrgyzstan, Labrys.

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk: How is life for women in Kyrgyzstan?

Nazik Abylgazieva: It's fun, not boring, to say the least. Of course, patriarchy is strongly entrenched here, and I've faced this since childhood. Patriarchal attitudes are very prevalent in Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian region, including neighboring Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan is more like North Korea, a closed-off country, but the other four countries have similar contexts. Even with the independence of Kyrgyzstan, which we just celebrated recently, women continue to face stigma and discrimination.

Starting from birth, the living conditions depend heavily on the region. The capital, Bishkek, is more modern, while rural areas are much more traditional. In some regions, there's still no electricity, and women have to walk long distances to get drinking water. There's a lack of access to essential needs, education, jobs, or even basic resources.

In 2024, some women in rural regions still lack access to water, electricity, and proper living conditions. Regarding reproductive health, women are expected to bear children and often denied contraception, as men often forbid it, mixing religion into it, claiming, "Allah said to give birth to as many children as destined." Women endlessly give birth, leaving them physically exhausted. By the time they're 40, they look like they're 60 due

to the toll of having multiple children, financial hardships, and no access to basic needs like food and education for their children.
When it comes to security, physical, psychological, and economic violence against women is common. The saddest part is that many women don't even realize they're experiencing violence from their partners.
I am not sure if you have heard about Nikah; it's a type of marriage which takes place in Islam [meaning] you don't have to register it. It's more common in Kyrgyz families than in Russian or other ethnic groups. Husbands migrate to Russia or another country, leaving these [legally unmarried] women with children. And they have no education, because they are often still young, 16-17 years old, when they are married off.

Nikah is a form of Islamic marriage ceremony that is common in some regions. Unlike civil marriages that require official registration at a registry office (ZAGS), *Nikah* marriages are conducted in religious settings, often without legal documentation. This can leave women vulnerable, particularly in ethnic Kyrgyz families where the practice is more prevalent.

We also have the issue of kidnapping women, even though it is legally prohibited. In these cases, brides are kidnapped and married off without their consent by their parents or the groom. Again, there's no way of romanticizing it, someone chooses you and steals you away. There are cases of rape and sexual violence against women. And, of course, there are cases where such situations lead to fatal outcomes.

Ala kachuu is a traditional practice in Kyrgyzstan that translates to "grab and run." It refers to the act of bride kidnapping, where a woman is abducted by a man and his friends with the intent of forcing her into marriage. Although it may be portrayed as an old tradition, in many cases, it still happens against the woman's will, and she is often coerced into marriage due to societal pressures, fear of stigma, or familial shame. While this practice was outlawed in Kyrgyzstan in 1994 and the penalties increased in 2013 to a criminal offense, it still persists, especially in rural areas (Kleinbach & Salimjanova 2007; UN Women 2013)

The [COVID] pandemic period caused a surge and revealed all these problems, which I think happened in many countries. But in Kyrgyzstan, I remember the figure showed a 64-67% increase in domestic violence. In these confined conditions, in isolation, men were showing their aggression and violence to the fullest, and there were horrific and shocking cases

of male partners torturing their wives or girlfriends. And it continues to happen now. You might have heard about that notorious case that gained public attention involving the former Minister of Economy in Kazakhstan and his wife, there was a trial in Astana.

> The former economy minister Kuandyk Bishimbayev was sentenced to 24 years in prison for the brutal murder of his wife, Saltanat Nukenova. The case sparked nationwide outrage, with demands for stricter laws. In response, a new law ("Saltanat's Law") now criminalizes domestic violence, but activists argue it doesn't go far enough in addressing issues like legal loopholes and societal tolerance. With hundreds of Kazakh women killed by partners annually, this trial marked a step toward justice, but significant gaps in protections for women remain (24.kg 2024).

