

BOUTIQUE OWNERS IN NUR-SULTAN: THE THORNY PATH TO SUCCESS
FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

СОБСТВЕННИКИ БУТИКОВ ГОРОДА НУР-СУЛТАН: ТЕРНИСТЫЙ ПУТЬ
К УСПЕХУ ЖЕНЩИН ПРЕДПРИНИМАТЕЛЕЙ

НҰР-СҰЛТАН ҚАЛАСЫНЫҢ БУТИК ИЕЛЕРІ: ӘЙЕЛ-КӘСӘПКЕРЛЕРІ
ҮШІН СӘТТІЛІККЕ ЖЕТЕЛЕЙТІН ҚИЫН ЖОЛ

by

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Abstract

Many people believe that shuttle trade does not exist anymore and it is a thing of the past. Shuttle trade as an activity in which individual peddlers buy goods abroad and import them for resale in local markets and street shops, was one of the main achievements that created millions of jobs and ensured relative stability at a time of uncertain 1990s. Today's shuttle trade exists under the guise of various types of business enterprises and legalized entrepreneurship. Sometimes it is still the only income source for many households of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. This thesis asks what the effects of shuttle trade have been on the personal lives of merchant women in Kazakhstan. I focus on the narratives of women and their own evaluation of the impact of trading on their lives. This study focuses on the experience of the women who got involved in shuttle trade after the collapse of the Soviet Union and their perspective on that experience from today's standpoint. It reveals the losses and challenges that women faced in their lives as merchants. This topic is interesting not only from the perspective of assessing the situation of free market trade activities after the USSR demise, but also from the perspective of analyzing the experience and stories of those merchant women. In this paper, women express their views and attitudes toward their business, life, work, family and also how their life perceptions changed over time. These women were the ones whom, with their hard work, physically created the capitalist market, sometimes without any knowledge and tools. Their contributions to the social and economic development of the country remain highly relevant. I find that despite benefits of shuttle trading for women including financial independence, freedom, and/or social influence, it has also significant costs and brings some regrets. By traveling the road from the small-scale petty trading to successful and legal business ownership, women traders contributed and in some ways shaped the market economy of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. This study will add value to the knowledge of shuttle trade process not from the economic perspective but from the socio-cultural sensitivity. It would be in interest to those who are interested in gender, sociology, culture, to

learn the experience of merchant women from their own viewpoint t and understand the role of women in a patriarchal society as Kazakhstan.

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Note on transliteration

The Russian and Kazakh words in this thesis were written by using ALA-LC system, which is a set of standards for Romanization¹. ALA –LC are the initials of the American Library Association and the Library of Congress. This system is used in representing the bibliographic names by the British Library, North American Libraries and in publications of English speaking countries.

¹ The table can be seen <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/romanian.pdf>

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Until the end of the 1980s, the word "shuttle" (*chelnok*) in Russian meant either a part of a sewing machine or a spaceship. But by the early 1990s, the word acquired a new meaning as a name for people who travelled to buy "consumer goods" abroad and then resold them in their homeland. In the situation of the consumer goods deficit, inflation and economic crisis, shuttle trade has become a source of new jobs, affordable goods, and currency. It was the shuttle traders, also known as suitcase traders, who brought in their huge checkered Chinese bags the newly fashionable clothes of the 1990s.

Who could become a shuttle trader? Anyone. Trade became an occupation for almost all the segments of the population. Younger scientists and teachers, single mothers and fathers of families, nurses and housewives all started looking for where to buy cheaper and how to sell it at a higher price. When in the late 1980s the "Law on Speculation²" was taken out of the USSR criminal code, trade became available to virtually everyone (Polyakov, 2014), while the opening of borders and the total deficit within the country pushed people of various professions and ages to start their entrepreneurial career.

