THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE:

Barriers Faced by Mothers with Young Children in Kazakhstan in Re/entering the Labour Market: An analysis with the concept of defamilisation

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This thesis is dedicated to my Mom who is not with us,

and my Dad who is in prison now

Abstract

This thesis explores women's experiences when combining motherhood and paid work, and the role that the state, the markets and the family play in this. The theoretical framework is based on the concept of defamilisation in order to explain the extent to which and the way in which three sectors, the state, the labour market and the family, impact the defamilisation of women (Lister, 1994). Mothers of young children, not only in Kazakhstan but in general need support from the state, employers and family (Dugarova, 2016). The state plays a key role not only in ensuring acceptable standards of living for people by decommodifying them from the labour market (Esping- Andersen, 1990; 1999), but it may also provide support to mothers of young children by defamilising them through assistance with childcare and allowing them to have free time to enter paid work (Lister, 1994; Chau and Yu, 2022).

While there is research published on gender inequality in Kazakhstan in terms of gender-based discrimination and wage gender gap they experience (Omarova et al. 2017; Khamzina et al. 2020; Mukhamadiyeva et al. 2019; Bidaishiyeva et al. 2018), there are few if any empirical studies carried out on defamilisation and motherhood penalty in Kazakhstan. This thesis therefore makes an original contribution by filling this gap in research. Through semi-structured focus group discussion and secondary research, it explores whether and how the state, the markets and the family assist or hinder women from (re)entering paid work and their impact on defamilisation. This data was analysed through an interpretive approach and thematic method, and utilising an insider positionality approach (Geene, 2010; Wilson et al, 2022). The data collection for this research took place in December 2021 and May 2022 in Almaty and Turkestan, cities located in South of Kazakhstan. The findings show that despite conservative values and beliefs in the importance of traditional gender roles, a pragmatic rationale for having dual-earner household and women choosing to enter paid work for financial needs prevail. The financial situation in families plays a decisive role in women's decisions to find paid work and commonly women whose partners earn generously postpone entering the labour market for an indefinite time. The findings also suggest that the state's lack of support for mothers of young children pushes them to seek paid work, but due to difficulties faced there to enter and retain, women remain dependent on their families. The traditional lifestyle of living in multigenerational households mean women are engaged in social exchange with members of extended family and receive support with childcare in return for unpaid domestic services. Therefore, the state, the labour market and the family present a complex environment for mothers of young children engaging in paid work, resulting in a strong pull from the family that ultimately hinders them from being able to maintain an acceptable living standard independently of their families.

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Kabylova, M. (2023). „Uyat Emes“ oder der Prozess der Enttarnung in Kasachstan. In Thibault, H. and Caron, J. (eds) *Uyat und die Kultur der Scham in Zentralasien*. Singapore: Palgrave McMillan. 43-91. <DOI: 10.1007/978-981-19-4328-7_4> Available from: <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-19-9014-4_4>

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Women often need support with childcare to be able to (re)enter paid work after becoming mothers. Since industrialisation, many societies have been based on a male breadwinner model of the family with men going out to do paid work and women staying at home to do unpaid work (Blossfeld and Drobnic, 2001; Giuliani, 2022; Lewis et al., 2008). With rising demand for equal rights for women to access the labour market and increasing living costs, today more women prefer and need to become second breadwinners in families making double-earner families more common (Craig and van Tienoven, 2021; Pfau-Effinger, 2020).

Since I became a mother, I experienced first-hand the challenges that women in Kazakhstan go through when combining motherhood and paid work. I found it very difficult to pursue professional development while raising four children close in age in conservative and patriarchal society in Kazakhstan. Despite multiple attempts and applications, I could not find stable work that would accommodate the needs of a working mother. Neither did I meet support with childcare at home, where I, on the contrary, bore the predominant responsibility of looking after the physical and emotional needs of my parents-in-law and four children, as well as supporting my then husband's career. Despite the state provisions of one year of paid maternity leave and state-subsidised childcare, they are far from enough to support me financially or enable me to take up any paid work. As a result, I became more reliant on the support of the family, especially my husband. I noticed that I may not be an individual case. Other mothers may share similar experiences when combining motherhood and paid work. I became curious about the factors that cause these issues, which formed the driver to embark on my PhD endeavour. My precarious experience with paid work led me to think about the role of the labour market, and my experience of looking after parents-in-law made me reflect on impact of family institution on women, and state's lack of support made me question the role of state in serving as a safety net for mothers. The main puzzle was to bring this all together, as I wanted to understand which of these factors was causing the

main obstacles. I was very glad to discover the concept of defamilisation as it allowed me to develop a theoretical framework that brought these three elements together. The lack of support women experienced from state services, the labour and product markets and the family as well as the gap in scholarly knowledge on mothers' experiences in Kazakhstan prompted me to develop this as a research project.

Most of the current research conducted on female employment in Kazakhstan is dedicated to gender inequality and discrimination (e.g. Omarova et al. 2017; Khamzina et al. 2020; Mukhamadiyeva et al. 2019; Bidaishiyeva et al. 2018). There is a scarcity of studies based on primary and secondary data that explore women's experiences when joining the labour market once they become mothers. To the best of my knowledge this thesis is unique in providing an account of the lived experiences of navigating the labour market of mothers with young children in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan is a ninth largest country by territory in the world and has one of the lowest population densities in the world, 6 people per square kilometer. Population-wise, it is comprised of about 20 million inhabitants: 13.4 million Kazakhs, 2.9 million Russians, 614,000 Uzbeks, 387,000 Ukrainians, 290,000 Uyghurs (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024B). There are more than 100 ethnicities living in the country, which is the result of forced mass migration of Poles, Koreans, Iranians, Germans, Karachays and Chechen-Ingush that took place during the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1950s (Yensenov et al., 2022). These mass migration flows and repression of whole 13 national entities resulted in 2 million people relocating to Kazakhstan, Central Asia and Siberia, who were punished by Stalin for supposedly treason and disloyalty to Soviet state (Pohl, 2000). Majority of population identifies as Muslim – 69.3% and Christian - 17.2%, and 0.1% of population are Buddhists and Jews. The number of atheists has decreased from 2.3 to 2.8% between 2023 and 2024 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023).

In terms of political structure, Kazakhstan is a secular country, and the governmental control is presidential republic. President is appointed for 7 years and there are two top lawmaking bodies – two-chamber parliaments called as Senate and Majilis (Gov.kz, 2024). The country transitioned from communism with planned economy to capitalist

political regime with free market economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Kazakhstan establishing itself as an independent republic 1991. The country had been part of the Russian Empire since 1840 until it became part of the Soviet Union between 1936 and 1991 (Beisembaeva, 2021)

Kazakhstan's GDP (gross domestic product) per capita has been estimated to be 13.2 in 2023 (World Bank Group, 2023B). Since the 2000s, Kazakhstan's economic growth increased significantly fueled by market reforms, oil and mineral extraction and reign investment. Kazakhstan went from a post-Soviet country with dire economy of the 1990s to an upper middle-income economy with better living standards and lower poverty.

The concept of defamilisation was developed in the West (Lister, 1994) as a response to the critique of Esping-Andersen's approach to welfare regimes for focusing on the decommodification of working people whilst ignoring families and those who are outside the labour market, such as mothers with young children, and has so far been predominantly applied in Western contexts. A significant theoretical contribution of this thesis is the application of the concept to, Kazakhstan, which is located in the Central Asian region and has Islamic, nomadic and communist heritage, to investigate if and how it helps to understand and explain how mothers balance paid work and childcare responsibilities in Kazakhstan.

A further contribution of the thesis is the discussion of Esping-Andersen's (1990) typologies of welfare capitalism concerning Kazakhstan's work-family reconciliation policies to explore where Kazakhstan belongs. Although his typology has been complimented with new regime types designed for East Asian, Eastern European and Latin American countries (Esping-Andersen, 1996; Aspalter, 2011), there is a lack of analysis of welfare states in countries from Central Asia, including Kazakhstan.

The state, the market and the family can all play a significant role in supporting mothers' chances to (re)enter the labour market after childbirth (Chau and Yu, 2021). The state can both provide suitable childcare and regulate the provision of childcare by third parties by setting standards and monitoring pricing mechanisms. Equally, the state has

a role to play in influencing the labour market by developing and overseeing the implementation of laws that protect women, and specifically, mothers, from unfair employment practices. The labour market and the market provision of childcare operate under market conditions where supply and demand are closely related to price and opportunity. These mechanisms can be regulated by state intervention, aimed at supporting mothers in their attempts to engage in paid work whilst also bearing the responsibility of looking after their families.

The role of the family is multi-faceted. Whereas traditional values expect that mothers bear all the responsibilities for looking after the household and caring for children and older generations, spreading these chores more easily between spouses would mean that women have more opportunities to engage in paid work, and thus contribute to the family financially and support themselves. The state has again a role to play in promoting egalitarian values, for example through universal education, or by setting examples in their own practices, thus normalising more equal positions of men and women in society.

Currently, in Kazakhstan, inadequate state provisions (such as in childcare provision and paid parental leaves), and discriminating practices in the labour market (such as in pay and job opportunities) are not conducive to mothers (re)entering the labour market after giving birth. This thesis explores how the state, the market, and the family in Kazakhstan support or hinder women with young children from entering or re-entering the labour market. This is achieved by exploring mothers' lived experiences of combining motherhood and paid work by interacting with the state, the market and the family and how these three sectors interplay to create more barriers and/or support for women.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the persisting issues mothers experience when combining their family-care responsibilities with paid work; and how the state, the market and the family assist or hinder women in Kazakhstan to do so. The main question it addresses is: "What are the main barriers for mothers of 1-6 aged children in

Kazakhstan to enter and stay in the paid labour market and why?". There are three main objectives of this study, which are:

1. To explore issues Kazakh women's experience in interacting with the state, the market and the family when combining motherhood and paid work.
2. To study how those issues might be understood and explained through the concept of defamilisation .
3. To develop an original contribution to the defamilisation debate from the Kazakhstan case of women's experiences.

This research attempts to find evidence-based explanations for five research questions, which are:

1. What is the current status of women's participation in the paid labour market in Kazakhstan?

2. What factors are affecting the participation in paid work of mothers of children aged 1-6 in Kazakhstan and how?

3. How do work-family reconciliation policies in Kazakhstan address or fail to address the issues of labour market participation of mothers?

4. How does the concept of defamilisation help us understand the role of work-family reconciliation policies in helping mothers' paid employment in Kazakhstan?

1.2 Research Approach

This project has taken the interpretivist philosophical approach and aims to give a voice to mothers of young children in Kazakhstan in relation to their experience of engaging in paid work in combination with their family commitments. Their stories are set within the context of what the state provides in terms of childcare, and the laws and policies there that proclaim to support women's opportunities to do paid work. The official narrative

presented by state officials and agents does not always match the experience of the people at whom policies and provisions are aimed, but it tends to be the main, or even only, voice heard; the voices of individual citizens are rarely heard. This thesis presents the stories of the lives of women who are affected by the actions and influences of the state, the market, and the family in their attempts to engage in paid work whilst taking care of their families at the same time.

1.3 Thesis Outline

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter, is a theoretical chapter that examines relevant theories and concepts and introduces the analytical framework of the study. Chapter Three is about methodology. Chapters Four to Six report the findings concerning the role and women's experiences with the three sectors: the state, the market and the family. The findings from the secondary research are presented followed by the findings from the focus group discussions which show how the lived experiences of the participants may be different from the policies and practices on paper. Chapter Seven provides further discussion of the analysis and a conclusion. The focus of each chapter is summarised as follows:

Chapter Two

This chapter discusses the relevant theories and concepts considered in framing this study. It starts with discussing how women's studies have developed over time (Pamarksiz, 2019). Feminism (hooks, 2020) and the capability approach (Sen, 1987; Nussbaum, 2011; Silva and Howe, 2012) are explained to show how different views have influenced debates around women's roles in families and the labour market.

The chapter then moves to exploring the three major sectors that have been identified as influencing how women balance the demands of motherhood with their attempts to engage with paid labour: the state, the market, and the family. The discussion about the state focuses on the different ways in which the state sees its role in providing welfare and care to its citizens. This has been conceptualized as welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; 1996; Chau et al. 2017; Barrientos, 2023) and care regimes (Giordano, 2022; Bettio and Plantenga, 2004). The exploration around care regimes touches on the provision of childcare which can involve the state as well as the private and voluntary sectors, or more informal arrangements.

The subsequent sections examine women's position in the labour market (Rubery, 2024; Core econ, 2022) and in the family (Powell et al., 2019; Bradley, 2012). Defamilisation is a concept that has been developed to understand the extent to which and under which circumstances members of a family have the opportunity to engage in the labour market in order to earn an income (Rubery, 2024; Core econ, 2022) and the role of family sectors (Powell et al., 2019; Bradley, 2012). In this thesis, the attention is focused on how reconciliation of motherhood and paid work affects mothers of young children.

The final part of the Chapter brings together all the previous concepts in one theoretical framework that discusses how the three sectors act and interact to influence mothers of young children's ability to balance carrying out paid work with their family responsibilities.

Chapter Three describes the research design and methods and explains the philosophical and methodological approach of this research. The research design includes data collection methods, the process of data recording and analysis, and a reflection on insider positionality (Wilson et al, 2022). It ends with stating the ethical considerations in relation to procedural ethics, ethical approval and research with women (Bryman, 2004; Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

Chapter Four presents the findings about how the state's work-family reconciliation policies affect women's decisions to (re)enter paid work. Work-family reconciliation policies are defined as laws aimed at improving the reconciliation of paid work and

family roles such as parental leave, formal childcare and the care of relatives (UNECE, 2016; MacInnes, 2006). It begins by discussing the accessibility, affordability and quality of state-subsidised childcare, and identifies issues such as long waiting lists, lack of innovation and unqualified staff making women resent placing their children into state childcare. Following this, the chapter looks at problems in maternity leave such as the modest compensation rate and long duration as factors hindering women's participation in the labour market. Thirdly, it discovers that paternity leave is mostly not taken by fathers and even if they do, it is done for non-childcare-related causes such as professional growth. The chapter then explains how these issues affect women's defamilisation from their own perspectives.

Chapter Five outlines the main findings about the part played by the labour market in women's combining motherhood and paid work. It discusses the challenges women experience in informal and part-time employment that contribute to the wage gender gap and job segregation. Following this, the chapter explores how women can be penalised for being mothers at work and where gender-based stereotypes and ageism played the key roles. The chapter then examines how financial needs play a decisive role in women's decisions to (re)enter paid work and how the motherhood penalty makes it very difficult for them to stay in paid work after becoming mothers.

Chapter Six presents the main findings about women's experiences in the realm of family when combining motherhood and paid work. The chapters examine two contradicting processes of nationalisation and detraditionalisation that impose traditional gender roles and, at the same time, positively affect women's professional aspirations.

Chapter Seven addresses the research questions and outlines the contributions made to knowledge in terms of the concept of defamilisation and issues women experience from the interaction with the state, the market and the family when balancing motherhood and paid work.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces different theories to explain factors that facilitate or hinder women to (re)enter the labour market after giving birth. It starts with a discussion of women's studies, and in particular, the historical development of feminism and the capability approach, as this will show how social thinking and academic debate about women and their roles in society changed over time.

This is followed by discussions of the state, the market and the family as three main social sectors which affect women's lives. The section on the state looks at different types of welfare and care regimes to show that women receive different degrees and forms of support from the state that can affect women's chances of leading an independent life and in quest to combine motherhood and paid work. The section on the market discusses the labour and product markets to highlight issues such as discrimination, wage gender gap, job segregation and profit-oriented childcare services. The section on the family discusses the influence of culture and gendered roles within the family.

The concept 'defamilisation' (Lister, 1994) is about individuals (women or men) being able to choose between traditional family roles (including caring and providing for) and leading a more independent life by earning a living in the labour market or depending on support outside the family, such as state provisions.

The penultimate section of this chapter discusses scholarly studies on and criticisms of defamilisation. The final section focuses on the ways the state, the market and the

family interact to influence women's defamilisation and their ability to combine paid work and motherhood.

2.2 Women's studies

Women's studies, also known as Gender studies, is the branch of scholarship that studies the impact of gender and gendered roles in society with specific focus on power, oppression and intersectionality (Brown and Moorer, 2015). It involves interdisciplinary study analysing the impact of gender, race, age, class, nationality, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and other factors affecting women's social, political and cultural experiences. Women's Studies first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with the movement of students and activists of civil and women's rights who criticised academic scholarship for being gender-blind and called for applying gender lenses (Parmaksız, 2019). Some women fought to tell their own stories instead of letting the patriarchal system convey inaccurate and belittling images of them. Meanwhile, access to education provided women with an opportunity to use their own voices, which they took advantage of to bring radical transformations to narratives about women.

2.2.1 Feminism

There is no rigid unified definition of feminism; its definitions range from "the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks, 2020:viii) to "A flexible, contentious, critical, and evolving worldview of theory and action with the goal of dismantling patriarchy, colonization, and other systems of oppression on behalf of equitable social change" (Allen, 2023).

Feminism first started as a movement against gender inequality and the struggles women experienced in society due to their gender. One of the first works on women's oppressed state and their facing injustice in society was written by pioneer Crisitine de Pizan in 1495 (Council of Europe, 2002). The first feminist movement started in France with women marching to demand political changes, coinciding with the French revolution. It resulted in the development of Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen aimed at recognising gender inequality in 1791.

The first wave of feminism, known as the ‘suffragette movement’, started in North America and was centered around women’s right to vote. By the 1920s, women were granted the right to vote in various countries across North America and Europe. As a result of increased number of women joining the workforce in factories and offices, they became more outspoken and active in social and social democratic parties. Universities started to admit female students at around the same time in the early 20th century (Mohajan, 2022).

The second wave of feminism took place in the 1960s and 1970s with the resurgence of the feminist movement in Western Europe and the USA. Although it advocated to achieve liberation for women, different groups diverged in opinion on the ways it could be achieved. The second wave of feminism contributed to the establishment and development of women’s studies as a discipline in higher education, and women’s achievements in history were included - in book publications on women’s achievements in literature, music, arts and science that had not been know widely before. The women’s movement served as a decisive driving force behind the production of international documents about women’s rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (Malinowska, 2020).

The third wave of feminism which began in the 1990s is associated with an increased awareness of intersectionalities such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation impacting and shaping feminist movement around the world. Issues of women from non-white races and their race affecting status were given more attention by the advocates of global feminism. Women’s different perspectives on feminism were included in the agendas of newly established feminist non-governmental organisations, such as the ‘Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan’ and the ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ in Nigeria (Mohajan, 2022).

The third wave feminism contributed to the creation of the concept cyberfeminism. Cyberfeminism entails activism of feminists in theorising, critiquing and utilising the Internet and new media technologies. Cyberfeminism is continuation of the prior legacy known as ‘networked feminism' and associated with general activism on the Internet.

For example, mobilising online voices and opinions to unite against injustices on women such as sexism, misogyny or gender-based violence against women. One well-known case of cyberfeminism is the online movement #metoo in 2017, which started with case of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, who was accused by various women of sexual harassment and violence, and which sparked a worldwide movement of women protesting against such treatments, often experienced in workplaces (Malinowska, 2020).

Jagger identified four main themes of feminism; liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, and radical feminism (Mohajan, 2022). Liberal feminism has been associated with basic rights such as rights for freedom: - liberty and equality, and, in particular, strives for different types of freedom – to live, the right to vote, freedom of speech, religion and access to education (Wijayati, 2020). Liberal feminism aims to set women free from assisting the welfare of men and children and goes against societal expectations of valuing women based on their roles as mothers and wives (Foley, 2007). Women's traditional role in a patriarchal society of subordinating to men has been regarded as oppression of freedom: "the subordination of women, which deprives them of freedom, is an unjust violation of the principle of liberty" (Mill, 1984). Liberal feminists, however, do not perceive the existing structures in society as problematic, and advocate for women's freedoms within those structures.

Marxist feminism analyses the exploitation women experience at the intersection of class and gender. It encourages women in reclaiming their bodies and power over their lives through the elimination of class divisions (Armstrong, 2020). It goes against limitations of women's choices for the sake of profiting men and capitalism, and supports women gaining control over land, paid and unpaid work, reproductive and social rights.

Socialist feminists view structures of class, race and gender as jointly reinforcing oppression (Huq, Tan and Venugopal, 2020). They argue that women must have a sense of sisterhood in order to be liberated from patriarchal oppression. While Socialist feminism shares with Marxist feminism ideas such as striving for socio-economic justice, the former believes in capitalism and patriarchy selectively targeting women for

exploitation purposes. In contrast, Marxist feminism claims that capitalism exploits everyone regardless of gender and that working class women get the worst of both worlds

Radical feminism sees patriarchy as a social order wholly based on the interests of men, which in turn is the root of all gender inequality. It argues that women taking part in paid work has not been liberating but rather results in women carrying the double burden of both paid work and domestic work, and that men in the family benefit from women's efforts, thereby supporting the patriarchy. Within this theory there are two main streams, one that sees the solution as eradicating gender differences and aiming for androgyny, and one that sees the solution as elevating characteristics seen as feminine, e.g. emotion, and downgrading those that are seen as masculine, e.g. hierarchy (Thompson, 2016). For radical feminists an ideal world would be one in which men are irrelevant.

In order to overcome the various divides in feminism across the world, "sisterhood" was proposed as global feminism (Morgan, 1994). This idea was critiqued for naively fitting women from different countries and diverse backgrounds into a one-size-fits-all framework and arriving at one way of viewing women's gender-related problems, experiences and the injustices they face. Feminists from the Global South criticised the changes feminism proposed as the West subjectively representing Euro-American values and ways of life (Chavez-Dueñas and Adames, 2020; Collins, Machizawa, and Rice, 2019; Thompson et al., 2021). Such values celebrate individuality and modernity and do not consider cultures and experiences that diverge from that (Tong, 2022; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994:17).

There is an ongoing criticism of feminist theories, that it is predominantly based on approaches representing interests and issues of women living in the Western world. Studies on postcolonial, indigenous and multicultural feminism critically approach the liberal and global sisterhood movement of feminism by arguing that feminism has different faces and women are not a homogenous group but with intersectionality such as race, ethnicity, social class, culture and geographical location contributing to differences (Ballestrin, 2022; Goma, 2020; Bloch, 2020; Green, 2017). Ethnic minority and indigenous women's participation in the feminism movement is limited due to

unequal capabilities between women of the West and the Global South. The growing acknowledgment of feminism across the world and the liberal values and independence it popularises, may inflict jeopardy on minority women (Bloch, 2020). Some indigenous and ethnic minority women are reluctant to openly acknowledge that they are feminists due to negative image of feminism as hatred against men and feminism perceived as movement of women living privileged lives who have little in common with indigenous women (Green, 2017). Due to feminism originating and spreading from the Western countries, this movement has been associated with alien culture and threat to local culture in the Global South.

The feminism movement is growing in Central Asia and manifested mainly in cyberfeminism - activists organising peaceful protests, disseminating feminism ideas and calling out to act on gender-based problems in the country through social media (Mattei, 2022).

Despite predominantly young group of feminists' activisms, feminism as a movement is negatively stigmatised by the majority of population: "The Women's movement in our country never saw itself as a feminist subject. In the media and in the public space, feminism continues to be associated primarily with radical feminism." (Shakirova, 2008:2). Women's issues are seen as problems of marginalised groups and associated with poverty, unemployment, victimisation, and, hence, feminism as a movement addressed at vulnerable people. As a result, success of women is not seen as feminism; on the contrary, problematic cases are more associated with feminism. Feminist activists who took part in feminism march on the women's international day were subjected to hostility from mainstream media, police officers and conservative groups of people (Arystanbek, 2020; Sorbello, 2023). Despite lacking knowledge on feminism, majority of population believes that that gender-based issues are nor acute in Kazakhstan. About 65 percent of 3,800 respondents from 17 regions of Kazakhstan and three large cities surveyed by the UNDP (2024) did not know what concepts of gender equality and feminism meant. Moreover, 83 percent of men and 70 percent of women believed that women have sufficient rights and opportunities in the country (UNDP, 2024). Online activism or cyberfeminism are dominated and carried out by youth groups who use their digital presence to destigmatise feminism and, as a result, there is

generational divide in awareness about feminism as there are less older users on social media and most of them follow pages whose values align with theirs (Azizi, 2023).

As feminism is negatively perceived in Central Asia and seen as a threat to family values and the majority of population believes in the importance of traditional gender roles, women have been using their soft power to advocate for resolving of women's issues. Women have to retain their traditional side and balance Muslim and wife-mother identities and build respectable reputation in order to be trusted by public regarding public activism. One of the main ways for women to be tackling women's issues is through political-social activism that non-directly addresses women's issues, which are often presented as general social issues of poverty, unemployment (Peshkova, 2020). Different interpretation of feminism in Central Asian region might be relevant such as 'feminine feminism', which differs from Western interoperation of it such as Liberal due to cultural and social norms prevailing in societies. Femininity and feminism are commonly counteracted (Gundersen and Kunst, 2019; Riley and Scharff, 2013), but women in Central Asia show that in order to start implementing positive changes regarding women's rights and opportunities, soft power is usually resorted to by women in the region.

Feminist theories, unlike the Capability approach, lacks focus on individual capacities and, therefore, it made me think about using the capability approach, which is discussed in the next section.

2.2.2 The Capability Approach

The capability approach studies people's quality of life and ways of improving it. It suggests that the freedom people have to achieve and perform the functions they value should be the main criteria in evaluating social arrangements (Sen, 1987). People's capability has been defined as "the alternative combinations of functioning that are feasible for [them] to achieve" (Sen, 1987). Capabilities show real opportunities and abilities a person has to achieve their desired life. "A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve" (Sen, 1987:36). Women are limited in their

capabilities to strive and achieve aims due to constraints imposed on them on fulfilling unpaid domestic work and childcare, hence, they cannot fulfill their potential. Further studies extended the capability approach and interpreted it as touching upon all dimensions of life (Haq, 1995).

The capability approach has been interpreted as having importance for human rights and agency because it centres around human beings and freedom to choose. Silva and Howe (2012) used the capability approach as a framework to explain empowerment and self-determination people feel in using opportunities to achieve valued outcomes.

Nussbaum and Sen ask key question regarding capabilities approach “what is each person able to do and to be?” (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999, 2005). Each person is an end and constitutes moral concern when evaluating the impact of social conditions on an individual (Robeyns, 2017: 183). In other words, agency is a priority.

After ruling out that neither wealth such as income and ability to commodify nor self-fulfillment such as happiness are sufficient to achieve well-being, the focus shifted to the importance of human functioning and capability (Sen, 1987, 2005). However, this approach has been criticised from four different angles. Firstly, Sen’s capability approach has been accused of under-theorising since it lacks clarity regarding identifying valuable capabilities and Sen’s failing to provide a list of important capabilities (Sudgen, 1993). Without a clear list of criteria representing cababilities, it is impossible to evaluate the fairness of the society we are living in (Pogge, 2022). The questions were asked whether all capabilities are of equal value and if not, how the most important ones should be prioritised. Secondly, the capability approach has also been criticised for lacking practicality in its application as it is troublesome to be using a list of capabilities for interpersonal comparisons between humans (Beits, 1986). The core focus of the Capability approach - ‘the ability to achieve the kind of lives we have reason to value’ - becomes utopian and unrealistic to achieve as everyone has different perceptions of what it means and values around it (Rawls, 2001). Rawls stresses the importance of the process of finding your own version of happiness rather than the outcome of achieving good and just life for liberals. Thirdly, Sen’s approach has been scrutinised for being overly individualistic in its approaches and hostile to the impact of collectivistic happiness. Shared values with others are neglected and not seen in

positive light (Gore, 1997). For example, culture is portrayed as ‘social good’ by Sen and functions only instrumentally in the capability approach. However, this individuality bias in Capability approach has been attempted to be compensated by the concept of collective agency and collective capability suggested by empirical studies (Pelenca, Bazile, & Ceruti, 2015).

Fourthly, the Human Development Index developed by Sen in 1990 for the United Nations Development Programme has been described as abrupt for focusing on three obvious elements of income level, literacy and longevity, and excluding unseen indications of well-being such as feeling ashamed for your financial situation or having meaningful relationships (Pogge, 2002).

While Sen stated that he does not strive for utopia but rather opts for an objective list of capabilities that help achieve worthwhile life without compromising autonomy (Sen 2008, 2009). However, overly focusing on objectivism may lead to the issue of perfectionism that could result in an issue of the list of capabilities being ‘one-size-fits-all’ (Naz, 2016). Therefore, a one-size-fits-all list is not realistic due to people seeing their well-being in different ways and different groups should have different lists of capabilities (Naz, 2016). Phillips (2004) and Fleurbaey (2002) offer equality of outcome and ‘refined functionings’ as the better ways for measurement instead of only relying on capabilities.

The capability approach has been used as an evaluative framework. Examples include a study of the results of a skills development programme among women in Jordan, who, as elsewhere in the Global South including Kazakhstan, experience obstacles to participate in the labour market. The findings showed that while the programme had positive impact on women’s well-being and personal development, local and Syrian refugee women could not find desirable employment due to difficulties overcoming obstacles in the labour market. The skills development programme did not help to tackle wider socioeconomic difficulties in the region. It suggests that the objective list of capabilities developed and widely applied in the Western countries does not address different criteria existing in the Global Southern world (Thorne, 2020).

Therefore, the capability approach might be challenging to apply as a framework for the current study due to its arguable list of capabilities for measurement of women's wellbeing as women Kazakhstan are different due to socioeconomic and cultural factors and might require different set of capabilities. While the capability approach discusses importance of agency and individuals' preferences and choices in utilising their potential, women might be constrained by cultural and habitual to benefit from freedom of choice (Meier, 2021; Nussbaum, 1999). For example, even when women do have the freedom and resources to live a higher quality life and be equals to men, they might be reluctant to do so and maintain life in subordination and oppression, due to social pressures and being accustomed to those roles. Nussbaum's approach has been described as "almost caricature-like" due to an over-simplistic analysis of gender-related issues in terms of capabilities (Meier, 2021:134).

Limitations in both the Feminist and Capability approach theories, with the lack of focus on the Global South and over emphasis on individualism, made me consider the concept of defamilisation, which seems to fill in these gaps. Seeking a more international and ethical feminism in social policy with focus of women's agency and right to choose led me choose the concept of defamilisation. However, defamilisation also has drawbacks such as not covering the Central Asian region, including Kazakhstan.

In view of the above discussion, defamilisation is chosen to be the core concept in the study. To understand the barriers women in Kazakhstan face in their pursuit for a more independent life outside the family, it is important to explore how they are affected by the three main social sectors – the state, the market and the family.

2.2.3 Defamilisation

Defamilisation has been chosen as the core concept of the theoretical framework of the study as it has been developed a critical evaluation tool indicating gender-blindness in welfare regime typologies (see discussion below) and demonstrates degree of state's support in increasing or decreasing women's and family's dependency on family to be involved in paid and unpaid work.

Lister (1994:37) was the first author to define defamilisation as “the degree to which individuals can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of family relationships, either through paid work or social security provision”. Similarly, Esping-Andersen (1999) distinguishes between familialistic and de-familialising welfare states where families are left to be self-reliant without state support in the former and the state shares an agenda to shift the burden from family to private and public sectors in the latter (Esping-Andersen et al. 2001).

Bambra (2007) identified two types of freedom within the family: freedom of women from family and freedom of family from childcare responsibilities. In the first case, state welfare creates conditions for women to be less reliant on the family through, for example, childcare. In the latter case, state assistance does not target helping specifically women, but care responsibilities within families through, for example, childcare allowances (Leitner, 2003; Korpi, 2000). Bambra (2007) measured defamilisation using female labour participation, maternity leave compensation and maternity leave duration. However, freedom of family does not equal freedom of women as childcare allowances might not result in women’s independence from childcare responsibilities but prompting the power dynamics in decision-making within families of how to and who use the allowances (Yu, Lo and Chau, 2021).

Lister (1994) developed the concept of defamilisation as a criticism of Esping-Andersen's decommodification, which “captures one important dimension of freedom and constraint in the everyday life of advanced capitalism" (Esping-Andersen, 1999:353). An Individual, whose paid work is decommodified, depends less on the labour market and gains more control over their lives through assistance received from the welfare state. Esping-Andersen used three indicators to evaluate the degree of decommodification: old-age pensions, sickness benefits and unemployment benefits (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Decommodification has been criticised for excluding women as they are already decommodified due to dependency on their families. On the contrary, women should be commodified and use paid work to decrease their dependency on families, hence defamilisation (Lister, 1994).

While decommodification is about decreasing dependency on the labour market and defamilisation is decreasing dependency on family, both Esping-Andersen (1990) and Lister (1994) saw it being achieved by financial means through state welfare. McLaughlin and Glendinning (1994) suggested defamilisation to be achieved through freeing from caring responsibilities, both providing and receiving. Similarly, Leitner and Lessenich (2007) identified emotional and social types of caring responsibilities in defamilisation. Leitner (2003) considered the product market, namely outsourcing childcare, as a way to reduce childcare responsibilities. Following the criticisms of decommodification, Esping-Andersen (1999:51) included the concept of defamilisation in the context of both financial and caring assistance : “the degree to which households’ welfare and caring responsibilities are relaxed either via welfare provision, or via market provision”. Kroger (2011) claimed that economic independence of defamilisation is more popular and, hence, defamilisation is often implied to financial freedom. Kroger (2011:429) believed caring responsibilities of defamilisation needs a different concept of dedomestication which means “the degree to which social care policies make it possible for people to participate in society and social life outside their homes and families”.

Defamilisation policies have been categorised into two different types, which are “decommodified defamilisation” and “commodified defamilisation” measures (Chau et al. 2016; Lister, 1994). Decommodified defamilisation measures refer to social security measures, which allow a person to have an acceptable standard of living irrespective of family relationships and participation in the labour market (Chau et al. 2016; Lister, 1994). Policies are commodified defamilisation measures when the government creates favourable conditions for women and men to commodify their labour in paid work (Chau et al. 2016; Lister, 1994). Decommodified defamilisation measures facilitate women to achieve a reasonable standard of living independently of both family relationships and commodity relationships (Chau et al. 2016). Examples of these measures for older women are noncontributory individual-based pension schemes provided by the government (Bennett and Daly, 2014). Commodified defamilisation measures provide supportive conditions that allow women (e.g. older women) to commodify their labor and have jobs that contribute to pension schemes (Chau et al. 2016). Subsidised state childcare services might serve as an example of commodified defamilisation (Kroger, 2011; Michon, 2008).

The degree of defamilisation is different across welfare regimes. In the social-democratic welfare states such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, affordable good-quality state childcare centres, generously paid maternity leave and non-transferrable paternity leave free women from family obligations and create conditions for take part in paid or non-paid activities (Eydal et al. 2018). Mothers tend to choose certain work that is most compatible with their motherhood role such as public-sector and female-dominated work spheres (Gronlund et al. 2017).

Chau and Yu (2021) developed the concept of defamilisation risks and familisation risks stressing the importance of having an acceptable standard of living and independence from family relationships and identifying factors that prevent people from achieving those two things. Defamilisation risks have been defined as “a lack of sufficient opportunities to choose not to perform a particular role (such as the role of care provider) in the family and/or maintain a socially acceptable standard of living” (Chau and Yu, 2021: 314). Paid work is seen as the main way of reducing defamilisation risks. While some women are forced to be the primary carer of their children at home due to lack of choice, others deliberately choose to do so despite having the choice of accessing the labour market (Kurowska, 2018).

Defamilisation, apart from state childcare through state welfare, may also be achieved through profit and non-profit providers, such as the market and the voluntary sector in a ‘welfare mix’ (Bode, 2003). However, as the voluntary sector has been underdeveloped and played a minimum role in Kazakhstan, this study focuses on the other three main sectors – the state, the market and the family, and the impact of their interplay on women’s defamilisation.

Alongside the debate on defamilisation, other concepts were proposed by other scholars, such as demotherisation and degenderisation. Demotherization has been suggested to best depict the cases where care responsibilities with family are not done by mothers but by other family members such as fathers, grandparents, live-in nannies and temporary caregivers. Women becoming freed from unpaid care work in the household is not merely decided by allocating it between family, state and the market, but also by making sure that other people within the family are sharing unpaid care work with the mother, the important nuance that defamilisation leaves out (Mathieu, 2016).

Defamilisation measures such as parental leave, leave compensation and childcare allowances are criticized for not challenging the commonly engraved norm of mothers being responsible for caring for their children, whereas childcare both in public and private realms allows to lift up the burden of childcare from mothers. As argued by Mathieu, demotherisation refers to expanding care responsibilities to institutions and individuals apart from mothers (Mathieu, 2016). However, while demotherisation emphasises the reduction of mothers' care responsibilities, it does not address the gender imbalance in both private and public care settings. The reduction of the care responsibilities of the mothers may mean the increase of such responsibilities of other women, such as grandmothers (instead of both grandparents) in the family and women childcare workers who are the majority in the childcare workforce.

The impact that the defamilisation measures in the welfare states have on gender dynamics in terms of work and family has been referred to as degenderization (Saxonberg, 2013). Degenderization describes cases when an individual is not differentiated according to gender in terms of allocating the share of employment and unpaid domestic work among men and women. The degenderization is the ultimate goal of family policies aimed at gender equality (Leitner, 2003; Saxonberg, 2013). The concept of the degenderization addresses the criticisms about defamilisation presented by feminists because this concept criticises defamilisation for ignoring gendered aspects. They demonstrate that time resources and the well-being of family members should be given priority on the same level as employment and financial sufficiency by the welfare states' family policies (Lewis, 2010). To achieve higher efficiency of welfare states' help to families, care should be recognised as an unresolved matter until adequate policy mechanisms are developed that would not force women to choose between paid work and unpaid care but assist with care work (Lewis and Giullari, 2006) While aiming to eliminate the gender difference within the family and wider society, proponents of degenderisation lose sight of the structural factors (such as culture and the capitalist political economy) that contribute to the persistent unequal share of responsibilities, resources and opportunities between men and women.

