Subverting oppressive structures: on *kelinhood*, solidarity and feminist research in the bazaars

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Abstract

Feminist principles in research emphasise acknowledging differences to address power imbalances. Taken at face value, discussions on positionality tend to prioritise differences, often turning into mere declarations of the researcher's social privilege. To counterbalance this tendency, I highlight the critical importance of also focusing on shared experiences between the researcher and research participants. Based on my feminist ethnographic fieldwork, this research note reflects on my positionality as an Uzbek *musofir* (migrant) *kelin* (daughter-in-law) conducting PhD research on the lived experiences of women in Tashkent's bazaars. It illustrates how my complex, intertwined identity as a locally-raised and foreign-educated *musofir kelin* initially posed challenges in accessing the field and building trust with participants. Yet, it also highlights how, in addition to the shared experience of *musofirchilik,* the oppressive experience of *kelinhood* can be subverted to build solidarity and rapport with the women in the bazaars, transforming an oppressive experience into subversive solidarity.

Keywords: positionality, kelin, musofir, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, feminist research, bazaars

Introduction

"Wait, are you a *kelin* too?" Iroda asked me, eyes wide open. This question marked a turning point in my field research. Four months into my fieldwork in the bazaars of Tashkent, I finally sensed the ice breaking and trust building. My own experience as a *kelin*—a daughter-in-law navigating familial and societal expectations while pursuing academic work—initially presented a significant challenge. However, following this question from Iroda, a young woman selling headscarves in Tashkent's Chorsu bazaar, I found myself in a state of reversed reality: the oppressive institution of a *kelin* became my subversive asset, my own "cockfighting" moment (Geertz 2000), enabling me to connect deeply with the women labouring in the bazaars.

Being an Uzbek female born and raised in Tashkent, bazaars weren't alien to me. Aware of the insider-outsider dilemmas in ethnographic research related to power, privilege, and socio-economic status, I hoped that the identities I embodied would make me local enough for the women in the bazaars to trust me. However, starting my fieldwork, I quickly realised that bazaar dwellers sensed my outsider nature.

Discussions on positionality often begin by highlighting differences between the researcher and the research participants, rooted in the feminist notion of power differentials and the goal of feminist research to mitigate rather than exacerbate these imbalances (Naples 2021; Davis and Craven 2020). While this ideal is crucial to uphold, the women I met during my fieldwork in Tashkent's bazaars taught me an important lesson—for feminist scholars conducting research within familiar communities, it can be valuable to shift the focus from differences to similarities between the researcher and the researched, albeit critically.

To illustrate this, I will reflect on my positionality as an Uzbek *musofir* (migrant) *kelin* (daughter-in-law) conducting PhD research on the lived experiences of women working in Tashkent's bazaars, where my intertwined identity as a locally-raised and foreign-educated *kelin* has proven to be both a hindrance and an asset in accessing the field and gaining my research participant's trust.

Despite the prevalence of the institution of *kelin* in Central Asia (Bietsch, LaNasa, and Sonneveldt 2021; Zhussipbek and Nagayeva 2021; Kudaibergenova 2018; Turaeva 2017; Dall'Agnola 2024), there are no in-depth accounts of Central Asian women researchers reflecting on how being a *kelin*[i] shapes fieldwork and the relationships with participants. Being an oppressive institution, a *kelin* is viewed as someone who, despite having the highest outer position (Turaeva 2017), occupies the lowest position within the husband's family, subject to "exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, 'cultural imperialism' and violence" (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva 2021).

As such, discussing the *kelin* experience within the context of a researcher's positionality can pose a significant challenge, as it may compromise both the identity of the *kelin* - particularly if this position remains a current aspect of her life - and the professionalism of the woman as a researcher. By reflecting on my own experience as a *kelin* conducting research in her home country, I seek to make visible and disrupt the normalised inferior social status and family position of a *kelin*. By creating space within Central Asian academia for the inclusion of non-hegemonic voices and narratives, including that of young *kelin* researchers, I therefore align myself with feminist decolonial scholars (Mohanty 1984; Gani and Khan 2024) who acknowledge the existence of multiple subjective truths that do not undermine researchers' professionalism.

