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**O. G. Isupova**

## **BABYSITTING PRACTICES AND ATTITUDES IN KAZAKHSTAN**

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## BABYSITTING PRACTICES AND ATTITUDES IN KAZAKHSTAN

*Olga G. ISUPOVA<sup>1,2</sup> — PhD in Sociology, Professor, School of Transformative Humanities; Professor, School of Humanities  
E-MAIL: [bolkab@yandex.ru](mailto:bolkab@yandex.ru)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4189-2063>*

<sup>1</sup> Almaty Management University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

<sup>2</sup> Narxoz University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

**Abstract.** The topic of this paper concerns delegated mothering in the context of Kazakhstani society, which is highly gender-normative, characterized by an almost unique combination of rather high average income, average level of economic development, high level of female participation in the labor force, and high fertility. This situation motivates mothers in this country to search for various ways of delegating mothering, including using nannies' and babysitters' services.

We aimed to study the barriers and triggers for using this method of delegation in the context of persistent traditional gender norms and ideals. We did this using qualitative methodology: semi-structured interviews with mothers, potential mothers, and babysitters, 29 in total, in two main cities of Kazakhstan, Almaty and Astana. The interviews were then analyzed using qualitative thematic text analysis methodology.

Our main conceptual frame was «care loop», formulated by Sekeráková Búriková in 2019, which presents relationships between a mother and other carers (other family members or paid nannies) for her child as a continuum and not a strictly divided dyadic model, since we found the former to be more relevant in the studied context.

We found that, albeit barriers to using nanny services are high in the context of traditional

## УСТАНОВКИ И ПРАКТИКИ В ОТНОШЕНИИ НАЙМА НЯНЬ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ

*ИСУПОВА Ольга Генриховна — PhD в социологии, профессор, Школа трансформационных гуманитарных наук, Алматинский университет менеджмента, Алматы, Казахстан; профессор факультета гуманитарных наук, Университет Нархоз, Алматы, Казахстан  
E-MAIL: [bolkab@yandex.ru](mailto:bolkab@yandex.ru)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4189-2063>*

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена делегированному материнству в контексте казахстанского общества, которое является в высшей степени гендерно-нормативным и характеризуется сочетанием довольно высокого среднего дохода, среднего уровня экономического развития, высокой доли женщин в рабочей силе и высокой рождаемости. Эта ситуация мотивирует матерей искать способы делегирования материнства, включая использование услуг нянь и сиделок. Мы стремились изучить барьеры и триггеры для обращения к этому способу делегирования и делегирования как такового в контексте сохраняющихся традиционных гендерных норм и идеалов.

Мы использовали качественную методологию полуструктурированных интервью в двух крупных городах Казахстана, Алматы и Астане, с матерями, потенциальными матерями и нянями (в общей сложности 29 человек), которые затем были проанализированы с помощью качественного тематического анализа текстов. Основной концептуальной рамкой стала «петля ухода», сформулированная З. Секераковой Буриковой в 2019 г. Она представляет отношения между матерью и другими опекунами (другими членами семьи или оплачиваемыми нянями) для ее ребенка как континуум, а не как строго разделенную диадическую модель. Мы обнаружили, что, несмотря на высокие барьеры к использованию услуг нянь в контексте тра-

Kazakhstani society with its strict gender ideals, need is higher and the market segment of care is already quite developed but unregulated by the state, all nannies do not have any specialized official status, including the agencies which help to find them, thus creating numerous vulnerabilities for mothers, children, and hired carers as well. Still, most agents of this area of social interactions do not want stricter regulations due to expecting higher prices in this case and preferring to keep to the perception of the domain of mothering delegation as something with blurred boundaries and not characterized by strictly divided roles.

**Keywords:** babysitting, fertility, family roles, mothering, childcare, cultural change

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## Research Question and Problem Statement

Traditionally, the society of Kazakhstan is highly gender-normative [Kabatova, 2022: 36]. Girls and boys from a young age are taught to behave by their sex [ibid.]. Boys are taught to be brave and confident. Girls are taught to be modest, humble, and calm [ibid.]. Those cultural norms and traditions assign gender roles: from very childhood, girls are “trained” to be good “kelins” (daughters-in-law), which means to do all the household duties and bear children. Boys are taught to be the breadwinners of the family and not to do any housekeeping.

These cultural norms have been the highest pressure since females started to actively join the labor force. In post-Soviet times, they are expected to work and do all the household duties and provide child care. According to the Bureau of National Sta-

диционного казахстанского общества с его строгими гендерными идеалами, потребность в них выше, а рыночный сегмент услуг по уходу уже достаточно развит, но не регулируется государством, няни не имеют какого-либо специального официального статуса, в том числе аффилиации с агентствами, которые помогали бы их найти, что создает многочисленные уязвимости для матерей, детей и наемных нянь. Тем не менее большинство агентов этой сферы социальных взаимодействий не хотят более строгого регулирования, ожидая в таком случае более высоких цен и предпочитая сохранять восприятие области делегирования материнских обязанностей как чего-то с размытыми границами и не характеризующегося строгим разделением ролей.