2.3 The Three Sectors and Their Effects on Women's Lives

2.3.1 The State

A state is a political entity comprised of people that regulate society, laws and policies (Pierre and Peters, 2020). One of its main aims is to address the interests and needs of the collective and individual citizens. Some states provide a basic economic safety net for their citizens by protecting them from market insecurities caused by old age, unemployment, accidents and sickness (Weir, 2001) and aim to combat poverty and decrease inequality in society by redistributing resources from higher socio-economic to lower socio-economic groups (Vanhuysse et al., 2021). The term 'welfare state' first developed in the United Kingdom during World War II and broadly describes resource-consuming and big institutions. As of 2021, social expenditure in Europe has been estimated to cost on average 28% of GDP and 66% of overall government revenue (Vanhuysse et al., 2021). While it may seem that the welfare state predominantly focuses on helping financially disadvantaged groups of people, it benefits the wider population by allowing them to live in a more socially equal and, hence, safer society, and provides them with access to healthcare, education, pension entitlements (Vanhuysse et al., 2021). Moreover, the welfare state develops social citizenship rights and reduces people's material reliance on the market and risks associated with it.

Marshall developed the concept of social rights, which constitutes one of three different elements of citizenship rights, civil, political and social (Mishra, 1991). Social rights refer to a 'modicum of economic welfare and security' and 'the right to share to the full in the social heritage and life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society' (Mishra, 1991:27). Social rights were first provided to the poor and later targeted working-class groups before they became the rights of the whole population. The social rights of citizenship are considered as an essential part of democratic and industrial state. Social rights strengthen the sense of belonging to a larger group.

i. Welfare Regimes

Esping-Andersen (1990) compared the provision of welfare in different countries through the concept of welfare regimes. He divided welfare capitalism into three types: the social-democratic, conservative and liberal welfare states. In social-democratic welfare regimes, which include Scandinavian and Nordic countries Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland and The Netherlands, the main principle behind the policy to improve social security were democracy and social rights. The governments aimed to create acceptable standards of living for all citizens and make society more egalitarian, through generous social benefits to citizens. The conservative welfare regimes' distinct feature is their historically formed corporatist nature which transitioned to the post-industrial period with rights that are tied to status and class (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Exemplary countries with conservative regime elements are Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Japan. The social benefits amount varies according to social class and status of citizens. For example, in Japan, welfare depends on occupation and is centred around a male breadwinner social insurance programme (Schroder, 2013). Pension and housing insurance in Japan is based on occupation and employment performances. Since there is gender inequality in the labour market with twice as many men than women in full-time employment, men are more eligible to receive state assistance (Shizume, 2020; International Monetary Fund, 2019). Employees working in large companies receive generous benefits, whereas employees of small companies receive the minimum (Shizume, 2020). The liberal welfare states provide modest, means-tested and flat-based social benefits. State assistance is often stigmatised because the entitlement procedure is strict, and the recipients are predominantly from disadvantaged backgrounds (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Countries regarded as liberal welfare regimes are the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Esping-Andersen's three worlds of welfare capitalism have been criticised for presenting a limited picture of welfare states by excluding the majority of countries. For example, East Asian countries are not included into the classic welfare regimes. The prevailing Confucianism and productivism means that states do not priorotise investments in

welfare state but advocate for families and employment be the main sources of safety net and help from the state is seen in a negative context (Walker and Wong, 2004). Other countries from the Soviet bloc and Socialist China were not included into Esping-Andersen's three welfare regimes, despite its established social policy, due to its authoritarian power over the population (Walker and Wong, 2004). These countries were later included under the additional regime clusters of East-Asian, Latin American and Eastern European countries, as well as Japan (Esping-Andersen, 1996).

The Eastern European regime might be considered as a ‘late welfare developer’ as its welfare regime typology was unknown after the fall of the Soviet Union and the post-communist countries went through a political transition from a communist to a democratic state in the 1990s (Bambra, 2007; Saxonberg and Sirovatka, 2006). New welfare regimes proposed by Esping-Andersen have been put under scrutiny. The East-Asian regime type seems to have been categorised according to its individual welfare characteristics similar to countries from across the globe rather than close geographical location (Chau et al. 2017). Countries located in South America have been suggested to belong to anti-welfare conservative welfare regime because its welfare system demonstrates distinct differences from Conservative and other welfare regimes and, at the same time, strong similarities with it (Aspalter, 2023)., Barrientos (2023) identifies Latin America as informal-liberal welfare regimes because social protection institutions are highly unequal and people from disadvantaged backgrounds often rely on informal employment. Although welfare regimes of Latin America are one of the earliest ones and in some of the countries, like Brazil, social security spendings are generous, the poor management makes its distribution ineffective (Barrientos, 2023; Aspalter, 2011). Therefore, low-income countries, despite expanding social security, struggle to include as many disadvantaged groups of people as possible into their support unlike in middle-income countries that social policy that follows rule of law and fairer (Barrientos, 2016). The social security system in Latin American countries is polarised and corporatist because it depends on groups that come to power because of political confrontations, thereby social security turns into “a political instrument” (Aspalter, 2023; Aspalter, 2011:743). Despite the criticisms, Esping-Andersen’s work has made a major contribution to the study of welfare systems. The formulation and application of the concept of decommodification to the categorisation of welfare regimes

turn on a new page for comparative welfare studies. Following this footstep, scholars have attempted to conceptualise welfare regimes from different perspectives and with various indicators.

ii. Care Regimes

Many studies on comparative welfare states, including those by Esping-Andersen (1990) predominantly focus on social transfers and study social security provision, risks associated with it and its impact on poverty level and income distribution (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004). While the comparative studies of welfare states focused on interplay of the state, the family and social issues arising from low participation in the labour market on people's survival with less reliance on the labour market, it pays less focus on the role of care provision in lessening burden on state and family (Giordano, 2022; Bettio and Plantenga, 2004). A care regime is an indication that demonstrates how care is produced and distributed between states, families and markets, and which is greatly influenced by gendered division of labour (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004). Care regimes are classified into informal and formal forms of care regimes. Care is informal when childcare services are provided on volunteered, unpaid and unregulated basis (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004). In contrast, formal care is based on law, the contractual arrangements and professionality in allocating services sourced by the state, market or both (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004).

Welfare states are classified into five sub-categories of care regimes in terms of care provision they provide (Giordano, 2022; Bettio and Plantenga, 2004). Italy, Greece and Spain are known for strong family involvement in care and lack of support from the state. Care for children and the older people would be sourced from the informal sector, such as family and community, and social exchanges in the UK and Netherlands, the informal sector is more relied on for childcare whereas the state intervenes for older people when the informal sector is not available; the state becomes the last resort for residential care. Informal sector and private sectors are also relied upon for care with the only difference is that the costs are partly compensated by the state. These countries were described as publicly facilitated, private care models. The third care

regime consisting of France and Belgium and the fifth care regime with the Nordic countries show the most generous formal care strategies.

Care regime has been criticised for excluding Asian countries from classifications or classifying them into rigid care regime types to distinguish from the Western ones. East Asian countries were described as productivist care regime where women take on main childcare responsibilities and welfare provision is allocated to the most productive elements of society (Yuda, 2021). However, the recent studies (Mok et al., 2017; Fleckenstein and Lee, 2017; Yuda, 2021) showed that East Asian had been going through changes in gender values, family norms and demographic growth, which transformed East Asian care regime to fit closer the quasi-European model (Yuda, 2021).

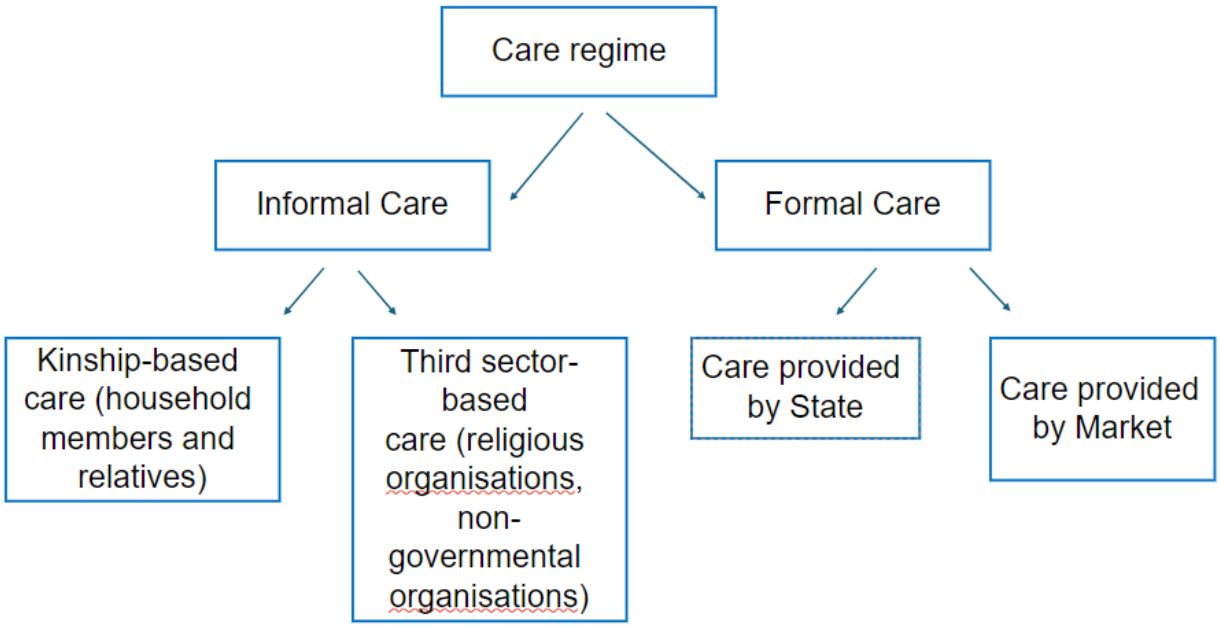

Figure 2.1. The Care regime (Yuda, 2021)

Similar to Yuda's framework, the concept of 'mixed economy of welfare' stresses that welfare may be sourced from state, market, voluntary and informal components at the

same time (Powell, 2019). The state is the most associated with welfare known as the ‘welfare state’ and is used as a response to ‘market failure’. Despite the discourse that welfare state should be public, there are still ambiguities and disagreements regarding its nature of regulation, finance and production. In contrast, the market has been suggested to be a more efficient source of welfare in times of ‘state failure’ and offered quasi-markets and privatisation of state-owned intuitions and services (Powell et al, 2020). The voluntary or ‘third sector' is based on philanthropic and mutual help, whereby the former means hierarchical support from the rich to the poor and the latter refers to horizontal mutual- or self-help. Informal sourced welfare is associated with family, friends, and community and has been criticised by feminists for reinforcing the traditional division of gender roles (Mattick, 2020).

As the product market aims to maximise profits, it is not interested in providing services that come with a small profit margin such as childcare and other care services (Powell, 2019). The market operates based on the supply and demand formula. The demand, being different from needs, addresses people’s wishes and goods and services they want and can afford. In terms of childcare, little provision from the state and parents’ high need for it but low affordability level will not necessarily result in a high supply of childcare services from the market (Powell, 2019).

Women already face challenges to becoming financially independent from family find it hard to reduce childcare responsibilities through consuming private childcare which is usually expensive and in short supply. There are discrepancies in the state-private childcare ratio across OECD countries ranging from free-state childcare in Bulgaria (an accession candidate) to private childcare costing 80% of median female income or a quarter of double-earner household income in the Netherlands (OECD, 2022B). In the Netherlands, Cyprus and Ireland, private childcare prevails over state provision and the state does not regulate fees. Expensive childcare serves as the main barrier for mothers to enter employment after having children. In the United States, women spend more time on childcare than on employment in states with expensive childcare (Ruppanner et al., 2019). Maternal employment is highly associated with affordable, high-quality and accessible childcare (Boeckmann, Misra and Budig, 2015). Mothers who lived in states with less affordable childcare were more likely to leave labour market whereas states

with more affordable childcare showed mothers staying in the labour market for longer (Landivar et al., 2021).

Studies about comparative welfare states do not take into account people's individual circumstances related to care when analysing the interaction of the state, the family and the market. As family structure has been going through changes, demographic issues such as ageing are becoming acute and more women are entering the labour market, many governments are reconsidering policies to address the increasing demand for care support. While the family is still recognised as the main unit responsible for care, welfare regimes are providing different degrees of provision ranging from universal support to partly subsidising.

2.3.2 Market

Despite the introduction of social policy measures and equal pay laws aimed at promoting gender equality in pay, women are still paid less than their male colleagues with same and similar knowledge and skills in most OECD countries (OECD, 2018A). As of 2019, the wage gender gap on average across OECD countries constituted 11.9%, a small improvement since 2010 when the average was 14% (OECD, 2022). The persistent issue of the wage gender gap may result in equity risks and cause deterioration to economic progress as unequal wages decrease participation in paid work and the shrinking of human capital. Generations of female workers may face long-term negative impacts on employment and wages due to fragmented employment caused by delaying entrance into the labour market and having breaks in their careers to take up family caring responsibilities (OECD, 2021). Three main driving factors have been identified to be behind the persisting wage gender gap between male and female workers with similar qualifications and skills.

Firstly, women are more likely to choose jobs with lower wages but higher flexibility and less commuting time to spend time on unpaid work such as care. Women choosing to

prioritise unpaid work may be shaped by social norms and gender stereotypes (Bertrand, 2020).

This problem of gender division in occupations is known as job segregation between men and women. Horizontal job segregation is when women and men are unevenly taking part in different fields, with women being over-represented in low-paid sectors (OECD, 2022). Vertical segregation is when men and women occupy positions at different levels within a field, with men commonly concentrated at managerial levels and women at lower levels of a profession (OECD, 2022). For example, women lead only 15% of world firms and account for 25% of managers (OECD, 2023C).

Secondly, women may face more difficulties than men in accumulating expertise and work-related skills and knowledge due to more frequent interruptions of careers after becoming parents, and thus less time spent at work and subsequently getting fewer promotions. This is often referred to as the a 'motherhood penalty' which prevents career progress in women with children. Women with high professional skills and high wages are more likely to experience high degrees of motherhood penalty as they often shift to part-time lower paid jobs after becoming mothers (England et al. 2016). The motherhood role might make employers feel reluctant to hire and promote female workers due to stereotypes of them being less productive and 'too soft' to compete with male colleagues at work. Thus, motherhood provides a second layer of discrimination on top of being a woman. Despite equal knowledge and skills in higher education between men and women, women are less likely to compete with men in the labour market due to family responsibilities taking away time and being viewed as less committed to work (Nugmanova, 2020). Visibly pregnant women are associated with being warm, emotional and irrational, but less dedicated to their work, less reliable and less authoritative (Clancy, 2020; Halpert et al. 1993). Worldwide, women do an average of 75 percent of the world's total unpaid work that entails childcare, caring of older people, cooking and cleaning (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020).

Several labour market phenomena affect women with and without children. The 'glass ceiling' occurs when women come up against seemingly invisible barriers that prevent them from advancing past a certain level in the hierarchy in a workplace. When women find it difficult to get above even the lowest levels in a workplace, this is generally called

‘sticky floors’. On average in OECD countries, the glass ceiling explains around 60% of the wage gender gap, whereas ‘sticky floors’, explain the remaining 40% (OECD, 2021). The ‘glass cliff’ is when an organisation or company is in trouble and people are more likely to appoint a woman, as they perceive qualities and characteristics that are stereotypically associated with being a woman, such as empathy and sensitivity, to be most suitable to that situation. Due to the precarious situation of the organisation or company, chances of failure are high, which then subsequently is attributed to women not being good leaders (Bruckmuller and Branscombe, 2011). A leaky pipeline is when women do not progress along established pathways to higher positions but drop out along the way.

A third driving factor may be based on conscious or unconscious biases, and stereotypes about women being less productive than men or socio-cultural expectations about women (Clarke, 2020; Tabassum and Nayak, 2021). These various elements that can hold women back in the labour market are classed as gender-based discrimination, which is defined as unequal treatment of because one’s gender (Petitfour et al, 2022) and society applying commonly accepted attributes and roles in social and cultural meanings about biological differences between women and men (CEDAW Committee, 2010). While education, experience and skills only partly explain the reasons for men being paid more than women, gender stereotypes at workplaces have been suggested to be factors behind wage gender gap (Razzu, 2014; Blau and Kahn, 2016).

Ageism is defined as “a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for colour and gender” (Butler, 1975, cited in Iversen et al. 2009:4). Ageism at work is manifested through devaluation and non-inclusion of workers due to prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination based on age (Cebola et al, 2023). While both male and female workers experience ageism, women experience more frequent cases of ageism and, in particular, threats to feelings of competence; self-doubt and helplessness; feeling isolated and lonely; and gradual disengagement from the workplace (Tahmaseb-McConatha et al, 2023; Hanrahan et al, 2023).

Gender stereotypes and expectations by employers preferring male employees over female ones are embedded in society, even to such an extent that they may be

internalised by women known as ‘internalised misogyny’ this can impact women’s conduct and decisions in the labour market (Duggan and Mason-Bish, 2022). Misogyny is described in general as “hatred of women or girls, expressed as disgust, intolerance or entrenched prejudice, serving to legitimate women's oppression” (Ussher, 2016:1) and misogyny in a workplace creates a hostile environment for women (Usher, 2023; Barnes and Adams, 2022). Internalised misogyny is when not only men, but women as well try to keep women in subordinate positions to maintain male power and dominance (Piggot, 2004; Saakvitne and Pearlman, 1993). An example of this is when women want to achieve higher positions, they adopt behaviours that are more commonly associated with being male than being female, such as decisiveness and being stern with employees, so as to be seen to be ‘one of the boys’.

Another factor that contributes to women’s weaker position in the labour market, is that they are more likely to work part-time than men. Part-time employment refers to work lasting fewer hours than full-time work (International Labour Organization, 1994). In OECD countries in 2014, 24.5% of employed women were registered at part-time work, which entailed fewer than thirty hours per week in the main job (OECD, 2017).

Despite OECD countries trying to tackle informal employment since the 20th century, it is persistent and comprises 60% of the world working population, equivalent 2 billion people (OECD, 2023B:32). “Employees are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits (advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave, etc.).” (OECD, 2019:156). It is often low-paid, risky, unstable, not productive and does not allow professional growth (Missurov et al, 2018). Women might turn to informal employment after experiencing discrimination, lack of perspectives to grow professionally and poor family-friendly work conditions in the labour market. On average, 54% of informal workers earn 50% of median wage level (OECD, 2024B). The vulnerability of informal workers is shown in their high chances of living in poverty line, having health issues and poor educational outcomes (OECD, 2024B). On average less than 5% of informal workers had access to professional training, and women in particular had worse perspectives (OECD, 2024B:21).

2.3.3 The Family

Family is the core unit of society that plays a vital role in maintaining social order and ensures traditions and values are formulated and passed down to the next generation (Chambers and Gracia, 2021). Traditional roles within the family that ensured the continuous functioning of society are gendered. In contemporary societies, the concept of family has been going through transformation and the traditional structure of family where women are homemakers and carers and men are breadwinners, has become more diverse (Meseguer-Sánchez et al. 2020). Increased numbers of women have joined the labour market, globalisation has amplified feminist ideas, and social policies encourage men to take more active roles in childcare. Traditional gender roles within the family have become blurred, with women taking on more breadwinner functions and men doing more childcare responsibilities. Some breadwinner families have transformed into dual-earning couples, single parents, and unmarried partner types of families as well as mixing it with diverse ways of working such as remote or virtual work (Powell et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, with cultures of conservative values and patriarchal norms still prevailing in some societies, traditional gender roles are reinforced resulted in women carrying the double burden of paid work and unpaid care work in the family. (Powell et al., 2020). A patriarchal system in the family realm may prevent women from becoming financially independent from family and delay entering the labour market. Patriarchy has been defined as a feminist concept that is applied to explain the continuous indebted organisation of male domination and female subordination (Aina, 1998). Patriarchy is a widely used concept regards to gender inequality and has been described as a position where men have a sense of ownership over women, children and property (Walby, 1990). Values of patriarchy are centred around male wishes and interests and are associated with women's economic dependence, violence and domestication (Becker, 1999; Lekchiri et al. 2019). Patriarchy imposes a structure that divides work into men's and women's and gives decision-making function into men's hands by allowing them to decide on preferred work, leisure time and evenings (Reardon, 1996). Domestic

responsibilities and child-caring roles are considered women's work (Bradley, 2012). Patriarchy has been classified into public and private whereby public entails patriarchal relations outside of the household such as policy-making, paid work, and cultural institutions (Walby, 1990). Study shows that ingrained patriarchy in workplaces shapes women's activity and productivity in paid work in a negative way by weakening them and making them accept subordination (Adisa, Cooke and Iwowo, 2020).

This discussion above outlines the main theories of women studies and the current debate on the three main social sectors that directly affect women's caring and working roles in the family and the wider society. This review confirms that the concept of defamilisation has the potential to facilitate a multi-dimensional exploration of women's positions in their interactions with the state, the market and the family and how such positions affect their roles and/or decisions in being carers and workers. The review also provides a solid theoretical foundation for the development of the analytical framework for this study and reference points for the understanding of women's diverse experiences.

2.4 The Analytical Framework

Based on the discussion above, the analytical framework for this study is formulated in a triangular shape (Figure 2.2). Each corner of the triangle represents one of the three social sectors. Women are in the middle of the triangle to show their interaction with the three sectors. The three sides of the triangles represent the connections between the sectors. While women's lives can be directly affected by each of the three sectors, the interaction between the sectors will also affect women's lives in general and the ways they combine motherhood and paid work. The discussion above has highlighted how policies and practices in different sectors affect women's caring roles and paid work. In the following section, how the sectors and their interactions promote or undermine women's defamilisation is examined.

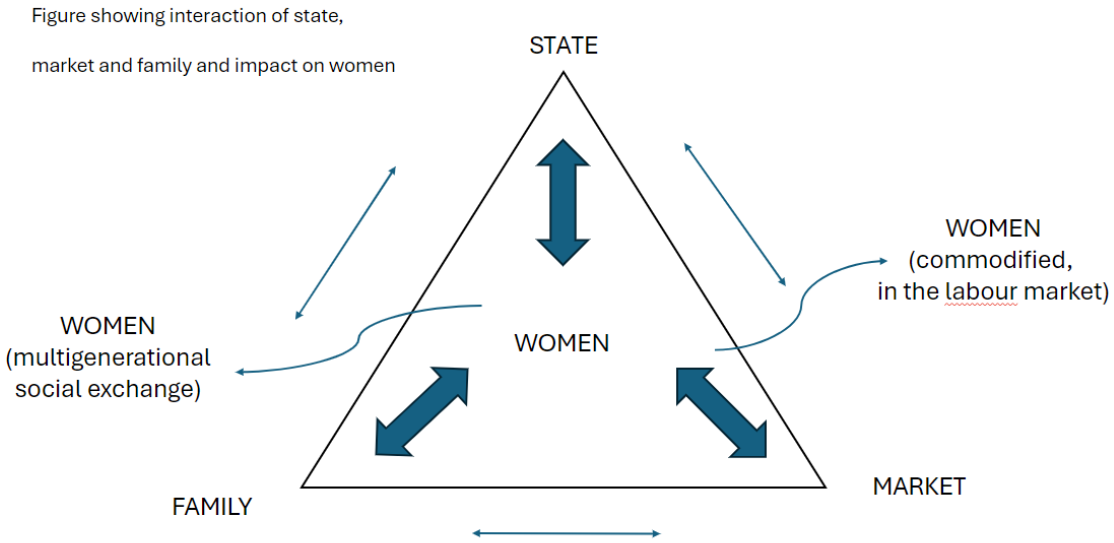

Figure 2.2 Interaction of state, market and family impact on women (author's own)

2.4.1 The State and Women's Defamilisation

Women's defamilisation through reduced dependency on family for childcare responsibilities and chances to do paid work may be disadvantaged in certain welfare

regime types due to policy aims. For example, in liberal and conservative welfare regimes with poor state childcare and maternity leave compensations, women after having children may find returning from maternity leave to employment more challenging (Esping-Andersen, 1990). While liberal-democratic welfare regimes are more likely to have a generous safety net to support women during early motherhood, studies have shown that long and generously paid maternity leave allowances have been associated with delayed entrances or no return to employment (Bergemann and Riphahn, 2023; Ferragina, 2020; Mullerova, 2017; Schonberg and Ludsteck, 2014). Higher access to subsidised childcare has been shown to result in increased maternal employment and lack of access to subsidised childcare has been associated with decreased labour market participation even among women with a strong link to employment (Landivar et al., 2021). Although the expansion of childcare provision is positively associated with maternal employment and work-life reconciliation, it does not contribute to gender egalitarian as families with higher salaries and women, working in managerial job positions that commonly allow more flexibility, benefit the most from childcare (Neimanns, 2020).

2.4.2 The Market and Women's Defamilisation

Women may find it difficult to decommodify their labour in the market after having children as mothers face motherhood penalties and other barriers such as gender-based discrimination, ageism and job segregation, which result in wage gender gap and poorer career prospect. Ultimately, mothers of young children who struggle to secure stable and sufficient earnings in the labour market are less likely to afford private childcare and more likely to remain at home and depend on family support. Studies show that women who decide to decrease working hours for childrearing are less likely to invest in career training by employers and ultimately less likely to receive promotions (Thomas, 2020).

2.4.3 The Family and Women's Defamilisation

Patriarchal structures of households are often re-enacted at workplaces which lead to patriarchy preventing women from progressing in their career. For example, in the academic sector, men are more likely than women to travel to conferences and build male networking due to women's predominantly childcare responsibilities (Galizzi, McBride and Siboni, 2023). Similarly, patriarchal cultural values ingrained in family upbringing serve as obstacles for women to take leadership roles in politics by making them develop less self-confidence and competence, qualities needed for political success (Khelghat-Doost and Sibly, 2020). Women, despite taking microfinance loans to invest in their business projects, experienced their husbands' making decisions on loan expenditure and controlling it (Shohel, Niner and Gunawardana, 2021). "The inter-generational reproduction of patriarchal gender relations continued to reproduce a strict gendered division of labour that reinforced restrictions on women's behaviour, mobility, and decision-making domains, and men's dominance in household and economic decision-making." (Shohel, Niner and Gunawardana, 2021).

2.4.4 The interaction between the state and the market and women's defamilisation

i. State and market's interaction impacting women's defamilisation

State welfare has the potential to tackle market failures, to eliminate risks and enforce participation (Vanhyusse et al., 2021). Apart from the welfare state's common function of redistribution, it is also efficient in cases when the market fails, and private markets are unwilling to produce accessibly and sufficiently.

Women who receive no or little support with childcare from the state, may find themselves in a much more disadvantaged position in the labour market while reconciling work and family lives. Mothers, who did not take maternity leave or took a very short one and did not receive support with childcare from their employers, were found to be more likely to adapt quite quitting at work and have issues with mental health such as increased postpartum depression (Zhang and Rodrigue, 2023; Van Niel

et al. 2020). Women in California who had paid maternity leave compensation were more likely to return to the same company to work after maternity leave ended (Bana et al. 2020). In the academic sector, access to paid parental leave and adequate childcare were positively associated with higher retention and recruitment among women (Morgan et al. 2021).

ii. The interaction between the State and the family and women's defamilisation

Increased state subsidised childcare may not result in higher maternal employment among women living in society and families with prevailing patriarchal values and traditional gender roles. Studies in the USA show that accessible childcare is associated with women's increased participation in paid work when paid work is supported by local gender norms (Ruppanner et al. 2021). Moreover, women who are expected to be responsible for unpaid work at home are less likely to use childcare services while households that have less gap in earnings between partners rely more on childcare services in most countries (Ferragina and Magalini, 2023). Despite legislative framework and work-family reconciliation policies such as childcare supporting gender equality in South Africa, women would be relegated to unpaid household work and childcare responsibilities above paid work due to patriarchal structures (Smit and Tessendorf, 2021).

iii. The interaction between the Market and the family and women's defamilisation

Women, striving to decrease their dependency on family for childcare, may seek it through the market, both labour and product. Firstly, the labour market may fail women by paying them insufficient wage, providing them unstable jobs and inflicting discrimination on them. In terms of the product market, women also may face such challenges as the high price of childcare, and low quality of childcare services.

Women, whose employment perspectives are jeopardised in the family due to patriarchal structures, are more likely to experience continuation of family barriers in the labour market. Men's less appreciation of women contributed to women's lack of confidence, feeling insecure and reluctance to have authoritarian behaviour, which ultimately negatively impacted women's career performances (Rawat and Athaide, 2022). Women living in a patriarchal society were more likely to quit jobs for their husbands' preferences and family obligations (Smit and Tessendorf, 2021). Paid work brought harm to women's well-being in patriarchal societies as women's sense of happiness decreased and stress increased when doing unpaid work around the household after paid work. Moreover, despite the increase in public pre-primary childcare, the main beneficiaries of it were women with advanced education as a share of them increased in employment in comparison with women with less education in Turkey and USA (Kocabicak, 2023; Landivar et al. 2022). Women in Nepal are more likely to be involved in entrepreneurship as long as they can fit it around their family responsibilities (Xheneti et al. 2021).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed how interactions of three sectors, which already considerably decrease women's chances to (re)enter paid work, further jeopardise their position regarding participation in the labour market. Difficulties to (re)enter and stay in paid work coming from the state (inadequate childcare and parental leave payments), the market (discrimination and lack of support in jobs) and the family (traditional gender roles) interact with each other, and their negative impact on women's chances to do work worsens. As a result, these negative effects multiplied by interaction push women into their traditional gender roles of domesticated wife and mothers.

Chapter 3 Methodology

The previous chapters have identified the knowledge gap on how mothers of young children attempt to combine paid work and care responsibilities in Kazakhstan and their experiences of defamilisation. This chapter explains how my research seeks to fill in this gap, by discussing the philosophical underpinnings and methodology of this project. I outline the methods used (including secondary and primary research), and the way the

data has been recorded and analysed. This is followed by a discussion of the ethical challenges and a reflection on my positionality in the research.

3.1 Philosophical Underpinnings

Throughout a research project, between selecting a topic and conducting data analysis, the epistemological and ontological processes are an essential part of research knowledge (Bryman, 2004). Epistemology, being part of philosophy, “deals with questions involving the nature of knowledge, the justification of beliefs, and rationality” (Thomas et al., 2019: 989). In philosophy, ontology does not have one common definition, hence it is interpreted in different ways by looking at the term “being” (Busse et al. 2015). It asks questions ‘’What is out there?’ and studies the existence of reality or what reality exists with each individual and society. 'Social ontology’ is reality made of social entities or objective entities existing independently from individuals or socially constructed reality consisting of perceptions and interpretations of individuals (Al-Saadi, 2014). The two aspects of philosophy are interconnected and help choose suitable methods for producing original knowledge (Bryman, 2008 in Al-Ababneh, 2020).

Two key philosophical underpinnings in research entail positivism and interpretivism (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). The positivist approach assumes that a single physical reality exists, and it exists independently of the researcher - ’one that can be understood, identified, and measured’ (Park et al., 2020:690). As positivism assumes facts and reality are value-free, the researcher’s values and experiences are immaterial to the research. This means that the researcher needs to distance themselves from the object of research and strive to have no interaction with the researched

Interpretivist research, which has gained popularity since the early 1990s, arose as an alternative to positivism (Walsham, 2006) and believes that reality is socially constructed or gains importance through individuals' meanings and interpretations of social events (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Interpretivist epistemology has been described as constructing dynamic and evolving knowledge derived from the personal

experiences, opinions and emotions of individuals (Heath and Devine, 1999). Weber is one of the advocates of applying an interpretive approach to social sciences instead of a positivist one based on facts and objectivity. He viewed human experiences as valuable, irreplaceable and too complicated to be simplified according to standardised general norms (Holloway, 1997). Meaning centres around how individuals comprehend their perceptions and experiences in their everyday lives. While individuals' subjective accounts are the focus of this approach, researchers analyse how these subjective meanings unite, trend in particular ways, and comprise collective meanings. Interpretations entail the process of making sense of social phenomena. Meanings and interpretations take as their source language, symbols and texts (Cheney, 2000). An interpretivist approach focuses on how individuals translate social phenomena into texts, stories and discourses. It emphasises the importance of names and symbols, where one word might bear more than its direct meaning but carry with it a cultural code, and how these symbols interact in constructing meanings and social reality (Putnam and Banghart, 2017).

Interpretivist research:

> 'Interpretivist knowledge comprises the reconstruction of inter–subjective meanings, the interpretive understanding of the meanings humans construct in a given context and how these meanings interrelate to form a whole. Any given interpretive reconstruction is idiographic, time– and place–bound; multiple reconstructions are pluralistic, divergent, even conflictual.' (Greene, 2010: 68)

This research aims to explore the role of state, the market and the family in supporting or preventing women in Kazakhstan from (re)entering paid work after maternity leave (see Chapters One and Two). There are no objective and singular perceptions and permanent truths. Instead, all perceptions are socially constructed, and truths are subjective, multi-polar and at times conflicting (Pascale, 2011). Interpretivist research accepts that each individual has a distinct reality and that each individual constructs his/her own reality through his/her unique meanings and interpretations (St. George,

2010). This research project's aims, and the research questions, are to grasp a profound understanding of a complicated culturally specific gender-related topic through experiences of women. Therefore, an interpretivist epistemological approach is the most suitable basis for this project.

From an interpretivist position, participants of a research project are treated as knowledgeable about the realities they live in, and their meanings and interpretations are valid and significant (St. George, 2010). The interpretations are analysed through thematic analysis and then placed under theoretical framework lenses to explain it through the concepts, theories and literature review (Bryman, 2004). They are set in the context of the findings from the secondary research (explained below) in relation to the - role of the state, the labour market and the family.

As a researcher, it is important for me to rely on and put at centre participants with their meanings, interpretations and experiences, as it guides and shapes the interpretivist approach in my research project. The role of participants is significant and decisive in interpretivist research as it serves as a director and narrator of the research. Interpretivist research 'situates each respondent within their context by providing informants with an opportunity to express their ideas clearly' and being able to understand the background of respondents and the circumstantial factors that shape their answers (Muganga, 2015:68). 'Knowledge is constructed by people or by groups of people, not discovered' (Creswell, 2011: 14).

Positionality is defined as the position a researcher adopts within a particular research study (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). It necessitates the researcher consciously examining their own identity to allow the reader to assess the effect of their personal characteristics and perspectives in relation to the study population, the topic under study and the research process. An insider positionality in research brings a number of benefits to research process such as easier participants access and recruitment, better understanding of data and dissemination (Wilson et al, 2022). My positionality is discussed in a separate section after the description of the research methods, in order to reflect on its influence and importance.

3.2 Research Methods

3.2.1 Secondary Research

The aim of this research is to relate the lived experiences of balancing motherhood and participating in paid labour to the context within which the mothers operate. The information about the state, the market and the family in Kazakhstan, which forms this context, is derived from secondary research. Secondary research has been described as a flexible approach that includes both 'a review of previously collected data in the area of interest' and 'an empirical exercise with procedural and evaluative steps, just as there is in collecting and evaluating primary data' (Johnson, 2014:620). In this research project, secondary research was used to include a review of statistical data, policy documents and laws ranging from President's addresses of the nation, various family-work reconciliation policies such as those relating to childcare provision and maternity leave, gender inequality acts and poverty data.

Once the analysis had been drawn from the findings of the focus groups, secondary research sources were accessed and evaluated to see whether there were disjuncture between the state's declared policy aims and how these policies were experienced by working mothers. The government sources such as the President's official website – Akorda, Ministers' official websites and for national data were widely used to obtain information on policy and population's socio-demographic data. Kazakhstan's news sources and scholarly articles were accessed to get informed on latest events and public opinion on acute topics happening in the country. To get comparative perspective between Kazakhstan and OECD countries, international sources such as UNDP and World Bank were accessed.

Table 3.1 A list of the key sources of secondary data

Government Sources

1	Bureau of National Statistics
2	Parliament Minister's Official Website
3	Akorda
4	Egov
5	Adilet
6	Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan
7	Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan
8	Human Rights Commissioner in the Republic of Kazakhstan
International Sources	
9	UNESCO
10	Asian Development Bank
11	OECD
12	International Monetary Fund
13	UNDP
14	World Bank
15	World Values Survey Association
16	Friedrich Ebert Foundation
17	Human Rights Watch
Kazakhstani Sources	
18	Scholars on Kazakhstan
19	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
Kazakhstani News Sources	
20	Nur
21	Khabar
22	Inform
23	Informburo
24	Kapital
25	Astana Times

Chapters 4, 5 and 6, present the findings from the secondary research regarding the state, the market and the family at the start of each respective chapter. The secondary research helped to increase the breadth of knowledge, put the focus group discussion findings into a larger national context and draw causal relations and identify correlations between social phenomena (Cheng, 2014).

3.2.2 Focus Group Discussion

The study applied the qualitative research method of semi-structured focus group discussion. Qualitative research has been described as “a group of approaches for the collection and analysis of data aims to provide an in-depth, socio-contextual and detailed description and interpretation of the research topic” (Vaismoradi et al. 2016:100).

Focus group discussion emerged as a method in the 1920s predominantly for marketing (Merton and Kendall 1946) and gained popularity in social sciences in the 1990s (Wilkinson 1998). Focus group discussion is a widely used qualitative approach in social sciences to get a profound understanding of phenomena in society (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). It has been referred to as ‘a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher’ (Morgan 1996:130). It collects data through ‘drawing from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction’ (Nyumba et al. 2018). ‘Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction’ (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999:5). Since this research project aimed to explore women’s experiences about balancing motherhood and paid work, the focus group discussion method allowed fruitful conditions for the participants to share rich data with me through in-depth targeted group conversations among women in similar experiences.