The post-Soviet suitcase trade was mostly practiced by women, rather than men. According to local Central Asian cultural ideology, men were perceived as breadwinners and family bearers, while women were supposed to stand behind acting as careful mothers and wives. Consequently, these stereotypes prevented most women from professional growth and made them opt for low-level jobs. The semi-legal nature of shuttle trading was understood as unworthy and unprestigious for the masculine nature of men (Mukhina, 2009). From this perspective, the only way to survive and sustain their household economics for many women was to start to travel abroad in order to buy goods and resell them locally (Cieslewka, 2014; Mukhina, 2009). As a result, there was a rise of so called "shopping-tours", in which people took

² Zakon RSFSR from 27.10.60 " Ob utverzhdenii ugovnogo kodeksa RSFSR" can be seen [here](#)

trips buying goods at low and resell them at high prices (Kaiser, 1997; Cieslewka, 2014). In this way, a small-scale trade business became feminized (Kaiser, 1997). Despite that Soviet people's attitude toward market traders and street vendors was negative there was no alternative choice for many women but to sell the commodities and goods to maintain their livelihood.

The high visibility of Kazakhstani women in the bazaar and trade sectors contradicts the cultural and traditional patriarchal norms of Kazakhs, according to which women should be mainly involved in the domestic sphere, following the Islamic canons (Werner C. , 2015). Cross-cultural studies of gender ideologies illustrate that the work performed by women, like household stuff, children care, maintenance of relations, although vital, but not regarded as an important work (Werner, 2015). So, the case of shuttle traders or women's trade activities clearly represents that women in patriarchal culture as of Kazakhstan are deeply immersed with gender inequalities and their work is mostly devalued in comparing with the men's. Still today, most women are forced to act as breadwinners in their families, however, their roles remain traditionally marginalized.

1.1 Statement of purpose

This study focuses on the personal experiences of women who got involved in the shuttle trade in the 1990s and eventually succeeded in their business. I am interested in the upper class segment of the market as a place of work for women. I explore the main motivations and challenges they have faced on their way to success and understand how their work influenced their social position in society. The important part of the study is an evaluation of women's experience and success from their own perspective, as it sheds a different light on their stories, without which the study would not be complete. This study also assesses the importance of trade, as a household survival strategy and a tool for women empowerment in a society, the influence of trade occupation on women's lives, and on the relation with their families. I am also interested

in how women's earnings can have any effect on the existing patriarchal social structure of Kazakhstan. The women's own analysis and their own perceptions of their work and place in society, as well as their life stories, are worthy of acknowledging in this work. I found it very interesting, as many existing studies on the nature of shuttle trade are focused on the impact of shuttle trade on the development of market economy in countries of the former Soviet Union. For instance, Kaiser's study (1997) focuses on the rise of the informal sector in Uzbekistan, while Anna Cielewska (2014) describes the bazaar economy in Kyrgyzstan. Another work "Women and the birth of Russian capitalism by Irina Mukhina (2014), comprehensively explains the history of shuttle trade in Russian state and adds the stories of merchant women occupied in small scale trade to identify the changes in trade. Also, Werner in her study (2015) in Shymkent region of South Kazakhstan, acquaints the reader with the order in local market of Shauildir, and demonstrates how trade affects on the everyday lives of local people and how the households are constructed around the market. Spector in her work on Almaty bazaars (2008) depicted the order of how Kazakhstani market is functioning. In this regard, I was very interested on the other side of market, on the people who work in trade, without whom the economic transformation would not be possible and learn how trade became the inimitable part of their lives.

1.2 Methodology

In this study, I aimed to find out to what extent the post-Soviet shuttle trade changed the lives of the women and affected society— so I engaged in qualitative research, specifically interviewing shuttle trader women. During my fieldwork, I conducted seven in-depth interviews with the citizens of Nur –Sultan, former Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan.

The stories of seven women from Nur-Sultan (Astana) trade malls cannot illustrate the full picture of the existed situation after the Soviet Union dissolve, particularly since Nur-Sultan (Astana) was never considered as the largest commercial center of the country, like Almaty or Shymkent. However, it can give us an idea on the effect of the shuttle trade on the lives of the

women who started from “nowhere” (from small towns or villages of the South of Kazakhstan) with very limited resources and managed to move their business to the new capital.