There's always this notion that violence only happens in marginal families and that the intellectual class is somehow protected from it. This case gained a lot of public attention, and the trial was conducted publicly. And it was just a nightmare. The authorities in Kazakhstan then started talking about introducing a law to protect women from domestic violence. But why does this only happen when something becomes public? Every day, even as we're talking right now, in some families, someone's ears are being cut off, someone is being raped, and children are being beaten.

I will be open and honest: I was subjected to physical and psychological abuse by my father for a long time. Our father is a tyrant, and he abused my mother, and my family – my sister and me – have lived through this psychologically, though we try to move on. Now I'm grown up and no longer a little girl. I have the right to talk back to my father. And there are many families like ours. Based on conversations and reflections from support groups with women of different ages, the stories are all very similar. What happened 20 years ago, 10 years ago, 30 years ago, and what's happening now – these stories are eerily alike. Only the actors, and the people involved, are different. That's the conclusion I've drawn, from what I see.

Now you have access to devices, phones, and the internet – everything spreads quickly. These tools weren't available before. If we go back even 15-20 years, there was no Istanbul Protocol, no signed conventions. But Kyrgyzstan signed the CEDAW convention to eliminate all forms of discrimination. At one point, Kyrgyzstan was seen as a beacon of democracy. The government was working on these documents and initiatives, which was great. But in practice, nothing changed. Implementing these things

requires massive resources – human and financial – to make them work and to monitor them.

The Istanbul Convention, officially known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, is a human rights treaty adopted in 2011. It aims to protect women from all forms of violence, prevent violence, prosecute perpetrators, and eliminate domestic violence. The convention emphasizes gender equality and requires states to adopt comprehensive legal frameworks and support services for survivors (Council of Europe 2011).

The CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) is an international treaty adopted by the United Nations in 1979. It aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women by ensuring women's rights to equality in all aspects of life, including political, economic, social, cultural, and family life (United Nations 1979).

Now, I don't understand why there's been such a strong rollback. The things that are happening in Kyrgyzstan right now are complete madness. I see so many women covered up in traditional clothing. It's scary sometimes to walk in the center of the city, not to mention the outskirts. You don't know what might happen to you. Will someone come after me because I look non-traditional, with short hair and tattoos? I notice the attention I get. When it's kind and positive attention, that's fine. But when it's aggressive or carries a criminal undertone, it's terrifying.

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk: And how is life for women who use drugs?

Nazik Abylgazieva: Similar to how they've always lived - terribly. If you're a woman and a drug user, society immediately condemns you. There's no support - only judgment and further psychological abuse. If we talk about public opinion, it's much stronger than any law or court. The presumption of innocence, I think, just doesn't work here in Kyrgyzstan, from what I observe.

The situation for women now is tragic, especially considering the drug scene. There was a time when women used heroin and now, the drug scene has changed, with all these synthetic drugs. Synthetics influence is immediately visually noticeable – a person changes in appearance without a doubt. It's not just about appearance but mental as well. There's a very

strong psychological dependence, and there are also some accompanying disorders.

Once I accompanied a girl, a young girl, who had been using synthetic drugs, mephedrone, for a long time, and experienced sexual violence, to the district police department to file a report. The violence was committed by her brother, a close relative. Of course, law enforcement agencies are reluctant to accept such reports, but because I was sitting next to her and presented myself as a human rights defender representing her interests, they were like, "You have no right to be here." And then there was this strange dialogue. I said, "You see what condition she's in, I just don't want to leave her alone with two investigators." Then a third investigator came, and I said, "What's this committee of investigators? You see the state of the girl, now you're going to question her about the events that occurred, and the three of you are here like it's some kind of circus. Even right now, I see clear violations."

"Where is the female investigator?" I asked, "The one who could at least examine her properly and follow the necessary legal procedures?" I told them, "This is a complete violation, what is this?"