**Ключевые слова:** присмотр за детьми, рождаемость, семейные роли, материнство, уход за детьми, культурные изменения

**Благодарность.** Автор выражает благодарность студенткам факультета социологии Назарбаев Университета в Астане (Казахстан) 2023—2024 учебного года Айну́р Сапаровой, Аян Тлеповой, Алуа Сулейменовой, Анель Бакаевой и Тамиле Туркменовой, которые оказали помощь на начальных этапах исследования, найдя участников, проведя интервью и оказав содействие в подготовке обзора литературы.

tistics of Kazakhstan, working women spend 3 hours and 36 minutes on household duties and childcare per day. While working men spend only 1 hour and 9 minutes, 3 times less than women. So, as in most other cultures, females in Kazakhstan experience a double burden, a phenomenon when women have to balance employment and unpaid housework [Chen et al., 2018: 1], albeit in Kazakhstan, it has its cultural specifics. In addition, nowadays, there is a socially desirable model of “successful success” for everyone (self-realization and development). Not surprisingly, the number of female graduate students increases. In 2024, there were 56 % of female graduates in Kazakhstan, while in 2022, there were only 49 % and in 2023 55 %, so numbers are slowly increasing<sup>1</sup>. Women tend to receive higher educational degrees 2 times as often as men<sup>2</sup>.

Women intensely participate in paid work (women’s share of the labor force in Kazakhstan is 49.1 % in 2023)<sup>3</sup>. So, on the whole, Kazakh women are quite modernized. But fertility is high for such a level of development; the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 3.05 in 2022 [Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2022], and fell to 2.96 in 2023<sup>4</sup>. Worldwide, the more educated females are, the fewer children they have [Pradhan, 2015]. Hypothetically, because the traditional “obligation” to have children is still supreme in Kazakhstan for women, despite the education level and employment, they continue to give birth to children at relatively high rates.

Summing up all the points, there is a trend for women to work, receive education, and self-develop, but Kazakhstani females still have more children than those in other countries with similar normative development<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, there is a need for help in childcare from kindergartens, relatives, or babysitters. In the article by Abilmazhitova<sup>6</sup> on the official website news “TengriNews”, currently, there is a big demand for babysitters in Kazakhstan, as “A babysitter is required” is one of the most popular ads on specialized personnel search sites.

We understand the issues we study in this article through the concept of working mothers’ delegation of core mothering tasks to nannies or kin. Since mothers’ participation in the workforce in Kazakhstan is high, and fertility is also high, such delegation becomes necessary due to the strain in work-life balance associated with such a lifestyle for individual women (as analyzed in a different context by Alpino and Luppi [Alpino, Luppi, 2020]. This is reinforced by the gaps in state childcare [Resvushkina et al., 2024], as detailed below in this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, Statistics of Education, Science and Innovation. URL: <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/stat-edu-science-inno/publications/277816/2025> (accessed: 02.08.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Bureau of National Statistics (2023). Graduate Students. URL: <https://stat.gov.kz/api/iblock/element/51392/file/en/> (accessed: 02.08.2025).

<sup>3</sup> Labor force, female (% of total labor force) — International Labour Organization (ILO), type: estimates based on external database; United Nations (UN), publisher: UN Population Division; Staff estimates, World Bank (WB). URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=KZ> (accessed: 02.08.2025).

<sup>4</sup> Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Bureau of National Statistics (2023). Age-Specific Fertility Rates. URL: <https://stat.gov.kz/api/iblock/element/40687/file/en/> (accessed: 02.08.2025).

<sup>5</sup> There is a very good analysis of this demographic anomaly in the article in Forbes: Alzhanova A. Why Is the Birth Rate so High in Kazakhstan? URL: <https://forbes.kz/articles/pochemu-v-kazahstane-takaya-vysokaya-rozhdaemost-73337d>. (In Russ.) (accessed: 02.08.2025).

<sup>6</sup> Abilmazhitova A. “They Demanded to Serve and Forbade Drinking Their Water.” Revelations of Kazakhstani Nannies. 2023. URL: <https://tengrinews.kz/article/trebovali-prislujivat-zapreshchali-pit-vodu-otkroveniya-1912/>. (In Russ.) (accessed: 02.08.2025).

In the late 1980s—early 1990s, researchers started to pay attention to the necessity of delegating mothering to a third party in many working mothers' lives, since a growing part of mothers in the West were working by that time [Graue, 2008]. Later, the concepts allowing for understanding processes developing in this situation were formulated, such as “Shadow mothering”, “Competitive mothering” / “competitive care”, and “care loops” [MacDonald, 2011; Cox, 2011; Sekeráková Búriková, 2019, 2023].

