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# Factors contributing to and preventing mothers of children 1-6 aged from participating in the labour market in Kazakhstan

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**Abstract:** Mothers of young children in Kazakhstan experience challenges to do paid work as the result of flaws in the state policies, motherhood penalty in the labor market and cultural barriers in the family institution. Absence of parental leave for fathers, three years unpaid maternity leave and shortage of state-subsidized childcare services reinforce traditional breadwinner family institution where women are the main caregiver and increase gender inequality. The labor market factors preventing mothers from fulfilling their fullest potential are wage gender gap, discrimination, and employers' reluctance to hire women of reproductive age, and a lack of flexible work options. Within the family sphere, women in Kazakhstan spend three times more time on unpaid domestic work compared to men and mothers of young children are likely to have higher workload. The research aims to explore the main barriers preventing mothers of children 1-6 aged from participating in the labor market in Kazakhstan. The research applied the qualitative research method and conducted three focus group discussions among 15 mothers of young children residing in cities Almaty in Southern Kazakhstan. The results demonstrate that women face cultural and family barriers to do paid work in cosmopolitan Almaty and experience challenges to enter and remain in the labor market as a result of underdeveloped state policies and motherhood penalty in the labor market. Mothers of children 1-6 aged in Kazakhstan need sufficient number of childcare services for children aged under 3 subsidized by the state, flexible work schemes at workplace and policy incentives for fathers to take paternity leave.

**Keywords:** Employment; Maternity leave; Welfare state; Kazakhstan.

## 1. Introduction

The topic of women's work patterns during the period of their lives after they become mothers is important and constitutes a socially urgent issue in Kazakhstan because mothers of young children in Kazakhstan experience difficulties at work which impact their families, surrounding and society as a whole. There are family, public policy and labor market factors that make full-time paid work of mothers of young children hard. Within the family sphere, women in Kazakhstan spend three times more time on unpaid domestic work compared to men (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a) and women in families with young children are likely to have higher workload. Absence of parental leave for fathers, three years unpaid maternity leave and shortage of state-subsidized childcare services reinforce traditional breadwinner family institution where women are the main caregiver and increase gender inequality (Dugarova, 2016). This issue is exacerbated by the fact that men are paid 32,2 per cent more than their female colleagues for the same jobs and, as a result, mothers are more likely to rely on partners as the main providers and give up their work to look after a child (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019b). The labor market factors preventing mothers from fulfilling their fullest potential are discrimination and employers' reluctance to hire women of reproductive age, and a lack of flexible work options. For example, the unemployment rate among women aged above 15 was 1,0 per cent higher compared to men in 2019 (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a). The survey conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan among youth aged 15-29 in 2016 showed that 21,4 per cent of respondents experienced gender-based discrimination (Umbetaliyeva et al. 2016). In addition, a new Labor Code Law introduced in 2015-2016 has a shortfall that complicates the procedure of suing for discrimination and leaves space for corruption. In article 6, paragraph 4 of the Labor Code, judicial protection on the basis of discrimination is not guaranteed and protection from discriminatory conduct is not legally set up (Ryskaliyev et al. 2019).

This research aims to investigate mothers' participation in the labor market in Kazakhstan. By applying defeminization, it identifies factors that encourage and prevent their employment.

## 2. Body Theoretical background

Defeminisation theory will be used as the main theory in this research to understand the impact the welfare state of Kazakhstan is having on mothers-of-young-children's work patterns. Defamilisation will help to analyze a degree the public policy is playing in liberating women from family work so that they are able to participate in the labor market or other non-commodified activities.

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). Defamilisation policies might be categorized into two different types, which are "decommodified defamilisation" and "commodified defamilisation". Decommodified defamilisation refers to policy measures allowing a person to have a financially independent life regardless of his/her status in the labor market or family and is achieved through social security (Chau et al. 2016).

It can be argued that the welfare state in Kazakhstan encourages familisation through policies that feminizing parenthood. Long maternity leaves lasting up to 3 years where one year poorly paid and up to 2 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 labor 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 (Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, 2019b). The amount of maternity leave benefits paid unconditionally to all women for up to one year after the birth of a baby equals about 111,000 KZT, which is half of the average income (Egov, 2021).