Finally, a female officer came to examine her, and they started the questioning. I asked if the extra men could leave the room. "This is not a concert or a performance; serious things are happening here," I said. "The fact that you're used to doing things this way doesn't make it acceptable." While she [the female officer] was questioning the girl, they simultaneously called her brother and mother, who subsequently arrived. She had a breakdown, saying she didn't want to go back home. So I took her away. The investigator wanted to send her back to that abusive home environment with her brother and mother, who were emotionally pressuring her.

Later, I referred her to a crisis center called AELZAD. It's a crisis center funded by international grants and by state funding. It positions itself as open to all women, without any specific requirements.

It took a long time to explain and negotiate before I could bring the girl to the center. But in the end, it didn't work out for her because she was going through withdrawal, and her psychological state wasn't stable. In such crisis centers, priority is given to women with children, women from rural areas, and women being pursued by husbands, abusers, or aggressors. As for women who use drugs or work in the sex industry, or if they're lesbian, bisexual, or transgender – if all of these identities intersect – then it's goodbye. "We don't want to deal with you."

People are afraid because they don't know better. Fear stems from ignorance. There are many stereotypes, and many factors influence decisions. If a person is more empathetic, like a good social worker, then that's great. But overall, the system works against women who are vulnerable to HIV, especially women in key populations.

Sadly, there are currently no shelters, a lack of space, and no proper services or conditions. While they exist in certain places, there is no comprehensive solution. This is similar to how we talk about aiming for "one-stop" services, comprehensive services. It all looks nice on paper, in proposals, but in practice it does not exist.

So, again, in Kyrgyzstan, there are sufficient numbers of non-governmental organizations, some of which have been registered for a while, because all these grant funds started pouring in during the early 90s. There are specific ones that work and are active, while others exist nominally. Due to the law on foreign agents, as of today, some organizations have self-liquidated. Two LGBT organizations have already self-liquidated. There is also a large organization that has worked with human rights defenders for more than 20 years, and they had to rebrand. They closed the old organization and opened a new one because they are already under close scrutiny. And even if they do not declare themselves as foreign agents, they are still subject to tax audits or visits from government representatives at their events. These are the realities we are facing.

Kyrgyzstan's "foreign agent" law, signed into effect in April 2023, imposes strict regulations on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that receive foreign funding. These NGOs must now register as "foreign representatives" and are subject to extensive financial reporting and auditing requirements. The law was inspired by similar legislation passed in Russia in 2012 and has sparked concerns about increased scrutiny of civil society (Library of Congress 2024).

If we talk about services regarding HIV prevention then, of course, there is testing. Many projects have even introduced express testing with results in 15 minutes, and it's 90-something percent accurate. And there are immediate referrals, of course, to AIDS centers, but now they've rebranded as hepatitis-HIV bloodborne contact centers. They try to present themselves better because the term "AIDS center" and the acronym "AIDS" still scare people. Many people still hold distorted and incorrect beliefs about HIV, despite all the awareness campaigns and countless videos. A

massive amount of money has been poured into HIV prevention and public awareness campaigns in Kyrgyzstan. While there has been some progress, many still think of it as "the plague of the 20th century" and have strange misconceptions about how it's transmitted – like thinking a mosquito bite or sharing a cup can transmit it.

Condoms are distributed, but there are no female condoms. This is especially problematic if we are talking about vulnerable women like sex workers or trans women. There is a significant lack of access to psychological support. Mental well-being is only just now being discussed. Before, it was like, "What mental health? Let's deal with the basics first." But mental well-being is indispensable. Even when talking about harm reduction, you treat the body with detox, and clean out the substances, but what about the mind? It's all psychological dependence. Sure, you've treated the body and brought it back to order, but the mental aspect is inseparable. How can we ignore that and say we'll deal with mental well-being later?