The remaining part of this research note is structured as follows. First, I will discuss how my experience as a foreign-educated *musofir* (migrant) both alienated and connected me with my female respondents in the bazaars. Then, I will reflect on how embracing my identity as a *kelin*, despite initial challenges, helped me build trusting relationships with Central Asian women working in the bazaars. My experience as a *kelin* paving her way to fieldwork underscores how Central Asian women demonstrate agency despite oppressive gendered social norms.

Locating the experience of a female *musofir* in the insider-outsider continuum of Central Asia

Feminist research begins with being true to oneself. Given the historical legacies of Central Asia, the variation within the category of "local" is substantial and contingent on factors such as language, education, place of birth, place of residence, gender, and age, to name just a few (Marat 2021; Dall'Agnola and Sharshenova 2024). In my case, the existential question of "who am I to study women working in the bazaars without having ever worked in one myself?" led me to feminist debates critiquing the colonial masculine underpinnings of ethnography. These debates viewed an ideal ethnographer as someone (ideally a white man) with an outsider perspective to maximise objectivity (Davis and Craven 2020). My positionality did not neatly align with the insider-outsider dichotomy.

Engaging deeply with second-wave feminists of colour and postcolonial feminist scholarship helped me to realise that my inability to fit neatly into the outsider-insider dichotomy was not unique to the experiences of Central Asian researchers. Concepts like insider-outsider (Zavella 1993), "outsider within" (Collins 1986; hooks 2000), a "halfie" (Abu-Lughod 2016), and hybrid identities (Narayan 1993) are just a handful of examples developed by second wave feminists who reconsidered the problematic binary approach. Their conceptualisation paved

the way to viewing insider-outsider dichotomy as a fluid continuum, where researchers share different degrees of locality and outsiderhood depending on factors beyond passports and birth places.

Indeed, I could resonate with some aspects of positionality shared by feminist ethnographers such as Narayan and Abu-Lughod (2016) who, like me, were born and raised in the Majority World, but received university education in the Global North. Before embarking on my fieldwork, I was convinced that being an Uzbek female, born and raised in Tashkent, would mark me as an insider and help me gain the trust of my female respondents working in the bazaars. Yet, being born in Uzbekistan and holding Uzbek citizenship did not automatically turn me into "native" or "insider" researcher with the undisputed right to represent the voices of women in Uzbekistan. In fact, my positionality as a "halfie", born and raised in Uzbekistan but educated in Western institutions both inside and outside the country, othered me in the eyes of the women labouring in bazaars in myriad ways.

Born in the capital city and rarely travelling to rural areas, I had a predominantly urban perspective. In contrast, many women in the bazaars came from remote villages in rural Uzbekistan. My socio-economic background underscored this divide—coming from a different class meant that bazaars were not institutions of survival to me as they were for market traders. In the end, I never worked in the bazaars. Just as Tashkent was distinct from other towns in Uzbekistan, so was I different from the women working in the bazaars of Tashkent.

Being ethnic Uzbek, I went to a Russian-speaking school in Tashkent and then attended an English-speaking university. As a result, I knew Uzbek, but it was only my third language. For most women that I spoke to, Uzbek was the main, and often the only language they used in

their daily lives. My conversational Uzbek conceded to my Russian proficiency, and the women in the bazaars could immediately sense my dual Uzbek identity with its *rusiyzabon* (russified) undertone. Bazaar women treated it as a sign of my superiority, whereas for me it was the sign of my weakness and lack of knowledge. Whenever I could not come up with an Uzbek word and used a Russian alternative, I apologised and explained that I am working on improving my Uzbek language skills. To my surprise, my "russifiedness" was not seen as a lack, but as an asset by some of my respondents. "Why do you apologise? You went to Russian school, you know Russian. I want to send my son to a Russian school too, because this would open many more possibilities for him in the future" Dilfuza, a seller of children's clothing, shared with me. Several women in the bazaar shared Dilfuza's opinion and sought my advice on whether to send their children to a Russian school.