It seems that the defamilisation is not a measure applied by Kazakhstan's welfare state as public policy does not free women from family work. Women are regarded as primary family carriers and secondary paid workers.

### 3. Women in the labor market in Kazakhstan

Low level of the defamilisation measures in the welfare state of Kazakhstan are worsened by gender inequalities in the labor market of Kazakhstan. This section discusses that motherhood and discrimination are the main causes of women experiencing difficulties in employment despite their degree of human capital being equal to men's.

Despite the fact that there is close parity ranging between 0,9-1,1 from pre-school to higher education level in educational enrolment between women and men in Kazakhstan, women are still paid 32,2% less than men in the labor market (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a). The human capital does not guarantee higher payments in labor market and employers might look at other criteria such as gender during recruitment, promotion, and evaluation processes. Gender parity index in educational enrolment into primary, middle, and high levels of education is 1, which signifies of both girls and boys apply to jobs after university completion with the same level of human capital (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a). It seems as women in Kazakhstan are willing to study and work, thereby invest in their human capital, but the long-term outcome such as wage gender gap and occupational segregation considerably differs from the starting point. This implies that particular factors such as motherhood and discrimination systematically take place along the professional path of women that causes disruption. It might be suggested that work disruptions caused by motherhood and traditional division of domestic labor substantially lower women's human capital, which in terms of education and skills begun on the same level with men. Discrimination might also explain gender disparity in employment despite women and men's similar level of human capital. These two factors of motherhood and discrimination demonstrates deception of human capital.

Data on gender statistics from the National Agency of Data of the Republic of Kazakhstan suggest that the country has a distinct divide in high-status and low-status jobs between women and men. For example, in decision-making positions such as head of universities and schools, principal board members of the National Bank, the Parliament seats, deputies of local state institutions and CEOs of businesses, share of women varies between 20 and 38 per cent (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a). In several areas women's representation is quite scarce with one female minister out of the total 17; 49 politicians in the overall 650; four female ambassadors out of the total 61; and 2 per cent female managers in defense forces (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a). In contrast, in the service sector, agriculture and judges about half of labor force are women equaling about 55, 42 and 50 per cent respectively (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a).

The labor market is separated into different segmentations not only based on gender, occupation, geography, but division of work might also be dictated by political factor. The Decree No.944 issued by the Minister of Healthcare and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2015 prohibits women from working in 229 professions, among which are a truck driver, welder, locksmith, boilermaker, miner, and driller (Adilet, 2015).

In Kazakhstan, considerable amount of 'reserve army' consists of women because of historically constructed perception of them and state policy that put them into category of second-class, low-paid, part-time, and insecure workers. Marx introduced the term 'reserve army' (1867), which he viewed as an inevitable outcome of capital economy, where workers less desirable to employers are forced out of the labor market contributing to formation of reserve army. According to Marx (1867), female labor constitutes cheap alternative to male work. Women today are still over-presented in jobs labeled as '5 c's' which stands for cleaning, catering, clerical, cashiering and childcare.

Share of women working part-time is 6,3 per cent compared to 4,1 per cent of men, and unemployment rate among women constitutes 5,3 per cent compared to men's 4,3 per cent (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a). Kazakhstan demonstrates the path dependence theory and application of some mechanisms inherited from the Soviet past. Path dependence theory is "that what has happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time" (Sewell, 1990:16). During the country's existence as a part of the USSR, despite women's educational and work progress, their pronatalist role was emphasized above other achievements and functions. For example, an abortion ban imposed in 1936, motherhood medals and social payments for large families with more than five children, a long 3-year maternity leave and state propaganda of romanticized 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. For instance, 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 responsibility. As a result, women are more likely to experience stereotypical attitudes, discrimination, and a complicated path in the labor market.

During the pandemic situation caused by the spread of COVID-19 virus, female workers' status of reserve army has been exposed. More female employees lost more jobs than males (Carli, 2020). Despite the ongoing detraditionalisation process in Kazakhstan due to urban educated middle-class citizens becoming more globalised and liberal, traditional gender roles still persist in society (Kabylova, 2022). Women's taking 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 2020, two out of five main reasons stated for unemployment during the pandemic are 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).