“Shadow mothering” helps to comprehend nanny-mother accountability, power, and resistance issues in the light of the intensive mothering ideal, which a working mother feels is impossible to adhere to and tries to accomplish through the delegation to a nanny. Class and ethnicity effects are very important in mother-nanny dynamics [MacDonald, 2011].

“Competitive mothering” and “competitive care” likewise link mother employment of nannies/babysitters to class anxiety, gendered guilt, and the construction of mothers' status through delegation [Cox, 2011]. These models better suit the Western context, where a nanny and a mother often are seen as clearly distinguished and only actors, accomplishing childcare, while in Eastern Europe and post-Soviet space, there is rather a continuum of carers where boundaries are blurred and the exclusivity of carers is less certain.

“Care loop” model [Sekeráková Búriková, 2019, 2023] argues to decolonize the Western dyadic model of the mother and nanny, calling for attention to multigenerational/family-embedded delegation [Goodall et al., 2020], which is claimed to be especially relevant in the post-Soviet/post-socialist context. This model connects gender division of labor with kin/nanny intersections, situating motivations for paid childcare within both social policy “care gaps” and cultural preferences for mother-like care [Sekeráková Búriková, 2019, 2023]. According to this concept, there is no strict border between nanny work, occasional babysitting, and using kin help, and all these areas of delegated motherly care is unregulated and therefore make all participants — mothers, carers, and children vulnerable. We find this concept particularly relevant to the situation in Kazakhstan and proceed from it as a conceptual frame.

Researchers in post-Soviet states do pay attention to the studied topic. Recent work by Resvovushkina et al. [Resvovushkina et al., 2024] describes how urban middle-class families revive and adapt “female assistant” practices due to insufficient public childcare, economic pressures, and complex gendered family expectations. Such a family assistant usually is a young girl from not very close kin who helps with children and household duties, in exchange for the possibility to live in a family that she cares for in a bigger city. Often, she is a student at the same time. This is a very good example of how informal networks of care lack boundaries between familial duties and paid care work, and also sheds light on the issues of trust and gender roles: a female carer, preferably related by kinship, is preferred. However, such a carer is not always available. Resvovushkina and co-authors emphasize that delegation of childcare in Kazakhstan is shaped by the conflict between traditional gender norms (the expectation of maternal presence) and practical need, often causing emotional discomfort but rationalized as necessary for career or income generation.

Two recent Russian papers [Sizova, Korenkova, 2020; Blednova, Bagirova, 2022] are relevant as well. They speak about similar issues: mothers delegating to relatives

(especially grandmothers), balancing traditional maternal responsibility with pressures for gender equality and return to workforce; and the increased use of paid services (including babysitters and nannies), where the decisions are shaped by cost, trust, perceived quality, and social expectations. Gender ideals (especially that of “intensive mothering”) and emerging egalitarian rhetoric create internal and social tensions around delegation decisions. A woman is expected to work and wants to work, while feeling able to rely on the male partner in childcare only partially, in the best case. Female kin members are not always available.

In the case we study, the decisions are made within a similar context, with the only difference that culturally traditional gender roles are still stronger in Kazakhstan, and a man is rarely considered the main child carer.

This study explores the following research question: how do barriers and motivations for hiring a nanny or babysitter function within the shifting landscape of Kazakhstani society, where women navigate both the traditional expectation of raising multiple children and the modern pressures of pursuing work and career?

We have researched this issue in a regional aspect, trying to understand whether there is a difference in the attitude towards babysitting in Astana and Almaty cities, the Northern and Southern capitals of Kazakhstan. Almaty is located in the more traditional South of Kazakhstan, but at the same time, it is more multinational than Astana, so it is not clear in advance how and in what respect practices and attitudes are different in these two cities.

### *Fulfilling all roles*

After finishing their education, many women in Kazakhstan start integration into the labor force, walking up the professional career ladder. Once they get married and give birth to children, many find themselves torn between house duties and work obligations: employers fail to see the energy- and time-consuming nature of unpaid labor, while familial responsibilities have no one to cover for women [Kuzhabekova et al., 2017]. In comparison with male employees, female workers tend to substitute their free time with child and elderly care, which puts more work on women's shoulders and leaves little time for self-care and development [Yanovskaya et al., 2020].