There are still strange discussions such as, "Men don't need a psychologist or psychotherapist, so why do you women?" It's strange thinking because it's obvious that there's a need. Women say it, and even some men have started talking about it. But when it comes to women, all of them say they need psychological support, whether it's peer-to-peer support, group support, or any other form that works for them. But there's no one specific model. People are different. There isn't one universal great psychotherapist or psychiatrist who suits everyone. These are different characteristics. It's all very complex. People often hire one psychologist or psychotherapist for a project and then say, "That's it, spread the word." But not everyone likes that specialist. So, yes, there is a service, but not everyone likes the specialist offering the service.

It's strange because people come to you with a request and you're trying to "set them on the right path" based on your own beliefs and convictions. You're not approaching your work professionally; instead, you're trying to change their orientation or their life decisions. Whether we're talking about drug use or sex work, or even about leaving a husband and someone says, "Maybe you should reconsider"—that is shocking and incidents like these occur. People think, "Why do I need such help?" and many become disillusioned with therapy and psychological support. They get traumatized and think, "Maybe people are right, why should I go to a psychologist? I'd rather turn to alcohol, substances, or other accessible antidepressants to balance my condition." That's how it is.

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk: How about 12-step programs?

Nazik Abylgazieva: The 12 steps Minnesota program was originally developed for Alcoholics Anonymous, but later it was adapted for people with various substance dependencies. This is, of course, a preferred therapy in prisons, correctional facilities, and so on. However, various pieces of evidence show that it doesn't suit everyone. This is especially true for those using new psychoactive substances. It's absolutely irrelevant. It doesn't fit at all.

I worked for three months at a private rehabilitation center that used the 12-step program. It didn't work at all, no. Especially when there's a mixed group – one person with alcohol addiction and another with mephedrone or amphetamine addiction, synthetic drugs. They're just in completely different realms. When sitting with them and talking, they don't understand each other at all. They're not even interested in it. So, I think, why is that? It's clear – it's just business. They take enormous amounts of money from people, but provide no real help. It seems to me that people don't even make it past the third step. I honestly think so. Does anyone actually reach the twelfth step? I think nobody gets past the third step. Stay sober every day and that's it. That is my experience.

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk: Could you tell more about your work as an activist?

Nazik Abylgazieva: For the past two to three years, I've been working with Alla Bessonova and Sergey Bessonov specifically on the Harm Reduction program. In 2019, Alla and I co-founded the Women's Network for Key Populations in Kyrgyzstan, specifically for women in key populations. We realized that many organizations provide basic service-related assistance, and we didn't want to duplicate those efforts. Why should we? Our focus became mental well-being and psychological support for activists, leaders, women who have used drugs or are currently using, or those in remission.

Addiction is something fluid; it's not as if today I say, "I'm an addict," and tomorrow I say, "I'm not." It's like sexual orientation, which I think is very fluid and flexible. Today, I might feel bisexual, tomorrow a lesbian. That's how people feel. I identify as pansexual. But I accept and understand that people are diverse, and they explore themselves. And I think that's fine.

Mental well-being and access to various forms of psychological support became something very important to me and Alla and we decided to move in this direction. We've already held two retreats for women who use drugs.

We also organized two off-site retreats with experts and psychologists. I don't have the academic background to call myself a psychologist, but as someone with lived experience, I enjoy speaking with women from different walks of life, including those with experiences of drug use.
Addiction is just one part of who these women are. They might also be actresses, homemakers, businesswomen, or travelers. Substance use is just one part of their lives, but there's so much more to them. I don't want to focus solely on substance use as the primary thing that unites us. However, we must highlight its importance. We offer group psychological support and individual sessions, though this requires funding because no one can provide this help for free indefinitely.
Alla and I realized that we also have our own needs. We can't volunteer endlessly. We need to cover our basic needs too. So, while I haven't fully stepped away from LGBT activism, I prefer not to work directly in LGBT organizations anymore. In 2021, I closed that chapter, saying I would pursue research and international forums. Recently, I attended the fifth Central Asian LGBT Platform in Almaty.
The topic of safety is something I'm passionate about - physical, digital, and psychological safety. I've completed two ToTs (Training of Trainers) with Frontline Defenders, a Dublin-based organization that supports human rights defenders. They help in urgent situations, such as those involving government persecution or threats to life, by providing relocation or evacuation support. I've also conducted safety workshops for LGBT organizations and their partners. These topics - mental well-being and safety - are highly relevant today.