Moreover, while I have travelled beyond Uzbekistan, most women in the bazaar had only travelled within Uzbekistan, shuttling between Tashkent and their home villages. The experience of *musofirchilik*, the feeling of being away from home as a migrant (Urinboyev 2017), unexpectedly united me with the women I met in the bazaars. Although I had concerns that my long absence from Uzbekistan would hinder my ability to build rapport, several women expressed their sympathy with me, because they could relate to my feeling of *musofirchilik*. For instance, when Iroda, a 28-year-old seller in the *Chorsu* bazaar, learned that I was a migrant, she opened about her experience as an internal migrant from a remote village in Qashqadaryo—something I had not anticipated. "Oh, I know that feeling," she said. "I am a *musofir* too, you know. I married and moved to Tashkent with my husband for a better life. I miss my parents, my mom and dad… And the food—here in Tashkent, people do not know what real meat is."

As Iroda's quote illustrates, similar to external migrants who emigrated for socio-economic reasons, many bazaar women, including Iroda, have left their home villages in pursuit of a better life in the capital city. Like myself, they missed their homes, their families, their food, and the sense of belonging to their community. In a similar vein, I soon noticed that being a *kelin* resonated with the sentiments invoked by *musofirchilik* – young women leaving their natal family to join the new, often unfamiliar, and sometimes hostile family of a husband, much like migrants venturing into new unknown destinations, as the following section shows.

Can a *kelin* do fieldwork at home? Building a mutual *kelin* solidarity

Returning to Uzbekistan in August 2022 as a PhD student affiliated with Dublin City University, funded by one of Europe's prestigious scholarships for my ethnographic fieldwork, I faced the harsh reality of my status upon arrival. Resonating with Gafu's (2024) reflections on her multi-layered identity as an early-career female social scientist holding a degree from a UK university while conducting fieldwork in her native Kazakhstan, all while navigating single motherhood in a patriarchal society, I too found myself grappling with similar experiences during my fieldwork. Although I did not share the experience of single motherhood, having a co-parenting partner (husband) involved another layer of responsibility related to fulfilling the role of a *kelin*, a daughter-in-law.

At home, I was still primarily seen as a *kelin*, obliged to live with my husband's family and renegotiate my researcher identity from scratch. Despite three years of *kelinhood*[ii] experience, giving birth to a son and a daughter, five years of independent living abroad, and having two younger *kelins* at home, I assumed I had transcended the stage of probation and adjustment, and finally transitioned to a more stable phase, as outlined by Turaeva (2017).

However, to pave the way to my ten-month ethnographic fieldwork with the women in the bazaars, I first had to renegotiate my place within my husband's family to secure their support and permission. This involved balancing my dual roles both as a *kelin* (which encompasses that of a mother and a wife) and a researcher, and demonstrating my commitment to familial duties while pursuing my academic goals. This became possible thanks to my foreign scholarship, which provided a material base for me as a *kelin* researcher to carve out space for my ethnographic fieldwork, underscoring the significance of Suyarkulova's (2019) call for greater accountability towards alienated Central Asian scholars.

Balancing between the many roles, I still struggled to fully immerse myself in the fieldwork because of the many expectations I had to fulfil. Traditional colonial ethnographic methods typically enforce a strict separation between fieldwork and a researcher's private life, assuming researchers are constantly present within the community they study. Having internalised these rigid notions, I often felt unsuccessful in my fieldwork, because unlike the traditional ethnographer, my fieldwork began at home with *kelin* responsibilities and extended to visits to bazaars, conferences, and other commitments intersecting with my research. I even questioned my expertise to pursue a career in academia until I came across "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography" by Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020). This manifesto validated my embodied fieldwork approach, emphasising the importance of working "with rather than against the gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterise all knowledge production" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020).