Despite a double-shift lifestyle, studies show that women do not bargain professional hours with domestic tasks, meaning they work as much as their male counterparts but compromise their remaining day hours with unpaid labor [ibid.]. There is a three-year maternity leave in Kazakhstan, but only the first year is compensated by the state, which encourages women who have jobs with high salary, all single mothers, and women whose husbands do not earn much, to return to work as early as they stop receiving childcare leave benefit [Akiner, 1997; Dugarova, 2016]. Monthly payment allotted by the government fails to cover most of mothers' pre-birth salaries [Dugarova, 2016]. Mothers believe that paternal leave is unlikely to be practiced even if it were paid because of how it is “stigmatized” as inflicting on masculinity [Kabylova, 2022]. Fathers receive no allowance from the state, which also negatively affects their willingness to be involved in childcare [Dugarova, 2016]. Such gender differences affect employment positions and professional paths: mothers, reluctant to take risky job tasks in public spheres and leadership opportunities, end up taking

lower-paid jobs and find themselves in slowed-down professional growth. This forms a new modern version of the so-called glass ceiling for educated mothers [Kuzhabekova et al., 2017]. In addition, some women take on more difficult and time-consuming assignments at work, eventually learning to manage their professional and personal life at the cost of overall overwork and self-exploitation [Ibid.]. There is a probability that mothers who manage to grow professionally use alternative ways in coping with the double-burden: hiring domestic workers, babysitters, or seeking help from familial relations [Brück et al., 2013].

#### *Co-residence: Grandparents as babysitters.*

One of the cultural aspects of marital life in the Kazakhstani context is a shared residence of a married couple with the husband's parents. In other words, it is common for Kazakh women to live under one roof or near an older generation [Rezvushkina et al., 2024]. Co-residence can also be shared with the woman's parents, especially by divorced or widowed women who left the residency of in-laws. Co-residency does not necessarily affect grandparents' willingness and ability to take care of their grandchildren. In some cases, a feeling of being one kin brings some benefits for employed mothers: grandparents can be eager to take care of their grandchildren while parents are at work. However, as noted by Posadas and Vidal-Fernandez [Posadas, Vidal-Fernandez, 2013], women who seek free help from parents or in-laws tend to be mothers from lower educational backgrounds and struggling financially to provide for their children. Receiving childcare help from parents is often short-term and occasional, as women perceive this job as mothers' responsibility [Rezvushkina, Karipbayev, 2021]. Understanding of childcare as one's responsibility and personal duty is peculiar to grandparents as well, especially to grandmothers: as women, elderly women find themselves obligated to help their daughters or daughters-in-law with children according to gender norms they acquired through their motherhood [Lee, Bauer, 2013]. Thus, mothers-in-law often take on some tasks of child-rearing before and after childbirth [Woollett, Dosanjh-Matwala, 1990].

In other cases, young mothers find themselves in the position of double-care work, where their responsibilities lie beyond childcare and involve caregiving for parents-in-law [Landmann et al., 2017]. Very often, there is little benefit from patrilocal residency and more domestic tasks, leading to conflicts in social roles, as women become responsible for family care and professional work at the same time [Padma, Reddy, 2013]. To ease social role strains, women might find it advantageous to hire domestic workers, including babysitters.

Even though grandparents try to help their daughters-in-laws in private sphere, so they could have more connection with grandchildren [Lopata, 1999], imposing of gender norms and occasionally misunderstood perceptions of familial relationships could worsen informal childcare situation: in-laws could potentially persuade daughters-in-law to give birth to more children, putting more burden on newly employed mothers, they also can establish their own rules of childcare to which young mothers would prefer not to agree [Waheed et al., 2020]. In addition, changeable mother-son and mother-in-law — daughter-in-law relationship dynamics in the household responsibilities context could create a hostile environment, creating even more strained rela-



tionships, causing women to seek babysitting from their parents or look for paid workers [Fingerman, 2004].

### *Other alternatives for childcare: kindergartens and specialized institutions*

In contemporary Kazakhstan, kindergartens have become one of the main centers for school preparation and introduction into the social world [Needham et al., 2018]. Nurseries and kindergartens in Kazakhstan accept children aged 1 to 6 years old, which gives more opportunities to mothers to return to work<sup>7</sup>. However, the waiting list for publicly funded kindergarten entrance is often endless, which creates a need to look for alternative support [Ibid.]. Some parents end up bribing responsible actors to pay for a place in the kindergarten or send their children to the more expensive private ones [ibid.].

According to the National Education Database, in 2022, there were 5,101 private kindergartens in Kazakhstan out of a total of 7,880. More than half (451,504) of all preschool-age children (878,739) are educated in private kindergartens<sup>8</sup>.

## **Methodology**

### *Data collection*

We aimed at exploring mothers', future mothers', and babysitters' perspectives on babysitting. The main method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews with different sets of questions for mothers, self-proclaimed future mothers (stating that they want to have children in the future), and practicing babysitters.

Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants. Their texts were later analyzed using thematic qualitative text analysis.

