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**Kazakhstan: Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan verbally and physically attacked**

On 29 May 2021, women human rights defenders **Zhanar Sekerbayeva** and **Gulzada Serzhan** were verbally and physically attacked by unknown male individuals and a police officer. The attacks occurred during a public event organised by the two women human rights defenders in Shymkent. Following the attack, a police officer detained Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan.

[Zhanar Sekerbayeva](#) and [Gulzada Serzhan](#) are women human rights defenders, LGBTQI+ activists and co-founders of Kazakhstan Feminist Initiative "Feminita". Zhanar Sekerbayeva is a journalist, poet, researcher and PhD in Social sciences (University of Tsukuba). She has been advocating on local and international levels, linking the academic and civic realms. Gulzada Serzhan has a Master's degree in Economic Theory (Russian School of Economics) and is an intern at the University of California, Berkeley.

The Kazakhstan Feminist Initiative "[Feminita](#)" is a grassroots queer-feminist human rights organisation working to protect the rights of women from the most oppressed groups in Kazakhstan (lesbians, bisexuals, queer and trans women, women with disabilities, women engaged in sex work). The organisation has been trying to register as a legal entity in Kazakhstan since December 2017.

On 29 May 2021, Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan were planning a public event about the rights of women and gender equality in Shymkent. However, the women human rights defenders together with 15 participants were prohibited from meeting at the previously booked conference room in the City Hotel Shymkent. They then moved to the hotel cafe where around 30 unknown aggressive men verbally attacked Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan as well as other participants of the event by harassing and insulting them. The unknown individuals called the police and surrounded the women human rights defenders.

Since 23 May 2021, Zhanar Sekerbayeva has received online threats, as her phone number was published on TikTok and other social media platforms. She received over 60 phone calls and 1500 messages on Whatsapp from unknown individuals. Also the popular Kazakh singer Alтынay Zhorabayeva and a member of the Kazakh Union of Parents, Bagila Baltabaeva, publicly denounced the women human rights defenders and asked their followers on social media to disrupt the women human rights defenders' events.

When the police officer, Arman Aripzhanov, arrived at the cafe he began shouting and insulting Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan and asked them to come with him. He detained both of the women rights defenders. The policeman, together with the men who were previously harassing the women roughly grabbed Zhanar Sekerbayeva and forced her into an unmarked police car. These events were documented and posted on [Feminita's Facebook page](#). The police officer didn't inform them why they were being detained. Zhanar Sekerbayeva has bruises on her hands as a result of this treatment which has been confirmed through a medical examination. According to the press office of the Police Department of Shymkent city, the police officer "took the necessary measures to ensure the safety of the event organizers".

Zhanar Sekerbayeva told Front Line Defenders that when she was shoved into the vehicle, another unknown man opened the opposite door and tried to pull her from the car by her hair and other man punched her in the face. One of these men took Gulzada Serzhan's phone, which he gave to the police officer. Ignoring this attack, the police officer took the women human rights defenders to the Police Department of Abay District of Shymkent city. Zhanar

Sekerbayeva was charged with “assaulting state representatives” under Article 378 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan. However, the police agreed not to convict her if she would not file a complaint against the police officer Arman Aripzhanov. The unknown individuals who attacked the women human rights defenders were not detained.

At the police station Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan were interrogated about the purposes of their visit to Shymkent for 8 hours without food and their phones were confiscated, however, they were permitted to meet with a lawyer. In the evening, around 100 people, mostly men, came to the gate of the Police Department of Abay District, advocating for traditional values and demanding “give us the lesbians and we will have a trial”. Popular Kazakh actor Kalybaev Galymzhan was also there and provoked the people. The video of this demonstration was filmed and published on [YouTube](#). The police officers communicated with the people in a friendly manner and some of them even came to the police department to lodge complaints against Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan. According to the police inspector, they also had the possibility to see the materials of the women human rights defenders’ case.

At around midnight on 29 May 2021, after 8 hours at the police department, the women human rights defenders were asked by police to leave Shymkent immediately. Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan were prohibited by the police officers from returning to Almaty by train and, instead they were escorted for eight hours in a police car by 5 other police officers who even accompanied the women human rights defenders to the bathroom. During the trip, the women human rights defenders were filmed by the police without their consent, in an attempt to show how the police had protected them. This was justified by the police officers as being necessary to protect the women human rights defenders’ safety.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the attacks against and detention of women human rights defenders Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan, as it believes they are being targeted solely as a result of their work in promoting and protecting women’s and LGBTQI+ rights in Kazakhstan. Front Line Defenders condemns the intimidation and targeting of the women human rights defenders, which may have a chilling effect on civil society, and is not conducive to the creation of a safe and enabling environment in which human rights defenders can carry out their work in Kazakhstan.

#### **Front Line Defenders urges the Kazakh authorities to:**

1. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the attacks against and detention of Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Kazakhstan are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.