Women in Kazakhstan contribute enormously to the well-being of society by their hours spent on unpaid domestic work and family care, which constitutes 14,8 per cent of their twenty-four-hour day compared to 4,9 per cent of men's (Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan bureau of national statistics, 2019a). Women are also engaged in selling goods and providing beauty, nursing, catering, caring and tutoring services from their homes and by visiting. These jobs are unofficial as it is not recognized by the state and women's work is not protected by the job security laws and no contributions are made to their pensions.

## 4.Goals

Taking into account the persisting issues in terms of mothers' position in the labor market in Kazakhstan, the research aims to answer one general question, which is:

"What are the main barriers for mothers of children 1-6 aged in Kazakhstan to enter and stay in the paid labor market and why?"

and will attempt to find evidence-based explanations to four research questions, which are:

1. What factors are affecting the participation in paid work of mothers of 1-6 aged children in Kazakhstan and how?
2. How and to what extent do family policies in Kazakhstan address the issues of low labor participation of mothers?
3. Why do current policies fail to promote mothers' labor participation and how can these policies be improved?

## 5. Potential Contribution

The qualitative research will fill in the gap in academia about mothers' transition from maternity leave to paid work. The majority of current research conducted on female employment in Kazakhstan is dedicated to a topic of gender inequality and discrimination (e.g. Omarova et al. 2017; Khamzina et al. 2020; Mukhamdiyeva et al. 2019; Bidaishiyeva et al. 2018). There is a scarcity of studies based on primary data that would demonstrate obstacles women face in the labor market after having children.

## 6. Methods

The study applied the qualitative research method of semi-structured focus group discussion. The qualitative method has an interpretivist epistemology in terms of philosophical foundation because the researcher aims to derive subjective knowledge from respondents' replies. Interpretivist epistemology has been described as constructing dynamic and evolving knowledge from derived personal experiences, opinions, and emotions of individuals (Heath and Devine, 1999). Max Weber is one of the advocates of applying an interpretive approach to social sciences instead of a positivist based on facts and objectivity (Holloway, 1997). He viewed human experiences as valuable, irreplaceable, and too complicated to be simplified according to standardized general norms (Holloway, 1997).

Women were encouraged to discuss certain topics in groups which is known as focus group research method. Focus group discussion is a widely used qualitative approach to get profound understanding of phenomena in society (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). One of the main advantages of this research method is its cost-effectiveness since less time and resources are needed to conduct group discussions in comparison with setting up each interview individually (Morgan, 1996). Moreover, group discussion and interaction contribute to the creation of synergy among participants, which is stimulating them to reveal more information and enrich the conversation (Coenen et al. 2012). The researcher plays a role of background observer letting participants to engage in discussion rather than moderator or investigator questioning them (Bloor et al. 2001).

However, focus group research method might limit scope of received data as a result of some participants' unwillingness to express their opinions and experiences openly due to private matter of subject, natural characteristics of respondents or feeling intimidated by dominance of peers.

Three focus group discussions were conducted in Almaty in December 2021, where 15 women in total shared their experiences of employment after maternity leave. The participants have been recruited through snow-ball sampling and networking. All of 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. Almaty was chosen as a location for conducting focus group discussions and gathering participants because it is a metropolis with almost 2 million inhabitants, attraction site for work migrants from all over the Kazakhstan and, hence, focus group participants recruited from Almaty come from different social-economic backgrounds.

The results from focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis method. NVIVO software has been used to code the data and categorize it into different themes.

## 6. Results Social policy: state childcare and low parental leave payment

In terms of social policy realm, the main factors preventing women's employment after maternity leave that were mentioned the most by the focus group participants were acute shortage of state subsidized childcare facilities and low maternity leave payments.

According to all participants of the focus group discussions, they identified the issue of poor access to state subsidized nurseries. Although most of them registered their children from early age for state nurseries at a government's official website and placed them in a waiting list, the system demonstrated its ineffectiveness as the order in the waiting list has not progressed further. As one of the participants pointed out:

*“By the time by son turned 10 years old, his turn in the waiting list for the state childcare approached.”*

Moreover, all of the women who took part in focus group discussions confessed that they do not trust state childcare because they are underfunded by the state which is reflected in insufficient number of childcare workers, their low level of income and overcrowded groups of children. These factors contribute to questionable quality of children’s time spending at nurseries and lack of motivation to work and emotional burnout of childcare workers, which contribute to poor reputation of state nurseries. Several women stated that even if they had choice to allocate their children to state nurseries, they would still prefer private nurseries to take care of their offspring.