### *Sampling*

The study is targeting babysitters and Kazakh mothers who can afford babysitters; the research sample is not representative of the general population and covers participants from economically mobile and rapidly developing cities such as Astana and Almaty. Contrasting the geographical location of two cities could potentially show differences in babysitting practices and attitudes between North and South Kazakhstan. Mothers that married and gave birth before 20 were not included in the study as Kazakhstani context due to lack of education of this group and traditional structure of the family there is higher possibility that they might have less powerful position in the household and are less likely to be economically independent enough or professionally mobile to have a bargaining power to insist on hiring a babysitter [Kabylova, 2022]. We used snowball sampling through researchers' networks and the contacts from the sites where mothers and babysitters try to find each other.

We intended to collect half of the interviews in Almaty and half in Astana. In normative aspects, these two cities are the trendsetters, so we assume that social norms

<sup>7</sup> On Approval of the Concept of Development of Preschool, School, Technical, and Professional Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the Years 2023—2029 (2023). [Information System on Legislation Adilet [Justice]]. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2300000249>. (In Russ.) (accessed: 02.08.2025).

<sup>8</sup> In Kazakhstan, the Number of Private Kindergartens Is Greater than That of State Ones. <https://kazaknews.kz/obrazovanie/v-kazahstane-chastnyh-detskih-sadov-bolshe-chem-gosudarstvennyh/> (In Russ.) (accessed: 02.08.2025).



modernization in the country is likely to start from there. We attempted to interview 5 mothers, 25—45 years old, 5 future mothers older than 19, and 3—5 babysitters of any age in each city. As a result, we collected 29 interviews with 4 babysitters in each city, 4 mothers in Almaty, 5 mothers in Astana, 5 future mothers in Almaty, and 7 future mothers in Astana (the detailed table with participants' characteristics is in Appendix). We aimed at mothers and future mothers with higher education or being enrolled in higher education currently, and work/career oriented. We did not set any quotas on marital status and number of children; as a result, one of the mothers in the sample was divorced, and 4 of the future mothers were married. Most mothers in the sample had 3—5 children, and two had 1 child only.

## Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were saved in separate sheets with indicators such as participants' numbers and interview date. Anonymity of the participants was preserved. The interviews were transcribed in full using Trint software and then analyzed qualitatively (coding and analysis of all codes from all interviews, with subsequent coding when necessary) using Atlas.ti software. The current article will attempt to explain differences and trends discovered during analysis. Coding categories were performed in-vivo, then codes were united into themes, main discovered themes were the issues of trust and vulnerability of mothers, nannies and children (including unregulated character of this market, motivations and barriers for using nanny services, cultural ideas concerning mother's presence near a child, state childcare gaps); role of a nanny in the family; and criteria for hiring a nanny). All these coding categories formed a basis for empirical analysis of the interviews presented in this paper.

## Results and discussion

Our study brings about contradictory results concerning normative acceptability and attitudes towards practices of babysitting in Kazakhstan society. On the one hand, many participants state that babysitting is widely used and in high demand on the market (mentioned by all nannies and about half of the mothers in both regions):

*It's very common now. Mothers who are just giving birth need help. They hire nannies who take the child for walks and bathe them at home. Some mothers are first-time mothers... It's hard for them, and they need help. (Babysitter, Astana, N 3)*

State kindergartens generally are available not earlier than at the age of 3, nurseries are not numerous, therefore the niche for care for children from 1 to 4 years is partly filled by routinely used private kindergartens, but, according to the interviewees, many mothers need childcare earlier than that:

*A year and a half... to sit at home... on benefits, and then what should I do... a child at three years old is only accepted into kindergarten? You also have to live without benefits. So they go to work. They give it to private kindergartens, [there — O.I.] they take one and a half years olds... (Mother, Astana, N 4)*

Many parents, in addition, do not trust kindergartens since they want to avoid exposing or prefer low segment nannies to even private kindergartens to avoid exposing a child to infections too early:

*Many parents do not trust kindergartens. There are cases when they beat children... And many worry that the child often gets sick when he goes to kindergarten... [...] Some people cannot afford, for example, an expensive kindergarten. At the same time, they can't get into the state kindergarten, so it's easier for them to find some poorly educated girl or, conversely, take a retired woman who will agree to look after a child for little money. (Mother, Astana, N 1).*

On the other hand, normative barriers to using these services are significant even in those who use them intensely. These barriers include fears that nannies could abuse children, steal property, leave the house and children unattended, that a child will grow up as a “nanny's child”, etc.