The focus group discussion research method was used as it provides an in-depth understanding of social factors and issues mothers of young children experience during combining motherhood and paid work. The data that is produced as a result of collectivist action of sharing, transforming and formulating (Nyumba et al. 2018). Grouping the participants helped to simulate discussion and it incentivised the women to exchange views and experiences as they saw that their issues were a larger problem.

One of the focus group discussion's main features is that it involves interaction between participants rather than a researcher taking on a dominant role (Kitzinger, 1994). The researcher plays the role of background observer also referred to as ‘a peripheral role’

letting participants engage in discussion rather than a moderator leading the discussion or an investigator interviewing them (Bloor et al. 2001; Nyumba et al. 2018). This feature is an advantage of the focus group discussion method as it contributes to the creation of synergy among participants, which stimulates them to reveal more information and enrich data derived from the discussion (Coenen et al. 2012; Morgan, and Kreuger, 1993). By allowing group members to lead the discussion and approach a topic from diverse perspectives, a researcher might glean unexpected findings that benefit a study (Skop, 2006). The researcher has a privilege of closeness to the original source of data and using their own positionality to approach participants might prompt participants to open up and make use of language and verbal and oral ways of describing their opinions more insightful and sincere (Hughes and DuMont, 1993).

A focus group discussion has the potential to gather people from homogenous backgrounds (Kreuger, 1994) sharing common interests, experiences and problems into one group and provide a safe and confidential space where they can discuss mutual topics of interest and confide in each other (Barbour, 2005). Qualitative research methods have been suggested to be a tool that gives voices to marginalised groups whose needs and concerns are neglected in daily life when people with more power are prioritized, for example, men in patriarchal societies (Fassinger and Morrow, 2013; Woodley and Lockard, 2016). Focus groups can be: “a powerful method for minority groups or groups which are often ignored in other research methods to express their views and experiences” (Smithson, 2007:364).

3.3 Positionality

Being a mother myself of four children aged under 7, I witnessed and heard stories of fellow mothers in Kazakhstan who struggled physically, mentally and emotionally to combine motherhood and professional development. Despite the issue being significant and life-changing to those women, strikingly it was not a big issue for their families and surroundings. I saw that mothers’ voices have so far not been heard, represented and studied by researchers and journalists in the country. Therefore, I want to use my close

familiarity with the mothers' struggles and my own lived experience to enrich my position as PhD researcher to bring those voices into the international academic debate. My ambition is to provide the background of the official/documented view from the state, the labour market, and the family, and contrast this with the lived experience of the mothers. My own lived experience enriches the analysis process as I have encountered and lived extensively on both sides of lifestyle: living in a very conservative and misogynistic in-law family and having an upper-middle class life, and then transitioning to more liberal and independent life with more financially disadvantaged status. Similarly, I have an understanding of mothers at different stages of their careers from stay-at-home mothers to career-centred ones as I transformed from a woman on extended maternity leave in Kazakhstan to being driven by career development and academic curiosity in the United Kingdom.

The topic of this research project is about women's lives and asking them to reflect on rather personal experiences. This intrusion into people's privacy needs to be handled sensitively and ethically (see para on ethics), and for a researcher to be able to show they share certain experiences can be a way of overcoming potential barriers. The fact that I had many things in common with the participants was an icebreaker between me and them. My Kazakh ethnicity and my gender, speaking in both Kazakh and Russian languages, and my prior experience of being married into a Kazakh family and giving birth to multiple children made them relate to me and gave a sense of trust in my personality. The women felt they could relate to me and that I could understand their experiences, which accelerated the process of opening up and prompted the women to perceive me as a trustworthy person

Women participating in my focus groups seemed eager to talk about their experiences and challenges they encountered in paid work after becoming mothers. The fact that research was being conducted on a topic about mothers of young children entering paid work, which is highly relatable to their daily lives, made them feel appreciated and part of an important project. They emphasised their happiness to be contributing to a study that would raise awareness about the struggles they are experiencing as mothers in the labour market in Kazakhstan and hoped that it would bring positive changes to the country's family policy-making process. The argumentative nature of discussions and

women exchanging different opinions on the same problems they are experiencing might contribute to the richness of responses (Sim, 2002). It allows participants to speak and elaborate on their experience due to me as a woman being closer to these women than a male or researcher coming from a Western background. According to Madriz (2000), women feel empowered when they are talking in groups and the role of the moderator is lessened whereas in individual interviews there are more power dynamics with a researcher leading the talk.

Moreover, being from the same culture as the participants and being aware of the importance of food in hosting guests, I organised snacks and tea at the location of data collection as a sign of respect to the participants and to make them feel welcomed and important.

I made use of insider and unique positionality by introducing myself as a woman who used to be in their ‘shoes’ and struggled to reconcile childcare with the demands of modern life, that the difficulties I experienced as a mother living in a traditional society prompted to dedicate a research project abroad to be useful and raise awareness to the wider public. My story raised interest and curiosity in these women to come and see me and share their stories with me.

Besides that, my status as a Kazakh woman doing PhD abroad and travelling from England to Kazakhstan made them curious about my project and my personality, patriotically proud of me due to me being from Kazakhstan and conducting research about them and realisation seriousness of my project in terms of being published and raising awareness to larger audience incentivised the women to show up for the meetings. Not least the importance of socialisation, hospitality and food in the Kazakh cultural context and collectivistic nature of society drew the women into the focus group discussions. Food is more than just food; it is a symbol of respect to guests and serves as a core part of gatherings that draw people closer. As one participant from the study emphasised, she usually did not participate in unfamiliar projects unrelated to her paid work, but she made an exception for my research as she saw value in it and was looking forward to discussing a topic that is relatable to other people in the group. I had

unique position in the role of a researcher not only due to my knowledge but also being perceived by the Kazakh women as one of them due to my ethnicity and gender. It is very unlikely that a non-Kazakh person or even Kazakh man could have co-produced the same results.

Although an insider positionality is beneficial for the creation of knowledge, it does carry some risk of my interpretations of the findings being skewed due to my position in society and prior experiences (Bourke, 2014; Wooten and Reed, 2000). My familiarity with the locality due to me being born and raised in Almaty, and my motherhood, and daughter-in-law roles in a traditional household before starting a PhD and going through divorce experiences during the analysis process are not separate from my position as the researcher who analyses the findings. My position is also influenced by liberal narratives I am mostly exposed to in social media platforms and predominately Western democratic and liberals discourses I am immersed in England. To tackle my subjectivities, I was engaged in critical re-evaluation and reflexivity of my views throughout the data collection, analysis and writing up processes (Mruck and Breuer, 2003). I was focusing on overcoming my presumptions about traditional gender roles shaped by my prior roles in the Kazakh family. The experience of talking with the women taught me new insights as well and made me reconsider my perceptions and views. I saw that some women seemed happy and content despite the hardship and injustice faced in traditional settings while others happily dedicated themselves fully to their families and left aspirations for careers behind despite holding several diplomas from higher education in Kazakhstan and abroad.

3.4 Participant Recruitment Method

Due to the private nature of the research topic, there is no existing sampling framework that could be used to recruit participants. Therefore, the participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which is defined as when “the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants” and is

frequently used sampling method in qualitative research in social sciences (Noy, 2006:327) The sampling method was aimed at including only those women who have direct experience on the topic under discussion and is a non-probability sample. This means that the findings have limited generalizability to the wider population of all mothers with young children in Kazakhstan. Generalisability is not the aim of this research. I focus on the experiences of women, however, and “for the purpose of obtaining a nonprobability sample or for constructing a frame from which to sample” (Thompson, 2002: 183). This method was relevant and useful to my research recruitment process as it enabled me to explore the private nature of the topic through my connections and networks. Women trust their family and private issues to be discussed with someone they know and with a good reputation.

One of the drawbacks of applying the snowball sampling method to recruit participants is that it creates a biased sample. Participants are likely to have similar socio-demographic characteristics as the first person through whom snowball sampling began (Erickson, 1979). For example, women in Almaty were mostly from better financial and educated backgrounds because the researcher used her networks and connections to find the participants. Similarly, the gatekeeper in Turkestan whose help was used for participant recruitment gathered women mostly working in the education sphere and from the suburbs of Turkestan. When the gatekeeper ran out of participants to recruit, she asked her neighbours, friends of her friends and relatives. The gatekeeper recruited participants from different job sectors ranging from teachers to cleaners. The gatekeeper offered a volunteer participation to the participants, and she did not hold any power dynamics with the other women in the study.

The overall number of participants recruited for focus groups equaled 30, then divided into six focus groups. Allocating five participants to each group seemed reasonable as it was within the recommended threshold for group discussions. Studies suggested including between 5 and 10 participants in focus group discussions to allow interactive discussion without people talking over each other (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Mendes de Almeida, 1980). Keeping the number of women in groups to five was beneficial for the data collection process because it created an intimate atmosphere where the

participants created a bond, and everyone had space and time to be heard. Moreover, dividing people into six smaller groups improves the quality of data as people discussing the same issues in different groups opens new perspectives on the issues (Burrows and Kendall, 1997). Due to the risk of people not being able to attend discussions that they agreed to, it is advisable to slightly over-recruit (Rabiee, 2004). In this research, all women who agreed to attend did so, and the group sizes worked well.

Overall, six focus group discussions were conducted: three in Almaty in December 2021 and three Turkestan in May 2022, where 30 women in total shared their experiences of combining employment and motherhood. All the participants are mothers of young children aged between 1 and 6, as this is the period when women are likely to use childcare services and return to work.

Table 3.2 Demographic information of participants

N	Pseudonym	Place of residence	Age of participant	Number of children	Marital status	Type of employment
1.	Gold	Almaty	37	4	Married	Manager at an institution
2.	Moon	Almaty	42	2	Married	Lecturer at a university
3.	Bright	Almaty	36	4	Married	Civil servant at the Ministry
4.	Brave	Almaty	40	3	Married	Professor at a university
5.	Jewel	Almaty	45	4	Married	Professor at a university
6.	Trust	Almaty	36	2	Married	PhD candidate abroad
7.	Sparkle	Almaty	41	3	Married	Employee at an international organisation
8.	Flower	Almaty	36	4	Married	Housewife, online therapist
9.	Hope	Almaty	42	2	Married	Professor at an international university

10.	Star	Almaty	37	3	Married	Housewife, part-time assistant of husband's company
11.	Green	Almaty	38	2	Married	Marketing manager
12.	Rose	Almaty	42	1	Divorced	Manager in a supermarket chain company
13.	Moon	Almaty	41	2	Married	Lecturer at a university
14.	Sun	Almaty	40	4	Married	Part-time lawyer at her brother's company
15.	West	Almaty	39	2	Married	Project manager at an international organisation
16.	Peace	Turkestan	42	5	Married	Lecturer at a university
17.	Emerald	Turkestan	39	4	Married	Secretary at a private company
18.	Sunrise	Turkestan	38	2	Widow	School teacher
19.	Joy	Turkestan	43	5	Married	Lecturer at a university
20.	Spirit	Turkestan	39	4	Married	Works at a state institution
21.	Hope	Turkestan	45	6	Married	School teacher
22.	Wise	Turkestan	43	6	Married	History teacher at school
23.	Ignite	Turkestan	35	3	Married	School teacher
24.	East	Turkestan	32	4	Married	Accountant at shop
25.	Daisy	Turkestan	37	4	Married	Secretary at a university
26.	Honour	Turkestan	40	5	Married	School teacher
27.	Pride	Turkestan	42	4	Married	School teacher
28.	Shine	Turkestan	38	4	Married	Lecturer at a university

29.	Sky	Turkestan	43	5	Married	Secretary at state institution
30.	Force	Turkestan	33	3	Married	School teacher

As has been emphasised, focus group discussions allow “a large amount of interaction on a specific topic in a short time” (Smithson, 2007:357). Travelling to Kazakhstan in December 2021 and May 2022 and gathering the participants into focus groups was the most convenient and practical way to collect suitable data for this project.

Conducting focus group discussions involves organisational expenses on finding accessible venues for all participants, negotiating convenient times and avoiding risks of participants’ absence, as well as challenges of facilitating discussions (Morgan and Krueger, 1993; Smithson, 2007). In my fieldwork process, it was challenging and time-consuming to find a commonly agreed time and place as the participants were very busy with family responsibilities, paid work and unexpected circumstances such as a child being sick.

To overcome the challenge of logistics at the location where the focus group discussion was taking place, I offered to order Uber taxi at my expense.

However, the focus group research method might limit the scope of received data as a result of some participants’ unwillingness to express their opinions and experiences openly due to the private nature of the subject, the natural characteristics of some participants or feeling intimidated by the dominance of peers. Participants might feel uneasy to share in front of each other information about themselves that can be perceived as stigmatised and it increases the risk of them modifying information, they are sharing out of fear of being judged (Harrison et al. 2015).

Almaty and Turkestan were chosen as the locations for conducting focus group discussions and gathering participants for three main reasons. Firstly, the two cities are internally diverse with characteristics in terms of social-demographic, economic and

cultural characteristics, which is likely to provide rich diverse data for comparative analysis. Secondly, Almaty and Turkestan are located in the South of Kazakhstan, which enabled the logistics process of data collection. Thirdly, the fact that Almaty is the hometown of the researcher conducting the focus group discussions helped the progress of participant recruitment and data collection processes as she used her networking opportunities and familiarity with the local context. The gatekeeper in Turkestan, who helped me to recruit the participants, was a former colleague of one of my friends.

Almaty is a metropolis with almost two million inhabitants according to official statistics and three million unofficially if suburban settlement is included (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022; 365info.kz, 2016). As Almaty is the financial centre of the country comprising almost 20 per cent of the overall country's GDP, it is the most popular destination of employment and resettlement for internal migrants from other regions (Kazakh Invest, 2020; Makhmutova, 2011). It has been estimated that between January and May 2022, Almaty was the leader in the number of residents moving there from other regions equaling 14,481 (Satubaldina, 2022). Almaty has become an ethnically diverse city because of the Soviet policy of forced resettlement of Russians, Koreans and other minorities since the 1950s, and this trend continues today as Kazakhstan is the second most popular destination, after the Russian Federation, for migrants from Central Asian countries (Heleniak, 2004; Karachurina et al. 2019; Ryazantsev et al. 2017). For example, during a nine-month period in 2021, the highest number of migrants to Kazakhstan came from Uzbekistan totaling 2522, followed by 2459 from Russia, 378 from Kyrgyz Republic, 237 from Azerbaijan, 188 from China, 168 from Tajikistan and 163 from Turkmenistan (Saruar, 2021). The diversity of society in Almaty is also complemented by expatriates temporarily moving to the country for job opportunities and as Almaty has the highest number of higher education institutions and international organisations functioning there, it is a favourable destination for foreign workers (Kuzhabekova and Lee, 2018; Robertson et al. 2007). Due to Almaty having status of the most prosperous, urbanised, ethnically diverse city with vibrant cultural life and more professional opportunities, the focus group participants recruited from Almaty are more likely to be exposed to higher quality of life and have progressive views on life.

Turkestan drastically differs from Almaty in terms of economic, social and demographic dynamics and is considered culturally a more conservative, economically disadvantaged and less diverse city. Population-wise, the city comprises about 170.000 residents (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022). The society is not as diverse as in Almaty and mostly homogenous consisting of mainly Kazakhs and Uzbeks due to close border with Uzbekistan. In 2018, Kazakhs comprised 75 per cent of the Turkestan region's population, followed by Uzbeks, the second largest ethnic group, making up 15 per cent (UNFPA, 2019). Poverty is much higher in Turkestan than in Almaty; the former is the poorest region of the country. Turkestan has the lowest level of income per capita in Kazakhstan whereas in Almaty its indication is almost four times more (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021A).

The Southern region where Turkestan is located has a reputation for being a more conservative and patriarchal part of the country. As the survey results of social values conducted by the Friedrich Foundation demonstrated, more participants from the Southern region than other regions agreed that men make better leaders in politics and business than women, totaling 61.5 per cent (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2020). Stronger beliefs in and practice of conservative values and traditions might be explained by the influence of neighbouring Uzbekistan on local culture as Turkestan is closely situated to borders with Uzbekistan, a country with a worse gender inequality index than Kazakhstan. In 2019, women's participation in the labour market in Uzbekistan was 52,4 per cent, 25 per cent less than that of men's, whereas in Kazakhstan the gap is 7 per cent (UNDP, 2023; Bureau of National Statistics, 2019A).

From the beginning of my PhD study, it was evident that this project would have limitations due to the method of focus group discussions and the focus on the perspectives of the participants. The selection of focus group discussion brought its challenges and limitations to research such as in generalising findings to the larger population size (more in chapter three) (Bryman, 2004; Smithson, 2000; Gundumogula and Gundumogula, 2020). It is highly possible that there will be differences in findings among women from different groups of Kazakhstan taking into account differences in

socio-economic and cultural differences between regions (Sermagambet et al, 2022; Kireyeva et al, 2022). However, the study sheds light on the diverse views of women in the two research sites with contrasting financial backgrounds and homogenous ethnic groups, but common marital status and work experience in female-dominated job sectors. That might not be the case in other locations. In the Western regions of the country, where the economy is concentrated in the oil industry and male-dominated, and in the Northern regions where the ethnical composition of the population is more heterogenous that includes Russian ethnic groups (Atakhanova and Howie, 2022; Jasina-Schafer, 2021). While considering the limitations, the project findings are still relevant. To be transparent, the limitations especially in generalisability have been emphasised throughout chapter three and the findings.

In terms of the venues for conducting the focus group discussions, seminar rooms at local universities of KIMEP in Almaty and Yassawi in Turkestan have been chosen. Since criteria of quietness, privacy and accessibility of venue have been emphasised to be important for the efficiency of discussions (Smith, 1972), university settings seemed to provide all of the above. The women were convinced to attend and turn up for the focus group discussions due to the credibility of the university location as it was perceived to be safe and professional. Besides that, my status of a Kazakh woman doing PhD abroad and travelling all the way from England to Kazakhstan benefited the process of data collection. It made them curious in my project and my personality, patriotically proud of me due to me being from Kazakhstan and conducting research about them. They realised the seriousness of my project in terms of being published and raising awareness to larger audience incentivised the women to show up for the meetings. Not least the importance of socialisation and food in Kazakh cultural context and collectivistic nature of society drew the women into the focus group discussions.

3.5 Data Recording

Audio recording of data plays an important role in qualitative research for ensuring fidelity and structure (Cypress, 2018). The most accurate fidelity can be reached using audio recording. Audio recording offers several advantages such as allowing

independent observers to draw analysis from raw data, providing completeness, opportunity to view as much as needed and paying attention to nonverbal symbols such as pauses, changing voice intonations and emotional outbursts (Cypress, 2018).

All the dialogues in the focus group discussions were recorded on a recording device and Teams, using my university account. Since I used my smartphone to access Teams, I made sure to keep it charging on a power bank and put it in airplane mode to avoid any interruptions. These measures and recording on two devices served as preventative measures against the disadvantages of audio recording such as technical failures and battery discharge (Stuckey, 2014). I listened carefully to all the recordings to check for missing information and add notes from the gestures, nonverbal communication and attitudes in physical meetings that could not be detected in the recordings. This tackled another disadvantage of recording, that is audio recording excluding important symbols and information from it.

I transferred the recordings into transcriptions and translated them into English and put the best effort into giving close meanings to proverbs, cultural context and metaphors, and sought the help of my friends who are linguists. The transcription process bears the risk of errors, and I read them several times to ensure they were exact duplicates of the recordings. Finally, while audio recordings are the source of fidelity, it is the job of a researcher to sensibly understand, interpret, describe, analyse and explore data (Cypress, 2018).

3.6 Data Analysis

The results from the focus group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis has been defined as “a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (Clarke and Braun, 2017:287). These themes are comprised of the smallest elements of data, which are codes. With the help of derived themes from analysing qualitative data, a researcher identifies regularities and patterns that potentially help to provide interpretations, explanations and solutions to an issue and research question being studied (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). Thematic analysis consists of six steps, which are: transcript creation and

data familiarization; keyword identification; code selection; theme development; conceptualization through the interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes; and, finally, the development of a conceptual model (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following these steps, I first started by carefully reading transcripts and getting to know the materials from different perspectives; then I identified keywords based on recurring terms and concepts; these key words were turned into codes based on their core significant meaning; grouping codes into different abstract themes based on my interpretation to link codes to larger theoretical picture; interpretation of themes to develop concepts; these recurring themes then used to answer research questions to develop a conceptual model.

Responses of women received during the focus groups in Almaty and Turkestan were divided into three areas that I am studying, work-family reconciliation policies, the labour market and the family, in accordance with the structure of the questions asked during the focus group discussions. Within these three categories, key moments and issues have been given codes and then similar codes formed themes. The process of thematic analysis involved classifying issues women experienced into the state, the market and the family subcategories and within each subcategory issues were broken into different themes. The most acute and relevant themes were analysed and attempted to be rationalised through the current literature review and secondary analysis. For example, such codes as lack of trust in state childcare, long waiting lists for placement and poor nutrition at state childcare were included under the theme “issues related to state childcare” and “work-family reconciliation policies”. Identifying key problems that appeared regularly in women’s responses regarding the use of state-subsidised childcare allows a researcher to explore the degree to which the state assists mothers of young children with childcare.

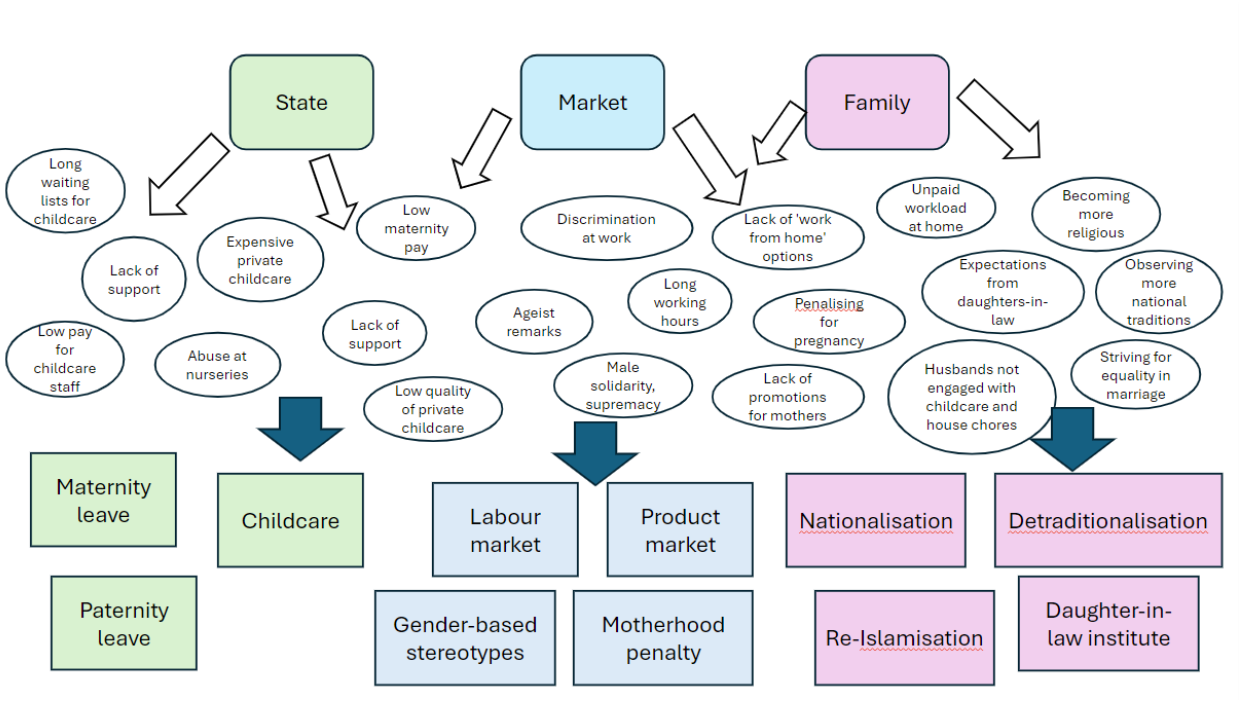

Figure 3.1 The process of thematic analysis, acquiring themes from codes

At the same time, there were inducted themes that related to neither of the identified areas. They opened up new areas in coding such as matriarchy that was explored while analysing patriarchy. Similarly, fathers using paternity leave for their professional development instead of childcare could fit both state and family areas.

Applying thematic analysis method has virtues for research, among which is flexibility. Thematic analysis has been praised for its ability to analyse a wide range of research topics and sample size without reliance on theoretical background (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis method is also described as “realist method” because it constructs reality by looking closely at participants’ words, expressions, experiences and meanings and, hereby, focuses on the outer than inner (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Although at first the data analysis process began from the manual coding, later it was transferred to the NVIVO software. I decided to transfer data to NVIVO as it allowed generation of themes in a more organised and efficient way. The use of the NVIVO software for data analysis has several research benefits such as providing transparent

and trustworthy data through the detailed account of respondents' words (Morrison et al., 1998).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

As 'Ethics is the disciplined study of morality' (Chervenak and McCullough, 2021:42), it requires researchers to uphold the best human qualities and conduct during research such as honesty, care and consent. In addition to those general expectations in ethical considerations, research that involves women studies or gender-related issues should consider power relationships and consent between researchers and participants. Another issue to consider is conducting non-White gender-related research is giving space to women for exploring culture that distinguishes them from dominant White women's gender issues:

> 'If we are to avoid holding Western women as an implicit norm for all women, research design must emphasize the significance of contextual and culturally specific knowledge.' (Bell, 2014:79)

As a student researching social policy focusing on women's experiences at the University of Nottingham, I ensured that the research complied with the ethical codes of conduct (University of Nottingham, 2024). I applied for ethical approval through the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham and the application was approved. The participants were given information sheets and consent forms, ensuring good moral ethics: 'Respect for persons requires that the participants of research should be allowed to make choices about whether to participate or not in the research.' (Manandhar and Joshi, 2020:89). Confidentiality, being of high importance in studying gender-related issues, was ensured by coding and anonymizing the key identifiable information such as the real names of the participants (Burgess-Proctor, 2015). The names given to the participants symbolise the hope and beauty of nature. Kazakh people's names given to them at birth have traditionally shown a connection to the power of nature and reflect their nomadic past and appreciation of nature. The pseudonyms were chosen as a synonym of their personalities to give them a voice. I am

using quotes/citations from the focus group discussions in the next three chapters on findings, which is in line with my aim to give a voice to people whose voices are not traditionally represented. While I tried my best to translate their quotes to English as clearly and closely in translation as possible, I have not taken out all the grammatical differences between Kazakh/Russian and English. Some of these quotes might seem not very fluent in English, but it adds to the authenticity of their voices.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of this research project. The selection of a qualitative research method, focus group discussion, was rationalised in a way that no other research design would be relevant to answering the research questions adequately. This chapter has focused on explaining the rationales behind choosing the methodology and emphasising my positionality within the research. In addition, the rationale for using secondary research methods to collect data from existing sources has been discussed. As shown in the following chapters, the secondary data contribute to the contextualisation of the findings from the primary research. They enhance the understanding of the participants' views in their political, socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Chapter 4 Childcare and Parental Leave Policy: Findings from the Secondary Research and Focus Group

This chapter addresses what the state in Kazakhstan does in order to support mothers of young children in the family and the labour market, and how mothers experience this. In terms of defamilisation concept, the support of the state would ideally be aimed at mothers being able to have a good standard of living, without having to rely on the family. This would mean that mothers are able to achieve a good standard of living through paid work, independently of family support. Defamilisation of the family, which is another aspect of defamilisation concept, means that families would be able to achieve a good standard of living without relying on the family, or the market. In practical terms this would mean that the state provides sufficient childcare, and regulates aspects of the labour market, such as maternity/paternity leave and pay, to such an extent that both families and mothers are free to take part in the labour market in order to provide for themselves to the standard that they aspire to.

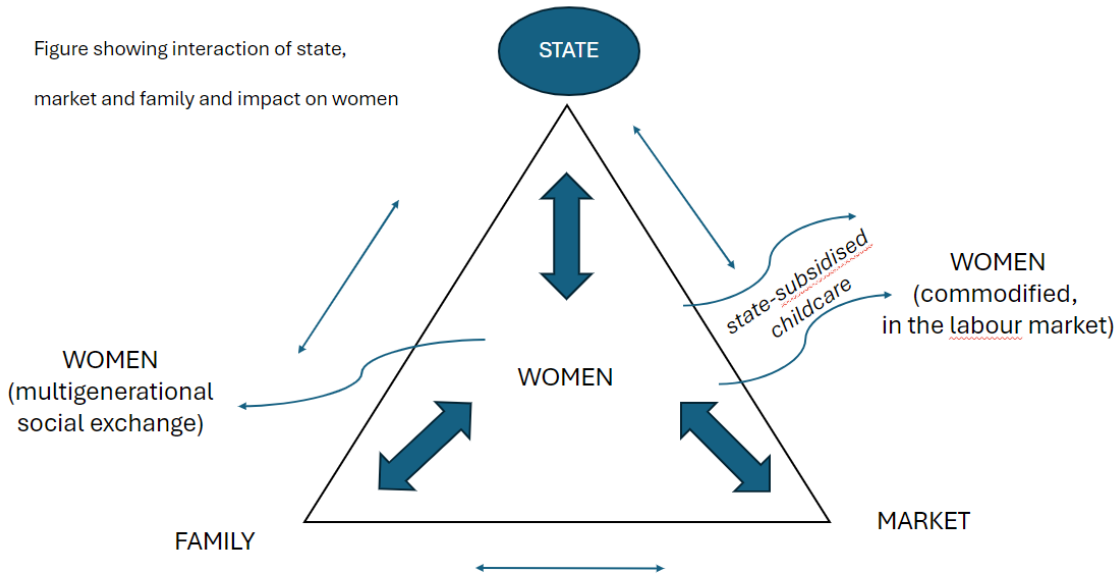

Figure 4.1 Interaction of state, market and family impact on women (author's own)

The chapter is structured into discussions of different aspects of childcare, i.e. long waiting list, issues with quality and lack of modernisation and innovation; maternity leave policy; paternity leave policy; Kazakhstan and defamilisation. For each of these, the findings of the secondary research are presented first, followed by the experiences of the mothers. Before presenting the findings, this Chapter starts with a discussion of how the concepts of Esping-Andersen's welfare capitalism apply in Kazakhstan, whereas the general concept of Esping-Andersen's welfare capitalism has been discussed in more details in Chapter 2 on theoretical framework.

This chapter reports the findings regarding state: Do state services, aimed at pregnant women and mothers, help women combine motherhood and paid work without relying on the markets and family? What do women say about their experiences?

The chapter takes off by outlining that Kazakhstan reveals gap of Central Asian region in Esping-Andersen's (1990) three worlds of capitalism and this empirical study tries to shed light on it by drawing upon the six semi-structured focus group discussions carried out with women from Almaty and Turkestan. Following this, the next chapters explore the women's experiences of state-subsidised childcare services, maternity and paternity leave policies, and then it analyses by comparing to secondary analysis (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021; Egov, 2022; Egov, 2023). The final section explains the key findings through the concepts of defamilisation, decommodified and commodified defamilisation, and defamilisation risks (Lister, 1994) (Chau and Yu, 2021; Chau et al. 2016)

4.1 Kazakhstan and the Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism

The case of Kazakhstan might be used as a critique of Esping-Andersen's world of welfare capitalism in the underrepresenting of the wider world; it exposes the absence of Central Asian countries in his welfare regime typologies. The research conducted about the post-Soviet region is by Pascall and Manning (2000), who analysed the welfare system of 27 former member states of the USSR from a gender perspective. Although the authors did not propose a new welfare regime type for post-communist countries, based on their analysis, two welfare regime types, one during the USSR and one after the collapse of the USSR, might be suggested. Taking into consideration high expenditures on social security benefits and the important role of the welfare state in eradicating inequality in society, on the one hand, and authoritarian government, on the other, during the rule of the Communist Party until 1989, these countries might be best described as the social welfare regime but with totalitarian political regime. Esping-Andersen's may have excluded post-Soviet countries welfare states from his typologies as it did not have democratic political regime like the countries, that he did include into his welfare regime typologies. After the collapse of the Soviet rule post-1989, states considerably cut back welfare funding, including maternity benefits, which made it more difficult for women do paid work, and families became more like the breadwinner model. Therefore, the welfare of post-communist countries went through a dramatic transformation and the social totalitarian welfare regime shifted to the conservative regime.

Fenger (2007) in his attempt to relate former USSR countries to Esping-Andersen's three welfare regimes, concluded that none of them best describes these countries because their social security systems, level of quality of life and trust in government are lower in post-Soviet countries than in the OECD welfare states which have been used as the foundation for Esping-Andersen's three welfare regime typologies. Instead, the author proposes three new welfare sub-regimes created for post-Soviet states. "The former-USSR" sub-type includes Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine, and resembles the Conservative welfare regime but with the addition of society having lower level of public trust in government. "The post-communist European" sub-type includes Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, and although it resembles "the former-USSR type" in welfare coverage, its economic development is more advanced, and the quality of life are higher in these countries

(Dabrowski, 2023). “The developing welfare states” sub-regime includes Georgia, Romania and Moldova, and it is distinct from the previous two types with its poorly developed welfare system and struggling economy.

4.2 Family-work reconciliation policies in Kazakhstan

This section discusses aims of family-work reconciliation policies such as childcare policy, maternity leave and paternity leave policy in Kazakhstan to demonstrate their impact on degree of defamilisation of women in terms of relying less on their families for childcare responsibilities. Childcare, maternity leave compensation and maternity leave duration have been identified by Bambra (2007) as measurements of defamilisation and, hence, this section applies this measurement to the case of Kazakhstan to see to what degree these policies support women with childcare responsibilities to decrease their dependence on their family.

4.3 Childcare policy

4.3.1 Reports of Secondary Research Results

The state of Kazakhstan has been aiming to increase funding and coverage of partially state subsidised childcare. The state subsidises childcare partially and directly by funding around 33% of total costs and leaving the remaining fees to be covered by

carers of children (Nur, 2020). The calculations may differ and depend on each childcare facility individually. For example, state childcare in Almaty costs 49 GBP* (for ease of reading, all prices have been converted to GBP) per month, which was split between parents and state as follows, 32 GBP and 16 GBP respectively (Nur, 2020). Major cuts in social security were enacted in the early 1990s. For example, major cuts in the childcare budget resulted in the decrease of children's enrolment into nursery from 52 to 28 percent between 1989 and 1994 (Klugman et al. 1997; Kuehnast, 1998; Fehlings, 2017). Subsequently, various policies in the 2000s and 2010s, including the State Program of Education Development for 2005-2010, the state program of Technical and Vocational Education Development 2008-2012, "Children of Kazakhstan" Program for 2007-2011 and "Balapan" Preschool Education Program for 2010-2014, aimed to restore and modernize the education system.

Pre-school education funding in Kazakhstan decreased from 7.1% in 1997 to 3% of GDP spending in 2003 (UNESCO, 2020). Overall, between 1999 and 2002, state expenditures on social security shrunk from 34 to 24.5% of GDP spending (Agrawal, 2008). With the "Balapan" Preschool Education Program for 2010-2020, the state had set an ambitious plan of increasing percentage of children aged between 3-6 enrolled into both private and public preschool education from 77.7% in 2015 to 100% by 2020 (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010). Apart from building new buildings and facilities for early education purpose, the program also applied settling an agreement with operating private childcare services that allows the state to reimburse the partial costs of every child aged between 3-6 using the services of private childcare.

According to the Bureau of National Statistics, 98.9% of children aged between 3-6 are enrolled into pre-school education institutions as of 2021, of which about 55% of overall childcare was private (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021E). The results have been achieved predominantly due to the state expanding its services through offering state-subsidised childcare at already functioning private childcare facilities instead of building new buildings in order to optimise and reduce costs. The 93,4 % increase in state childcare is largely achieved through subsidizing places at private childcare settings. New state childcare facilities comprise less than 1000 of newly built around 4,000 pre-

school facilities in 10 years (Inform, 2023; Khabar24.kz, 2022). Parents and carers are expected to pay only for food at state subsidised childcare, which ranges between 34-60 GBP per month. Fees of state childcare are much more affordable than those of private childcare, which ranges between 100 and 850 GBP per month (Informburo, 2022). Children attending state-subsidised childcare are mixed with children who are on private fees there.

The independent journalists project aimed at fact checking claimed that almost 20% of children aged between 1-6 are not covered by either public or private childcare, which included 13% in Almaty, 4% in Astana, 1.6% in Almaty region and 0.2% in Kostanay region, while 98.9% coverage of childcare was reached in Shymkent and other 12 regions (Factcheck, 2021). This suggests that less half of children covered by childcare provision are concentrated in state subsidised childcare, which may indicate that state childcare provision is not sufficient for all children aged 1-6 in the country as more than half of them use private services.

More than 250,000 children aged 1-6 were estimated to be on a waiting list for state subsidised childcare as of the end of 2022, which comprises 10% of overall 2.4 million children aged 1-6 in the country (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023A; Inform, 2023). There is a lack of state childcare for children under the age of three. Only 56.3 percent of children aged under 3 were going to childcare in 2019 compared to 98.9% for those aged between 3-6, which shows inaccessibility issues of early childcare (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021E).