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk: How do you take care of yourself?

Nazik Abylgazieva: Good question. I do take care of myself. Speaking of external interventions, I occasionally allow myself to use - to smoke marijuana. Episodically, once a year or every six months, I go on a psilocybin journey, which involves using mushrooms or LSD. But I don't mess around with it; it's very philosophical for me, but it has to be [practically] beneficial. Yes, sometimes what occurs is unexpected, but it's a good experience.
Otherwise, I found that music always saves me. I love music in different formats, and I love to listen to music. I also move around by bike a lot. I visit nature, go out, read books, talk to good people. So, I have my own little set of practices that help me keep going and holding on.
And even, like, when it comes to my father, with [questions like] "why is he like that?" I have practices now. He has an alcohol addiction, and he

used to go on binge-drinking sprees. When he's intoxicated, he can be very aggressive. Well, it's more controlled now, more manageable, but still, I have to suppress it, and then I need an outlet. At least I can use my bike for that.
I also love nature and going out. New experiences, new bright impressions – they create new neural connections in the brain and prevent me from sinking back into darkness, into someone else's scenarios, like my family's. I don't want to fall into other's scenarios; I want to live my own life. How long can I keep living the lives of my parents or someone else? It feels like a waste of time.
Time flies fast now, like seasons changing – spring, summer. Years fly by. I want to allow myself to love myself and direct resources toward myself. Otherwise, I'll fall apart mentally and physically, crumble into pieces, and I won't be able to provide support to anyone else. I've already been in that state. I was in a deep depression. I've been through it, and the recovery was hard, and I don't want to go through it again.
Self-care has to be a priority; otherwise, how can you help others? Of course, there are times - without a doubt - when I feel powerless, like I just want to say, "That's it, I can't anymore, enough," and go off into the woods or mountains, into a little hut, and say, "Leave me alone, I don't want to see anyone. I just want birds, animals, plants. Yes, I'll grow carrots and eat leaves and I won't want to see a single person, not anyone at all." But then I allow myself to go off to some quiet place, like our Karagach Grove. We have places like that where you can retreat and restore yourself, and then I think, "Well, things aren't that bad after all, Nazik, not so bad."
There are, of course, emotional swings, naturally. This is because I love helping people. But there are times when, honestly, I hate people. I hate them because you think, "Why even bother?" when things don't go as you hope. Then you start devaluing yourself, digging deep, and thinking, "Why am I doing this? It's all useless." I think you're familiar with this, right? Walking through the maze of your thoughts, having these internal dialogues and monologues.

Katarzyna Kinga Kowalczyk: If you had a magic wand and you could immediately change whatever you want, then where would you start?

Nazik Abylgazieva: I wish, on a global scale, that there would be no conflicts and wars at all. I don't want people to fight, to show aggression. Ideally, everyone would just love it. If I had a magic wand, I'd make sure people just loved each other and there was no aggression.

Violence in families is a micro-conflict. And then you have clans fighting clans, cities against cities, nations against nations, and then it escalates globally. It's all the same. People. It's just people.
Whether you call it wars or special operations, it's all about competing for resources. These are all just human ambitions; it's all about people. Some just have more resources. I feel like if we could change that, if we could instill in people that there's no need to fight and compete, but instead just love each other and focus on creating, then people would have more time to enjoy life, to improve, and to get educated.
Why aren't women educated? Because their whole day is taken up with cooking, washing, and dealing with endless children. When is a woman supposed to have time for herself? She might want to get educated, but she simply doesn't have time.
Now we just need to invent that magic wand, Kasia.

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