*When parents devote little time to the child, and he mainly grows up with nannies, I think that this is also not entirely correct. (Future Mother, Astana, N 7).*

*My friends have a fear that the nanny might just leave the children at home and leave, if she didn't like something... that she could steal, perhaps she could do something to harm the child... (Mother, Almaty, N 2).*

Still, motivations to use babysitting are even stronger than these fears and vary from necessity (situation of divorced working mother of 4 children living far away from relatives) to the need for temporary relaxation of a mother:

*Well, probably the popular word now is burnout. There is such a thing when it seems that strength is running out of you. So I wanted an assistant, in particular, a nanny, who could be completely entrusted with the child... (Mother, Astana, N 1)*

*From a psychological point of view... Six months passed after I gave birth, and I could no longer be at home. I wanted to do something... Of course, there was a financial reason, too. (Mother, Astana, N 2).*

Some women speak about their own negative experience with nannies as children (being beaten, or just being in a situation of “cold care”):

*To be honest, I don't trust nannies. I had nannies as a child, and it wasn't a very good experience... Mom had to go to work... Some students didn't care; they didn't look after me and my brother. There were nannies with their children, and they brought their children to our house and often scolded them... I believe that nannies, like teachers, need to undergo a psychological test. For emotional stability... the main thing for me is that my child is safe, that he is fed. (Future mother, Almaty, N 4),*

*As a child, I was left with a nanny. The nanny beat me twice, beat me well for no reason... of course, after that I hated the nannies... because such an incident happened to me. (Future Mother, Astana, N 3).*

Others are afraid young nannies will always be looking at the telephone instead of playing with children:

*I chose a nanny through naimi.kz, in the application... She spends very little time on the phone herself... all this time, I never saw her talk on the phone or call anyone. When she comes to us, she just puts the phone on charge and doesn't touch it. I like it. (Mother, Almaty, N 2).*

All participants refused to hire a man as a babysitter due to cultural views based on current gender roles and expectations, according to which men are not brought up to be able to do any care work:

*[A man] as a nanny, like a job, then probably not. I'm even afraid. (Future Mother, Astana, N 6);*

*In the case of Kazakhstan, it is not entirely safe... we all know what happens to children and that you can't always trust the male gender in the CIS countries... (Mother, Almaty, N 2).*

As a result of the combination of factors described above, the main requirement for the nannies (according to both mothers and babysitters) is that a worker should be kind. Professional skills and even the health of a woman are of much less importance:

*Some nannies graduated from university, but are not at all competent in some matters... one can, of course, say that they should be given a chance, and young ones, they should gain experience... And there are women who... due to circumstances, they did not receive an education or received an incomplete education, but they sincerely love children. (Future Mother, Astana, N 5).*

*Yes, it happened. Only recently. One parent called, the child's mother, and asked if I had medical cards, certificates... I'm doing it now because my other clients didn't ask about this, since I have little work experience. (Babysitter, Almaty, N 4).*

However, although in the more expensive segment, and hiring a permanent babysitter, parents ask for proof of lack of infections, psychic illnesses, and criminal record, they most often do not require anything like that from a person who will care for their child on an hourly basis:

*Often, there is fluorography. And I directly asked her to go for one. I pay for laboratories and tests myself. (Mother, Astana, N 1).*

Likewise, while looking for a permanent nanny, mothers express preferences concerning the age and education of a nanny (preferring a degree in education or nursing,

the latter in the case of younger or special needs children, they also prefer Kazakh-speaking nannies.

*I needed a Kazakh woman so that my children could speak Kazakh. (Mother, Astana, N 1).*

*Because of the individual approach. You trust one person, your only child... for example, my mother-in-law. She works in a kindergarten. And she doesn't have time... in the main kindergarten, not everyone has enough attention in terms of development. An educated nanny can do this. (Future Mother, Astana, N 6).*

When they hire a babysitter for several hours, all this is not important. Probably this is because hourly services are, or seem to be, cheaper; in this case, the clients allow themselves to have only the very basic needs. And the most important need here is (basic) safety of a child:

*While I'm cleaning, so that the child doesn't get into the kettle of boiling water, does not climb over the fence, go out into the street, I don't know, does not pick up a knife and start cutting something. Here, the safety of the child is my top priority... cleanliness, punctuality, and, naturally, love for children [are important for a nanny too]. (Mother, Astana, N 1).*

Accordingly, women from 25 to 50 are preferred, but very young girls from 16 years old are not. Work as hourly babysitters quite often. They start while not yet having any medical certificate and acquire these, as well as recommendations/work experience, though this early activity is hourly babysitting, which later, after acquiring all this, could be transferred into a permanent position:

*It was a very long time ago when my daughter was just born. The first nanny, whom I hired hourly,... then became a permanent one. And she worked the longest. (Mother, Astana, N 1).*

Age preferences have clear local specifics: mothers (especially younger) often prefer nannies who are not older than themselves, since if this is not so, there is a danger that a nanny “to whom I pay” might start behaving “like my mother-in-law”, dictating a mother what to do, while the market situation expectations are that the hierarchy will be the opposite:

*I would prefer from 30 to 45... So that we have a clear age limit... Well, perhaps this is a myth, but many adult women can violate boundaries... (Mother, Almaty, N 2).*

In the context of the “care loop” concept, this can mean decentralization of the power hierarchy about child care issues, in cases where relatives help, and additional motivation to use the services of hired workers, where the mother has a more definite priority right to make decisions.