*“My child would cry refusing to go to the state nursery. Once we transferred him to the private one, he started looking forward to going there. Obviously, there was something wrong with the state childcare.”*

Furthermore, all of the focus group participants expressed their discontent with extremely low level of parental leave payments, which barely covers the monthly costs of baby necessities such as disposable diapers and solid food. When asked about the sufficiency of parental leave amount, all of the women gave negative reply and some even grinned considering the question ridiculous. It seems as the participants, who were going on maternity leave, did not consider parental leave payment as the reliable source of means, but rather relied on partner’s income.

Extremely slow pace of waiting list for state nurseries and lack of trust in state nurseries left all of the focus group participants no other choice rather than allocating their young children to private childcare services.

It is worth mentioning here that all participants were working women and their partners were employed as well, which allowed them to afford paying private childcare. Their financial position might be partly explained by their living in Almaty, the biggest city in Kazakhstan offering vast job opportunities. The issue of lack of state childcare would be more challenging for families from lower economic backgrounds as mothers would be expected to remain on maternity leave and take care of young children until they would reach school age. This factor would limit women’s career opportunities and deprive source of income.

## **7.Labor market: discriminatory questions, higher demand, compromising work and stigmatization of paternity leave**

Almost all the women from the focus group discussions except two, experienced discriminations at their workplaces from their employers, both before and after maternity leave, in a form of personal questions regarding young children. The questions asked during the job interview:

*“Seeing that you have three daughters, I bet you will for a baby boy after them and take another leave from work?”*

*“Who will be looking after your children when they are sick?”*

As a result of mothers being perceived to be less efficient workers and expected to perform poorly at workplace, several participants experienced managers putting higher demands for them. For example, one of the focus group participants was not allowed to take part in a conference due to the absence of a qualification such as a master’s degree. The decision was made by a woman in a top managerial position.

It is worth mentioning that it was women who showed the hostile reception and exaggerated testing of mothers of young children at work. This phenomenon might be explained by the “internalized misogyny” which is the concept of women distrusting, undervaluing, and despising each other and distancing from other women due to sexist and patriarchal beliefs that men are superior to women (Szymanski et al. 2009). According to the participants, those female top managers shared common characteristics such as working late hours described as “living at work,” being single, divorced or widowed and usually childless or with grown-up children. It is likely to send a discouraging message to employed mothers of young children that women with poor work-life balance principles and single relationship status as better workers and more deserving the managerial job positions.



The majority of the focus group participants emphasized the importance of work-life balance in work, which would allow them flexibility to spend more time with children. They prioritized time with family over money and were willing to work part-time for reduced income mainly because their husbands earned income sufficient to cover decent quality of life for the whole family. Only one woman from the focus group was forced to work full-time job involving long working hours despite having young children because of his husband's low level of income to sustain whole family.

There was an explicit expression of stigmatization of paternity leave among husbands, as far as women in focus groups were concerned. They claimed that their partners would not take paid parental leave for fathers even if it was accessible because their spouses considered childcare as women's job. Taking childcare-related break from paid work was perceived as damaging male's pride and honor, and not crucial enough to prioritize it over the role of a breadwinner. One of the focus group participants went as far as to comment:

*"For my husband, taking a paternity leave would equal the castration".*

None of the focus group participants witnessed male colleagues taking paternity leave except the one. According to Ariel (name altered), her co-worker faced bullying, misunderstanding and lack of support from colleagues and was pressured to quit the job by the manager when he decided to go on paternity leave and help his terminally ill mother and a wife who had just given birth to a fifth child. Unfortunately, his uneasy private life circumstances did not convince the top managers of the company to grant him paid temporary absence from work despite his outstanding professional skills and long-term working experience. For the company's decision-makers it was preferable to lose the valuable employee rather than temporarily paying parental leave for less than a year and keep the employee.