A shortage of carers in state childcare emerged during the rapid increase in the number of childcare facilities implemented by the "Balapan" Program following the crisis in education after the collapse of the USSR. There was a considerable increase in the number of newly built childcare facilities both state and private: it reached 8,467 units in 2014 and almost 11,000 in 2022 throughout the country after the closure of 3,668 preschool facilities in the early 1990s due to financial crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2014; Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022; Asian Development Bank, 2004). While the state

managed to achieve a 10-time increase in the number of childcare facilities, the level of funding allocated from the state budget for teachers' salaries, training and recruitment was less generous. The amount spent on pre-school education constituted 0.51% of GDP in 2020 and is lower than the level spent by the OECD countries, which range between 1-2 percent (Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022; OECD, 2023). The quality of preschool childcare is severely affected by the lack of state funding as the low salary level. The lack of qualification does not attract professionals who stay in their job long-term. Instead, the lack of perspectives to grow professionally, and salaries that do not allow a socially acceptable standard of living result in people without qualifications looking for temporary earnings signing up for the job. In 2023, the average wage level of childcare workers constituted the equivalent of 325 GBP, which comprised almost half of the average wage level in Kazakhstan for the first quarter of 2023 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023; Informburo, 2023).

4.3.2 Findings from the focus groups: Trust in childcare

The focus group participants emphasised the difficulty in accessing state subsidised childcare due to long slowly progressing waiting lists. According to mothers, despite registering for state childcare very shortly after the birth of a child, their turn had not come up for at least four years and some were still on the waiting list when their children started attending primary school.

> *My child who is 10 years old now, is still on the waiting list. He is already in the 4th grade now!* (laughing) (Gold, mother of four children, manager at an institution, Almaty).

A shortage of qualified staff has been frequently mentioned by mothers as one of the main problems when explaining their reluctance to send their children to state childcare. Affordable childcare is not sufficient to incentivise women to enter the labour market, providing quality childcare is a more decisive factor to increase women's employment level (Lee, 2021). Studies in South Korea show that despite the provision of free childcare since 2013, women's participation in the labour market has not increased

considerably and the gendered division of unpaid work has not changed too much (Lee, 2020). Shortage of staff in early education in Kazakhstan has been explained by poorly developed competitive working conditions such as low pay and lack of promotion and training opportunities (Litjens and Taguma, 2017). The low status of staff working in pre-school education attracted candidates with a lack of qualifications and dedication, which is manifested in frequent cases of abuse and violence towards children in nurseries. Abuse and violence have been captured on CCTV and hidden video recordings on mobile devices by other carers ranging from screaming, bullying, beating, suffocation, biting to sexual assault (Tengrinews, 2021; Liter, 2023). Overcrowded groups of children with few childcare workers caused concerns among the parents about the wellbeing of their children. Fears of children being neglected and experiencing accidents in oversubscribed groups due to the limited emotional and physical capacity of carers were expressed.

> *We didn't consider the state childcare, we are rather afraid of it. The number of children is high, more than 30* (Moon, mother of two children, lecturer at a university, Almaty).

> *People without calling work there, too many children, 30-40, I saw in videos and on television in what conditions children are in* (Bright, mother of four children, civil servant at the Ministry, Almaty).

Parents were also aware of child abuse cases taking place at state childcare facilities by burned-out and unqualified carers. It came after stricter requirements for childcare job positions were terminated in 2012 to allow more workers to fill in the deficit of childcare workers. Cruel incidents of child abuse were covered widely multiple times in the press. Cases of neglect and other risks to child wellbeing caused by incompetent carers and failed fire safety and sanitary conditions checks of childcare facilities were also detected. As a result, the Ministry of Enlightenment ordered all childcare units to be checked for quality, raise requirements for placing state childcare contracts at private

childcare, to raise qualifications of carers, and renew the preschool education program in 2022 (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022; Arbat Media, 2022). Salary level of childcare staff has been increased by 30% since September 2023 to improve status of the job sector (Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazkahstan, 2023).

> *My daughter E. also told me that teachers put tape on some children's mouths. I should stress that this nursery was one of the best options. She only told me years later, at 10 years old.* (Brave, mother of three children, professor at a university, Almaty).

> *I do not trust childcare for 100% with a child under 3. When child is above 3, he/she can react to carer's mistreatment, beating, shouting, abuse, can demonstrate with his mood once he, she is back from nursery at home, whereas children younger than that age cannot do that* (Jewel, mother of four children, professor at a university, Almaty).

A shortage of qualified childcare staff resulting in lower quality of childcare might be explained by a gap in university programs preparing specialists to work in early education. Students enrolled into early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs at Kazakhstan universities spent 390 academic hours on practicing their skills in industry in contrast to the OECD countries that makes practical experience the central part of ECEC education with an average number of 576 hours spent on internships (Litjens and Taguma, 2017). In Denmark, for example, six months of the second and third year of the teaching program are spent on practical experiences (Litjens and Taguma, 2017).

4.3.3 Lack of modernisation and innovation in childcare

The Minister of Enlightenment reported at the annual board meeting with the Prime Minister in 2022 that pre-school education programs and teaching methods will be transformed to include a more innovative approach. There will be a shift from the academic-focused teaching method commonly used at Kazakhstan childcare facilities to internationally recognised and practiced play-centered teaching. "Prior to this, the program was too academic, it had to seat children 3-4 years old, teach for 20 minutes. Now, considering international experience, education and training begin at the threshold of kindergarten, in accordance with the age characteristics of children. Play is a natural activity that matches a child's behaviour." (Prime Minister, 2022).

4.3.4 Findings from focus groups

Some parents, predominantly from Almaty, were reluctant to send their children to state childcare due to the outdated early education curriculum that does not consider the latest evidence-based findings and does not reflect the needs of children today.

> *...nursery turned out to be Soviet style with authoritarian approach where head of nursery keeps herself on distance and sits at a separate table. She could never be seen at the nursery, another woman acting head of childcare replaces her and does her functions. The head of nursery arrives to the nursery in her jeep through a separate entrance gate opened by a janitor. A big frog in a little pond. Everyone was intimidated by her.* (Brave, mother of three children, professor at a university, Almaty).

One of the respondents from Almaty named Brave was the most outspoken person on the lack of modernisation and innovation at state childcare in Kazakhstan. She had lived in the UK for several years, where she had witnessed firsthand how far advanced early childcare education is there in comparison to Kazakhstan.

> *My first daughter adapted quickly to a nursery in Kazakhstan because I had been preparing her and telling her about nursery three months in advance "You will be going to work, and I will be going to work. After you finish this work, you will then go to school."* (Brave, mother of three children, professor at a university, Almaty).

> *My daughter E. was not allowed to play with toys to not break it; she was placed next to a teacher for a day nap when she could not fall asleep with other children. I raised this case at nursery and told them not to force her to sleep.* (Brave, mother of three children, professor at a university, Almaty).

Early childcare education is not adapted to diverse ways of modern parents' employment and does not provide flexible options of childcare. It still accommodates the needs of typical Soviet families who were predominantly full-time employed two-income households working 9 to 5. While developed nations are moving towards designing and implementing education programs for children in early education (OECD, 2023D), childcare in Kazakhstan seems to be lagging as state funding is mainly allocated to childcare for children aged between 3-6.

> *I wish it (sending a child to childcare) was earlier and if parents were given more options such as attending nursery three times per week. Moreover, if there was more focus on early development of children at nurseries, I would take my child to nursery earlier from 2.5 years* (Brave, mother of three children, professor at a university, Almaty).

The nursery administration was defensive to me because I used to express my enquiries and concerns via email. Other parents used to come and voice their concerns and comments orally "Teacher, my children have this issue…". I used to address my emails to the head of nursery. Few times I had a meeting with her. My impression of her was that she was very proud to be acquainted with the daughter of the first president of RK, she was implying that she had connections. (Brave, mother of three children, professor at a university, Almaty).

4.3.5 Private childcare provision

As the state fails to provide quality and accessible state-subsidised childcare with various issues outlined in the previous sections, some women turned to private childcare. In 2023, inflation reached 21 percent, which is the highest level in decades, exacerbated by aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic and Russian invasion in Ukraine (International Monetary Fund, 2024). The free-market economy shapes motherhood to be an expensive and difficult choice to make for families from disadvantaged backgrounds and, hence, lack of access to state childcare services contributes to social inequality. Mothers of young children are more likely to stay at home and do unpaid work if their wages are low and are mostly spent on childcare and transport costs to work (Landivar et al, 2021).

4.3.6 Findings from the focus groups

Mothers of young children face challenges in keeping up with the costs of private childcare and material attributes of raising children, such as strollers, diapers, winter clothes and extracurricular activities.

It is very hard for women in Kazakhstan. It's a developing country. The socio-economic situation is not very favourable towards women. (Brave, mother of 3 children, Professor at a university, Almaty)

...she wants to work, wants to do everything, but it's hard for her, there is no childcare, she has to care for them at home because there is no money for a babysitter, they are costly, or they don't want to hire for other reasons. At home, all the domestic work is weighted on women, it is difficult for her to develop in career, it is not necessarily that she is discriminated because they don't like women, but often women can't develop (their career) as men. (Trust, mother of 2 children, PhD candidate abroad, Almaty)

Jewel from Almaty emphasised difficulties in managing paid work, childcare and household chores. Occupying a managerial position at university and having resources to afford comfortable lifestyle such as private school for the children and a private car with a hired driver, she still experienced difficulties of being a woman and being responsible for earning a wage as well as doing childcare.

I think it is hard for women to reconcile work and family in Kazakhstan because there is a lack of social help, everything is chargeable, no system and infrastructure in place. There might be no accessible nurseries near their house, and parents must look for ways of transporting a child. Its predominantly women who do school errands and after-school activities. All the burden is placed on women.

In my case now, I must drive my children to nursery and school further away from our home because they are not nearby. Even if there is a school close to home, it might not be of good quality. I strive to give my children good quality school. (Jewel, mother of four children, professor at a university and Head of Department, Almaty)

Mothers from both affluent, less affluent and disadvantaged backgrounds struggled with childcare from private providers. Women who struggled financially were deprived the most in terms of childcare as lack of accessibility and quality issues with state childcare left them with private childcare option that was unrealistic to afford. At the same time, even if women from affluent backgrounds could afford private childcare, outsourcing childcare still did not drastically ease these women's burden of combining motherhood and paid work. They had to take care of driving their children to childcare and afterschool activities, look after household and family members, carry on responsibilities at paid work, help with homework of children – all these duties laid on women's shoulders as traditional gender roles dictated women to maintain these multiple roles while men were expected mainly to provide financially.

4.4 Maternity leave policy

The Labour Code in Kazakhstan is the law that stipulates the rights of workers and the conditions that employers have to provide for their employees (Adilet, 2015).

According to this code, mothers are allowed to take maternity leave lasting up to three years with a right to keep their own working place. 18 calendar months of which are paid by the state budget or childcare benefits or maternity pay from the Public Social Insurance Fund and 126 calendar days by the employer. Childcare benefits paid for 18 months that constitute 40 percent of average income and the benefits during the 126 calendar days from the employer are based on the average monthly income paid before maternity leave (Egov, 2022). Considerably long period of maternity leave of three years, common in Eastern and Central European, Balkan, and Central Asian countries, is a legacy left since the Soviet Union, where extended maternity leave policy was part of the state's pronatalist strategy emphasising women's traditional role of mothers by

constructing “an idealized, romanticized vision of motherhood" (Michaels, 2001: 324; Pascall and Manning, 2000; Spoorenberg, 2015).

The duration of maternity leave in Kazakhstan resembles closely the Scandinavian countries of Norway and Sweden, which are known to be Social-democratic welfare regimes for its universal, subsidised childcare and long maternity leave period (Esping-Andersen, 2015). In terms of the level of maternity leave pay, Kazakhstan is lagging behind the Scandinavian countries (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2023A). (see Table 4.1)

Table 4.1 Maternity leave payment and duration for 2023 (Egov, 2022; European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2023A)

	Kazakhstan	**Norway**	**Sweden**
Maternity leave duration	1095 days (3 years)	343 or 413 days	480 days
Paid maternity leave	547 days (1.5 years)	343 or 413 days	390 days
Amount of maternity leave payments	8-12% (if not worked) or 40% (if worked) of average salary	100% salary coverage (343 days) or 80% (413 days)	80% of salary (if worked 240 days)

4.4.1 Findings from the focus groups

Women from lower disadvantaged financial backgrounds are more likely to be excluded from long maternity leave lasting three years as the levels of maternity pay are so low. Therefore, it becomes a privilege accessible to women from well-off background or those who have partners with a high-income level. The participants in Turkestan predominantly chose to return to paid work much earlier, i.e. before their children turned one year. The main reason for having a short maternity leave among women in the Turkestan focus group participants was due to the need to provide for their families. The women stated that their husbands are being paid at a low wage level, with unstable jobs or being unemployed. Moreover, the source of income of the partner's parents residing

with them in one house, such as pension payment, was also quite crucial for some of the women.

> *...to earn salary and provide for my children, …husband and mother-in-law are at home.* (Peace, mother of 5 children, lecturer at a university in Turkestan)

> *I had to go back to work after 6 months because we needed a second income to feed our family.* (Emerald, mother of 4 children, secretary at a private company in Turkestan)

> *I returned to work 6-8 months after having a child because there was a replacement for me at work. I wrote a letter to the school director asking to allocate me teaching hours soon explaining my aim to provide for children.* (Hope, mother of two children in Turkestan)

A large share of the participants in Almaty decided to use extended maternity leave of two and three years, and sometimes longer. As some of them emphasised, they felt joy from time spent together with their children during their early development years:

> *But with the third child I worked, and I even got fed up with it and I went on maternity leave and sat there for 3 years., with great pleasure. Because I became a bit tired.* (Bright, mother of 4 children, full-time civil servant at the state institution, Almaty)

> *The longest I was on maternity leave with the second child, that was deserved maternity leave, I have worked for two years at the state institution. This experience with the second child was favourable. With the third child I did not*

have proper maternity leave. (Sparkle, mother of 3 children, full-time employee at an international organisation, Almaty)

Those women above, who immersed themselves in the process of unpaid extended motherhood at home, had been working full-time before giving birth. They emphasised that maternity leave was a long-awaited time for rest from paid work for them and they were looking forward to having extensive time at home with their baby.

Numerous studies have shown that long maternity leave improves long-term well-being and health of children and decreases the risk of post-partum depression in mothers (Avendano et al. 2015; Niel et al. 2020; Carneiro et al. 2021). In this sense, the state is improving the welfare of mothers and children by providing them with the means to do so.

The decision to dedicate themselves solely to childcare by taking long maternity leave might be also prompted by a lack of choice in childcare options and mistrust of childcare services. Some women must prioritise their children and choose to do unpaid childcare at home over paid work and career progress because the state does not provide reliable quality childcare. Research shows that educated professional women from the middle and upper-middle classes are more likely to fall into the pattern of male breadwinner families and dedicate themselves to the educational and well-rounded development of their children. Parents are seeking the aim of remaining in affluent and elite groups by building up the human capital of their offsprings (Stone and Lovejoy, 2021). Women from affluent backgrounds, despite having higher education, qualifications and career potential to achieve professional growth, dedicate themselves to becoming homemakers and raising their children to become well-rounded and successful students. Women could have used their human capital to narrow gender inequality, but instead, they directed their effort into private tutoring and preparing their children to get into top universities. This tendency of women taking extended absences from paid work and careers has been termed ‘opting out’ (Stone, 2021).

> *There was an opportunity to work, I used to work in a construction company as a manager, I could be promoted there, to do a lot of things, but I voluntarily sit on maternity leave because after the birth of the children I realised that who could not leave my kids to anyone. ….. Because I don't think anyone would look after them better than I do, that's why I voluntarily decided to dedicate myself to the children.* (Flower, mother of 4 children, housewife, freelance psychologist, Almaty)

Taking long maternity leave might also be a last resort for women who are not provided support in returning to paid work after the maternity leave. Women are more likely to go back to paid work earlier or reconcile leave with part-time work if there are mechanisms and regulations put in place that allow flexibility in the labour market. In practice, some women might feel unwelcome and unqualified to enter the labour force after spending time taking care of a newborn baby and find it easier to carry on being on extended maternity leave. The phenomenon of women encouraged into a sole motherhood role by child-unfriendly work conditions, such as inflexible long work hours, has been referred to as being "pushed out" after which women are likely to remain outside of the workforce due to a lack of confidence (Lim and Rasdi, 2019). Flexible work options such as being employed on distant and part-time contracts are not quite common and underdeveloped in Kazakhstan and the work environment is built to suit the "ideal worker model" (Bayazitova et al. 2023). Even the world pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, which forced people to be work from home, reinforced the "ideal worker model" and instead of opening up new possibilities of reconciling work and family, it prompted women to decrease working hours or quitting their jobs to be able to do childcare (Cannito and Scavarda, 2020; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022).

4.4.2 Differences in experiences between mothers in Turkestan and women in Almaty

Turkestan is one of the poorest regions of the country, with its economy mainly based on the agricultural sector (Eurasian Research Institute, 2020; Asian Development Bank,

2022). In contrast, Almaty is the commercial and financial center of the country, which contributes 30 per cent of the overall national retail trade of Kazakhstan (Silk Road Briefing, 2022). In 2019, GDP level and growth rate of the agricultural sector in Turkestan was estimated to be 102 and 100,7 points respectively whereas it was 105 and 79 in Almaty (Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2019). According to the Bureau of National Statistics, the lowest average income level is in Southern Kazakhstan, namely the Turkestan and Zhambyl regions, which was 275 GBP in 2021; Almaty has one of the highest 420 GBP (Forbes, 2021). Furthermore, residents of rural regions of Kazakhstan are more likely than their urban counterparts to experience financial deprivation (50.1%), housing issues (31.7%), unemployment (14.6%) and lack of medical help (8.3%) (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). Residents from Turkestan perceived financial deprivation to be the most prevalent issue, and it came second among other rural regions with an indication of 68.2%. Moreover, the region is in the top four locations in terms of the worst unemployment conditions (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022).

The discrepancy in perceptions of maternity leave between Almaty and Turkestan women might be caused by different levels of economic development in those cities, reflected in the poverty rate, cost of living and income level. While Almaty has been reported to be one of the most expensive cities to live in Kazakhstan, it has also been listed one of the cities with the highest wage level across the country (Astana Times, 2022; Baigenews, 2023). In contrast, Turkestan was the region with the highest poverty level of 9,8 per cent in 2021 and the lowest average monthly earnings (Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2022; Baigenews, 2023). In terms of the costs for housing and renting, Almaty is at the top of the list and Turkestan at the bottom of the list in 2022, where Almaty is more expensive by 30 per cent (Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2022A). Despite the considerable disparity in quality of life due to wide social divide and poverty gap between Almaty and Turkestan, the amount of maternity leave payment paid across Kazakhstan is universal and does not vary based on local economy of locations within the country. Living in a society with high social inequality is likely to profoundly impact Almaty and Turkestan women’s experiences and expectations regarding scale of money.

4.4.3 The findings from the focus groups

The possible rationale behind Almaty and Turkestan women's contrasting evaluations of the same amount of maternity leave payment might be explained by their career choices. Based on the findings from the focus group discussions, women in Turkestan are more likely to start doing paid work earlier after having children and have longer periods of employment. This is due to the higher financial necessity to become a second breadwinner and provide for their family. The women in Almaty are more likely to have husbands earning above the average wage level and are less pressured to do paid work due to the higher proportion of middle and upper middle-class respondents inhabiting Almaty.

> *It depends on the work experience of mothers: the longer they work, the higher they are paid leave. But still the leave payment is not that low. There are many opportunities. For example, women can work as entrepreneur while being employed as a teacher. If the business is registered and taxes are paid, a mother would receive a more generous maternity leave payment. In a nutshell, maternity leave payment depends on a woman's work.* (Joy, mother of five children, lecturer at a university, Turkestan)

> *Unfortunately, I didn't have his salary before the first maternity leave and, hence, the maternity leave payment was low. The higher the salary level is, the higher the maternity leave payment is.* (Spirit, mother of four children, works at a state institution, Turkestan)

A low level of maternity leave paid during the first and a half year after a child is born means that mothers cannot survive on her own income and are financially dependent on a partner or other people. Thus, maternity leave payment in Kazakhstan contributes to familisation as it does not guarantee women an acceptable way of living without reliance on family and paid work but, on the contrary, reinforces the breadwinner type of

family, The high poverty level and a lack of job opportunities in Turkestan, due to a less diversified economy than in Almaty, leads to unstable employability and decreases the chances of having double-earner families. Women receiving maternity leave payments, with no source of second income, might find it challenging to stretch those payments to the needs of the whole family. As it is quite common for families to live in multigenerational households with parents from the husband's side in Turkestan, their pension payments can play an important role in helping to provide for family needs.

> *Maternity leave is not sufficient, of course. We lived on our husband's income. If he had been unemployed, we would not have survived on maternity payments.* (Peace, mother of five children, lecturer at a university, Turkestan)

> *The maternity leave payment was not enough, luckily, we had pension of my mother-in-law. My husband's job is unstable.* (Hope, mother of six children, schoolteacher, Turkestan)

> *The maternity leave payment is very funny amount of money. I could spend it on taxi, on manicure.* (Star, mother of three children, housewife, part-time assistant of husband's company, Almaty)

> *The Kazakhstani maternity leave payment? It's very small! (laughing) I don't even remember the amount, I guess there was something, but it was small. It was insufficient, might have covered the costs of pampers. Predominantly, it was husband's salary.* (Trust, mother of two children, PhD candidate abroad, Almaty)

Particularly, divorced, widowed, single women and those whose partners are unemployed are likely to find themselves in a difficult situation to provide for themselves and newborn babies by relying on purely maternity leave payment. Single mothers, who

cannot rely on their partners' income, seek material assistance from their extended family and rely on siblings and other relatives as a safety net.

> *As a single mother, I don't receive help from the state. I was rejected for help because of the benefit I received as a widow. But I didn't pursue it hard because there were more in need of support than me. The benefit for widows that I received was small, 50,000 KZT (78 GBP) that is granted until the oldest child completes university.*
>
> *Frankly speaking, there is no help from the state. In the past, widows used to receive clothes for children and free meals at school for children, which was helpful. But now even the benefits are denied because my widow's benefits are higher than the threshold for few tenge (currency in Kazakhstan). I am struggling because I pay for rent, credit, and other expenses for children, it is very hard to provide for children as a single mother, Thanks Allah, I have brothers who help me if I am in desperate need.* (Sunrise, mother of two children, schoolteacher, Turkestan)

Low level of maternity pay paid during extended period of 1.5 years in case of Kazakhstan drastically increases women's dependency on their families to have an acceptable standard of living and, thereby, increases level of familisation. Women are in quite vulnerable state after having children and need extra support with childcare and well-being of themselves and children, and it is extremely challenging to enter paid work at early stages of motherhood. Hence, women rely on support of their families to survive if the state cannot offer sufficient safety net. It might be suggested here that familisation has a much worse impact on single mothers as it makes single mothers dependent not only on their former partners but on extended family as well.

4.4.4. Maternity leave used ‘career reinvention’

In Kazakhstan, more courses for acquiring professional qualifications are becoming available due to increased accessibility of the Internet. Because companies’ struggles to provide additional training for their employees, especially female entrepreneurs, and challenges of educational institutions to provide digitalised teaching to students, social media is becoming increasingly popular as an alternative educational platform (Orlova and Taradai, 2016; Bokayev et al. 2021). For example, online courses on make-up, nail services, therapist, coaching, social media marketing, numerologist, astrologist, nutritionist and photoshopping qualifications, are mainly in high demand among women on maternity leave ready to invest time and effort (Myrzabayev et al., 2023). Apart from short online courses, women also enroll on graduate and post-graduate degrees at universities, for which three years of unpaid maternity leave would be sufficient to complete a degree and improve chances for better perspectives in the labour market. The family’s income level is the crucial factor that has allowed the women to dedicate themselves to childcare during the extended period of maternity leave and enroll into the qualification courses and university degrees.

4.4.5 Findings from focus groups

The women find maternity leave period as an opportunity to invest into their future professional growth. The women who shared their experiences have one thing in common, which is being married to a breadwinner, a spouse providing comprehensive financial support for the family.

> *I find it extremely difficult to spend 3 years on maternity leave since I am an active person and in constant search of professional development. When I was pregnant with the first child, I realised I wanted to continue my education and enrolled into a master's programme in the UK. After the birth of a second child and one year of maternity leave, I did not want to further extend my leave and*

started thinking about professional development and decided to embark on PhD journey. (Brave, mother of 3 children, full-time academic, Almaty)

He finances everything, my studies (online courses on psychology qualification), I continue studying for psychologist, you could study endlessly, that's why the fact that he pays for that is his support for me, he is not against helping me the way he can. He pays for the babysitter, finances me, and my studies, and I think this is the best support. (Flower, mother of four children, freelance psychologist, Almaty)

Three months into maternity leave stay, I took on a project from home, which was bringing me more money than my previous work. As an entrepreneur, it was more enjoyable because I worked for myself not in a company and felt more independence. (Green, mother of two children, full-time marketing manager, Almaty)

It might be suggested that this long-term plan to defamilise were achieved through current familisation as women relied on resources of their families. Women on maternity leave had a privilege of choice and time in regards of future professional aims at the expense of their partners.

4.5 Paternity leave policy

In Kazakhstan, men are legally entitled to paid paternity leave (Egov, 2023). The paternity leave is transferrable, which means it is not mandatory for fathers to go on leave and full length of leave could be solely taken by mothers.

An opportunity for men to take a childcare-related breaks from paid work whereby they are paid the average level of previous salaries for 18 calendar months serves as a potential way to increasing the defamilisation level of women in families. Men might be more likely to consider taking paternity leave and be incentivised by higher parental leave payments than women due to gender wage gap and being paid higher wages. Merely increasing state childcare provision is not enough to achieve gender equality. Reasonably paid parental leave among fathers is needed too (Lee, 2021). Non-transferrable paternity leave also might incentivise fathers to take on caring responsibilities. The universal caregiver model puts emphasis on involving men to take part in unpaid childcare and reducing their working hours, the practice that has been successful in Scandinavian countries with compulsory non-transferable paternity leave for fathers (Meyers and Gornick, 2009; Morgan, 2009).

In the decree on family politics, the President of Kazakhstan talked about, among other family issues, the increase in divorce rate despite having young children in families (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). He stressed a lack of involvement of fathers in the child's upbringing and a lack of communication with children. The state-run large-scale poll by "Family-Demographic Politics" in 2021 showed mothers are the main carers and spend time alone with children (38.1%), both fathers and mothers spend time with children (40.2%), the rarest are fathers spending time with their children without the mothers being present (2.1%) (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022).

4.5.1 Findings from the focus groups

The findings about paternity leave in Kazakhstan might be evidence of that shortfall. Although paternity leave aims to encourage more fathers to be involved in childcare and have quality time with children while having time off from employment, in practice women still carry on being primary child carers and homemakers and lose out on paid

work opportunities during their husbands' paternity break. Some fathers use the paid time to care for their children for unrelated activities such as establishing and developing business ideas, pursuing their careers, which suggests that policy aims and outcomes are not aligned. Family reconciliation policies in general aim at increasing defamilisation by allowing women to have more free time for paid work if they choose and more fair distribution of childcare between parents. However, the result is the opposite, that is decreased defamilisation from childcare by allowing fathers to use paternity leave for paid work and make women further depend on husband's wage and solely take on childcare.

The findings of the current study in Kazakhstan demonstrate that either fathers are reluctant to use it, or they utilise it for non-childcare causes. This finding proves previous studies (Karu, 2012; Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, 2014) that when mothers are at home during paternity leave of their partners, fathers are not involved in childcare.

Using findings from the focus groups, this section argues that paternity leave is not utilised for defamilisation of women, but rather not used at all or for other benefits not directly related to childcare. There is a gradual increase in the number of men voluntarily taking paternity leave, with men sharing their experiences of helping their wives or replacing their wives as homemakers. Their wives were away from home doing paid work. At the same time, other men go on paternity leave to receive higher leave payments due to their higher salary rate or to avoid redundancy at work (Sputnik, 2020). According to the State Fund of Social Insurance, as of 2021, out of 385,000 parents taking parental leave, 3,500 comprised men, an increase from 2,900 in 2019 (Zakon, 2023). The highest number of men taking paternity leave were from the over-populated regions of Zhambyl, Turkestan, Almaty and the city of Shymkent, all located in the Southern region of Kazakhstan (Zakon, 2023).

Despite the increase in the number of men taking paternity leave over the years across Kazakhstan, especially in the Southern part of the country, the findings from the focus groups from two Southern cities of Almaty and Turkestan revealed none of the husbands went on paternity leave. Among the respondents and their husbands there

was a strong belief in traditional gender roles and seeing a man as a breadwinner. Nevertheless, some women thought that more generous paternity leave payments would make their spouses eager to go on paternity leave.

The idea of men, commonly perceived as heads of families and breadwinners among the women, taking temporary absences from employment to take care of a child has been described by both cities' respondents as shameful and to be laughed at in society in Kazakhstan. Not only did husbands feel reluctant to take paternity leave due to the stigma attached to men doing unpaid domestic work in society, but some of the women themselves were against their partners helping with childcare as it was going against men's deeply rooted role of breadwinners and damaging men's pride.

> *I told him "Take paternity leave, take the money", he said "What are you on about? They will misunderstand/misjudge me". Especially, his position is very important, and responsible, he is not allowed to take paternity leave just like that. What is more, in KZ, society is not ready to accept paternity leave, not ready at all. Firstly, they would laugh? at this, usually they laugh at this "What, is he like a woman?". Won't understand don't understand. And my husband would not take it, he would be ashamed* (Trust, mother of two children, researcher, Almaty).

> *It would equal castration. He is the man, provider, he should be fit. The mentality is built in a way that a man goes to work, sits there, and plays, he is relaxed, on chill, but he is working, what you are doing at home is your responsibility, but at the same time, you should be on top of the game in your looks, better than anyone else. Our men don't know how to be at home, how to be with family, there is no culture like that* (Rose, mother of a child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

> ...*there is a notion of 'namys' (pride) among Kazakh men* (Wise, mother of six children, history teacher at school, Turkestan).

> *...he is a man* (Moon, mother of two children, lecturer at a university, Almaty).

It seems like families are willing to compromise their traditional beliefs and values to receive payments for their financial needs. More women in the Turkestan focus groups than in Almaty indicated that a financial incentive of generously paid paternity leave was a determining factor that would make their husbands consider taking paternity leave. As the poverty level is higher and the average wage level is lower in Turkestan than in Almaty, any additional source of income, small or big, makes a substantial difference in the quality of life for Turkestan people. Pragmatic considerations such as having acceptable social standards of living are more important than cultural and religious factors that might be an obstacle to achieving that living.

> *Men in the South are in general against paternity leave. They are afraid to be shamed by relatives and family and hence don't take paternity leave. If the payment were high as salary and there was more awareness of it, men would be more likely to take it because nowadays everyone is interested in money to survive* (Sunrise, mother of two children, teacher at school, Turkestan).

> *After the birth of a child, my husband applied for paternity leave because his salary guaranteed him decent leave payment. But instead of him, it was me who went on parental leave. We used to receive 70,000 KZT, whereas mine was only 10,000 KZT* (Spirit, mother of four children, works at a state institution, Turkestan).

In contrast to their compatriots in Turkestan, launching a business project and avoiding redundancy, rather than financial incentives, were the most common rationales for husbands take paternity leave. This discrepancy might reflect more opportunities and

resources are available for families in Almaty to launch business during paternity leave.

> *He would like to take paternity leave, but not to look after the child, he wanted to do business, in order to keep his workplace, he wanted to take paternity leave. He is our family friend who did that. He works at a very nice place, international company, with a good salary, he wanted to develop himself too, do business, take paternity leave, in 1.5 years he did business, and then returned to work again* (Flower, mother of four children, housewife and freellance psychologist, Almaty).

> *I heard how my dentist was discussing with the nurse how one man at their work took paternity leave, they were laughing so hard at it "Can you imagine?". As if something very bad happened, worse than being put in jail. (laughing) Then they explained that he had trouble at work, they wanted to make him redundant. In order to avoid all those problems, he took paternity leave* (Sparkle, mother of two children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty).

Living in a foreign country with more gender-egalitarian values impacted men's perceptions of unpaid domestic work. Several of women noticed changes in their husbands' conduct at home during and after life in Western countries, whereby their partners became more involved in work around the house and childcare.

> *Because the environment is different here (England), and he behaves himself differently here. Because he knows I need to write PhD, he took the children outside few times, he even offered it himself when I had just woken up "Come on! Dress her! Put in the stroller!" The most important thing, he doesn't dress the child himself, doesn't want to dress. "Prepare the kids, I will take them outside". I am like "We haven't had breakfast yet". (laughing) "Then have breakfast quickly!"*

Here, in the UK, he started helping the children. He now has less meetings, calls, he is quitting soon (Trust, mother of two children, researcher, Almaty).

We have cultural uniqueness, mmm, I would say, mmm, patriarchy, men are the heads of family. It is cultural uniqueness; people laugh at men taking paternity leave. My husband told his dad that he would be taking paternity leave and wife return to work. His dad, in retirement age, criticised him and said that people would laugh at him. The old Soviet generation would not understand, my generation in their 30-40s understands it (Brave, Professor at a university, mother of three children, Almaty)

Both Trust and Brave noticed positive changes in their husbands' conduct in terms of becoming more involved in unpaid work around household and childcare and feeling less ashamed for helping out their wives. Both women explained it by influence of living in British environment, which has more liberal and gender egalitarian approach to family compared to Kazakhstan.

4.6 Kazakhstan and defamilisation

It can be argued that the welfare system in Kazakhstan encourages traditional gender roles, which is the extent to which public policy supports family to lessen burden of caring, through policies that feminise parenthood by reinforcing unpaid work and childcare on women (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Long maternity leaves lasting up to 3 years where one and half year paid modestly compared to average income and another half additional years of unpaid maternity leave, shortage of affordable quality childcare services for children aged over three and high scarcity of nurseries for babies aged under three - all these policy factors put pressure on women to perform care work while falling out of the labour market. According to data from 2019, only 42,7 per cent of

children aged under three are enrolled in childcare services ranging from 18,5 per cent in Western to 76,4 in Eastern region of Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics, 2019A). The amount of maternity leave benefits paid unconditionally to all women for up to one year and a half after the birth of a baby equals about 111,000 KZT equivalent of 190 GBP, which is half of the average income (Egov, 2021).

It seems that the defamilisation is not increased by Kazakhstan's welfare system as public policy does not free women from family work. Women are regarded as primary family carers and secondary paid workers.

As defamilisation and familisation concepts may be used to evaluate family policy in welfare system (Lohmann and Zagel, 2016), Kazakhstan's policy of long maternity leave durations and subsidised childcare may allow women to keep the workplace and decrease childcare responsibilities. On the other hand, special status given to mothers of more than four children that is signified by medals and monthly benefits encourages traditional mother roles. However, policy outcomes and lack of improvements and funding in family policy aimed at defamilising women show that family policy is contributing to familisation of women.

The impact of culture is determining in state policies having defamilisation impact on women. In East-Asian countries, gendered division of paid work and caring responsibilities are influenced by Confucian ideas (Yu, Chau and Lee, 2015). Although there may be policies that encourage defamilisation through paid work, traditional gender role expectations shaped by culture might be still familise women by making them perform caring work at home. Similarly, in Kazakhstan, cultural values shaped by the main dominant religion Islam might diminish defamilisation measures of family policy.

Second issue of lack of confidence in state childcare hinders defamilisation of women who consciously did not choose state childcare. The women predominantly from disadvantaged background in the study did not strive to defamilisation from family through decreased childcare responsibilities and join the labour market. Some of them preferred to keep their children out of state childcare due to issues with poor quality of state childcare. For women from financially privileged backgrounds, more options were

available in terms of achieving defamilisation from childcare in cases when they were reluctant to trust their children to state childcare. The findings show that there is a strong connection between quality of childcare and defamilisation of women. Women were not pursuing defamlisation from childcare at any cost, but wellbeing of a child was a priority for them. Lack of qualified staff in state childcare and risks of child abuse made women domesticated and take on childcare work on themselves.

4.7 Private childcare and defamilisation

Women seem to be far away from commodified defamilisation (Chau et al. 2016) the labour market can accommodate women's needs without state intervention. The family, not the state, becomes source of safety net for women and support with childcare, and, hence, result in women's defamilisation from childcare. Women are more familised because of their husband's financial support in childcare. Husbands who are not expected to bear childcare responsibilities have less barriers to maintain paid work and possess more resources to financially provide for women after having children. In contrast, women, who are expected to bear childcare responsibilities and are not provided affordable state childcare, lack resources to provide for a child and rely on family's resources. The state, by providing limited or no state subsidised childcare services, is shifting expenses on childcare from state to family. However, within a family, it is mothers who mostly bear practical expenses by providing unpaid care and husbands who bear financial costs.

The women from Turkestan in the current study seem to be experiencing familisation risks as the women with more traditional gender values would like to become a full-time care provider but are prevented from doing so due to the necessity to do paid work (Chau and Yu, 2021). Familisation risks are described as factors preventing women from performing a particular role in the family, and/or living a socially acceptable standard of life (Chau and Yu, 2021). For example, familisation risks include situations when women cannot fulfill their wishes of becoming a full-time family care provider due

to the necessity to earn in the paid labour market. As for most of the women in Turkestan focus groups having a male breadwinner is important, but they had to become additional breadwinners due to rising costs of living and insecure employment of their spouses. Whereas for the women from Almaty, the contrary, defamilisation risks were more prevalent as they had more liberal values that prompted them to enter paid work despite their spouses' financial advantage and lack of financial pressure to earn money.

It prompted some women, who could financially afford it, to use private childcare services. Lack of accessibility to state-subsidised childcare disadvantaged mainly women's defamilisation from family whereas women from financially better backgrounds had more opportunities to achieve defamilisation through the support from private childcare services. Lack of access to state-subsidised childcare resulted in inequality in the level of defamilisation depending on the financial status of women. The participants from Almaty and Turkestan were making different childcare decisions with the former being in a better financial position to outsource childcare through privately hired babysitters or childcare. In contrast, the participants from Turkestan, who cannot afford private childcare but need an extra source of income were looking for alternative ways of childcare.