Still, if a babysitter is professional, an age of 45—60 years is also very welcome: “they have experience and still have energy”:

*I've been divorced for four years. My children have grown up: my daughter is 19, my son is 12... It's good to work with children in the sense that they have a pure soul... [I advise how to] put to the potty and how to wean from the breast... (Babysitter, Astana, N 3)*

Very often, parents want a nanny who has her own children, but who are not already young and do not require care, since the clients believe that this means they have experience in childcare:

*I rejected if there are small children... a child can get sick at any moment... so that either there are completely grown-up children, or there are no children. (Mother Astana, 1).*

On the whole, the market of babysitting is underdeveloped, since the majority find and offer services through sites such as youdo, olx<sup>9</sup>, or even Kaspi<sup>10</sup>. All these provide no guarantee of the quality of service. Both nannies and clients can find themselves in a situation where they are either required to do something other than what they promised, or do not receive nanny service at all when needed and agreed. However, this arrangement without guarantees is considered to be cheaper, since, as was mentioned many times in all interviews where this topic was discussed, the existing agencies are often also not official and do not provide reliable guarantees of quality of services, but still take their fees. But this is also associated with numerous risks for both sides: nannies prefer not to take any offers from men, being afraid of sexual abuse in strangers' homes:

*I first look at their photo and immediately ask for the address. How old is the child? I found out that it's my parents writing to me, or that it's some kind of scammer. (Babysitter, Almaty, N 4).*

Nannies might not be fully paid, and might be required to do work they did not agree to. We were told about one situation when a baby was left with a nanny for a month while the mother disappeared; parents' risk that their children might get infected by a stranger babysitter, or not be properly cared for. Accordingly, many participants expressed a need for more regulation in this market, but they would prefer something like a trade union, self-organizations of the nannies, and not the agencies. To a big part, this is because clients are not willing to pay too much since they are not rich.

Only women with extensive relatives' networks, younger, poorer, and having fewer children, can afford to use relatives' help in babysitting.

*[With my first children] I was young and my salary was small. I wouldn't be able to hire a nanny, and my relatives helped. (Mother, Astana, N 4).*

In our sample, there were just a few women like that. In all other cases, for various reasons, the tendency was that first children are cared for by grandmothers (mother

<sup>9</sup> <https://youdo.com/> and <https://www.olx.kz/> are online services where you can find workers of any kind, and people there advertise themselves.

<sup>10</sup> <https://obyavleniya.kaspi.kz/> — a bank online service with the same purpose.

or mother-in-law), sisters or other relatives, as helping hand to a mother, but younger children of older mothers required nannies support almost irrespectively of a mother income or lifestyle — because they were already older, tired, working, or because they needed to pay attention to their older children. Of course, if they were still poor in this situation, they would not be able to use a nanny service; but we were told in several interviews that since now they are “richer”, it would be inappropriate or even shameful to ask relatives for help when they can afford hiring a nanny.

## Conclusion and Broader Impacts

On the whole, our research shows that the norms concerning babysitting in two main cities of Kazakhstan now presuppose acceptance of this service, though barriers are still huge for many mothers and especially potential mothers. However, a combination of persistent high fertility and modernization in Kazakhstan makes the nannies' services highly demanded, and the market is growing. Our research provides qualitative evidence on the specifics of this market functioning in two main cities of Kazakhstan. In Almaty, the situation is more diverse and multinational; at the same time, in the South of the country, both fertility is higher than in the North, and gender ideals are more traditional. In Astana, the majority of both nannies and their clients, including potential clients, are ethnically Kazakh; in Almaty, we found the demand among the ethnically Kazakh women, and nannies and babysitters are of various ethnicities. It might be since fertility is higher among Kazakhs, and some of the large families are quite well-off, while the need and desire to work as a nanny is more representative of the general population of Almaty, which is very multinational. In Astana, the population is more ethnically homogenous, and there are many jobs occupied by women in civil service (city specifics), and in medicine and education, as everywhere. These jobs are characterized by an average level of salary and the necessity to return to work relatively early after birth. These conditions create demand for the affordable segment of the babysitting market or of budget-friendly nanny services, which fill the gap in state childcare policies.

In both cities, the more children there are in the family, the higher the need for income generation and the share of this generated by a woman, the higher the probability that the family will use the services of a nanny. Kazakhstan seems to largely rely on market solutions in the domain of childcare, since childcare leave is paid only until a child reaches one year of age, and state kindergartens are scarce, and if available, most often from the age of 2 or even 3 years. A gap between paid childcare leave end and usual kindergarten start creates a solid market niche; at later ages, nannies are often required to accompany children to and from school, and to and from various study groups, and to sit with them when they are sick. Much less often, and by richer citizens, babysitters are required to allow non-working mothers to relax, to have some time of one's own, but this is not the main segment.