Having experienced the disabling aspects of *kelinhood* in accessing fieldwork, I could not have imagined how my *kelin* experience would become an enabling factor that would allow me to connect with many women in the bazaars on a deeper, more meaningful level. During the first

few months of my fieldwork, my interactions did not go beyond the superficial level of "*Xudoga shukur"*, an Uzbek phrase that translates as "God bless, all is well". Mamlakat, a 48-year-old vegetable seller in the *Gospitalka*[iii] bazaar, would talk to me and be friendly, but she would not share the ups and downs that forced her into the bazaar. She limited herself to saying "It was a very difficult time for me and my family, but it is in the past and, God bless, all is well now" and then continued talking about abstract topics. Similarly, sitting together and selling fresh greens with a 40-year-old Bahora on a warm sunny day in Chorsu bazaar, I was treated like one of the tourists who had fled to Tashkent as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She would joke with me, show how her trade was done, but never share anything more intimate. In their eyes, I was a strange, foreign-educated Uzbek woman who, for some obscure reason, was eager to learn about their work in the bazaar.

As a feminist researcher, I was determined to build trustworthy relationships with women traders, and the friendly yet superficial interactions we had at the time did not satisfy me. On the one hand, I did not want to force these women to open up to me by inquiring too closely. On the other hand, I realised that the interactions I was having were not allowing me to truly understand the gendered experiences of women working in the bazaar. Levelling power imbalances, being respectful and remaining honest towards my interlocutors remained a priority. As a result, at times, I felt vulnerable and like I was failing. Yet, my immense gratitude towards these women kept me going. A visible shift happened, when Bahora, Iroda, Mamlakat, and many other women that I met during my fieldwork learned (spontaneously and naturally) that I too was a *kelin*.

One day, Bahora suddenly seemed distant. I worried I was no longer welcome, but she quietly explained her mother-in-law was trading nearby. I sensed a feeling of fear and tacit

subordination, feelings I knew by heart. The shared experience of being a *kelin* is a language that only the "insiders", those who had undergone this oppressive experience, could understand. I understood it and behaved in a way that would not compromise Bahora. Later, Bahora and I talked about our *kelinhood* experiences, shared pictures of our children, and finally established a rapport: the rapport that allowed me to learn that it was the intrahousehold dynamics involving her mother-in-law, that led Bahora to the bazaar. The finding that helped me to uncover the ambivalent role of bazaars for women, going beyond mere survivalist discourse.

Likewise, when Iroda, the headscarf seller in Chorsu (see her quote in the introduction) found out that I too was a *kelin,* and lived in a patrilocal household, the dynamic of our interactions changed dramatically. As Iroda explained later, I was no longer perceived by her as an odd and curious foreign-educated Uzbek woman. I was a *kelin* who underwent the initial, the most oppressive stages of *kelinhood* and motherhood, and still managed to receive education abroad. "You managed to do it! We are similar in that. I know the struggles that are behind your achievements. I worked in the bazaar, came home, and did all the kelin work, and at night I studied after putting my daughter to bed" shared Iroda her own experience of doing a part-time undergraduate degree as a full-time *kelin* working in the bazaar. As such, the shared lived experience of *kelin* helped me to build a situated *kelin* solidarity that became a cornerstone to establishing rapport with women working in the bazaars, deepening mutual trust, and going beyond the superficial level towards grounding the research in their concerns.

While women that I talked to did not understand the words "feminism", "gender inequality", and "oppression" (Mamadshoeva 2019), they knew the shared language of being a *kelin* in a sense of Herzfeld's (1997) concept of cultural intimacy. When people have a deep

understanding of each other's cultural background, traditions, and internalised norms, they can experience a sense of shared solidarity. This mutual familiarity with cultural aspects creates a bond that transcends mere acquaintance. Like having an inside joke or a shared secret that strengthens a connection; so did our *kelinhood* become the shared asset that advanced the goal of feminist research in mitigating the power imbalances. Rather than exploiting the vulnerabilities of research participants, we managed to build *kelin* solidarity.