> *We registered online into the waiting list on Egov 6 months in advance after she was born. Our turn came when she reached 4 years old. But by that time, we already decided to choose private childcare* (Moon, mother of two children, lecturer at a university, Almaty).

> *We put him on the waiting list from birth, on the first day of birth, but our turn didn't come up, that's why we didn't think much and gave him to the private nursery* (Sparkle, mother of two children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty).

Both alternatives to state childcare have issues that were expressed during the discussions with the participants.

> *I attempted to send my son to a private nursery on the right bank of the city, when he was 1.5 years old, which then I was running away from in horror. They just opened this nursery in a 4-bedroom flat. The Montessori room was pretty, chairs were beautiful, toys are appropriate, I think. Even better than in British nurseries, more spacious. Whereas in other rooms where they sleep, the beds were close to each other, with no free space. The room where they played in, the kids constantly beat each other. There was one babysitter and the rest of the children. The most horrible thing was when they went outside. They didn't have their own playground, they were in apartment block, and when they went outside, cars drive by, they cross the road, there were fragments of broken glass vodka, cigarettes are thrown down, they were men who lived there who smoked and drank. I was in utter shock* (Trust, mother of two children, PhD candidate abroad, Almaty).

4.8 Informal childcare and defamilisation

The women who lacked childcare arrangements while living abroad due to the more costly services of childcare there often relied on transnational contacts and inviting grandparents and hired nannies to assist them with childcare. It resulted in decreased defamilisation risks.

The women are not experiencing decommodified defamilisation (Chau et al. 2016) as the state is not providing sufficient childcare for women to have an acceptable standard of living irrespective of family relationships. They must rely on grandparents' help and husbands' financial support to afford childcare. In South Korea, a free market economy

with competition and rising costs results in women increasingly relying on their husbands and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Lee, 2017).

Women from Almaty were less likely to live in multigenerational households with parents-in-law and more likely to rely on their own parents for childcare support. One of the respondents could not turn down the offer of her employer to return to work earlier as her family needed a second income-earner and she was afraid of being replaced permanently by the young man who was temporarily replacing her. Rose, who held a managerial position, had fewer childcare responsibilities by relying on the support of her retired parents. However, despite Rose becoming free from childcare and entering the labour market, childcare responsibility still stayed within her family. Ultimately, defamilisation has not been achieved as other members of the family are still performing childcare duties.

> *…at 11 months my child cannot be passed on to any childcarer. My parents were looking after him, were brought to work for breastfeeding, during lunch and evening time* (Rose, mother of a child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty).

The most practised tradition in conservative regions such as Turkestan, which is living in multigenerational households, served as an advantage for the women who were willing to enter the labour market before their children turned three years old. Most women living with parents-in-law in Turkestan relied on the childcare help of mothers-in-law and/or oldest children in puberty and teenage years. The women from the focus groups in Turkestan often emphasised gratitude to a mother-in-law for taking care of a child and allowing them to work when stating the fact that they live with parents of their husbands. There were rarely remarks on close kinship, friendship, or companionship with mothers-in-law, but rather a pragmatic approach to benefiting from the patriarchal custom. Women were involved in economic exchange with their mothers-in-law by providing unpaid services and submissiveness. Women were dependent on their mothers-in-law for childcare, which resulted in women's increased familisation. At the same time, by receiving help with childcare from mothers-in-law, women have more free

time and opportunities to enter paid work, which results in increased commodified defamailisation.

Nevertheless, mothers-in-law helping with unpaid childcare only partly free women from childcare responsibilities in Turkestani traditional multigenerational households. Although women are experiencing defamilisation from childcare, it does not consider defamilisation from non-material caring work such as social and emotional aspects, which proves shortfall of defamilisation narrowly looking only at childcare responsibility (Yu, Lo and Chau, 2021; Leitner and Lessenich, 2007). The provision of childcare and paid work is not enough for women's defamilisation as there are social norms and gender expectations that were put on women's different kinds of unpaid work and prevent defamilisation. While women could return earlier to the labour market as they are partly freed from childcare work at home, they are substituted with a double share of emotional and caring duties as they are expected to be responsible for the welfare of children as well as older members of the family. This results in women in multigenerational households having double or triple the burden of work, which includes paid work, unpaid domestic work for the nuclear family and responsibility to provide emotional and physical care to the older people. Most of the women from the focus groups in Turkestan cook the three meals of the day before leaving to work in the mornings and some of them come home during lunch breaks to serve food to family members. In the evenings after returning home from work, women clean and tidy up accumulated dishes and mess around the house as quite often domestic work is the sole responsibility of daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law only look after grandchildren. Help from older female members of the extended family is often restricted and rigid and leaves women more pressured to keep up with paid and unpaid work under supervision or even surveillance of older people. On the one hand, women get help with childcare from the older generation. On the other hand, women are expected to do more household work such as addressing the health and dietary needs of old generation. Moreover, women might feel more pressure from the older generation to meet expectations of fitting in with submissive and hard-working daughters-in-law.

Considering the lack of accessible quality state-subsidised childcare, in particular the absence of it for children under the age of two, the tradition of living in multigenerational households does have advantages. The parents and grandparents are engaged in social exchange among each other by parents exchanging emotional and financial support for free childcare assistance with their offspring. The social exchange theory has been described as case when “every individual voluntary enters and stays in any relationship only as long as it is adequately satisfactory in terms of costs and rewards” (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959:37). The women whose partners were unemployed relied on monthly pension payments of their mothers-in-law and it is often the case when a house of multigenerational household belongs to older generation, which is respectfully referred to as “big house”, “black shanyrak”. Ultimately, in poor region of Turkestan, living with extended family not only provided free childcare, but also free housing and additional financial contribution to families making it easier for women to enter the labour market after having children.

Women’s defamilisation from childcare was hindered due to the lack of confidence in state childcare. The welfare of children and placing them into pre-school institutions corresponding with the latest quality standards and higher educational achievements had higher priority than affordability for families. Young families from financially privileged backgrounds living in Almaty were more aware and demanding of modernised and innovative childcare while the women in Turkestan did not stress importance that much on these aspects. This again demonstrates a close association between income level, education and the experience of living in developed countries with more gender egalitarian norms.

The rising costs of living, inflation rate and widening social class inequalities make it more challenging for women to achieve defamilisation through private childcare (Izvorski et al, 2023; International Monetary Fund, 2024).

Negative effects of free market economy reinforce domesticated roles of women in Kazakhstan society that is already imposed by national traditions and insufficient state support.

Having three years of maternity leave with one and half year of poorly paid compensation is unsustainable and may result in women having to stay at home for childcare, opt for private childcare or/and commodify their labour. It increases women's dependency on families and the labour market to have an acceptable standard of living, and ultimately reinforces familisation and unsupported adult worker model (Chau and Yu, 2022). Situation, when women do paid work with lack of support from government to defamilise from childcare through minimum childcare subsidies, is suggested to be unsupported adult worker model (Chau and Yu, 2022). The minimum expenditure basket was 80 GBP on average for a person and 65 GBP for a child in Almaty, and 73 GBP per person and 56 GBP per child in Turkestan in 2023 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023B).

4.9 Conclusion

The chapter explored the role of family policy in women's combining motherhood and paid work by comparing secondary analysis and empirical findings from the focus group discussions. The concept of defamilisation was applied to check whether women could be self-reliant with state services and without seeking support from the markets and family. The key message from this chapter is that women's defamilisation from childcare is closely tied to family income level. Despite fathers taking paternity leave, mothers still carried out the majority of childcare responsibilities because paternity leave was used for non-childcare-related duties by fathers. The following chapter takes the lead from this chapter by exploring how the labour market hinders or assists mothers of young children to (re)enter paid work.

Chapter 5 Labour Market: Findings from the Secondary Research and Focus Group

This chapter looks at mothers' position, both support they get and difficulties face, in the current labour market of Kazakhstan, and how mothers experience this. It discusses the effectiveness of state policies and laws aimed at protecting women's and mothers' employment rights and compares it with the focus group findings on women's experiences from Almaty and Turkestan. The recent literature review provides reasons that explain persisting disadvantaged position of mothers in the labour market of Kazakhstan. Ultimately, the disadvantaged position of mothers in the labour market makes their defamilisation from childcare responsibility challenging to be achieved. Women who find little support from state with childcare, may strive to find resources for independence in paid work by commodifying their labour. However, facing unfit working conditions for women with young children, women may struggle to commodify their labour and may be unable to afford private childcare and achieve financial independence from family. In terms of the concept of defamilisation, difficulties to (re)enter the labour market and remain there may suggest women unable to achieve acceptable standards of living by relying on paid work.

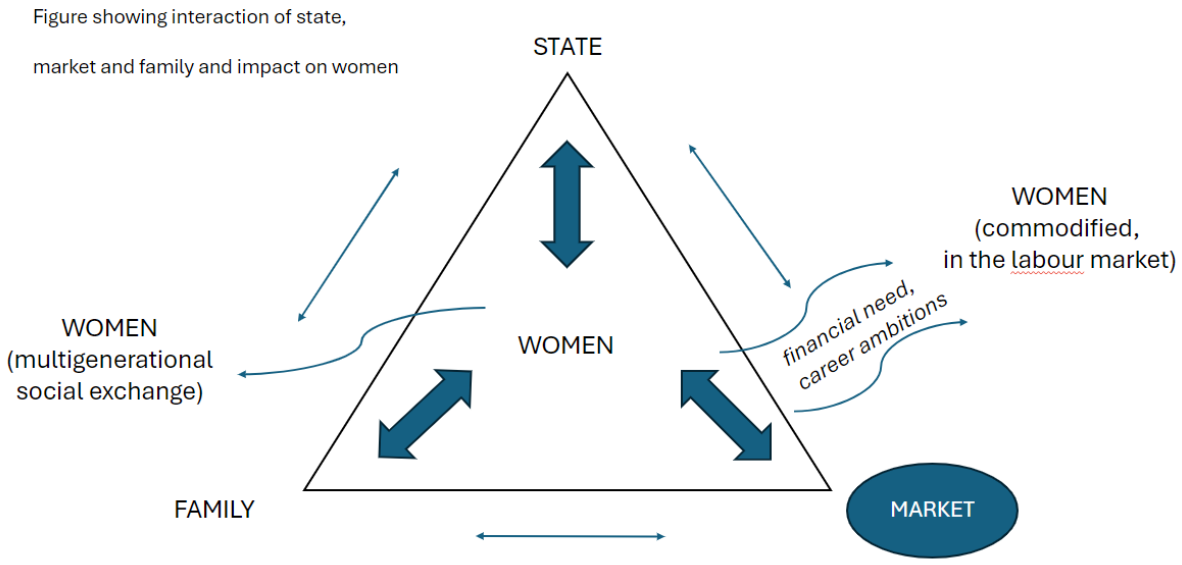

Figure 5.1 Interaction of state, market and family impact on women (author's own)

The chapter is structured into discussions of different aspects of the labour market, i.e. wage gender gap and job segregation; informal employment; part-time employment; reserve army; motherhood penalty and unpaid work; gender-based stereotypes; support to pregnant women and mothers and ageism. For each of these, the findings of the secondary research are presented first, followed by the experiences of the mothers.

This chapter reports the findings regarding the labour market: Do the labour market conditions allow women combine motherhood and paid work without relying on the state and family? What do women say about their experiences?

The chapter starts from looking at the main issues of wage gender gap and job segregation. Further, the discussion moves on to the topics of informal and part-time employment as the reasons explaining wage gender gap and job segregation. The next section looks at the phenomenon of 'motherhood penalty' and unpaid work in household as causes of women's disadvantaged position in the labour market and prevention of defamilisation from childcare responsibility. Wage gender gap and job segregation are

also explained by gender-based stereotypes and ageism in the following section. On top of gender, intersectionality of age worsens women's position in the labour market and women are subjected to double-layered factors. Next section discusses challenges women face to defamilise from childcare responsibilities in the product market. The issues in the product market include high fees of private childcare and material attributes of rising children such as strollers, diapers, winter clothes and extracurricular activities.

5.1 Wage Gender Gap and Job Segregation

Horizontal and vertical job segregation is the outcome of women switching to part-time, flexible and less demanding work, mostly concentrated in low-paid job sectors, or having long absences from work due to family responsibilities and unpaid work, which result in women lagging behind men in climbing career ladder.

There is a high discrepancy in decision-making and leadership professional positions in Kazakhstan (see Table 6.1)

Table 5.1 Leadership positions by gender in Kazakhstan (2022) (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022A)

2022	**Men**	**Women**
Heads of higher education institutions	79%	21%
Principal board members of the National Bank	78%	22%
Ministers	90%	10%
Share in Parliament	73,1%	26,9%
Proportion in managerial positions	59,2%	40,8%
Heads of labour unions and non-governmental organizations	65,7%	34,3%
Ambassadors	97%	3%
Managers in defense forces	98,4%	1,6%

These disproportionalities at managerial positions and job segregation based on gender is even more striking considering the higher female than male share in higher education compared, 65% and 53% respectively (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022C). The gender parity index between girls and boys in higher education is 1.2, which indicates number of girls prevailing in higher education in Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics, 2019A). Moreover, the number of female PhD candidates of science exceeds by eight percent of male candidates of science (Bureau of National Statistics, 2019A). Despite the number of women with PhD degrees being higher than that of men, male academics on tenure track positions outnumber women (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021C).

Women are under-represented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) sector jobs higher pay such as computer science, engineering and communications and over-represented in low-paid jobs in Kazakhstan (CohenMiller et

al, 2021). In higher education, social sciences, arts and humanities, and health subjects are more popular among female students whereas IT, engineering are predominantly enrolled by male students in Kazakhstan (Asian Development Bank, 2018).

The wage gender gap and job segregation might also be the result of a historical but extensively implemented legal ban of certain professions for women. The Decree No.944 of Kazakhstan, implemented in 1936 by the Soviet Union, prohibited women from working in 229 professions due to high risks to health, among which were a truck driver, welder, locksmith, boilermaker, miner and driller (Adilet, 2015). Although the ban was abolished as part of the Human Rights Action Plan in 2021, gender segregation in those professions is most likely to be remain for some time (Anti-Discrimination Centre, 2021). Professions entailing higher health and safety risks such as oil refining, mechanical engineering and chemical technology are problematic for women for two reasons. They are heavily male-dominated and, because of the higher salaries men are paid, contribute to wage gender gap (Kireyeva and Satybaldin, 2019). Regions with large share of economy based on oil and mining such as Mangistau and Atyrau have the highest wage gender gap of 48% whereas Almaty and North Kazakhstan regions have a wage gender gap of between 12-13% (UNDP, 2021). In construction and industry, there is a problem of under-representation of female workers as they comprise 28% of workforce while share of male workers is much higher - 72% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021D).

While the level of wages paid to women and men does not differ drastically at lower positions of employment, as both start with the same level of education and skills (Kireyeva and Satybaldin, 2019), the gap starts widening in higher managerial positions in favour of men as they start climbing the career ladder. Education is the influential factor that might serve as a booster that assists women to narrow down the gap between them and men. The gender pay gap is the lowest between men and women who are highly educated, 8.5% (OECD, 2017).

Moreover, 20% of wage gender gap in Kazakhstan is explained by the individual characteristics of workers, characteristics of workplace and workers' place of residence (CSMNERK in Roshchin and Yemelina, 2020). The remaining 80% of the wage gender gap cannot be explained in the study and it might be explained by gender-based stereotypes (Roshchin and Yemelina, 2020).

Men undertake more strategies to move into coveted positions in job sectors that allows more access to power. For example, it is common for men in lucrative job positions such as government officials or business leaders in Kazakhstan to acquire postgraduate degrees to increase their status and further opportunities for climbing the career ladder. Male postgraduate students who occupy key positions usually select prominent professors for the role of their advisers who could advance defense of their thesis or support a successful study journey. These professors gain benefits from their successful students' professional resources where they can transform their academic careers into political ones and access more decision-making power in privileged circles (Rodionov et al. 2021).

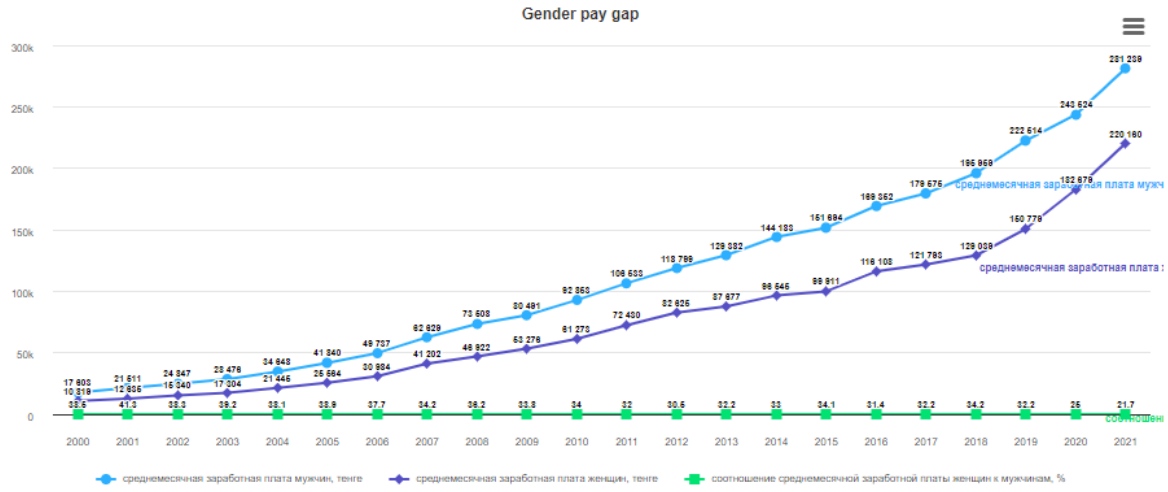

Figure 5.2 Gender pay gap in Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021)

(blue line – average wage among women; purple line – average wage among men; green line - ratio of wage between men and women)

There has been progress in gender equality in the labour market that narrowed down pay gap between men and women. The difference between men's and women's wage in Kazakhstan constituted 21.7% in 2021, a considerable improvement since 2019 when the gap was 32.2% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2019A; 2021).

There has been increase in the number of small and medium size enterprises headed by women to 42% in 2022, which provide one third of the total jobs in small-medium business sector (Satpayeva et al. 2020; Bureau of National Statistics, 2021). Despite the state's attempts to strengthen female leadership in entrepreneurship through allocation of state grants to female starting entrepreneurs, female entrepreneurs still face number of obstacles such as dominating low-paid services sector and requiring little capital investments and technical advancements. Female entrepreneurship is distributed unevenly throughout the country: it is high in North Eastern regions, less rural, and low in the Southern regions. Female entrepreneurship is often financially supported by husbands or other male figures in women's lives and thus not really symbol of independence and gender equality (Satpayeva et al. 2020; Euro Plus, 2017). There is an inequality in access to state programmes and grants supporting female entrepreneurship between urban and rural areas as state funding is usually allocated to profitable and already established businesses in cities (Euro Plus, 2017). This suggests that small businesses led by women in rural areas are less supported and reinforces wider wage gender gap in rural areas than in cities.

5.2 Informal Employment

Working in informal employment might be one of the reasons holding women back from earning the same wage as men. “Employees are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits (advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave, etc.)” (OECD, 2019:156). At the same time, women opting for unconventional types of work might be an outcome of them being pushed out of the labour market that is more fit for ‘ideal’ workers with no family and unpaid work obligations.

Informal employment is another factor behind wage gender gap and job segregation in Kazakhstan. Informal work is predominantly popular among women and young people around the world, especially in post-Soviet-Union countries with transitional economies, and Kazakhstan is no exception (Schneider et al. 2010). Rapid economic development between 1999-2007 when GDP per capita rose from 845 GBP to 5067 GBP in Kazakhstan did not shrink the scope of informal sector, which brought 19% of total GDP growth for the period of 2005-2012 (World Bank 2023A, Inform, 2014). As of 2021, 7.2%

of population was involved in informal employment across Kazakhstan with different variations across regions (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021A).

There is a positive association between economic stagnation and crisis and migration flows to mostly Almaty and Astana resulting in 43% an increase in population size in Almaty and 70% in Astana between 2002-2015 (Goskomstat, 2015). Increasing unemployment drives migration of low-skilled workers from rural to urban areas, and it is more likely to be women who look for informal employment in services sector (An et al. 2017). The study also showed that women, who came second after agricultural workers in terms of the largest group working in informal sector with low pay, were less likely to be encounter suitable working conditions to achieve productivity in work and therefore remain in poverty. Sometimes the distinction between formal and informal work is not quite so clear, as annual leave and unemployment benefits do not always apply to what is otherwise formal work. (Missurov et al. 2018).

Informal employment on the Internet has become a source of income for some people in Kazakhstan, in particular, among women on maternity leave (Sadyk and Islam, 2022). Women are engaged in selling goods and providing among others beauty, nursing, psychology, numerology, catering, caring and tutoring services from their homes through online platforms such as Instagram, OLX, TikTok and Telegram. Instagram is the most popular platform that not only allows informal female workers to efficiently advertise their services through easily accessible visual content and promptly find clients but also earn more money than on average paid formal work. These jobs are unofficial as they are not recognised by the state and not protected by job security laws and no contributions are made to their pensions. However, taking into account that some of Instagram users who monetised their accounts, referred to as ‘bloggers’ and reached more than a million followers, are to be legally required to pay taxes in Kazakhstan.

5.2.1 Findings from the focus groups

Informal employment was not very common among the participants in the Almaty and Turkestan focus groups. Commonly informal employment involves mostly female

workers providing cleaning and catering services who migrated to urban areas in search of a better life in Kazakhstan. A survey of domestic migrants in Kazakhstan shows that low-skilled migrants are often refused legal work contracts by employers and are involved in babysitting, housekeeping, cleaning, cooking even though 36% of them had achieved higher education - their average age was 40 (Karachurina et al. 2019). Internal migrants relocating from villages to cities use personal networks to find informal employment such as daily labourers, bazaar traders and cleaners to pay for rents and groceries and are reluctant to go to formal work as it is poorly paid, and entry requirements are high (Jager, 2014). In the focus groups, all the women have long settled in Almaty and Turkestan and had formal jobs. That might explain the scarcity of women doing informal employment in the focus groups. This shows limitation of snowball sampling – domination of certain demographic sample with similar/the same socio-economic characteristics (Parker et al., 2019).

One participant was involved in internet-based white-collar informal employment, which is contrary to the more wide-spread physical labour informal employment such as cleaning or construction services. Flower, from Almaty, provided psychology sessions on Instagram from her personal account that she turned into a professional service where she accepted enquiries from potential clients. She engaged with her online job casually dedicating time to it in her spare time and when she felt inspired. As her husband was the only breadwinner in the family, Flower was not planning to turn her psychology services into an ambitious career. She was not driven by making money out of it, but rather by the acquired sense of self-fulfillment.

It could be suggested that informal employment is not the main factor behind wage gender gap and job segregation among educated women from financial stable backgrounds. Women with higher education and partners who earn an income are less likely to be involved in labour-intense informal employment such as cleaning, catering, renovating services and are more likely to be engaged in online informal employment. With the progress of the internet and widespread of communication platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok, it has become more normalised among women with free spare time to be making income from online platforms. As was shown in a survey among 200 women in Kazakhstan in 2020, Instagram is still a place to spend leisure

time and less about earning realistic income (Baskynbayeva, 2020). The overwhelming majority indicated the purpose of using Instagram to entertain, monitor news and lives of relatives and friends while "to advertise and promote business or earn extra income" was one of the last reasons provided (Baskynbayeva, 2020). Minority of celebrities and bloggers with many followers reaching several million and monetising Instagram can achieve earnings ranging between 1–6 million KZT (1.700-10.000 GBP) are minority for posting a post with advertisement placement (Tengrinews, 2023). Moreover, the Instagram contributes to rise of Small and Medium-size Enterprises (SME) in Kazakhstan, which are established and promoted there and mostly led by women (Filipov, 2021).

5.3 Part-time Employment

Part-employment has become more common in the world due to globalisation and technological advances, especially since the COVID pandemic. Kazakhstan is slower to fully integrate this type of unconventional employment as only 5% of workers are employed on part-time basis, which is lower than the OECD average 16.7% (Jussupova, 2019; Bureau of National Statistics, 2021D; Bureau of National Statistics, 2022B).

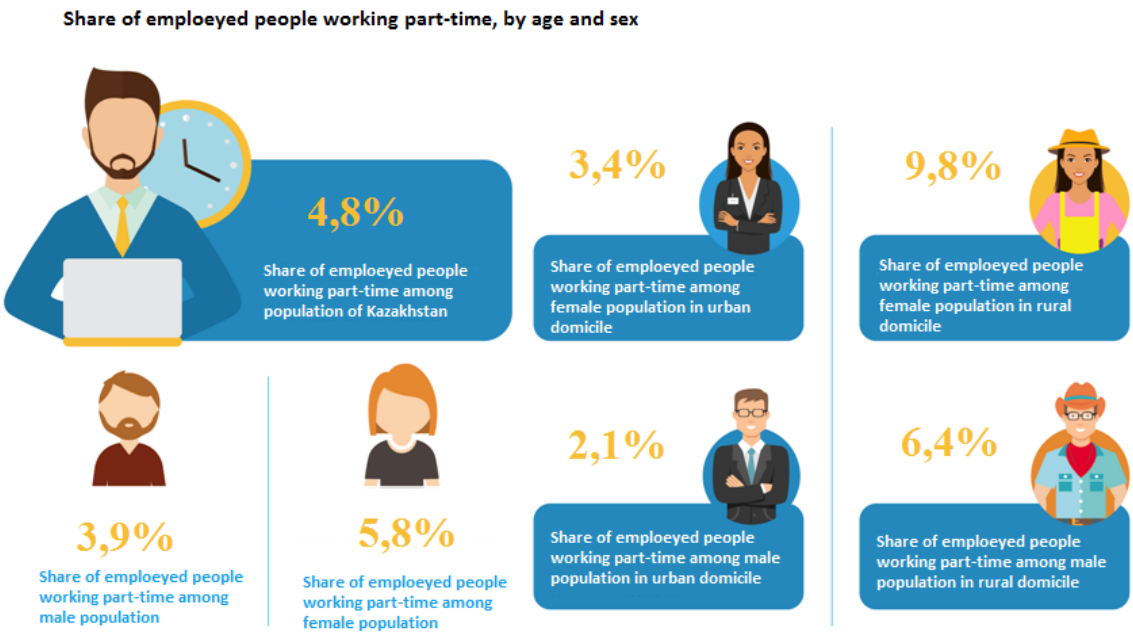

Figure 5.3 Share of employed people working part-time, by age and sex (2022) (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022B)

The Labour Code, which is the law that regulates labour conditions in Kazakhstan, adopted in 2015 aims to improve flexibility at work and prepare employers for crisis moments by allowing mechanisms such as a temporary transfer of workers to another employer, and an easier start of part-time contracts (Khassenov, 2016). Article 70 of the Labour Code grants pregnant women and mothers of children aged under three to work part-time and obliges employers to allow part-time work contracts (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015). The President Tokayev stresses in the Decree on family politics that the main aim of a flexible work option is to allow reconciliation of family obligations with paid work (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). Although part-time employment is more common among female workers as it provides more flexibility in working hours and to better reconcile family and work, working part-time is not normalised in Kazakhstan. The number of people working less than 36 hours has been in decline since 2013 and overemployment, on the contrary, that is people working more than 40 hours has increased by 6.5% in one year (Orynbassarova et al. 2019). To grant protection to part-time workers, Convention 175 about ratification was accepted in 2022 that aims to protect rights and interests of part-

time employees to the same degree the rights and interests of full-time employees are protected. These rights and interests include rights to negotiate collective bargaining, negotiations; safety and protection of labour; motherhood protection; provision of annual leave; elimination of discrimination of labour (Akorda, 2022).

5.3.1 Findings from the focus group

Work that is designed for 'ideal workers', who are employees with no family responsibilities and able to work on a full-time basis with long hours and lack of flexibility is not always suitable for mothers. Mothers, on the contrary, need work that allows them to work unusual, shorter and remote hours, and with short breaks for breastfeeding and long work terminations for maternity leave. As the experiences of the participants show, women end up sacrificing their professional development as family obligations such as unpaid work and childcare are incompatible with full-time employment. Since flexible working hours is not common in Kazakhstan and employers are more interested in hiring workers willing to work full-time (Orynbassarova et al. 2019), women are more likely to quit their paid jobs as they do the majority of unpaid work.

Many participants acknowledged the preference for flexible work arrangements that allow them to spend more time with their families and do chores. They accepted a full-time working schedule and had little expectations for changes in the labour market in terms of the working hours, they normalised work to be 9-to-5 that is not inclusive for workers with different family responsibilities. Some of them expressed feeling of guilt for becoming pregnant and taking maternity leave as they felt that they let down their managers by being less productive and self-motivated employees than others with no or less childcare duties. Women in Kazakhstan largely lack knowledge about the rights for part-time work indicated in the President's address to the nation (Khassenov, 2016) and progress made in other countries on flexible work becoming more common. The COVID-19 pandemic (Putra et al. 2020) has put even more emphasis on the need for a healthy work-life balance as an essential part of people's lives (Aruldoss et al. 2022). The gap in women's knowledge on the increasing relevance of flexibility in paid work in current literature was evident in their remarks on reconciliation of motherhood and paid

work. The women in the focus groups more considered themselves as not fit for paid work after becoming mothers rather than seeing the problem in the rigid 9-5 desk-based requirements of current workplaces. They did not criticize the employment conditions that are non-friendly to mothers, nor question the patriarchal structure in the labour market. They tended to see themselves as a burden to an employer and quit a job rather than take a pro-active citizenship position to demand changes for female employees with caring responsibilities. Both employers' and mothers' working with an 'ideal worker' model of the workplace might indicate the state's and employers' lack of initiatives to accommodate and address the state policy providing and protecting women's rights in the labour market. For example, as part of pregnant women and mothers' rights in the labour market, they are entitled to have 1-hour break for breastfeeding at work, to keep workplace up to three years after giving birth and to be freed from attending work trips (Egov, 2023A). However, this is not often implemented in workplaces.

Sun explained that she had to quit her previous full-time job as she could not reconcile 9-5 working hours with her frequently sick young child who needed her care at home. Fortunately, she managed to negotiate flexible distance paid work at her cousin's company. There are several women in the focus groups who secured flexible workhours, but this was mostly possible as their employers were their husbands and relatives.

> *Since then, I have never worked at official full-time jobs. My career ends at this point. I spent three years on maternity leave because my child was weak, got sick every month, on top of that, I didn't have any to help me here. My relatives and his relatives live in different cities away from us. It was really difficult for me. I don't work from 9 to 6 in the office. … have a flexible schedule at my cousin's company. I tried to work a full day, but I couldn't do it. I do my job, within the deadlines, check the documents straightaway after they send me, could do it at coffee shop or at home without going to the office, its ok. The office is located far*

away in another part of the city. (Sun, mother of four children part-time lawyer at brother's company, Almaty)

Rose and Green, who have been extensively working on a full-time basis, expressed regrets about their unhealthy work-life balance and lack of time spent with their children. Although Green shifted from a full-time job to a freelance job that entails short-term causal contracts, she has a sense of missing out on professional growth. In contrast, Rose, being a single mother and the only breadwinner to her son, stayed with her full-time job that required long-term separations with her son due to long stays in different cities. This shows that mothers who lack a safety net, such as single mothers, often do not have choice but to sacrifice their work-life balance and compete in the labour market, whereas mothers who have support of their partners and relatives are more likely to give up professional growth.

I missed childhood of my children. That is partly the reason I quit my job to do freelance job and spend my time with kids at home, I am trying to compensate for the time I lost without them before they turned into teenagers. But I am tempted to go back to a full-time job and achieve success because I fear that by 40, I will not be in demand for a job. Another reason I reconsidered my work views is the COVID pandemic. I enjoyed being with my husband and children only at home and decided to quit my full-time job. I rejected promotions at work because I was overburdened with family and work, and I didn't want to "rape" myself with more obligations and responsibilities. For example, the Dubai promotion I turned down because I didn't believe it would benefit me but rather, I would be exploited more there. (Green, mother of two children, marketing manager, Almaty)

When I was discussing the conditions for me, I said that I needed a place here where I could bring my visiting child because I was madly missing him, often flew to him on weekends, when I miss him, I fly to Almaty, to kiss him, cuddle him. Whatever director you are, firstly you are the mother. I could be a director

anytime, there are many projects, but being a mom… The child is being raised without me. He flies independently from the age of 4. He flew to me, I am looking at him, "Wow, he has changed, he is different". I understand that I lost time. (Rose, mother of a child, manager at a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

Brave was a rare example of a women with pro-active position in the focus groups who referred to official documents such as her employment contract and policies to protect her right to not overwork and be exploited by an employer. It might be explained by Brave's prior experience of living in a Western country with strong trade unions and better conditions for employees.

Once I was asked to take foreign colleagues to Shymbulak on the weekend, I refused referring to contract where it is stated that I work 5 days per week, and I have family that I need to spend time with. It all depends on the relationship with the employer. I used to ask to arrive at work half an hour earlier and subsequently leave half an hour earlier. I took my child to nursery at 8am and was at work at 8:30am, and I had to collect my child by 6pm. (Brave, mother of three children, professor at a university, Almaty)

The female respondents from the focus groups emphasized the importance of flexibility in paid work, but not all of them could access it at their workplaces. Their partners' income level played a determining role in women's decisions to transfer to part-time employment. For example, Star from Almaty was registered as a part-time employee at her husband's company - it allowed her to pop into the workplace in between the children's school drop-off and collection times and be paid wage and pension. Sun from Almaty could also afford to be working part-time due to her husband's senior position in a law company and being the main breadwinner of the family. She was working part-time at her cousin's company and the working conditions were very flexible as she quite often worked from coffeeshops any time of the day. According to the women working part-time, who were mostly from financially well-off families, flexibility was more

important than wage level as they prioritized spending more time with their children. The money earned from part-time work was rather pocket money for them to spend on beauty salon procedures and buying presents for their parents. As Sun had pointed out, she did not want to be asking her husband for money to buy presents or financially help her mother as he had been hesitant every time she had asked in the past. She wanted financial independence and autonomy in making decisions on additional spendings given that her husband allowed her to work part-time and their family's privileged position. Both Star and Sun were not chasing ambitious career plans but rather left the breadwinner role and climbing a career ladder to their partners.

Among the respondents from Turkestan, there was less opportunity to choose part-time employment as it was vital for their families to have a second breadwinner in addition to the husband. Women from financially disadvantaged families were more likely to work full-time. However, the women working in feminised job sectors, such as education, were content to be working in a sector that allowed better reconciliation of family and work as they could leave work after teaching and be home earlier. Overall, due to the more unstable financial situation in Turkestan families, the women were less likely to be working part-time and, on the contrary, strived to return to full-time work earlier after maternity leave. Most of them were the second breadwinners along with their partners and some were the only providers in their families. The only women who were working part-time in the focus groups were women working at their husbands' and relatives' companies. Women are more likely to stay at home after having children and become housewives or work full-time.

Whenever some mothers could, given their husbands' wage level and job sector, they would opt for part-time employment to dedicate more time to children and unpaid work. However, there are some obstacles to part-time employment for women after having children. Firstly, employers in Kazakhstan are more interested and invested in hiring full-time employees who can contribute more working hours and be productive at work (Jussupova, 2019). Secondly, at the time of the focus groups, the state had not implemented policies providing more support to part-time employment: a guaranteed minimum number of working hours and minimum threshold for insurance payments for job losses had not been specified in the Labour Code (Orynbassarova, 2019). In 2022,

the President of Kazakhstan signed the Convention 175 about ratification in 2022 that aims to protect rights and interests of part-time employees to the same degree the rights and interests of full-time employees are protected. The rights and interests include rights to negotiate collective bargaining, negotiations; safety and protection of labour; motherhood protection; provision of annual leave; elimination of discrimination of labour (Akorda, 2022). Because Convention 175 was signed after the focus groups took place, it is not possible to say if this would have changed the situation for the women who participated. However, such a change in law is likely to take time to filter through into labour market practices and therefore people's experiences thereof.

5.4 'Reserve Army of Labour'

The term 'reserve army of labour' refers to women acting as a flexible reserve depending on the state of the economy. The main factors that drive this flexibility are gender segregation in jobs, with women often working in more precarious positions; the responsibilities that women have to family care which make them more likely to do part-time paid work; and policies and laws that support and protect women's position in the labour market (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013). In Kazakhstan, women make up a considerable part of 'reserve army' because of historically constructed perceptions that put them into category of second-class, low-paid, part-time, and precarious workers. During the country's existence as a part of the USSR, despite women's educational and work progress, their pronatalist role was emphasised above other achievements and functions. An abortion ban imposed in 1936, motherhood medals and social payments for large families with more than five children, a 3-year maternity leave and state propaganda of romanticised heroine motherhood through press, media and symbolism indicates of the state's agenda to praise women for their reproductive function (Michaels, 2001). This trend continues in contemporary Kazakhstan's political agenda.

In the first President's national address Strategy 2050, one paragraph is dedicated to protection of women's right to be mothers and stresses the importance of giving appropriate upbringing to daughters because they are "future wives, future mothers, homemakers" (Akorda, 2012). Similar to the Soviet policy, mothers in independent Kazakhstan are also honoured for having more than four children by social payments and medals (Usseinova et al. 2016). These factors of path dependence and the President's vision for the nation's development until 2050 creates a motherly image of women whose employment regarded as second after family care responsibilities. As a result, women are more likely to experience stereotypical attitudes, discrimination, and a complicated path in the labour market that places them into the category of 'reserve army'.