Cultural norms that a woman should be able to manage everything herself are blurring, partly because now fewer young families live with the older generation, thus both having less help from and less obligation towards them. In such a situation, normative pressure is less direct as well. In addition, migration to the larger cities often makes help from extended family less feasible. Barriers associated with fears are

still strong but might be relevant mainly until the 3<sup>rd</sup> child is born in the family, or until a divorce or other situation which might force a mother to go to work when a child is still very young.

We found that our main conceptual framework of care loop [Sekeráková Búriková, 2019] is very relevant in the Kazakhstani context, since women strongly prefer mother-like care and not a nanny as a “third parent”, as is specific for more Western models [MacDonald, 2011; Cox, 2011]. Here, nannies and babysitters form a continuum with kin members who also help in childcare, but are not always available to every mother. Boundaries between the mother’s care of a mother, sometimes delegated to kin, and at other times to the hired babysitters, are blurred. Permanent nannies might grow from such occasional babysitters, and the majority of mothers prefer to consider themselves the main responsible person in the area of childcare, even if the delegation of mothering in their situation is intense.

The babysitting market needs regulation to make it less risky for both sides; however, both sides are afraid that regulation might make services unaffordable to the majority of clients. This constitutes another case of the vulnerability studies in delegated childcare [Goodall, Cook and Breitzkreuz, 2020].

The presented study poses a significant field for further research that could reflect complex dynamics in the area of motherhood, gender roles, and employment managed by Kazakhstani mothers with the help of delegation of mothering. The need to obtain economic independence in a highly competitive economy, older parents’ dependency on adult daughters-in-law’s housework, growing number of cases when free informal childcare from relatives is not available, and motivation to have a career constitutes a problematic situation in which women become motivated to hire a babysitter and start to have means for that due to their activity on labor market. In a broader sense, increasing demand for babysitters could reflect changing ways of compromising Kazakh gender roles, showing women’s increasing agency in adapting and changing assigned social functions as a mother, daughter, and employee.

The research also presents the importance of an often-overlooked narrative approach, which gives voice to economically active women from diverse backgrounds: single mothers, divorced wives, mothers with more than two children, and female workers to whom they can delegate part of their domestic duties as well. Showing experiences and lifestyles of mothers could potentially present valuable data to official institutions and policy makers, as diversity in the mothering experiences indicates the importance of a careful and more comprehensive approach towards motherhood support from the state.

This is qualitative research, and its results cannot be generalized to a larger population of Kazakhstani or even the population of Almaty and Astana. This research was done to generate insights into the area of attitudinal change in the area of delegation of mothering in a society going through changes in family life, a society where gender roles of women now include both work responsibilities and still expectations of relatively high fertility. Further, maybe quantitative research in both cities or maybe in a country on the whole, is needed to get representative data on the issues of attitudes and practices in using nanny service and delegated mothering on the whole in the context of gaps in childcare policy and new expectations from women.



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## Appendix

### Sample description

Babysitters_ Astana	Babysitters_ Amaty	Parents_ Almaty	Parents_ Astana	Future Mothers_ Astana	Future Mothers_ Almaty
1. 29 y.o., higher education, unmarried, no children	1. 21 y.o., unmarried, university student, no children	1. 40 y.o., 4 children, running business, higher education	1. 30 y.o., married, running business, 2 children	1. 23 y.o., married, pregnant, finishing higher education, planning to work, has work experience	1. 25 y.o., higher education, working, unmarried
2. 24 y.o., second job as babysitter, higher education, married, no children	2. 18 y.o., college student, unmarried, no children	2. 23 y.o., 1 child, unfinished higher education, working part-time	2. 41 y.o., 5 children, married, not working	2. 22 y.o., unmarried, running business, higher education	2. 23 y.o., married, no children, working, master student
3. 43 y.o., divorced, 2 children (youngest 12 y.o.), higher education	3. 42 y.o., higher education, divorced, 3 children	3. 38 y.o., 3 children, married, working	3. 30 y.o., 3 children, higher education, temporarily not working	3. 21 y.o., married, higher education, working part-time	3. 21 y.o., master student, working, unmarried
4. 26 y.o., 4 y.o. child, running a business, nanny agency (informal) as a second job, married	4. 19 y.o., unmarried, university student, no children	4. 38 y.o., 3 children, higher education, working (childcare leave)	4. 37 y.o., 4 children. Physician, divorced	4. 25 y.o., married, working, higher education	4. 21 y.o., unmarried, higher education, working
			5. 29 y.o., married, 1 child, PhD student	5. 22 y.o., unmarried, higher education, master student, working	5. 23 y.o., higher education, working, unmarried, no children
				6. 24 y.o., PhD student, not working, married, pregnant	
				7. 21 y.o., higher education, working, unmarried	