When we talked from the positions of *kelins*, it felt as if we were equals. I knew the language of this trauma, and the women I talked to recognized it. Many women felt solidarity, and opened up. Although it was difficult for me as a *kelin* to start my fieldwork and do it extensively, it helped me accomplish the most important aspect of fieldwork—earning women's trust and friendship. Of course, it would be an oversimplification to build the entire analysis on our shared *kelinhood*. It is thus important to underscore that the women I talked to are much more than *kelins* with traumatic experiences. The identity of a daughter-in-law in the Central Asian context encompasses many other domains spanning personal, professional, and cultural positionalities.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that shared experiences do not automatically translate into rapport, akin to a magic wand. For instance, when Mamlakat learned that I was a *kelin* after my mother-in-law called me to buy groceries in the bazaar, she exclaimed "Voy, so you are one of us, aren't you?". However, despite our shared *kelinhood*, deeper interactions with Mamlakat were prevented by her husband, who did not allow her to have an interview with me. Consequently, I chose to stop visiting Mamlakat to preserve her marital harmony.

In most interactions, though, the shared cultural affinity of being a *kelin*, while never the primary focus of my research, enriched relationships between me as the ethnographer and my research participants. These interactions shifted from my self-perception alone to how participants responded to and perceived me — as a *kelin* and a *musofir,* and as a *musofir kelin*. Thus, this illustrates how feminist field research can generate knowledge across multiple divides of power, and axes of difference in ways that build solidarity. By building *kelin* solidarity, the oppressive institution of a *kelin* became our subversive asset.

Conclusion

Conducting feminist research in Central Asia is challenging. While some Central Asian female researchers have voiced their concerns, such reflections are still rare and lack comprehensive insight into the region's complexities. Such epistemological lack makes an early-stage feminist researcher's commitment to quality research a challenging and a lonely process. To address this gap, I decided to reflect on my experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with women in the bazaars. Instead of focusing solely on the insider-outsider dichotomy, my reflections presented here reveal the challenges and opportunities of my positionality as a *musofir kelin*.

Initially, I hoped my local roots would ease my research, but I found myself an outsider when interactions remained superficial. It was Iroda, Bahora, and other women in the bazaars who taught me that our complex, shifting identities are shaped by social relations. Focusing on shared experiences, such as *kelinhood* and *musofirchilik*, fostered deeper trust and understanding. They taught me that positionality is a process of building solidarity rather than merely stating social differences. By sharing my *kelin* experience within Central Asian academia, I aimed to challenge the normalised inferiority of *kelins* and advocate for diverse,

non-hegemonic voices. My journey underscores how Central Asian women demonstrate agency despite oppressive gender norms.

The very act of writing this note in the middle of my PhD project, between two fieldwork periods, has served as a reflexive exercise that has helped me not only to problematise the power differentials between my research participants and myself, but also to crystallise in whose interests I am writing. Talking and listening carefully to women, and being open to their influences, did not end with the fieldwork– I continue to maintain relationships with them and to question whether my understanding of their experiences and analysis is accurate–my research continues to be centrally shaped by the concerns and thinking of the women with whom I have worked. Thus, the ongoing process of this research partly explains why I have only briefly touched on the methodological implications of my positionality in terms of interpreting and representing women's lifeworlds– an encounter to be addressed in the future works.

Ethics Approval

This note is based on research conducted as part of the author's PhD fieldwork. The project underwent the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (Dublin City University) research ethics process and received approval on March 10, 2022 (DCU-FHSS-2022-013). All names used are pseudonyms.

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[i] Turaeva (2017) who pioneered *kelins* both as an institution, and liminal identity marker, has only briefly reflected on how her three-year experience of being a *kelin* followed by divorce paralleled with her native - not so native positionality when doing fieldwork on the role and status of *kelin* in Central Asia.

[ii] Being a daughter-in-law (Cleuziou and McBrien 2021). *Kelinhood* experience involves joining her husband’s family household and performing all unpaid domestic labour. Generally, a kelin occupies the lowest rank in the household and must seek permission—typically from her mother-in-law and husband—before leaving the house.

[iii] A colloquial name for the Mirobod dehqon bazaar located in the European part of Tashkent.