## **8. Family institution: husband not sharing the unpaid work, discouragement of career aspirations and low confidence after maternity leave**

All women from the focus groups except one who confessed that their husbands did not share unpaid domestic work such as childcare, cleaning and cooking with them. Instead, men expect their wives to do home chores and be the main carriers of children despite women's employment status. As Zhako (name altered) emphasized the phrase said by her husband, which had been repeated by other respondents as well:

*"If you will work, you should bear in mind that you must keep up with household work and childcare on your own".*

Similarly, as emphasized by another participant:

*"When I worked full-time and studied at university part-time at the same time, I cooked and cleaned the house after long working day because I knew I was responsible for those duties. Mother-in-law, brother-in-law and husband did not help".*

Families involved in the study shared one common feature of strong sense of patriarchy in their relationships with partners. There was an explicit distinction between male and female tasks in family: earning income and working full-time belonging to the former and cooking and cleaning duties associated with women's job. For example, Merel's (name altered) husband would either wait for her to return home from work very late and remain hungry or have dinner at restaurant but not cook himself. Another participant's husband was against the wife's aspirations to get post-graduate education:

*"It's too late to study. It should have done before marriage. Now you have to take care of children and house. You are a general manager of the house number X (referring to their home). This is your main job".*

## 9. Discussion

The state, instead of putting in place policies that would provide mothers systematic support and an incentive to be employed, reinforces traditional gender roles where woman is a main carrier of children and do most of the house chores.

State-subsidized childcare that women found to be acutely insufficient, underfunded and of poor reputation plays a crucial role in liberating women from unpaid domestic work and allowing them to have free time for paid work. Limited access to affordable quality childcare creates class division between families and contributes to wage inequality between rich and poor. Mothers, whose husbands possess sufficient means to pay for private childcare, are more likely to enter the labor market. On the contrary, women from poor background have less choice in terms of childcare, and, unless they have grandparents who are willing to babysit a child or paid work that can cover the private childcare fees, are more likely to remain on maternity leave for longer and have less perspective in professional development.

Nevertheless, financial need provides strong incentive for mothers from working class to enter the labor market in early stages of maternity leave and gain financial independence. As the current study showed, double-breadwinner households are more common among working class families and women from less affluent background are more likely to progress in their career. In contrast, women in the focus groups, who had more opportunity to do paid work due to their partners financing certain comfort in their lives such as personal drivers and private schools that allowed more free time, were not in full-time paid work and did not demonstrate willingness to change it.

Moreover, the parental leave payment in Kazakhstan does not allow mothers to have socially acceptable standard of living without help of family and paid work. It was rather viewed as pocket supplementary money than substitute to salary. Low maternity leave payment reinforces traditional gender roles where women after birth of children need working men for survival. Single mothers find themselves in more challenging situation where low maternity leave payment and limited access to state-subsidized childcare force them to consider paid work as the only source of self-reliance and make them socially and financially vulnerable residents of society. Poorly paid parental leave also refrains fathers from considering taking paternity leave and reinforces childcare as female poorly paid job.

Family policy in Kazakhstan does not have defeminization approach to mothers because it does not assist women with young children to have socially acceptable standard of living without reliance on other people. On the contrary, family policy in Kazakhstan contributes to facilitation: making mothers more dependent financially and socially on partners and other family members, which prints them from entering and staying in paid work.

## 10. Conclusion

This paper made an attempt to understand the obstacles women face in the labor market in Kazakhstan when transitioning from maternity leave to paid work. The data collected from the mothers of young children residing in Almaty city, demonstrates that the state reinforces the traditional gender roles by imposing long-term poorly paid maternity leave, non-existent paternity leave and a lack of state-subsidized childcare. Moreover, there are barriers such as discrimination in the labor market based on gender and patriarchal traditions in family institution that restrict women's professional development and career aspirations. It could be concluded that the state of Kazakhstan applies familisation rather than defamilisation principle in the family policy because the state does not take active role in helping women to liberate them from family obligations for them to be able to participate in paid work. The study has number of limitations such as small sample size and respondents residing in two locations in the South. It would be beneficial for objectivity to increase number of focus group participants and widen the geographical scope of focus groups in order to draw comparative analysis between different regions.




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