During the pandemic caused by the spread of COVID-19 virus since 2020, female workers' status of reserve army has been exposed. More female employees have lost jobs than males. Moreover, women taking a higher share of unpaid domestic work has indicated the higher importance accorded to male partners' work commitments because women more often sacrifice their work by taking on more family and household duties and allow men to carry on with their work. According to a survey conducted in Kazakhstan in 2020, two out of five main reasons stated for unemployment during the pandemic were child-care and unpaid domestic work factors (Kapital, 2020). It is most likely for women to quit the job if old members of household or children need care (Central Asian bureau for analytical reporting, 2019).

5.5 Motherhood Penalty and Unpaid Work

Motherhood might require long-term absences from paid work that negatively impacts women's progress in the labour market resulting in wage gender gap and job segregation. Women in Kazakhstan spend three times more than men on unpaid domestic work and family care, 14.8 % and 4.9 % respectively (Bureau of National Statistics, 2019a). In 2021, the 79.2% of women were in paid employment compared to 85.7% of men (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021D).

While women in Kazakhstan have been part of workforce since the Soviet Union and further integrated into the labour market under the current free market economy, they are still primarily perceived as wives and mothers imposed by patriarchal culture based on Islamic values (Kuzhabekova Janenova and Almukhambetova, 2017). Studies show that married women are paid 8% less wage compared to women who have never been married, but divorced women earn more than unmarried women in Kazakhstan (Roshchin and Yemelina, 2020). Marital status explains 10.2% of the wage gender gap. Contrary, married men earn more than single men in Kazakhstan (Roshchin and Yemelina, 2020). Those differences in wage between married and nonmarried workers might indicate that unpaid work that comes with marriage might be the main factor behind motherhood penalty. Women in Kazakhstan are disadvantaged in paid work due to reconciling family and work as cultural expectations sees childcare as women's natural obligations (Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, 2017).

5.5.1 Findings of the focus groups

The women experienced gender-based discrimination in the labour market, which is also found in the existing literature on systematic discrimination taking place against female employees in Kazakhstan workplaces (Roshchin and Yemelina, 2020; Omirkhanova, 2023; Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, 2019; Sarseke, 2022A). The most common gender-based discrimination the women came across, includes the questions about their marital status and number of children during the job interviews. Women's family circumstances played a decisive role in making decisions on their hiring and promotion processes.

> *There was total discrimination at all the interviews I was going to. One company was a 100% fit, I worked with them before, the positions were perfectly fit for me, we were understanding from half word, and then the questions reached the "how many kids you have, what gender, girls?" I said "yes, girls". "It means you will go after boys." It was horrible!* (West, mother of two children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty)

> *You come to be interviewed with men, firstly, they give you an appraising glance, you already start preparing yourself. And then the questions "are you married?" If you are married, it's bad; if you are unmarried, it's even worse. And then "do you have children"? "One? How old is he?" You carry on talking, keep yourself together. You leave those interviews as if you were covered in rubbish.* (Rose, mother of one child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

In the case of West and Rose, professionals with extensive experience of work in their fields, the skills and knowledge were not considered to the same extent as age, gender or number of the children they had. The job interviewers assumed that West and Rose would not be suitable candidates for a job due to a risk of future absences from work to have an heir after two daughters in the case of the former and childcare responsibilities for young child of the latter. Despite the company that interviewed West being an international one with policies on enhancing gender equality at workplace, the interviewing team consisting of Kazakhstani citizens made it possible for local views on traditional gender roles to prevail over the company policies. In the case of Rose, she applied for a managerial position at the entrepreneurship company and based on the interviewing team's questions, it seems that they were looking for an 'ideal worker' with no family responsibilities to distract from work. Rose's prior experience in successfully launching and facilitating the company from the start to practical realization was not prioritized by the interviewers. In the end, both West and Rose were not successful at the job interview, and they claim the gender-based discrimination against mothers of young children was the reason for it.

Both interview processes with West and Rose could explain gap between women's high share in higher education and low representation on managerial positions and STEM related jobs (Bureau of National Statistics, 2009; Sarseke, 2022; Bureau of National Statistics, 2022A). Despite women starting with the same education level as men in terms of higher education qualifications, they lag behind along the way after becoming mothers. Stereotypes about motherhood resulting in a lack of dedication and

productivity at work often lead to mothers being denied opportunities to progress professionally. Mothers receiving support and less workload from their employers and colleagues in Turkestan, as has been emphasised by the respondents in the current study (see p.138), might explain negative impact of helpful treatment of mothers on their future professional growth. While mothers benefit from support and help - they receive at work that allows them to have better work-life balance and flexibility, it might hinder them from making career progression and contribute to stereotypes of them as being less committed and productive.

Rose's prior role in the decision-making of the company was possible due to her having no family commitments. What is more, she was required to refrain from having children while being in a leadership position of the company, which is against legal protection of women stated in the Labour Code of Kazakhstan. Everything changed once her colleagues became aware of her pregnancy; she was not considered to be fit for the managerial role and was asked to leave the job. This example shows direct discrimination against mothers, unlike discrimination during job interviews where reasons for rejections might be vague and hidden.

> *At the previous job, they told me that they would put me in a leading position, but with a condition that I don't get married, don't get pregnant in the next 2-3 years. I was young back then, family was not in my plan, wanted to develop. At a different job, I was pregnant, they didn't consider me as a top employee and asked me to resign. It's the board of directors, they just sent the message through the head of the HR department. It was uncomfortable for her to inform about it. Of course, I got upset. I made such a contribution to the company and got such a response. If pregnant you would merely be thrown away and that's it.*
> (Rose, mother of one child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

Since the majority of unpaid work is done by women and fathers do not generally take paternity leave in Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics, 2018), men are less likely

to face gender-based discrimination and fatherhood penalty in the labour market. Rose emphasized the factor of male solidarity at work where men form men's club and are more willing to support each other than women. The male solidarity Rose witnessed at her former workplace is in line with prior findings in scholarly literature about lack of locus of control in post-communist countries, where professional success and promotion is achieved more through demonstration of loyalty, compromises and obedience rather than productivity, knowledge and skills (Semykina and Linz, 2010; Ardichvili, 2001; Ardichvili and Gasparishvili, 2001). Rose felt a lack of support as a female at work despite occupying a managerial position, and support turned into redundancy once she became pregnant. On the contrary, according to her, for men it was easier to progress the career ladder not only due to lack of caring responsibilities, but the safety net provided by male colleagues playing an important role as well. Rose's experience of acute and direct discrimination against mothers might be explained by the predominantly male-dominated nature of her former workplace. In contrast, other participants of the focus groups of the current study who worked in female-dominated workplaces reported less cases of gender-based discrimination. Only 30.8% of CEOs of overall businesses were women in 2021 in Kazakhstan (Prime Minister, 2023). As men are the majority of decision-makers, there are more possibilities for men to support each other. Men have more time to stay late after work to join male colleagues for drinks or sauna, which strengthen their network, whereas women are more likely to lose out on those socialising informal meetings due to their family responsibilities and unpaid work.

> *If a single father came for a job interview, he would have received help. I came across people a lot, work together, a man is alone, without a flat, a man helps out a man, the top level, whereas for me, I have to work out how to manage without help.* (Rose, mother of one child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

5.6 Gender-Based Stereotypes

There are social and cultural expectations of women in Kazakhstan that pressure them to fulfill roles of wives and mothers, and bear the sole responsibility of looking after household, children and relatives. Women in Kazakhstan experience obstacles at work such as stereotypes of them being too emotional at work, male gatekeeping when men oin decision-making positions make subjective decisions, control of women's choices and voices when women are deprived of making free choices by their parents, school, family or the labour market (Omirkhanova, 2023).

Stereotypes about women may disadvantage women's position in higher paid sectors such as STEM-related jobs – engineering, gas and oil, computer science and technology (CohenMiller et al, 2021). Women doing the majority of unpaid work also contributes to stereotypes of them not belonging to STEM subjects. Men were perceived to have natural traits of rationality and innovativeness that made them more suitable for STEM sector that puts high value on skills in mathematics, logical thinking and problem-solving, which have been traditionally more associated with men rather than women who were seen as emotional, irrational and indecisive (Almukhambetova et al. 2023; Kussaiynkyzy and Doskeyeva, 2023).

For women, there are more barriers to achieve leadership positions in academia in STEM subjects, which has been referred to as a leaky academic pipeline (see p.35). The main reason for it in Kazakhstan higher education institutions is due to informal networking of men on decision making positions that women are not part of. Women quite often do not have time to take part in informal gatherings outside of working hours as they bear the main responsibility for unpaid work such as family and household commitments (Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, 2019). Gender stereotypes are reflected in choice of course materials at universities in Kazakhstan: only 15% of overall reading materials is authored by female writers in higher education (CohenMiller and Lewis, 2019).

Based on interviews with women occupying dean positions at universities in Kazakhstan, they experience it as common practice that men are appointed to rector

positions and women to leadership positions below rectorship where they do most of the paper and administrative work. In the few cases when women are appointed to decision-making roles in higher education, it is often done due to absence of male candidates for the job position or when work involves “a lot of paperwork” for which women is perceived by male managers to be better due to their stereotypically female inherent qualities of attention to details and compliance (Sarseke, 2022). Moreover, women who occupied middle managerial positions in higher education were reluctant to apply for higher positions despite academic merits and achievements, due to a lack of self-promotion. This was explained by their lower awareness about gender equality standards and lower belief in positive changes at work in their favour (Sarseke, 2022A).

Women occupying top and middle managerial positions faced discrimination at workplaces such as being prevented from acquiring additional professional qualifications and prejudiced conduct of colleagues. Women had to present traits that are generally considered as naturally male ones in the workplace, such as assertiveness and confidence, to achieve goals in their jobs (Omirkhanova, 2023). Traditional upbringing based on rigid gender roles might make women reluctant to show or lack leadership characteristics and be competitive with male colleagues at work. ‘Girls are trained in Kazakhstan to be detail-oriented, neat, and responsible, while a leader is expected to have the ability to see the big picture and to strategise.’ (Kuzhabekova et al. 2017: 1299).

An empirical study in Kazakhstan of 29 female professional leaders showed that women lack confidence, aspirations for leadership and avoid taking on extra responsibility at work (Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, 2019). Women hold prejudices (see p.37) that men are more deserving to be occupying leadership positions with more weight of responsibility due to their natural traits of masculinity, problem-solving and courage, perceiving themselves as weaker gender. About half, 52%, of both male and female respondents from Kazakhstan who took part in the World Value Survey believed that men are better at leading business than women: 80% of men and 40% of women stated that men are better leaders than women in work (World Values Survey Association, 2018). It should be stressed that there are gradual improvements in public opinion as

this opinion decreased from 52% to 44% in 2011 (World Values Survey Association, 2018).

A culture of patriarchy and male supremacy in a corporate world that profoundly impacts employers' decision-making power and employees' conduct might play a determining role reinforcing gender-based discrimination in Kazakhstan. For example, there is a weak correlation between factors that might be controlled by a person directly, internal factors for productivity such as putting in effort and hard work, and earnings level at workplaces in Kazakhstan (Semykina and Linz, 2010). If a worker is not paid accordingly despite working efficiently and productively, there might be factors outside of the workers' control. Kazakhstan's workplaces have been suggested to have a paternalistic culture that prevails over productivity values. Success indicators at work, such as wage level and promotion decisions, are achieved less through increasing productivity and efficiency, and more through showing loyalty and compliance (Ardichvili, 2001; Ardichvili and Gasparishvili, 2001). In Kazakhstani companies, where the leading and decision-making positions are predominantly occupied by men, the management team might be applying male favouritism and prejudices in choosing male employees for promotion and wage increases. Male managers who believe in male supremacy and female managers with internalised misogyny are more likely to apply selectivity bias in preferring male workers over female ones despite same level professional skills and education (Auer, 2022). They might hold beliefs that male breadwinners deserve or need higher wage level to provide for their families.

At universities in Kazakhstan, the selection process for leadership positions is not based on open selection, but appointment board of directors, who are predominantly men (Sarseke, 2022A). For example, the board of directors at a renowned university of Kazakhstan comprises predominantly men and only two women (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 2024). A male-dominated close circle making choice of rector makes the process more prone to be influenced by gender stereotypes, nepotism and other vested interests of people at top level (Sarseke, 2022A).

5.6.1 Findings from the focus groups

The women shared their experiences of misogyny at work, when they received hostile and discriminatory treatment particularly from female managers occupying managerial positions above them. Misogyny is quite common in corporate culture in a society where patriarchal values prevail.

The participants discussed that in Kazakhstan the misogynistic and patriarchal national culture transferred to the corporate culture where employees, regardless of the professional and educational skills they possess, target colleagues based on perceived weaknesses such as gender. Preventing female colleagues to progress in career by creating toxic environment, setting higher demands for female colleagues and applying stricter scrutiny to their work, are ways in which female managers can seek approval from men in decision-making roles. It is a demonstration of distinguishing and separating oneself from ‘inferior’ women and joining the men’s club. In Kazakhstan, there are well-known proverbs that help to build stereotypes of women as being evil because they emphasise the flaws of women in contrast to men. For example, these proverbs put the blame on women: “Good wife turns a man into a king. Bad wife turns a man into a slave”, "If brothers are in conflict, their wives are to be blamed for it”, "Woman is born not to make herself happy, but to make others happy". Kazakh proverbs undermine or even demonise women: "Caravan led by a woman is cursed“, "Woman's hair is long, but knowledge is short”, *"*Woman is weak but cunning*".*

> *Among the top managers, there was one woman, she was a drama queen, always not content, everyone has to emphasise how hard working she is while others are doing nothing, these kinds of things.* (Star, mother of four children, part-time employee at her husband's company, Almaty)

> *From some women, there was envy. You know, women are different, emotional, envious “Young, came here and bossing around”, “How is she managing men”. They cannot reply, but I can give a response.* (Rose, mother of one child, manager at a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

In my previous work, female top manager used to tell me "Didn't you get married too early? Children get sick a lot. Asking for cover/leave is not allowed, our system is card based, impacts salary" and started private questions "do you have anyone to help you, if they are sick will you take them to a doctor or is there a grandmother?" I told her that I have my mom who lives nearby, we will sort out this issue.

I really didn't like this boss lady because she oppressed me because I came to work there already pregnant. She counted, seems to be an experienced woman. (laughing) She told me "When you came to apply for a job, you were already pregnant, why you didn't make us aware?" "No, I didn't know. According to law, when I was three months pregnant, I told her, in six months' time I will plan to leave." And she was furious that I didn't inform her. The law is on my side. Because of that she loaded, loaded me with work. (Sun, mother of four children, part-time lawyer at her brother's company, Almaty)

5.7 More Support to Pregnant Women and Mothers at Work

5.7.1 Findings from the focus groups

The predominant narrative in the scholarly literature on gender-based discrimination in Kazakhstan states that women have less opportunities in the labour market due to prejudices surrounding gender (Kabatova, 2018; Baudiyarova and Meirmanova, 2023. The findings in Turkestan show that pregnant women and mothers of young children were provided more support than other employees. This contradiction might be explained by employed women with parental responsibilities experiencing positive discrimination, which has been described as using characteristics such as gender, race and age commonly served as basis for discrimination used in formal decision-making to improve inclusion and diversity (Noon, 2010). In the case of women working in Turkestan, they stated that their motherhood status helped, rather than hindered, them

to receive empathetic and supportive approach from colleagues and they felt included, rather than excluded, from work.

> *On the contrary, a woman who is pregnant is given easy conditions such as less workload and sympathized and consider her psychological state. Pregnant woman is not burden. With the aim of protecting mother and child's rights, this is not only a state initiative, but the result of traditions established among people in society.*

> *My workplace allows mothers whose children are under 3 years old to work flexibly and granted absence from meetings and students' examinations. For example, if there are 4-5 staff members are expected to be sent to attend a meeting outside of the university, male colleagues and women with older children are prioritized and women with young children are not bothered with public duties.* (Joy, mother of 5 children, lecturer at a university, Turkestan)

Most of the women who experienced support due to their motherhood status were working in the female-dominated job sector of education. A considerable part of the women in Turkestan and several women from the Almaty focus groups with experiences of support were working at universities and schools in administration and teaching roles. The focus group discussion in both Almaty and Turkestan demonstrates women's pregnancy and motherhood status, rather than merely gender, were acknowledged as 'an Achilles' heel' and colleagues were more willing to provide extra support, which helped with reconciling paid and unpaid work.

This phenomenon of women experiencing more support in female-dominated job sectors might be explained by people becoming united under the same problems and are being more empathetic and willing to help when sharing the same problems. Women helping out women goes against the well-known phenomenon of internalized misogyny and has been referred to as sisterhood and female solidarity (Evans, 2015;

Wickstrom et al, 2021). The main difference is that when the number of women prevails over that of men, needs and wishes of women are more likely to be taken seriously and to be adequately addressed whereas internalized misogyny commonly takes place when women are outnumbered in a predominantly men's environment and are more likely to adapt to men's rules rather than make women-friendly changes (Lucifora and Vigani, 2022; Webber et al., 2021). It was evident among the women working in male-dominated job sectors such as Rose from Almaty who was employed in business and entrepreneurship companies. This pattern suggests wider persisting problems in occupational segregation in Kazakhstan where women predominantly occupy low-paid and insecure job sectors. Although women's essential needs such as requiring leave for pregnancy and childcare might be regarded as important among colleagues in female-dominated job sectors, the fact that majority of decision-making roles are occupied by men might cause number of issues.

Firstly, men in top positions in female-dominated job sectors are less likely to understand and prioritise the needs of female employees. Secondly, women, having experienced predominantly men in decision-making positions and being governed by them, might adapt and apply prejudiced treatment of women with the aim to survive among men and win favourable positions at work. The research by Szymanski and Kashubeck-West (2008) suggests that women who engage internalized misogyny are more likely to agree with self-objectification of women and passively accept traditional gender roles. Internalised misogyny has also been found to be associated with lower self-esteem, lack of social support and higher psychological distress (Szymanski and Kashubeck-West, 2008).

Mothers receiving more support at workplaces in Turkestan might also be explained by more conservative traditions in the Southern region that impose traditional gender roles. The Southern region of Kazakhstan, where Turkestan is located, is one of the most conservative areas of the country where people hold conservative family values, are ashamed of deviance and less likely to be open to social changes; especially women are heavily scrutinised and confined to strict social norms (Kabatova, 2018; Baudiyarova and Meirmanova, 2023; Internews, 2021; Voxpopuli, 2013; Kabylova, 2022). The conservative Kazakh traditions view women's role primarily to be

domesticated within families and responsible for unpaid work taking care of family members. Since women are expected to naturally prioritise family and be financially dependent on male family members, paid work is viewed as a secondary activity that requires less time and effort. Earning money and providing for family have been associated with masculinity and are attributed to male breadwinners whereas women are seen as belonging to domestic environment and needing protection due to their weak and feminine physiques. Therefore, the local cultural context might explain mothers being provided additional support and even protection at workplaces in Turkestan. The respondents' colleagues tried to diminish workload allocated to pregnant women and mothers of young children as those women were already carrying out disproportionate unpaid work at home and perceived as traditionally 'weak' gender with limited physical endurance compared to men.

Another rationale behind the mothers receiving special treatment at workplaces in Turkestan might be based in Islamic values that are dominant and one of the core foundations of Kazakh traditions along with pre-Islamic Tengrism and Paganism (Yemelianova, 2013). Profound respect to motherhood in traditional Kazakh culture is based on Islamic teachings that portray mothers as divine and deserving high status before fathers and other members of family due to their tireless nurturing and caring functions (Oh, 2010). Therefore, in traditional societies such as Turkestan, mothers are given credit for their hard work in raising children and in particular for women doing paid work as they have reconciled paid and unpaid work.

Female employees being perceived as mothers foremost rather than equal colleagues with men and the Turkestan respondents emphasising the importance of their motherhood roles being valued at workplace might also be explained by social gap between urban and rural population in Kazakhstan. As the social and economic gap between urban and rural life has been increasing in Kazakhstan since the fall of the Soviet Union, so does the gap in women's status between urban and rural society (Salimzhanova and Iikaracan, 2018). Research by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) shows that women in villages with high female unemployment and limited access to gas and water, spend up to 90 per cent of their time on household work whereas it comprises 50-60 per cent in urban areas (OSCE,

2010). Considering that economy of Turkestan heavily relies on agriculture, women also play a vital role in providing labour force in agriculture. Women experiencing more hardship due to higher physical workload in addition to their unpaid childcare and domestic work as mothers in Turkestan, might explain extra loyalty and respect given to mothers at workplaces. It might also rationalise the Turkestan respondents' expectations and normalisation that the importance of their childbearer and childrearer roles are acknowledged at workplace. Moreover, receiving favourable treatment at work might be perceived as compensation by them for the contribution they are making to the family and household.

> *In the Southern region, pregnant women receive special treatment. I noticed it myself working before and after becoming pregnant. As a non-pregnant woman, I used to work a lot, whereas during pregnancy people try to ease workload, I used to receive comment such as "please, have a seat", "don't overwork". Outside of work, pregnant women are provided a seat in public transport.* (Spirit, mother of 4 children, works at state institution, Turkestan)

> *People would understand my pregnancies and leave from work. When my children got sick, my colleagues helped me out by providing covers for my classes. It is called "Kazakhs looking out for each other, solidarity".* (Wise, mother of 6 children, history teacher at school, Turkestan)

> *On the contrary, in our Southern region, pregnant women and mothers of young children receive support at workplace, they are given less tasks, less involved in public events. Similarly, I also received a lot of support at my work. I have a flexible work scheme.* (Peace, mother of 5 children, lecturer at a university, Turkestan)

In Almaty, based on the focus group responses, women did not put as much emphasis on their motherhood role being appreciated by an employer and colleagues as in Turkestan. Experiences of no discrimination was mainly expressed by women working at universities and international organisations. The women employed at universities interpreted understanding and support they received at work such as being allowed more flexibility in work hours due to childcare responsibilities as being part of female-dominated culture in educational sphere. The more women work in a team, the more normalised the female needs and willingness to accommodate work around those needs are.

The Almaty women's different perception of their motherhood roles and different ways of explaining reasons behind support and no gender-based discrimination they receive in female-dominated job sectors from the Turkestan women might be due to the better quality of life that women in Almaty enjoy. Due to better infrastructure, a higher level of urbanisation and a better socio-economic situation in Almaty (Nyussupova et al, 2023), women are more likely to live in flats without land and livestock, and with access to water that requires less physical labour from women unlike in rural and agricultural Turkestan. As a result, women are less burdened in terms of unpaid work around household and, hence, might be expecting less loyalty and support at work than women living in agricultural Turkestan.

> *I did not feel any discrimination or pressure towards me when I was pregnant at work. Neither did I ask discriminatory questions at job interviews. I explain it by my cultural uniqueness of our nation when we see joy not burden in children. Children have a special role in our country. Especially, try to combine everything with children without excluding the choice to become mothers. For example, in the UK, mothers' early stopping to breastfeed due to return to work causes distance/alienation between mother and child. I am a firm believer in close contact with a child and long breast-feeding. Personally, I breastfeed the first child until 1 year old, and the second until 2. Hence, we are very attached. The second explanation of having children not stigmatised at workplaces in Kazakhstan is due to socio-economic situation. We want us to be more in*

quantity (number of ethnic Kazakhs). Especially, in villages women give birth to many children for financial reasons so that children will be supporting parents and siblings in the future. In contrast, in cities, it is more challenging for women to have many children because women are more ambitious in career and have "role conflicts" in trying to be a good mother and a good employee. (Brave, mother of 3 children, professor at a university, Almaty)

I had not discrimination, but advantage at work when I worked at state institution. Because sometimes their employees worked until 12 am, mostly young men whereas I could leave at 9-10pm. Me, I was sent home earlier, men were sitting for longer, women left earlier. (Trust, mother of two children, PhD candidate abroad, Almaty)

There was no problem with having long breaks at work possibly because it was religious university of Islamic studies, and they approached situation of mothers going on maternity leave/having family obligations with understanding. (Jewel, mother of four children, professor at a university, Almaty)

I didn't feel worse attitude at work because of my children. Mostly it is women who work at university, men are mostly on top positions, pro-rectors, deans. There is no discrimination against mothers. (Moon, mother of two children, lecturer at a university, Almaty)

The women working at international organisations saw the strict gender equality and anti-discrimination policies in place at work, set by the Western top management, as the main reason for not feeling discriminated during pregnancy and early maternity periods. Some of the respondents even expressed disappointment for being treated equally with men to American owned companies as they felt not receiving sufficient support after becoming mothers. They are provided very short maternity leave and expected to be

back at work when a child is two months old. This kind of gender equality at work when women are viewed equal to men without considering that men do not give birth to children is seen by one of the respondents from Almaty as going against women's rights. This is seen as denying women their natural right to breastfeed their newborn children and bond with them over longer period and obliging them be confined to office walls when their bodies are still going through hormonal changes and healing from the birth and labour process.

> *Currently I work at an international organisation, there people are for the rights of women, gender topic is sensitive. During the seminars, we should take into account that the number of women is not lower than that of men. Gender component is considered when we hold seminars, even the report developed by each project should include how gender is reflected in realisation of all projects, even management of the waste, energy efficiency. But the maternity leave lasts only 4 months despite they respect rights of women very much. 2 months before the birth, 2 months after the birth. There is no sick leave for a child. We only can take sick leave for ourselves. I consider it as oppression of women's role. But there was no discrimination in entering the job. My lady boss always used to tell me "Children are in the first place, work in the second".* (Sparkle, mother of two children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty)

> *Now I work at a very good job. Work with Americans. On interview there were no questions about my family status, Americans didn't ask me. They done that it in their ethics, even they shouldn't see the photo on the resume, you black or what you are. They must not see. Can you imagine? They didn't even ask, I just ran there for an interview, left my kids to the neighbour, quickly and got the job. I was in shock. When I remember those moments, I think "Damn, we will never reach that level". Never ever. I am still happy and joyful that I got the job.* (West, mother of two children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty)

> *The problem is that both men and women have the same requirements despite women's break for maternity. For example, as academics we are expected to publish but due to baby care, I don't have time to write and research. No publication, no extension of contract. The contract does not consider that women have more obstacles such as one break from work due to maternity leave and she loses time, and the contract time is not compensated. It's indirect discrimination. It might be explained with the fact that there are less women at the top, if they were more, they would have changed contact rules.* (Hope, mother of two children, professor at an international university, Almaty)

Women in Turkestan might be receiving more support at work not only due to the harsher lifestyle with more physical unpaid work that requires more loyalty and understanding and less workload at work, but also might be explained by more oppressing gender roles in the Southern region. As the Southern region that includes Turkestan is known for its predominantly conservative and traditional values and stricter approach to and segregation of women, it is very likely that women are given less work and receive special delicate treatment at work due to being viewed as weak gender (Baudiyarova and Meirmanova, 2023). They are not expected to aspire high, demonstrate distinguishable professional and intellectual achievements or take on additional work because they are born with particular skills and potential to fit their main roles of wives and mothers.

5.8 Ageism

Young people in Kazakhstan experience ageism based on their young age from their employers and colleagues when doing paid work, as research suggests. They are often treated as less knowledgeable, lacking experience and are asked to do trivial tasks that do not help them grow professionally. For example, the survey results of young faculty members in higher education Kazakhstan showed that young employees were asked to move furniture and file the documents by older supervisors (Yelibay, 2020). Apart from encountering ageism based on young age, gender amplified ageism as being a young

female employee prompted double prejudices based on age and gender. There was more preference for young male workers than female as the latter were not viewed as valuable to workplace as they were expected to need time for marriages and having children (Yelibay, 2020). Older employees are seen as more reliable and stable as they are more likely to stay on the same job for a long-term period due to their need for stable income whereas young employees are more likely to change jobs in search of more career ambitions (Smirnova and Tatibekov, 2013).

In addition to ageism towards young employees in Kazakhstan, employers also have prejudices against older employees at workplaces in Kazakhstan. Older people are less likely to be employed and face age-based discrimination at hiring process in Kazakhstan due to their lack of flexibility, outdated Soviet education background, close to retirement age and health issues (Smirnova and Tatibekov, 2013).

Older women were less likely than young women to believe that women are able to achieve leadership roles at work in Kazakhstan (Semykina and Linz, 2013). This might indicate older women getting used to male dominance as they grow older and give up striving to be making changes (Semykina and Linz, 2013).

5.8.1 Findings from the focus groups

The problem of ageism at workplaces seems to be relevant among the focus group participants. Ageism was directed at both the young and old. Despite positive ageism towards older people predominantly expressed in current literature in Kazakhstan and prompted by national traditions of deep respect and taking care of older people (Dakhshleiger, 2011), the women in the current study experienced degrading remarks regarding their older age making them unfit for job application. Similar to gender, marital status and having children, age was paid more attention to, and professional traits overlooked by the potential employers during the job interviews. While older people have special status in Kazakh society and are perceived as deserving much respect due to their wisdom and experience, at work it had the opposite effect where they were seen as having outdated knowledge and experience. The problem of ageism is worse for women as having parental responsibility for a young child on top of older age

considerably deteriorates their image in the eyes of potential employers. The intersectionality of gender and age has been referred to as gendered ageism that jeopardises women's opportunities in employment and career (Rochon et al, 2021; Itzin and Phillipson, 1995). In the case of Rose, who was in her early 40s when facing ageism during the job interview, one might view her age as not old, but rather one of the periods for productive results at work. The early threshold for ageism of older people in Kazakhstan might be explained by the cultural and patriarchal factors whereby women start facing more hostile discrimination earlier on and is based on their reproductive health (Tang, 2022; Amin, 2019).

> *How old are you? Oh, no, you are too old for us." I went out of that interview, tears on my face. I thought of myself as experienced, with huge luggage, knowledgeable, but I went out of there, couldn't hold myself back, tears appeared. Came home, laid down, told myself "Hold yourself together! Hold yourself together!" That's it, carried on.* (Rose, mother of one child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

At the same time, the findings from the focus group discussions in Almaty and Turkestan show that ageism towards young employees also was prevalent in Kazakhstan workplaces. The existing literature also shows young people facing ageism based on their young age whereby they are not taken seriously and equally by older and more senior colleagues (Yelibay, 2020)**.** The main difference between the old and young experiencing ageism at workplace, is that the former experienced it mainly during the job application interviews while the latter did not have young age as an obstacle in finding jobs, but they were seen as less skilled and knowledgeable by older colleagues. They were asked to do trivial jobs, seen as young women rather than workers and tasks not directly related to their jobs such as doing clerk tasks, bringing coffee and being at the beck and call of older workers. Younger workers' professional qualifications and skills were undermined and looked down on by older colleagues who considered themselves to be wiser and more experienced. Age is an indicator of how much respect

should be expressed to a person in the hierarchy of the corporate world, which reflects social norms in society in general, in particular, to young women. Young women are expected to comply with certain social expectations in conducting themselves in a humbler and less confident way, be ready to help with less intellectual paperwork (Yelibay, 2020; Almukhambetova and Kuzhabekova, 2020). Young women not taken seriously at work might be explained by prejudices coming from patriarchal culture of them leaving work anytime to get married and have children whereas men would carry on working due to their breadwinner roles (Yelibay, 2020; Kandiyoti, 2007).

> *There was discrimination in terms of young people. I was a young specialist, but I already had substantial experience, knew a lot of things, but nobody took me seriously. I was given such tasks including bringing coffee, and it angered me a lot. Over time, I was given more serious tasks, but still there was an attitude "who are you?" Due to age, I always looked young, my voice is childish, it might had influenced or not, didn't treat me seriously, despite I had experience, completed master's degree. (Star, mother of four children, part-time employee at her husband's company, Almaty)*

> *...there is a different attitude between doctors who acquired their degree during the Soviet Union and the young generation of doctors. There was tension between old, middle and young generations of academics, not humiliation, but every time they tried to mock/comment "That is PhD, not a candidate, doctor". I categorise myself to the middle generation. They always remind "She is PhD, not a doctor, not a candidate, who is scholar with Soviet postgraduate level".* (Moon, mother of two children, lecturer at a university, Almaty).

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter looked at women's position in the labour market in Kazakhstan in terms of the support and difficulties they experience to successfully reconcile motherhood and

paid work. Women in Kazakhstan are paid less than men and are concentrated in low-paid, service sector job occupations. Working women are also in a disadvantaged position because they are predominantly concentrated in informal and part-time employment. The main reasons that might explain women's underachievment in the labour market compared to men's are gender-based discrimination, motherhood penalty and unpaid work. Despite the state laws guaranteeing protection of labour and motherhood status, women enjoy less rights and opportunities than men in paid work.

Chapter 6 The Family: Findings from the Secondary Research Results Reports and Focus Group

This chapter looks at the impact of the family on women's combining motherhood and paid work and thereby completes the three sectors after having explored the impacts of the state and the labour market in Chapters Four and Five. It discusses the current trends in the private sphere of society impacting women's participation in the labour market and compares it with the focus group findings on women's experiences from Almaty and Turkestan. The recent literature review provides overview of factors coming from the family that constrain women's role to house in Kazakhstan. In the long run, these constraints put on women decrease their defamilisation from childcare responsibility and chances of participating in the labour market. Women, who already lack support from the state and the labour market as shown in the previous chapters four and five, are pushed even further into domestic roles after receiving little support within the family and running out of sources to help themselves to achieve defamilisation.

The chapter is structured into discussions of different aspects of the family, i.e. nationalisation that includes re-Islamisation and tradition of daughters-in-law, and detraditionalisation that entails financial independence of women and feminism. For each of these, the findings of the secondary research are presented first, followed by the experiences of the mothers.

The chapter begins by exploring the process of nationalisation that exacerbated since the collapse of the Soviet Union and comprises the main reason holding back women from defamilisation and taking on traditional role of domesticated wives and mothers. The section discusses two driving factors behind nationalisation, which are re-Islamisation and daughter-in-law institution processes. Following this, contrasting processes such as detraditionalisation, free market economy, influence of global ideas such as feminism are discussed to explain phenomenon of women's liberation and

seeking independence from their families fueling women's motivation to enter paid work. This chapter demonstrates that women's status is not straightforward, but rather a complex process whereby contradicting processes have influence over women's decisions to defamilise or familise.

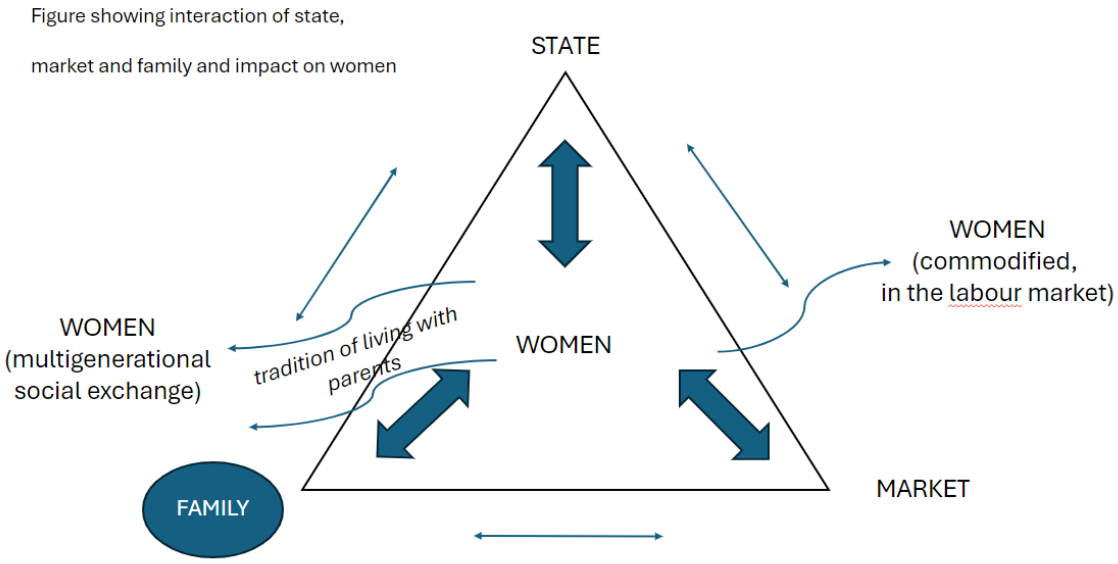

Figure 6.1 Interaction of state, market and family impact on women (author's own)

6.1 Nationalisation

Nationalisation is a common strategy applied among the post-Soviet countries that entails ethnicisation of the population through policies (Kudaibergenova, 2020A; Rutland, 2023). The government of Kazakhstan developed an ideology through policies, school curriculum and media aimed at reclaiming and strengthening the national identity of ethnic Kazakhs, since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Sovietization has been described as a process of installing a political system prioritising Soviet values such as councils of working-class people and embracing Cyrillic script and Russian language. Since 1938 the Russian language had become compulsory in all the Soviet Socialist Republics, with the aim of establishing bilingual education and further expanding the process of Russification (Krouglov, 2022). The culture of indigenous non-Russian people, living in the territory of the Soviet Union, were thoroughly and systematically Sovietized with great emphasis on Russian language and culture. Sovietisation has been associated with the policies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union imposing domination and hegemony of Russians and their culture. It entailed forceful embedding Russian language, values and ideas on indigenous communities and institutions of non-Russian ethnicities living across the Russian lands (Mironov, 2021). Although Soviet identity building aimed at creating ’one big family’ with different ethnicities coexisting peacefully under the flag of communism, the family was still headed by the ‘big Russian brother’ dominating other ethnicities (Sharipova, 2019).

State-led ideology manifested in policies and depicted in media of Kazakhstan conveys a nostalgic view of pre-Soviet Kazakh identity and tries to amplify the role of Central Asian culture of Steppes in current Kazakhstan. This entails customs and traditions of the free-spirited steppe nomads freed of Russian influence. The key feature of steppe nomads is that they operate as a strong community and provide mutual help between clans and kins (Tiberghien, 2020; Bankoff and Oven, 2019). Women’s domesticated role played a key role in maintaining this communal culture of nomads, referred to as “nomadic communitarianism” in harsh living conditions of nomads (Bankoff and Oven,

2019). In school textbooks and television programs, Kazakh women are more often depicted as mothers, wearing national pre-Soviet attires, performing national dances and music than as single, independent and working professionals (Dukeyev, 2023; Kamp, 2016). Women bore important roles in nomad system of survival as they provided care to children, as well to older people and were expected to sacrifice their individual interest and prioritize the interests of the community. The image of mothers in the national nomadic culture of Kazakhs was centred around functionalities of being 'custodians and conveyors of traditional behavioral norms and family rituals' (Ayapbergenova, 2024:26).

Kazakh women in current society have been depicted as 'mistress of the house' responsible for household and childcare whereas men's function included being providers, protectors and outside business (Naizabayeva, Garifolla and Mukhanbet, 2022). Today advocates of popularising nationalism in Kazakhstan reinforce idealistic image of Kazakh family where women are mainly mothers and "keepers of domestic fire". Women play one of the key roles in the state agenda on strengthening national identity and 'going back to roots'. Women are portrayed as caring nurturing mothers taking care of nuclear and extended family members. As mothers, their main responsibility is to keep their pure reputation in order to give children an appropriate upbringing and pass on the national heritage consisting of traditions, language, religion and beliefs (Naizabayeva and Mukhanbet, 2022; Makatova, 2010).

Nationalisation is also expressed in a high interest to into increasing demographic growth and is prompted by the national trauma Kazakhs experienced during the Soviet regime. National trauma is closely associated with collective memories that shape the identity-formation of a nation (Neal, 2018). The number of ethnic population and how they are dispersed throughout the country has been drastically and profoundly changed and shaped by the Soviet ideology, which made Kazakhs feel oppressed and outnumbered. Between 1931-1933, Stalin's rapid collectivisation policy throughout the Central Asia resulted in famine that decreased the number of Kazakhs by almost half. According to the latest estimates and previously unpublished archival materials from the Central and regional archives of Kazakhstan, 49% of ethnic Kazakhs died from forced

sedentarisation of nomadic Kazakh communities (Dulatbekov, 2023). Forced sedentarisation entails brutally settling nomads with violent force, 70% of whom were livestock farmers scattered across arid and semi- arid lands of vast steppes (Beall, 2003). Moreover, due to the high numbers of Russians relocating to Kazakhstan and other ethnicities forcefully sent to Gulag camps, the country was the republic within the Soviet Union with the highest number of ethnically Russian residents living there after Russian republic (Sinnott, 2003).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has been aiming to increase its population size by incentivizing the return of ethnic Kazakhs from abroad as well as stressing special mission of women to be mothers. The policy of repatriating ethnic Kazakhs from abroad has been implemented since 1991 and as of 2016 267,944 families equivalent of 972,719 individuals relocated to Kazakhstan (Kaiser and Beimenbetov, 2020; Dulatbekov, 2023). There is a sense of pride in every child being born in Kazakhstan as contributing to demographic growth. For example, five 20-millionth newborns were presented 3.600 GBP with gift cards and the name of the 19-millionth newborn was announced in mass media (Inform, 2023A; Astana Times, 2021).

Sharing its borders with superpower nations the Russian Federation and China, both with substantially larger population size makes the state of Kazakhstan more cautious of its vast territories with very scarcely spread population with only 20 million inhabitants (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020). Formerly faced with incursions from Moguls from Chinese Empire and dominated by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan feels threatened and puts high importance on demographic growth (Goble, 2023). These rationales to prioritise ethnicitising and increasing population put pressure on women to fulfill traditional role of mothers.

6.1.1 Findings from the focus groups

The participants rationalised the male domination in their households and surroundings through the national culture of ethnic Kazakhs. Women are expected to bear most of

caring and homemaking responsibilities. There was little or no mention of involving fathers into family responsibilities to get more support, but rather the women discussed finding solutions by relying on their own resources and skills. Women were left to find solutions on their own. Some women opted for cutting down on working hours or quit altogether due to having to bear most of unpaid work around house and childcare.

> *Cultural uniqueness: in our mentality a man is at the head, in front.* (Brave, mother of 3 children, Professor at a university, Almaty)

> *She came to the dynasty of husband. From generation to generation, women were passing down the information. Men were fighting, conquering, providing. The hearth was kept by women. All the customs, how it is in this family, what she learned from her parents, all of it she should pass down to children, show, teach, to create harmony. From the beginning, women raise strong men. If you haven't met a 'real man', you will give birth to him (son) and raise him up.* (Rose, mother of a child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

> *I cannot afford to work full-time because my husband would expect me to keep up with both domestic work and childcare, instead of helping me* (Star, mother of four children, works part-time at husband's company, Almaty).

Despite the State's politics of resurging traditional gender roles with domesticated and nurturing images of women, women in Kazakhstan still hold ambitions of fulfilling roles of 'hero women' who are successfully reconciling paid and unpaid work. The participants expressed great appreciation of educational and professional achievements. The importance of educational and professional development peacefully coexists with some of the women's beliefs in traditional gender roles and does not seem to be influenced by their degree of conservatism. This propaganda of 'hero women' was popularised by the Soviet Union as it aimed to achieve both demographic and economic growth by incentivizing women to have large families, get a compulsory higher education degree, join the workforce and be actively involved in the communist party (Saktaganova et al. 2020). During the Second World War, women were also

encouraged to be brave and join the battlefield, as depicted by the line: ‘a heroic woman, toilers of the rear, a brave warrior on the fronts’ (Saktaganova et al. 2020:281). The common belief prevalent among the women was that women are very good at taking on different roles both within families and outside families due to mothers’ image of being strong, enduring, adaptable and resilient.

> *My friends say that's why Turkish men marry Kazakh women, because they have children and “labour as horses” and look after themselves. I think women are forced to do all of it, to multitask, to achieve professionally. For example, my friend has four children, takes them to clubs, does paid work, and goes to gym, she is multitasking, on top of everything. We easily adapt to difficulties, have the capability to bear this burden.* (Brave, mother of 3 children, professor at a university, Almaty)

In rural areas the pressure on women to take care of family and house is higher due to the stronger sense of community and lower socio-economic conditions in villages. Inequality between urban and rural areas has widened in 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union evident in 110 GDP in Almaty, the most economically advanced city, and 102 GDP in Turkestan, the poorest region of the country (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024A). GDP stands for 'the total monetary or market value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country’s borders in a specific time period’ (investopedia, 2024). A higher percentage of people living in rural areas compared to those in urban areas received structural income from social transfers such as financial help to family relatives, friends and alimony (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023F). In other words, people living in villages and small towns, known for their higher poverty level, receive higher levels of financial help and social benefits through bank transfers. As living in multigenerational households is more common in rural areas, women have more responsibilities in not only caring for children but also addressing emotional and physical needs of the older people in a household. Rural areas have more large households, which are those with more than three children and several unemployed members, as well as older people than in urban areas (Shabdenova, 2021).

> *...the negative impact is that after a certain age, health is damaged due to inadequate self-care in postpartum, don't go to annual checkup, don't exercise, don't rest. I am lucky that I was born and raised in city, in villages women have mother-in-law and guests to take care of, I pity them.* (Brave, mother of 3 children, professor at a university, Almaty)

6.1.2 Re-Islamisation

The resurgence of Islam in Kazakhstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union has reinforced traditional gender roles and returned women's role to the house. This increased perception of them as commodities of their families and husbands, which accordingly resulted in their increased dependency on families (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva, 2023; Khairullayeva et al, 2022; Kabidenova et al, 2020).

After Gorbachev loosened up state restrictions on religion in 1989, there was an entrance of Islamic teaching materials and religious educators from the Middle East (Kamp, 2016). Islam of the Middle East brought a more Orthodox interpretation of Islam that put women in a conservative framework such as covering their body, head and face, and decreasing their mobility by abandoning public life and employment. This was a drastic difference from pre-Soviet Islam that free-spirited nomad Kazakhs practiced. Nomads of Central Asia were more free-spirited as their mobile and harsh living conditions required flexibility and practicality, which contradicted the settled predictable way of life that compliance with Islamic rituals required (Dosmurzinov, 2023). They have closer ties to nature than sedentary Central Asians, which installed in them beliefs in Shamanism common to 'Turkic nomads' (Tromble, 2017). Tengrianism deriving from Shamanism has belief embedded in the power of nature (Kaynar and Sakhitzhanova, 2016).

The followers of Orthodox Islam in Kazakhstan call on their countrymen to give up shamanistic practices of praising and worshipping ancestors and doing pilgrimages to

sacred places in Kazakhstan. Instead, they see the right path of Islam in practicing Middle Eastern interpretation of Islam based on Quran and Hadith with pilgrimages to Makkah in Saudi Arabia. They strive to denationalize religion of Kazakhstan from its pre-nomadic influence as “there is only one true interpretation of Islam” (Karimov, 2022; Schwab, 2015:255). Kazakhstan became part of the global Islamic world and welcomed scholars and missioners from Middle East and Turkey after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Karimov, 2022; Bissenova, 2007). This was possible due to supporters of Ultra-Orthodox Islam from Saudi Arabia known as Salafism, who are close relatives and from the same social circle of the first President Nazarbayev and are one of the wealthiest people in the country (Baitas, 2022). A nephew of President Nazarbayev has a net worth estimated to be around 168 million USD, and he is known to be an advocate and a major funder of Salafism in Kazakhstan (Caron, 2023; Kaztag, 2022). Another person close to the first President and a follower of Salafi Islam was a member of the Parliament for 15 years and is known to have religiously married three wives despite polygamy being illegal in the country (Karagiannis, 2016). Islam that has been gaining popularity in Kazakhstan and becoming the main path is based on teachings that “differentiate women’s and men’s roles, designate them as complimentary rather than as equal” (Kamp, 2016:274). The increase in the number of the Orthodox Muslims normalised practices of gender segregation at social gatherings and public life (Sultangaliyeva, 2015). The country has seen the opening of mosques and Islamic religious centres across the country, with the number of mosques increasing from 68 in 1991 to 2516 in 2016 (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2017).

At the same time, Islam was not going against national traditions and views on women as it coincided with a domesticated vision and expectations from women in pre-Islamic culture of Kazakhs. Women who practice Orthodox Islam, are expected to isolate themselves from public life by becoming housewives and are not allowed to leave house without their husband’s or a blood-related male relative's guidance; some of them cover their hair and face. They are very likely to face challenges in being visibly too religious to the public and leading completely domesticated and isolated life of pious Muslim ancestors from the Middle East, who serve as a role model for Orthodox Muslims. They romanticize old way of living and try to restore it in modern urbanised

post-Soviet Kazakhstan that has a secular education and legal system. This gap between idealised Islamic values and current Kazakh lifestyle has been described as “dissonance” (Sultangaliyeva, 2015). While in the Soviet Union women wore double roles of a homemaker and worker, similarly, the women of post-Soviet Kazakhstan are torn between contradictions in constitution and culture. The constitution recognises equal rights of men and women while according to Islamic values prevailing in society women’s role is hidden and subordinate while men are dominant and operate openly in public realm. Despite the resurgence of Islam and possible radicalisation of society in line with the most conservative values seeing women’s role as “keeper of the home”, Kazakhstan is by constitution a secular state. It is governed by civil law that guarantees men and women equal rights and opportunities and protects discriminatory based on sex, race, ethnicity, social status and other characteristics. The civil law in Kazakhstan was implemented during the Soviet Union that replaced prior Sharia law and system of pre-Islamic laws known as “adat” (Chereji and Sandu, 2021).

Economic instability, widening social inequality and increasing poverty strengthen the tendency to turn to Islam and radicalisation among the lower social class of society. Socio-political inequality has been positively correlated to terrorism and radicalisation (Frank and Pavlovic, 2023). While Kazakhstan has witnessed the arrival of strict interpretation of Islam influenced by the Middle east and Arab culture, it was still less conservative compared to neighboring Central Asian countries that were less economically developed. People in Kazakhstan being less conservative Muslims has been explained by higher socio-economic quality of life compared to other people in Central Asia and to more than half of the Kazakhstan population living in urbanized areas in contrast to neighboring nations who one-quarter live in urban areas (Tromble, 2017). Women who observed Orthodox Islam explained their choice as longing for safety and stability against insecurity and risks, particularly among financially and educationally disadvantaged families (Dosanova, 2010). For women from vulnerable social groups, who have not established themselves in their careers and public life, depending financially on family and serving a husband and children can be a way of finding self-realisation and self-importance as they have power and status within the family in raising children and making decisions on domestic level.

The fact that Kazakhstan embraced Islam as the dominant way of spiritual development while being a secular state after living under atheism during the Soviet Union is not unexpected. Despite totalitarianism that lasted 70 years and tried to brutally erase Islam from the daily lives of Kazakhs, Islamic conservative way of life remined deeply embedded in cultural values and beliefs of people. “The demands for change were imposed so rapidly and with such stringency that men could not assimilate them..." (Tasar, 2020; Dodge, 1966:134). In comparison with women of Slavic ethnicities, which was the dominant ethnic group in the Soviet Union, women of Central Asia were still considered as “the most tradition-bound elements of Central Asian society” (Lovett, 2023; Lubin, 1981:194). Women of Central Asian nations, including the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, were to a much lesser extent impacted by women’s emancipation and gender equality movements led by the Soviet ideology. Women keeping their traditional role of homemakers and subordinate positions to men was manifested in their lower participation in paid work, higher fertility rate, higher drop-out rate from education in comparison with Slavic women who are Russians, Belorussians, Ukrainians. The birth rate in Central Asia was on average 35% in 1970, compared to the 15% of the more emancipated Slavic women, whose participation in workforce was higher (Schwartz, 1979). The Soviet state targeted Central Asian women for professional training and orientation with the aim to alienate them from their traditions and religion towards progressive communism, which included legal, social-political, economic and cultural growth (Kassymbekova and Chokobaeva, 2021). Prior to the Soviet-led movement on women liberation, women of religious and traditional Central Asian republics including Kazakhstan “were veiled and secluded from all aspects of social, political or economic life; were slavishly bound to the duties of home and procreation; and in general were viewed, both by themselves and by others, as being by nature the lowest element of society” (Lubin, 1981:182).

In the late 1940s, Kazakhstan women decided to have more children and not to join the workforce, as was promoted by the Soviet ideology through the expansion of education and paid work for women and childcare provision for their children. This resulted in their higher dropouts from higher education due to getting married and forming families as

well as being perceived as unproductive, inconsistent workers. Employers who were predominantly from Slavic dominant group commented on having Central Asian workers: “they are sure to be taking many maternity leaves not too long after being employed” (Lubin, 1981:193). Women of Central Asia chose jobs with more flexibility and lower responsibility that allowed them more time for their families, which resulted in lower-paid jobs. The survey results of 260 unemployed women conducted in 1977 revealed that almost all of them prioritized working near home and having shorter working hours; and two-thirds of 760 non-working women expressed the wish not to work (Lubin, 1981).

It was not always women’s choice to remain traditional and resist getting education and work. As historical archives show, women were violently attacked and sometimes murdered for trying to abandon the old ways of living, such as taking off their veils and divorcing their husbands when the unveiling order was imposed by the Soviet rule in 1927 (Gradskova, 2021). In the 1940s, women of Central Asia were still expected to hold on strongly to traditional and religious views by practicing patriarchal customs where they were in subordinate position to men. Examples of such customs that were still strong, are that women were forced to be get married young and their parents played a key role in arranging marriages; women were pressured to wear traditional scarves despite the Soviet regime carrying out the unveiling of women; the parents of bride and groom exchanged gifts despite a ban on purchasing brides; men and women still kept gender segregation in place despite mixed gender politics at workplaces; religious values were still popular among youth despite open atheism promoted by the Soviet state; some daughters were not allowed to acquire higher education; divorced women were highly stigmatized (Peshkova; 2021).

Findings from the focus groups

Some of the participants demonstrated stronger beliefs in the importance of Islam in their daily lives through observation of rituals and modest attire. The resurged religiosity or re-Islamisation required women to choose between a domesticated lifestyle to fully dedicate themselves to retaining religious values over professional growth outside of home, where they would not be able to observe rituals.

> *As a practicing Muslim for few years, I understand that I won't be able to pray five times a day everywhere. It should also be taken into account.* (Star, mother of four children, works at her husband's company part-time, Almaty)

Flower, mother of four children and practicing Muslim too, prays five times a day, observes fasting and wears a religious headscarf, did not enter the labour market as she prioritised providing home to her children with a focus on Islamic knowledge.

6.1.3 'Kelin' (daughter-in-law) Institute

Both nationalisation and re-Islamisation amplified the tradition of a prescribed role for the daughter-in-law ('kelin') that signified the revival of pre-soviet culture of Central Asian steppes and "returning Kazakhstan to the "primary, pre-historical values of the continuation of family and the role of women in this process" (Isaacs, 2015:408). The rise of nationalisation and popularisation of pre-Soviet traditions aimed at reclaiming cultural identity contributed to higher occurrence of non-consensual bride-kidnapping ('kyz alyp qashu') that had been banned by the Soviet regime and was a matter of imprisonment from 40 days to one year (Werner, 2021; Olcott, 2002; Azizova, 2009). The Human Rights Watch defines bride-kidnapping as "the act of taking a woman or girl against her will through deception or force and using physical or psychological coercion to force her to marry one of her abductors" (Human Rights Watch, 2006). This indicates the lowering of young women's status in society and their objectification to marriage and reproductive roles. Between 2019-2023, 219 cases of kidnapping were registered and on average 20 cases of women's abduction are registered per year since 2019 in the country (Human Rights Commissioner in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023; Standard, 2024).

Although nationalists believe in the importance of reviving the traditional institution of 'kelin' as being part of long neglected and forgotten culture of Kazakhs, scholars argue that this institute has been modified by current socio-economic and religious factors and

drastically differs from elevated status young women enjoyed during nomadic period. Ultra-Orthodox interpretation of Islam coming from Middle East and worsening socio-economic inequality resulted in marriage as a quick way to financial security and respectful social status and making daughters-in-law a marginalised social group with oppressed human rights (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva, 2021; Kudaibergenova, 2018). The traditional perception of 'kelin' has been described as: "The kelin has assumed the main housekeeping tasks (cleaning the house and raising kids), preparing food, taking care of her husband and his family, and most importantly, showing respect and pouring tea for family members and guests in the proper traditional manner, the latter being an important ritual of self-obedience traditionally ascribed only to the kelin" (Ismailbekova, 2016:269). Moral policing and shaming of young women for being inappropriate Kazakh wives, mothers and daughters-in-law shifted to the digital world and social media became a platform where both nationalist and liberalist women use their physical bodies to express their freedom from public shame and traditional norms by exposing more skin (Kudaibergenova, 2020).

6.1.4 Findings from the focus groups

While the participants expressed mutual agreement and shared opinions on the role of daughters-in-law in Kazakh society and expectations of them to serve the needs of others, views on it being acceptable or unacceptable varied between Almaty and Turkestan. For the former, the tradition of 'kelin' seemed outdated, harmful and oppressing human rights of women whereas for the latter it was an essential part of Kazakh culture that was a way of gaining blessing from the older generation and continuation for next generation as they wished for the same service from future daughters-in-law.

> *In our society, when parents take daughter-in-law for themselves (choose a proper woman who son is marrying to), she should be always with them, should be serving them, she should forget her own children, of course, there will grow gap between her and husband. He works, develops, but she is like a servant.*

She becomes like a mother to her own husband (Flower, mother of four children, housewife and freelance psychologist, Almaty).

In the Southern region, there are many cases when women stay at home. There is a notion of "Southern mentality": there is a perception that women should be content with only raising children, feeding, caring; a man should be a breadwinner and a woman be housewife. I have friends who are housewives (Sunrise, mother of 2 children, teacher at school, Almaty).

In the South, I notice, that only women are slaving, slaving. And men always look so much better (younger, well-looked after) compared to women there. It is very noticeable (West, mother of 2 children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty).

Predominantly the participants from Turkestan were prepared for the role of future daughters-in-law and taught to do chores around the household. The construction of self-identity through the family as the primary social agent to teach of values and beliefs profoundly impacts long-term development of life. The process of teaching future duties around the house such as cleaning and cooking was accompanied by reminders of its aim of pleasing and serving future in-laws. The potential possibility of disgracing her own family in front of their future husband's family was used as a tool to manipulate and embed fears.

Growing up in my parents' home, I was taught how to cook and clean so that I don't shame my parents at house of future in-laws. I tried hard to show my skills acquired from my own home to my parents-in-law and am still demonstrating it. 'Respect your parents-in-law, view them as your own parents" were the advice given to me by my parents (Sunrise, mother of 2 children, teacher at school, Turkestan).

> *My mother taught me all the housework because, as she said, "so that I won't let my parents name be mixed with dirt when I am married* (Peace, mother of 5 children, lecturer at a university, Turkestan).

> *It is a custom in our region that daughters are reminded about their future mission of being daughters-in-law. I have become accustomed to hearing from a young age that I will be a daughter-in-law, they should respect parents-in-law, 'uyat bolady' (it will be shameful). We have been told a lot of these things; our ears got used to it. We perceive it as normal; it outgoes to be like that. For example, do not sit with legs apart, have a tidy look, do not cross a road in font of old people, tomorrow it will be shameful in the eyes of parents-in-laws, these phrases my mom used to tell me when I was younger before marriage* (Spirit, mother of 4 children, works at a state institution, Turkestan).

Women in Southern Kazakhstan, Turkestan, feel more immense pressure to adhere to traditional roles of mothers and wives and accept their low position in the family hierarchy compared to other parts of Kazakhstan. The reappearing theme that kept being mentioned by the participants when discussing women's roles was 'Southern mentality'. While retraditionalisation has reinforced conservative roles of women within families across the country, 'Southern mentality' entails much stricter expectations from women that make defamilisation from childcare much more challenging to be achieved among mothers in Southern region of Kazakhstan. 'Southern mentality' has been described as people in the South being bearers of true national traditions and embedding it into their daily lives (Baudiyarova and Meirmanova, 2023). Women are seen as inferior to men and responsible for unpaid work at home that brings little output while men are perceived to be exceeding women in knowledge and talents and born to accomplish grand aims outside of home (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva, 2023).

While Sparkle and Rose from Almaty held conservative views on the family as they believed in the importance of traditional family values and the superiority of men in the household, they did not share strict social norms that women in the South had to adhere

to and even expressed feeling shocked and disapproving of that. Gender-based segregation between guests and men's critically low involvement in domestic chores in Southern households were the main features the participants drew line between themselves and the Southern families.

> *My dad is pure Southern, mother is pure Northern, so I know the Southern mentality. If my dad is sitting and eating, he is sitting and eating. He would not stand up for the spoon, mom would stand up. In the household, my dad does nothing, no groceries shopping, nothing* (Sparkle, mother of 2 children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty).

> *I have a friend who married into Kyzylorda (Southern Kazakhstan) family. She tells me about traditions and norms there, I was shocked. When they come to visit, men sit at the table separately, women separately, on the floor on 'korpeshka' (Kazakh traditional handmade mats), small table. This is insane! Why on 'korpeshka'? A woman, as a dog, is a friend of a man? She says "yes, it's their traditions". Women there should so much selfless, she crosses out all her wants, wishes, abilities, desires, and replace it with "I must, I must, I must". I look at those women and pity them. In my case, husband is Russian, and everything is very simple there. We even haven't had conflicts.* (Rose, mother of a child, manager at a supermarket chain company, Almaty).

The distinctive feature of 'Southern mentality' that was also highlighted during the focus group discussions is the low social status of daughters-in-law whereby they are perceived and treated as 'modern slaves'. Daughters-in-law are demanded to be servants to their husbands and his relatives and are often deprived of freedom of expression and choice, bullied and oppressed (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva, 2021).

> *I contrast with people in Turkestan, I feel like white crow because I completed Russian school. People in Turkestan see women's role in obeying, servicing husband and his family. It's not only Turkestan, but Shymkent, South of*

Kazakhstan in general. Once I was at the gathering of my mom and her friends, old women similar age. Many of them were from the Southern villages near Shymkent and Turkestan. They were telling very cruel vile stories about their daughters-in-law: how they torture and force them to serve in-laws, making life difficult for them. My hair standed on end when I heard this conversation. I couldn't say anything because of women's old age (Hope, mother of 2 children, professor at a university, Turkestan).

While maintaining a close, respectful and caring relationship with old generation is a common part of national traditions in Kazakhstan, the degree of closeness was differentiated between Southern and non-Southern regions by attitudes to living in a multigenerational household. Flower from Almaty had to reluctantly accept that her parents-in-law would be moving in with them as she was aware of 'Southern mentality' when marrying a man from Zhetysay, village in Southern Kazakhstan close to border of Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, she was not willing to put up with becoming a voiceless 'servant' with no interests outside of family.

I was born and raised in Almaty, but currently live in Astana. Hence, my mentality is very Northern, but my husband is from the very South, not even Shymkent, but Zhetysay. The most southern South of Kazakhstan. Few years ago we bought new flat, to move his parents to ours, we bought a big flat so everyone is comfortable, I was already prepared, but I straightaway discussed when they move in with us, I won't stop my life, every day I will be living the way I live now, develop, study and so on, and he said "Fine" (Flower, mother of 4 children, housewife and freelance psychologist, Almaty).

My parents always were visiting, calling, helping, we used to leave the kids with them. I am a very direct person; I say what I think. In general, young people should be living separately. Close, but separately. Because they are forming their own unit, adjusting to each other, growing roots, establishing norms, family

traditions. They should have their own space (Rose, mother of a child, manager at a supermarket chain company, Almaty).

Daughters in Kazakhstan are treated as temporary residents of their parents' home and constantly reminded about their temporary stay as quests to find true home at future parents'-in-law. This may result in alienation of girls from young age from their own family and feelings of lost self-identity (Abrahams, 2021). This may lead to a risk of despair if a woman programmed to find her true home in her husband's family faces mistreatment there. Some families give their daughters a seat at the top of a table, which is usually given to guests out of respect. This is done to make the daughter feel respected while she can because they are aware that difficulties may await her in future family, and usually daughters-in-law are seated at the end of table serving and pouring tea.

Since my childhood, my mother has been telling me that "daughters are guests at their parents' house" and I should be sitting at the further corner of the table or room which is usually is given to guests out of respect. If my brother sat higher than me at the table, my mother would tell him off and let me sit up higher than him. He is the son, he stays with parents, whereas I am the daughter temporarily living at home and will leave soon after getting married, hence, should be sitting at best seats. (Spirit, mother of 4 children, works at a state institution, Turkestan).

While the participants from Turkestan accepted the demanding expectations set for them as for daughters-in-law and adhered to it by carrying out unpaid physical and non-physical work at home, the participants from Almaty expressed objections and wishes to change it. Those participants from Almaty who were married to husbands from Southern Kazakhstan, felt more pressured and obliged to serve needs of parents-in-law with which they had issues with:

Once I left with my husband for his work trip to Amsterdam for 2 weeks. They (parents-in-law from South region of Kazakhstan) were shocked "How dare you?". There was a conflict. They should understand that I can leave to do my own stuff, that I have my own business apart from the children and them. My father-in-law even, who usually doesn't comment, started criticising. I know now that if I didn't cook, my mother-in-law would do the cooking. I never leave my children to parents-in-law without arranging helpers. If they are left without helpers, there would be big problems with the in-laws (Flower, mother of four children from Almaty, housewife and freelance psychologist, Almaty).

…to live with parents of husband, to serve them, how it is usually common in our Kazakh traditions, neglect my studies, career: I won't be able to do any of these. I said enough is enough, drew the boundaries. It was unpleasant for his family, they said "Well, ok then", once a year they visit us, or we visit them. Of course, when they visit, you treat them with respect, host them as dear guests, I think few times per year this is not a problem, not only for Kazakhs, but for all (Gold, mother of four children from Almaty, manager at state institution, Almaty).

Although 'kelin's' low status in Kazakh society has been depicted and ridiculed in contemporary cinema and television production series, it has also been reinterpreted and reimagined giving it an important role in patriarchal society upon whom existence of family institution relies (Satybaldiyeva, 2022). The process of ageing and gaining more experience among daughters-in-law moved them higher up in the hierarchy, especially with the arrival of new daughters-in-law in a husband's dynasty. Transformation of daughters-in-law into mothers-in-law when children become turn into adults and marry, also makes women gain more power and voice in husbands' family. Both processes may imply matriarchy in disguise in Kazakh familes where such factors as ageing, experience, sacrifice and patience of daughters-in-law pay off. 'As the number of descendants increased and family ties expanded with age, Kazakh women naturally

ascended to the status of 'matriarch,' wielding considerable influence over family and societal dynamics' (Ayapbergenova, 2024:26).

> *After all these years of hard work and resilience I showed while serving as a daughter-in-law in my husband's family from Southern Kazakhstan, I gained a reputation and respect in our family circle, they put me as an example for other young daughters-in-law. But hardly anyone imagines what it cost me: nerves, strength, exhaustion, I missed childhood of my children* (Green, mother of 2 children, marketing manager, Almaty).

6.2 Detraditionalisation

Along with the process of an amplified nationalisation in Kazakhstan where women's traditional roles as homemakers and child carers are reinforced because of state's politics of reviving national identity, there is an ongoing parallel process of detraditionalization among the Kazakhstani population that is contributing to women's defamilisation process. According to Heelas (1996), detraditionalisation has been described as a process when a person no longer feels belonging to the whole and loses faith in traditions. Growing individualisation and wider awareness of gender inequality issues are contributing to women's acknowledgment of the importance of being financially independent from their partners and families. Young people in particular who were born around time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, referred to as Nazarbayev generation, prioritise interests of their family over interests of community and society, value uniqueness and independence more, and rely less on shame culture in decision

making (Laurielle, 2019; Kabylova, 2022). Although people in Kazakhstan are predominantly family-oriented, they are basing decisions less on societal pressure to comply with conservative social norms and national traditions, but individuality and self-interests are becoming influential factors in making daily decisions (Kabylova, 2022). Especially young respondents aged 18-25, educated to higher education level, living in cities with population more than 500.000 inhabitants and from the Northern and Eastern regions of Kazakhstan showed more openness to partnership in relationships between men and women (Kabylova, 2022).

Changing socio-economic conditions in the country, the rise of social media, higher awareness of feminist ideas among the younger generation and social grievances over lack of decision-making power in policy making resulted in women's establishing pro-women's rights and anti-domestic violence groups on popular social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook (Maltseva, 2021). There was a common acknowledgment among the women in the focus group discussion in both Almaty and Turkestan about the importance of financial independence, and doing paid work was perceived as a way to have a decision-making role in family along with their husbands. As emphasised by one of the participants, working part-time remotely from home allows her to have freedom in spending her earnings and financially help out her mother. When she was unemployed, she felt uneasy about asking and reporting about where money was spent, and her husband was hesitant for money to be spent on her parents. It made her realise that women's wishes and interests are more likely being neglected without financial independence.

Information Communication and New Media Technologies have been discussed as driving Kazakh women away from adhering to traditional gender roles based on national cultural values. Technology was perceived as a source of feministic ideas from the Western liberal world that went against beliefs about the image of a traditional Kazakh woman, who has been described as modest, sacrificing and selfless (Dall'Agnola, 2024). With the spread of liberal ideas promoting women's rights on the Internet, there also has been rise of online policing of women's 'sexual identities and bodily expressions' on social media platforms driven by 'fear of losing their 'national culture' in these global trends' (Kudaibergenova, 2020).

All the customs, how it is in this family, what she learned from her parents, all of it she should pass down to children, show, teach, to create harmony. Modern technology of daily life, information that overwhelms and lets astray, all this information from the Internet should be used in harmony with our traditions. (Rose, mother of a child, manager in a supermarket chain company, Almaty)

I realised I need my own money, I can't ask my husband all the time, I want to help my mom, if I ask him, he questions "why you keep giving to your mom?" It strains me. If I wish, I could just go and buy. Hence, that is why I started working. (Sun, mother of 3 children, works at brother's company, Almaty)

Nevertheless, the participants, who supported gender egalitarian values and tried to incorporate them into their lifestyles, disguise this from their husbands and extended family. This suggests that women in Kazakhstan are searching for a balance between traditional and contemporary worlds.

There was a common belief in the positive impact of employment on women among the focus group participants who stated that women become more complete and fulfilled as an individual when they work as socialisation in a professional field with educated colleagues make them open-minded, progressive and respected.

Surely, I can be a housewife because family is very important for me. But to progress and develop as a person, one should continue learning and working. I work firstly for self-realisation. (Joy, mother of 5 children, lecturer at university, Turkestan)

Women, whose life is focused only on family and home, cannot widen her thinking to larger things from domestic realm. Her thoughts cannot go outside. In contrast, women who work, socialise, interact with different people, gains experience, know how money is earned. (Sunrise, mother of 2 children, teacher at school, Turkestan)

It is worth pointing out here that positive views about women being financially independent have existed since the times when Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union and did not arise with globalisation and feminism after the fall of the iron curtains of Socialism. According to several participants from Almaty, they had been encouraged by their mothers-in-law rather than their husbands to remain employed after having children. Mothers-in-law, who were born and raised during the Soviet Union, were career-driven and worked full-time their whole lives until retirement.

They are from Karaganda and they help me around the house. They are modern, my mother-in-law always tells me "Go and work, develop, dress up", always supports me. It's another thing about the reconciliation of characters, we would not be able to live together! Because we have completely different temperaments and so on. But in terms of the work, then yes, they would be supporting. She would prepare dinner by the time I am back from work. Mother-in-law has always supported me in terms of that, she always told me "Go to work, husband should not see you at home in slippers and rope, one needs socialisation". (Sparkle, mother of 2 children, project manager at an international organisation, Almaty)

Egalitarian values are not only about women doing paid work to be financially independent from partners, but also having more equal share of unpaid work with their partners. Minority of women shared their experiences of succeeding in involving their spouses to help them around the house and with childcare. Their spouses were hesitant at the beginning of marriage to share stereotypically female job, but after the women's

negotiations and persistency changed their approach. The participants' families had traditional gender roles prevailing where it was easier for women to do unpaid work themselves rather than invest time and effort in asking and teaching their husbands to help them with domestic chores. It might be stated that this imbalance in men and women doing paid and unpaid work takes its beginning from the so-called women emancipation of the Soviet Union when gender equality was not achieved, and the labour market changed to accommodate female workers, but family was not changed to fit in more male help.

> *Step-by-step, I was involving him in housework. When he started helping me, he became aware how hard it was. Now it has reached a point when I iron him nothing, absolutely nothing. I only cook at home, he cleans the house, irons his clothes, vacuums, wipes the floor, the only disadvantages are that he can't handle the kids, he doesn't take part in the upbringing of the children and can't cook, that is his only disadvantage.* (Moon, mother of 2 children, lecturer at a university, Almaty)

6.2.1 Transition to Free Market Economy turning women into second breadwinners

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, while transitioning from communism to capitalism, women of Kazakhstan gained an additional role of paid worker in a competitive and insecure world of free market economy and "were catapulted into a new economic reality" (Zellerer and Vyortkin, 2004:444). Extreme economic turbulence, stagnation, devalue of currency and soaring unemployment that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, prompted the new government of independent Kazakhstan to listen to international consultants who advised political pluralism and a

free market economy as the way forward (Groce, 2020). In contrast to the prior Socialist system with planned economy, state-controlled prices, widely accessible state services and stable employment, the post-Soviet Capitalism brought market-based economy, insecure employment, inflation-induced prices and widening social class inequality to families in Kazakhstan. Weber defined capitalism as: “where we find property is an object of trade and is utilized by individuals for profit-making enterprise in a market economy, there we have capitalism’ (Weber, 1976:51).

Aiming to be accepted at the world arena, become part of the free-market world economy and be attractive for international investments, the government adapted the constitution to include international standards of equal human rights between men and women (Shakirova, 2015). The government set three goals for economic development benefiting from oil and other natural resources, diversifying economy from oil, agriculture and imported goods, and developing entrepreneurship (Kamp, 2016). Even before the country accepted entrepreneurship as one of the main ways of economic progress that demands both male and female labourforce, unemployed women of the early 1990s had already begun entrepreneurship work by getting involved in trading of clothing, home-made food and other products. They were known as ‘shuttle traders’, entrepreneurs traveling between Turkey, China and post-Soviet countries to bring goods to trade and made-up informal economy that provided job to millions of people in post-Soviet countries in the financial crisis in the 1990s (Karrar, 2019; Bloch, 2011). Gender equality expectations in terms of women not only being involved along with men in the labour market but also becoming independent self-reliant individuals that comes with free market economy are contradicting and irrelevant to local Kazakh culture and tradition (Bankoff and Oven, 2019).

Despite the growth of GDP almost tripling between 1993-2016 and the expansion of state services and renewed infrastructure since the 1990s, within the country social inequality has widened due to multiple economic crises and poor government regulation (Turganbayev and Diener, 2018). Income inequality between urban and rural regions has worsened as the factories, ‘kolkhoz’, known as collective farms, have closed in rural areas and generous state funding from the more affluent central parts to rural areas has

ceased after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Scarborough, 2023). Turkestan has the highest poverty level in the country of 8,1percent for 2023 while the biggest cities of Astana and Almaty having 1,9 and 3,7 percent respectively (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023G). There is unequal distribution of wealth throughout the country, the more affluent part of population living in cities and in regions abundant in natural resources, while the poorest live in the Southern regions, including Turkestan where the economy is heavily reliant on agriculture (Asian Development Bank, 2022; Zakon, 2023). The unemployment level has been the highest in Turkestan in the country compared to Almaty constituting 5 and 4,6 percent respectively (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023E).

Despite women's persisting image of traditional homemakers in Kazakhstan, they have been successful in opening and leading businesses with support from their families. Starting business has been a more popular choice compared to being employed by somebody else among women as it provides flexibility in terms of reconciling it with childcare for mothers in Kazakhstan (Smagulova and Gonclaves, 2023). Opening an independent business project is the preferred option in developing countries including Kazakhstan as women are driven by 'push factors' to feed their children in uncertain difficult economic circumstances (Smagulova and Gonclaves, 2023). Entrepreneurship grew from being a small side job with family being their main work and difficulties associated with establishing a business such as lengthy bureaucracy of legal process and taxation. Women took "manual, financial and transactional advantages from their dependencies on their families" and used their family resources to build their way into entrepreneurship (Werner, 2003).

It is often the case when business is open under the name of a woman, but the financial sponsor is her husband with supporting function (Trifilova et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there are stereotypes about women-owned businesses being owned by rich male civil servants who are using their wives' names to hide their wealth as civil servants are not allowed to have businesses or rich businessmen investing in their wives' businesses (Trifilova et al., 2014).

Women, who traditionally have been caretakers of children and homemakers, developed transferrable skills of multi-tasking, problem-solving, being considerate of others' welfare and providing emotional support to people around them and translated those skills into entrepreneurship. Female leaders in business are more likely to prioritise the welfare of employees and flexible work arrangements that allow healthy work-life balance ahead of making profits and taking high-risk investments (Kamp, 2016). For example, women with childcare responsibilities are provided a separate room for breastfeeding and more options for remoting working are considered. The open market, which increased professional growth expectations from women to be competing with men in addition to pre-existing Soviet standards of a high female labourforce, allows working women to have more decision-making role in family (Myrzabekkyzy et al. 2021).

6.2.2 Findings from the focus groups

Women returning and entering employment before a child turned one year old was prevalent among the participants from Turkestan than Almaty. The main rationale for returning to paid work early among the Turkestani women was the need for more financial means as their partners' wages are not sufficient to cover family's basic needs. Several women preferred to stay longer on maternity leave as they had a choice since their partners earned enough wage and other women also expressed the wish to spend more time with their children if their families were in better financial position. It was the case for some women that employment was an escape from unpaid domestic work and problematic relationships with their mothers-in-law, who often live with nuclear family as multigenerational households are common in Turkestan. Therefore, women preferred to start working early after giving birth to keep themselves away from psychological distress and physical burden from serving older extended family members and the belittling treatment of daughters-in-law. Women from Turkestan, despite having conservative views and supporting traditional gender roles, were pushed out to work due to financial necessity and gained financial independence and some became the main breadwinners their families. This shows that financial necessity resulted in

detraditionalisation of women, turning them into independent individuals who saw benefits of modernising gender roles.

> *Before I started working, I used to prepare breakfasts and dinners for my family and in-laws who lived with us. After I returned to work, they breakfast without me and started cooking dinner if I was late home after work, and I continued cooking once home. But surely, if I had time after work and on weekends, I would spoil them with tasty dishes. I tried to make them content with me* (Sunrise, mother of 2 children, teacher at school, Turkestan).

> *Mother (in law) takes care of the children and cooks while I am at work* (Peace, mother of 5 children, lecturer at a university, Turkestan).

Financial need incentivised men to encourage their wives to enter the labour market but it did not change their attitudes towards gender-based share of unpaid work at home. Husbands experiencing difficulties with providing for their families were interested in their wives bringing income home, but they also expected their wives to carry on with childcare responsibilities and domestic work.

> *In our country it is normal when a woman goes to work, it is even good for a husband when wife works, and its normal. But it's hard for our women. (*Trust, mother of 2 children, PhD candidate abroad, Almaty)

High poverty and unemployment levels in Turkestan with increasing inflation level of 10,3 percent for 2023 make the need for families to have two wage earners to be acute and essential need to survive (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023E). The poverty rate doubled in rural parts of the Southern region between 2013 and 2019, salaries dropped by 2.1%, reducing the income of many families (World Bank, 2023B). Considering large size of families in Turkestan, which is prevalent due to more conservative values in the South and with the second highest demographic growth throughout the country, more

resources are needed to sustain family basic needs (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023C).

6.2.3 International experience

The participants from the Almaty focus groups had more experience of travelling and living abroad in comparison with the women from Turkestan, apart from one. These experiences of traveling abroad are not common among most of population as the Ministry of Internal Affairs shows only a third of the population in Kazakhstan has passports, which means two thirds of people have never left territory of Kazakhstan (Tengri Travel, 2023). Western countries, tend to have a more liberal approach to women's rights, and men spending more time on unpaid work and a lower wage gender gap. The women with experiences of living in such countries referred to this international experience as prompting them to reconsider their views on gender roles in their families and apply some of the values and lifestyles they observed abroad on their relationships with their spouses. Jewel, Trust, Brave and Hope from Almaty who lived in the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States while pursuing education at university and working there talked fondly and with admiration about the more equal share of unpaid work between spouses, and men having higher respect for women. Witnessing contrasting values inspired them to improve their own position in the family and ask their husbands for more involvement in household chores. It was a surprise for Jewel to discover that her husband was very good at cooking and treated the family to delicious meals regularly. Before living abroad, the women had gendered misconceptions about men being inherently incapable of doing stereotypically female work around the house and children. However, positive changes in their husbands' attitude to unpaid work showed them that the life of a woman can be easier, and she does not have to solely bear responsibility for both paid and unpaid work. Trust and Brave felt anger and regret at losing time and not realising earlier that changes were

possible. As noted by Trust, it took her to step outside of her comfort zone of a home country to realise that women's burden could be lifted and while living in the country she accepted women's hard role in family as given, "everyone tolerated, and I tolerated as well".

> *In the Western countries, it is normal when husband and wife do things together, look after children together, not everywhere of course, in particular in the United Kingdom and United States. In comparison with them, yes, we are falling behind.* (Trust, mother of 2 children, PhD candidate abroad, Almaty)

6.2.4 Work as escape from domestic obligations and stress

Another unexpected finding from the focus group discussions in Almaty and Turkestan is that some women viewed paid work as a way to get away from unpaid work. Spending the whole day at work completing tasks given by the manager was seen easier to manage compared to not only physical work at home such as cooking and cleaning but emotional burden from meeting needs of parents-in-law and children. Women engaged in paid work had a sense of control, with decision-making power and respect from colleagues at work whereas at home the low status of daughters-in-law in the hierarchy of a traditional Kazakh household means having little ownership over life but on the contrary being 'owned' by members of husband's family. In a life with more egalitarian rights and individual autonomy, people would rush from work to home, the place of rest and protection. In contrast, oppressed women rush to work from home, the place where they are exploited and belittled.

> *Thanks to work and busy schedule, I didn't have time and energy left to think about my in-laws' attitude towards me, their comments about me. Work saved me from negativity at home.*

… nobody helped. The grandparents (in-laws) just visit and stay as guests, I am expected to do the housework and childcare. Therefore, to save me from stress and avoid conflicts in the family, I outsourced the help for me. I appreciate the fact, although nobody helped me, at least family members acknowledged my hard work caring about family and house. Thanks to their generous compliments, I tolerated the hardship. Otherwise, it would have ended in conflict or something more serious. (Green, mother of two children, marketing manager, Almaty)

Currently my husband's younger brother's family lives with his parents. They also have four children. I see how she is burning out in front of my eyes because to keep up with housework while raising four children… There is an attitude from the parents "Why do you need it (paid work)? Your husband works. Sit at home, only look after the children". There is this kind of message in words. She still doesn't give up, works. But I see how emotionally drained, squeezed, she is by the end of the day. Then it impacts children, she raises her voice very often, and children have complicated diagnoses (skin etc.), if you look at the root of all illnesses, it is lack of support from mother, there is no emotional contact, mother is often absent from children's life, either she is in the kitchen or at work. (Gold, mother of four children, manager at state institution, Almaty)

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the processes in the private family sphere that influence women's decisions to (re)enter paid work. Women are torn between nationalisation, where they are expected to take on traditional role of domesticated wives and mothers, and the detraditionalisation, which prompts them to seek liberation and independence from families. Both processes impact women's defamilisation level. Socio-cultural differences

between Almaty and Turkestan are evident as the latter ones hold more conservative values that affect their perceptions of their gendered roles, whereas women from Almaty express more resentment against traditions such as living in multigenerational households and the pressure of being daughters-in-law.

Chapter 7 Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis has researched how the state, the market and the family support or hinder women's participation in paid work after maternity leave in Kazakhstan.

The central finding of the thesis is that the state, the market and the family are not helping working mothers on Kazakhstan to defamilise their childcare responsibilities. Despite women's high literacy and tertiary education levels, women are struggling to achieve defamilisation and their their status has worsened since the collapse of the USSR, women becoming 'shadows' and learning 'to put up' with their situation. Women are taken advantage of by their families and supported neither by the market nor the state. Paradoxically, women are finding ways of resisting their disadvantaged status. Women in Turkestan, who have to work due to financial needs and making dual-income households, may be more liberated than their counterparts in the wealthier area of Almaty despite Turkestan women's more conservative beliefs. In other words, my findings are multiple and contradictory.

There are three key findings drawn from this project. Firstly, Kazakhstan's work-family reconciliation policies and the labour market do not support women's defamilisation after maternity leave but reinforce their dependence/reliance on the family. Secondly, the financial situation of a family and cultural values play significant roles in women's level of defamilisation. The necessity to earn wages for women from disadvantaged families and adhering to traditional gender roles were in conflict with each other in women's decision to commodify or decommodify themselves. Paradoxically, while traditional gender roles strengthen the familisation of women, multigenerational relations assist women to entering paid work by alleviating their childcare responsibilities. Thirdly, women perceived themselves and their motherhood status as the main reason for their low defamilisation level rather than issues in the state, the family and the market that failed to meet mothers' needs. This chapter concludes the thesis by answering the research questions and discussing its original contributions to empirical and theoretical knowledge. It ends with outlining the potential of the study and proposing areas for future research.

7.1 Addressing the Research Questions

This thesis aims to address five research questions as outlined in Chapter one:

7.1.1 Research Question 1.

- What is the current status of women's participation in the paid labour market in Kazakhstan?

The first question was answered through the analyses of the secondary data and focus group discussions with the women from Almaty and Turkestan (see Chapter six). The participants' experiences demonstrate that the current status of their participation in paid work is in general limited. This is due to multiple factors including their traditional gender role in childcare, the lack of support from the state and the market. Motherhood penalty and gender-based stereotypes contribute to women's disadvantaged positions in the labour market, in which, women are negative affected by the wage gender gap, job segregation and other gender-related issues such as the glass ceiling and the leaky pipeline. These findings are in line with the world literature of recent findings (Petitfour et al, 2022; Clarke, 2020; Tabassum and Nayak, 2021).

An unexpected finding was that mothers living in areas more dominated by conservative values may have a better chance to engage in paid work. The women in Turkestan received more support with flexible work arrangements that allowed better family and work reconciliation. Two other major factors that drive the ability of mothers with young children in the more conservative Turkestan to go out to work are living in multigenerational households that can provide support in childcare and financial necessity (due to their low household income) for women to work. The tradition of living in multigenerational households reinforces traditional gender roles paradoxically but improves women's opportunity to go out to do paid work. The women in Turkestan mostly take up paid work because of financial necessity, despite their traditional gender roles, are supported by the older generation who help with childcare and are engaged in social exchange.

In contrast, the mothers working in an environment with more equal treatment of male and female employees may face more challenges to reconcile motherhood and work. The women in Almaty who worked in international organisations, that have their headquarters in the United States, experienced little support and flexibility at their workplaces to reconcile work and family.

7.1.2 Research Question 2.

- What factors affect the participation in paid work of mothers with children aged 1-6 in Kazakhstan and how?

The second question was addressed by drawing on findings from Almaty and Turkestan focus group discussions; the factors affecting mothers' participation in paid work have been classified into three areas: the state, the market and the family (Chapters four, five and six). The quality of the state and the market affecting women's participation in paid work was used by Esping-Andersen (1990) in the analysis of the three regime types. The third sector, the family, was contributed by Lister (1994) who brought research focus to it by studying the role of it in defamilisation.

In terms of state-related factors, low compensated and long maternity leave, and the low quality and shortage of state-subsidised childcare were the main factors preventing mothers' participation in paid work.

In the labour market, the working environment is built around the ideal worker norm, which lacks the flexibility to meet the needs and preferences of working mothers. Contrary to the main discourse in the literature (Cebola et al, 2023; Tahmaseb-McConatha et al, 2023; Hanrahan et al, 2023), young women, instead of older women, experienced ageism at workplaces from employers and colleagues, who undermined their knowledge and skills and asked to do trivial tasks. This shows double-layered stereotypes, based on both gender and age, that are shaped by the predominant hierarchical and patriarchal culture in Kazakh society that puts more societal pressure on young women. At the same time, due to the special respectful status that mothers hold in the Kazakh culture, pregnant women and mothers of young children working in a traditional environment received support and loyal treatment.

In the family, women experience obstacles when trying to (re)enter paid work due to strengthened traditional gender roles driven by the resurgence of nationalisation and re-Islamisation in the post-Soviet period. The main message emphasised by the women was the strengthened tradition of a daughter-in-law (‘kelin’) being expected to be subservient to their husband's family. At the same time, women are assisted by detraditionalisation processes that serve as a counter to traditional gender roles and incentivise them to (re)enter paid work. They entail feminist ideas disseminated by New Media Technologies and financial necessity arising from a free market economy. Despite the traditionalisation of the Kazak society that results in the reinforcement of traditional roles of women, women benefit from traditional values. Paradoxically, women gain more independence and attain a higher level of defamilisation by engaging in social exchange with members of multigenerational households. Women provide services as wives and daughters-in-law to older people in the hierarchical structure of the family, but in return get support with childcare within the household and increased opportunities to enter the labour market. Women are also incentivised to participate in the labour market despite holding traditional gender roles. This may be explained by the fact that work can provide an escape for women from emotional and physical unpaid work expectations at home. Especially in multigenerational households, women bearing the lowest status and the youngest woman in the extended family as a daughter-in-law, have more burden of addressing the physical and emotional needs of older people. The extent of unpaid work exponentially increases if a family lives in rural areas with livestock and garden to look after and with no indoor water facilities in addition family members to take care of.

Some women might be interested in keeping traditional gender roles and complying with the traditional requirements of daughters-in-law with a long-term interest of dominating the family and gaining more decision-making power in the family, which is part of traditional gender values in the first place. While men are breadwinners and operate outside to make a living, women have more decision-making power in the household regarding daily affairs. This phenomenon has been coined as ‘Matriarchy in disguise’ that describes situations when daughters-in-law who are expected to sacrifice their professional development and ambitions for serving the needs of their husbands’

families gain more power and voice with age and experience as they turn into mothers-in-law themselves.

Pragmatic needs prevail over traditional gender values. This is an important finding that contradicts current literature claiming that people are becoming more conservative and adhering to traditional gender roles as a result of the re-Islamisation process since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kamp, 2016; Sultangaliyeva, 2015; Zhussipbek and Nagayeva, 2023; Khairullayeva et al, 2022; Kabidenova et al, 2020). Women who initially entered paid work due to financial necessities acknowledged the importance of financial independence and the decision-making role and control it gave them in the family. They referred it to the importance of education and developing professionally brought up from childhood, which could be explained by women's emancipation during the Soviet Union when women were required to get an education and join the workforce. Especially among Turkestani women, despite holding conservative values, financial needs incentivised them to enter the labour market. It might be suggested that conventional values such as more gender egalitarian roles in the labour market were forced by circumstances. Most women would not prefer to name it as feminism and gender egalitarian values due to the negative stigma attached to those concepts in Kazakh society.

International experience of travelling to foreign countries with more gender egalitarian values and lifestyles prompted men to change their conservative views on families and women's roles. They became more involved in household work and spent more time on cooking, childcare and cleaning. However, they are in the minority as two-thirds of people do not hold international passports in Kazakhstan (Tengri Travel, 2023).

7.1.3 Research Question 3.

- To what extent do family policies in Kazakhstan address the issues of low labour participation of mothers?

Based on the experiences of the women, work-family reconciliation policies in Kazakhstan support traditional gender roles and reinforce domesticated roles for mothers. These policies undertake little to address issues of mothers' low participation in paid work.

Despite the state's latest endorsement of extending maternity leave compensation from one to one and a half years, the rate at which it is paid changed only fractionally. Studies show that long, and poorly paid maternity leave does not improve women's status in paid work. On the contrary, it contributes to women's longer breaks from careers by delaying their return to work for an indefinite amount of time or forever (Bergemann and Riphahn, 2023; Ferragina, 2020; Mullerova, 2017; Schonberg and Ludsteck, 2014).

Paternity leave is not compulsory and transferrable between mothers and fathers in Kazakhstan, which means that women are more likely to take leave associated with childcare. The fact that some fathers use the paid time for unrelated activities such as establishing and developing business ideas or pursuing their careers suggests that policy aims and outcomes are not aligned.

Despite the implementation of the Balapan Programme aimed at expanding coverage of state-subsidised childcare across the country (Bureau of National Statistics, 2021), it did not solve the problems related to quality and shortage of childcare in large cities such as Almaty.

7.1.4 Research Question 4.

- Why do current policies fail to promote mothers' labour participation and how can these policies be improved?

The findings from this research suggest that work-family reconciliation policies in Kazakhstan intentionally domesticate women by providing little support with childcare and paid maternity leave and ultimately reduce women's opportunities to defamilised. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been insufficient increase in state funding that would reach the same degree as the Soviet Union (Fehlings, 2017;

Agrawal, 2008), and women expressed a lack of satisfaction with the amount of maternity leave payments and quality and quantity of state-subsidised childcare.

Firstly, the lack of state funding for social services and failure in addressing the needs of the family, women and children might be due to its non-democratic political form of the country. Democratic countries are more likely to hold accountability for societal issues and there is a positive correlation between democracy and funding into state welfare and the well-being of citizens (Guzel et al, 2021; Neff and Pickard, 2024; Bellinger, 2021). According to the report by the Freedom of House (2024), Kazakhstan has been concluded to be an authoritarian regime due to restrictions on freedom of speech and the government's weak capacity to protect civilians after adoption of restriction laws on journalists and deadly accidents in forest fires and coal mines in 2024.

Secondly, the state might be neglecting the needs of women and does not give them the priority due to decision-makers at the top managerial level being predominantly men with conservative values. Studies show that women in male-dominated areas particularly at the managerial level experience more challenges in their professional development and are expected to put more effort into their needs and voices to be heard (Glazebrook et al, 2020; Tabassum and Nayak, 2021; Lekchiri and Kamm, 2020). In Kazakhstan, the managerial level of state institutions predominantly consists of male officials (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022A).

7.1.5 Research Question 5.

- How does the concept of defamilisation help us understand the role of work-family reconciliation policy in helping mothers' employment in Kazakhstan?

These policies that are ostensibly aimed at supporting mothers of young children in their return to the labour market were found to be less helpful than their aims would suggest. Instead of freeing women up from childcare and family responsibilities to allow them to take part in paid work, the maternity and paternity leave arrangements and the poor quality and scarcely available childcare meant that women remained tied up to family

responsibilities. Therefore, these policies have limited effects on promoting women's defamilisation.

The financial situation in a family is a key determining factor in women's decisions that impact her defamilisation. Women with better access to financial resources seek support from their families, mostly partners, to outsource childcare from the private sector instead of relying on state-provided childcare. Women have limited defamilisation due to higher reliance on their partners. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds resolved the childcare dilemma by relying on multigenerational relations and commodifying their labour in the labour market and outsourcing childcare to the private sector. The labour market plays a key role in helping women to gain financial independence by commodifying their labour force to achieve better financial well-being. In both cases, it is evident that state services do not improve women's acceptable standard of living after having children and fail to achieve defamilisation. As a result, they compensate for insufficient state support by increasing reliance on family and the market to alleviate childcare responsibilities. However, they faced challenges in the private sector as private childcare had issues with providing quality and accessible services. Moreover, multigenerational relations caused issues for women as it created double unpaid work by putting women under pressure to be subservient to extended family. Also seeking support from within the extended family reinforced defamilsation as childcare was mainly done by other women within the household such as grandmothers. Hence, it results in familising mothers-in-law.

Issues with the quality of childcare and traditional and religious beliefs were among the main reasons for women's reluctance to rely on the private sector for childcare services. Women were left with no choice other than to have family to support with childcare responsibilities, and in most cases, it was women, either them or other female members of extended family, helping with childcare. While the social exchange between women and family members in multigenerational households increases women's opportunities to have fewer childcare responsibilities, on the contrary, it decreases family's defamilisation as childcare is carried out by other mostly female members within the family. Women's defamilisation was negatively affected as a result of relying on the extended family for childcare and the support was often gendered. However, this kind of

support coming from extended family might be a blessing in disguise as women may compromise on their decision-making power in family issues, especially in decisions relating to childcare.

While long and poorly paid maternity leave may affect women's defamilisation and keep them out of paid work for an indefinite amount of time, some women in the study spent maternity leave for career reinvention by seeking further education and professional training. They used this period of their dependency on the family to achieve independence in the long term. The fact that some women have resources to develop and progress educationally and professionally while being on maternity leave with their children while other women cannot do the same implies inequality in the potential levels of defamilisation of women in the future. Women who spent maternity leave acquiring new professional skills and knowledge would have higher chances of applying those skills in paid work in the future.

Paternity leave further decreased women's potential defamilisation as men spent leave from their main paid work on extended commodification of their work. It resulted in men progressing in careers at the expense of women's defamilisation and remained responsible for childcare during partners' paternity leave.

7.2 Contribution to Knowledge

Based on the findings from the focus group discussions in Almaty and Turkestan, three sectors of the state, the market and the family (Chapters Four, Five and Six) push women back to family and, thereby, result in women's and family's familisation rather than defamilisation. During pregnancy and the early period of motherhood, women seek help from the state for childcare support and compensated maternal and parental leave. Experiencing the state's lack of capacity to address mothers' needs, they turn to the market for support with childcare and/or more financial resources. Mothers face challenges to remain working in the labour market as the latter does not offer mother-friendly conditions for the commodification of their labour. Similarly, there are issues with private childcare provision such as high fees and poor quality that make it a difficult

alternative solution for childcare. Left with little support from both the state and the market, women are pushed back to the family, where they are further familised. Childcare is predominantly carried out by mothers, which decreases women's opportunity to lead a defamilised life, or by other female members of the household and extended family, which decreases the family's level of defamilisation. The unexpected finding is that when it came to the resonating lack of support mothers experienced from both the state and the market, the women expressed more expectations from the state rather than the market. Women expecting more support from the state might be explained by Kazakhstan being part of the former Soviet Union, which was known for its paternalistic state and wider coverage of social services including better-paid maternity leave period, accessible state childcare and holiday clubs for pupils. People expect the state to carry on providing a similar level of social services given that the government inherited and retained most of the Soviet policies but with much less funding. However, in terms of the issues experienced in the market, the women blamed themselves and their motherhood which took away much of their time and independence rather than seeing they are the result of the lack of flexibility, gendered biased norms and gender-based stereotypes in the labour market. It means that the women strived to adapt to the existing norms that are mostly fit for male breadwinners from traditional households or single childless female workers. After attempts of struggles to fit in, women saw the reason for it their young children and postponed their return to paid work for indefinite amount of time. It demonstrates the importance of cultural norms and women's low expectations when it comes to decisions related to defamilisation.

7.3 Policy suggestions

There are three main policy suggestions emerging from this study:

1. State should:

- Increase funding into state-subsidised childcare;
- improve quality monitoring of childcare both state and private;
- to provide training to childcare workers;

- Increase the number of female employees in civil service and provide mandatory training on gender equality;

2. Non-governmental organisations should be allowed more freedom for activities in volunteer work with helping to women and children;

3. More research should be conducted on women's studies and the state's performance through qualitative studies to give women a voice. It would serve as pressure for the state to retain its reputation and be more proactive in front of international organisations.

Taking into account that women in Kazakhstan might not be aware of policies and their citizenship rights and academic publications commonly read by small group of people, I am planning to disseminate the findings of my thesis among general public through non-conventional, from academic point of view, ways:

- Recording Podcast series for the LCARN (London Central Asia Research Network) in 2025;
- Writing posts and creating reels for social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok;
- Writing columns for blogs such as the SPA and Voices of Central Asia;
- Commenting events/issues/phenomena related to my topic in local Kazakhstani News outlets.

7.4 Future research

This research provides comparative studies of two cities Almaty and Turkestan in Kazakhstan. The two cities had different demographics where Almaty was more well-off and less traditional, and Turkestan was more influenced by conservative values and less developed economically. While the study is exploratory and demonstrates data from only two cities, it would be useful to expand the scope of the study in the future and include other cities in different parts of the country. For example, there are less well-off cities in the Northern region that are less conservative than Turkestan, or both more well-off and traditional cities such as Shymkent in Southern Kazakhstan.
It was evident from the research findings that policies contribute to familisation and increase women's dependency on their families. However, the research has not explored in detail what are the factors that influence the development and implementation of policies and impact of government officials behind the decisions.

This research would have never been possible without my personal background as the women I spoke to would not have spoken as freely with another researcher. Therefore, for future research, I would suggest involving researchers who are from the same background as participants: be it gender, motherhood status, ethnicity, place of birth or residency.

Based on the above-stated points, there are three areas suggested for future research:

- Enlarging the scale of study by including more locations throughout the country and applying focus group discussions. To draw a comparative analysis to explore similar or contradictory findings might be found in other regions.

- Adding intersectionalities such as different job sectors, age and the number of children to explore whether they produce repetitive patterns in the use of work-family reconciliation policy and the level of defamilisation.
- Expanding on the concept of defamilisation (Lister, 1994) by exploring further the impact of cultural and ideological factors in shaping the effect of state policies on women.
- Exploring research focusing on policy making processes, factors contributing to the state's decisions and conditions for the development of policies that promote women's defamilisation.

7.5 Conclusion

This thesis has studied how the concept of defamilisation explains women's experiences in combining motherhood and paid work and the parts played by the state, the market and the family in promoting or hindering women's independence from the family. The project started off with my own interest and prior experiences of reconciling motherhood and professional development – and was completed with 75.000-word project aimed at representing the voices of women. The study focused on demonstrating the role of three key sectors, the state, the market and the family, in assisting or hindering women in combining motherhood and paid work; whether work-family policies in its current form help women to achieve defamilisation by alleviating their childcare responsibilities, improving financial well-being and enabling them to make choices between family caring responsibilities and paid work or combining both.

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Appendices

Appendix A Participation Sheet

Participant Information Sheet & GDPR Privacy Notice

Section 1 - Participant Information Sheet

Date:

Title of Study: Factors contributing to and preventing mothers of children 1-6 aged from entering and staying in the paid labour market in Kazakhstan, and impact of the social policy, labour market and family institution.

Name of the Researcher: Moldir Kabylova

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide I would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. The researcher will go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of the research is to study the main barriers that mothers of children 1-6 aged in Kazakhstan experience when entering the paid labour market and reasons for it.

Why have I been invited?

You are being invited to take part because you are a mother of a child/children aged between 1 and 6 years old residing in Almaty or Turkistan. We are inviting 30 participants like you to take part.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. This would not affect your legal rights.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will have a meeting lasting about 1.5-2 hours with the researcher leading this project and other fellow female participants in the community centres located on campuses of the KIMEP and Yassawi Universities at convenient time to answer research questions and discuss the topic.

Expenses and payments

Taxi expenses spent at Kazakhstan currency tenge KZT to reach the destination of the meeting at will be paid by the researcher through Uber application. No money will be handed directly to the participants. The refreshments and drinks for the meetings will be purchased by the researcher by her own money.

Participants will not be paid an allowance to participate in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There will be no serious risks and disadvantages expected during participation in the project. The questions from the side of the researcher might lead to disclosure of private family issues which some of the participants might find uncomfortable and distressing. If this will be the case for you, you are free to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study without giving any reasons.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

We cannot promise the study will help you but the information we get from this study may help to raise awareness of the difficulties mothers of young children face in the labour market. More discussions and awareness about this topic on academic and professional levels might lead to introduction of improved governmental policies and better work regulations.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to the researcher who will do her best to answer your questions. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this by contacting the School Research Ethics Officer. All contact details are given at the end of this information sheet.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

The researcher will follow ethical and legal practice and all information about you will be handled in confidence.

If you join the study, the data collected for the study will be looked at by authorised persons from the University of Nottingham who are organising the research. They may also be looked at by authorised people to check that the study is being carried out correctly. All will have a duty of confidentiality to you as a research participant and we will do our best to meet this duty.

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept **strictly confidential**, secured within the University of Nottingham. Any information about you which leaves the University will have your name and address removed (anonymised) and a unique code will be used so that you cannot be recognised from it. Anonymised data may also be stored in data archives for future researchers interested in this area.

Your personal data (address, telephone number) will be kept for 2 years after the end of the study so that we are able to contact you about the findings of the study *and possible follow-up studies* (unless you advise us that you do not wish to be contacted). All identifiable research data will be kept securely for 7 years. After this time your data will be disposed of securely. During this time all precautions will be taken by all those involved to maintain your confidentiality, only members of the research team will have access to your personal data.

Although what you say in the interview is confidential, should you disclose anything to me which I feel puts you or anyone else at any risk, I may feel it necessary to report this to the appropriate persons.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without your legal rights being affected. If you withdraw then the information collected so far may not be possible to extract and erase after 1 month and this information may still be used in the project analysis.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be written up in Thesis at University of Nottingham and used to develop academic publications within 2-3 years after the study completed. A copy of published articles might be obtained from the researcher via email moldir.kabyl@gmail.com. You will not be identified in any reports and publications.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is being organised by the University of Nottingham and is being funded by the Bolashak Scholarship of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Who has reviewed the study?

All research in the University of Nottingham is looked at by a group of people, called a Research Ethics Committee (REC), to protect your interests. This study has received a favourable ethical review by the School of Sociology and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee.

Further information and contact details

Researcher: Moldir Kabylova, email address: moldir.kabylova@nottingham.ac.uk Mobile telephone numbers: +44 78448838918 (UK); +77054250188 (KZ)

Supervisors:
Dr Ruby Chau, email address: ruby.Chau@nottingham.ac.uk Office telephone number: 0115 84 68132
Dr Pauline Jas, email address: pauline.jas@nottingham.ac.uk Office telephone number: 0115 95 15425

Dr Melanie Jordan, Research Ethics & Integrity Officer, REC Chair & Associate Professor in Criminology. email: melanie.jordan@nottingham.ac.uk, +44 (0)115 74 87284/ 95 15410

Section 2

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data

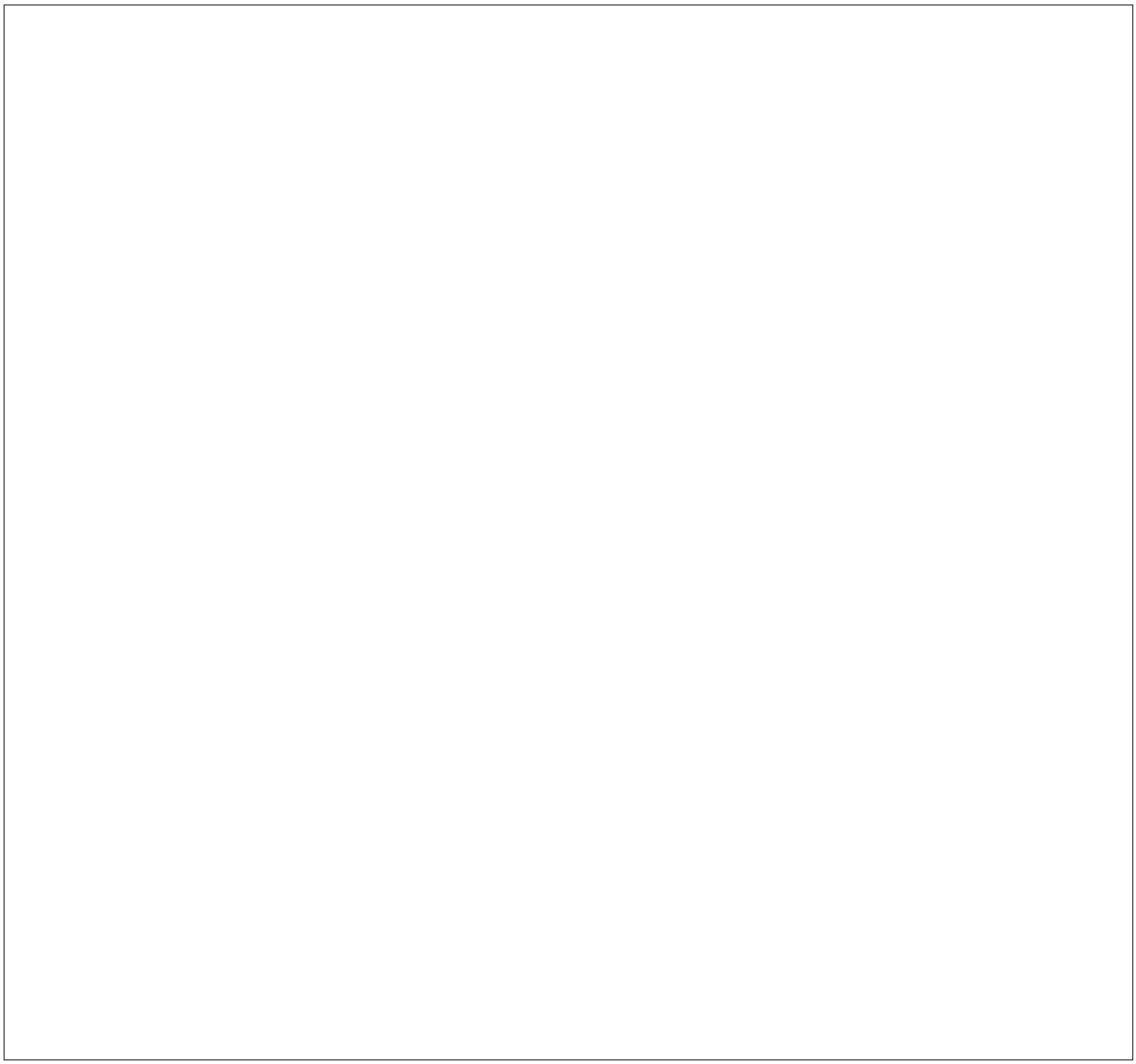
We collect personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter in our capacity as a teaching and research body to advance education and learning. Specific purposes for data collection on this occasion are to study experiences of mothers' of young children aged 1-6 in the labour market in Kazakhstan.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR

The legal basis for processing your personal data on this occasion is Article 6(1a) consent of the data subject OR Article 6(1e) processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest OR Article 6 (1b) processing is necessary for the performance of a contract OR Article 6 (1f) processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller Moldir Kabylova.

How long we keep your data

The University may store your identifiable research data for a minimum period of 7 years after the research project finishes. The researchers who gathered or processed the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Measures to safeguard your stored data include anonymisation of data.



Appendix B Participant Consent Form

School of Sociology and Social Policy
Participant Consent Form

Name of Study: A Focus group discussion and an Individual interview

Name of Researcher: Moldir Kabylova

Name of Participant:

By signing this form I confirm that (please initial the appropriate boxes)**:**	**Initials**
I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	
Taking part in this study involves an interview and a focus group that will be recorded using audio and written notes. Audio recordings, will	

be transcribed as text and the recording will be destroyed.	
That data from interview audio recordings may be transcribed by an external transcription provider (subject to a confidentiality agreement)	
Personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.	
My words can be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs.	
I give permission for the de-identified (anonymised) data that I provide to be used for future research and learning.	

I agree to take part in the study

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Signature Date

Moldir Kabylova

_____ _____ _____

Researcher's name Signature Date

2 copies: 1 for the participant, 1 for the project file

Appendix C Ethical Approval Form Reference: 2122-12-PGR

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Sociology & Social Policy
University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

Reference: 2122-12-PGR

10th December 2021

Dear Moldir,

Application for ethical review from the School of Sociology and Social Policy REC

Project title: Investigating the factors contributing to and preventing mothers of children 1-6 aged from entering and staying in the labour market in Kazakhstan and impact of the social policy, labour market and family institution.

The School of SSP REC has reviewed your planned project and can now give a Favourable Ethical Opinion (FEO); therefore, you now have ethical approval to commence your study, subject to the conditions and ethical processes outlined in your application being upheld. This Favourable Ethical Opinion is subject to you: adhering to the details specified in the application; securing local access approvals where required; complying with all applicable local policies and regulations, and any contractual and funder requirements; reporting any deviations and adverse events to this committee.)

Please note:

- that any substantial changes or deviations from the application's content and planned research will need to be reviewed by the committee prior to their implementation - please contact the REC Chair (Dr Mel Jordan) to debate the significance of the desired amendments;
- COVID: it is the researcher's / PI's responsibility to keep up-to-date with relevant Government, University and local guidelines/safety measures - please implement any changes as required. We strongly encourage researchers to undertake data collection online or via telephone where possible. If this is not possible researchers must follow the public health guidance in place at the time, including where necessary postponing fieldwork and/or seeking other means with which to collect/create data as appropriate and subject to REC (re)submission/approval;
- **Please re-read COVID declarations in the ethics application and the Fieldwork Record**, before you organise and commence face to face fieldwork;
- that research undertaken by UoN postgraduate researchers and staff is subject to a University mandated annual ethics audit process, whereby several studies per year are selected for audit.

Kind regards,

Dr M. Jorde

Dr Mel Jordan
Research Ethics & Integrity Officer, REC Chair, & Associate Professor in Criminology
+44 (0)115 74 87284/ 95 15410
LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk
nottingham.ac.uk/sociology