I purposefully decided to focus on the success stories of women who got through the thorny path from an inexperienced shuttle trader to a successful business owner. My participants are aged between 45 to 55 years old women and are currently occupied in the trade of branded and lux textiles from Turkey and/or Italy. I am interested in the upper class segment of textile trade as a place of work for women, as this sector of market is mostly unpopular and neglected when talking about the trade business among women. It is known that it is easier to sell cheap and mass market textile rather than branded and lux type clothes that are associated with high price and high quality, which can be the determinant factor in attracting as well as distracting consumers. Each of my informants has more than 15 years of experience in a shuttle trade. It is also important to highlight that each of them has own fashion stores with lux segment clothing from Turkey and Europe, particularly Italy. It is particularly interesting to see how these women from the perspective of sellers reach their consumers and ensure the stability of their businesses.

1.3 Data collection

In order to recruit participants for the study, I used an approach of purposive sampling technique, which is also known as judgment selective or subjective sampling. The first and biggest challenge was to find participants, as I found out that those who match interview criteria are busy and will not read the research advertisements. I informed all my friends, including from social network applications as Facebook, VK and Instagram. Finally, one of my friends who studies in Moscow, told me that her aunt could match the study criteria. In this way I found my first respondent. In addition, she was the one who directed me to my second respondent. Here I need to state, that it was hard to appoint time with each of them, as they seemed very busy with their shops and customers. Therefore, firstly, I wanted to take interview in their shops, but after first 30 minutes I revealed that it is too distractive, as they were not able to focus on my questions due to the. Other participants were found in the same way, as my second interviewee. I

was forced to ask the participant if they could give contacts of any merchant whom they know, based on the criteria of the study. My semi-structured in-depth interviews were organized around five topics: a) general social demographic information; b) information about the attitude of an interviewee to her job; c) interfamily relations; d) information about personal self-realization; e) information about social system changes. Interviews were conducted both in Kazakh and Russian languages. Parts of the interviews were recorded, while other parts were written down as notes. As the interview questions included question that required response on the personal parts of their past lives, two participants during the interview asked to not record their interviews.

1.4 Social portraits of my informants

Portrayals of seven merchant women are presented here to explore the effect of trade on the lives of women and its implication for a larger society.

The first, Svetlana, by passport Sovetkul, is a 57-years old woman who is an example of a successful business owner of a chain of boutiques offering top-end lux quality clothes, shoes, and accessories for women from Turkey. She retails them in the three cities of Kazakhstan: Almaty, Nur-Sultan (Astana) and Merke. She was born and raised in Merke, and trained as a school math teacher. In 1995, she got involved in trade activities at a local bazaar in Merke selling homegrown potatoes. Later, she switched to the sale of fruits and vegetables, but found it physically difficult to sell them, so she moved to shuttle trade bringing different goods and reselling them at the local bazaar of Merke. She lost her eldest daughter in a car accident, who was married and had a little daughter. Her other two children are not yet married which is a cause of her worry. Nowadays, her business is stable and brings good profit. Twice or three times a year she personally goes to Turkey, to Istanbul to bring the new collection of clothes for her shops. Despite the technological advancements, she prefers to choose the design and quality of textile of garments in person. The half of the responsibility for her business she delegated to

her daughter. She moved to Nur-Sultan (Astana) because of her health problems, particularly asthma, which she believes started long ago, when she had to work at the bazaar standing outside despite the heat or cold.

The second informant of my study, Rakhilya, is a 53 years old good-looking women, who owns the fashion boutiques of Turkish brand clothes, similar to Svetlana's. Her retail shops are located in the main cities of Kazakhstan, Almaty and Nur-Sultan (Astana). In the 1990s, she had a job as a nurse in Shieli village of Kyzylorda oblast which she left for maternity leave and never returned. Her journey in trade sector starts in 1993, when she moved to Pavlodar to sell onions grown by her younger brother at their father's field. She is the only informant who had the experience in bartering deals. From 2000s onwards she started to engage in shuttle trade activities and sell various commodities from China and later from Kyrgyzstan, Dordoy. She is a divorced woman who has one adult daughter now studying abroad.

The third participant is Tamara, a 51 years old local woman. She is in the business of retailing furs, leather, coats and other outer garments from Turkey, Italy, and Greece for both women and men. She has two stores in Nur-Sultan, one in Almaty and one in the city of Aqtobe, in the West of Kazakhstan. She has a higher education as a zoologist, but could not find job during the crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her friends earned extra money selling different cheap goods brought from Bishkek. Following the lead of her acquaintances, Tamara decided to try her luck selling things at the bazaar. In her first trip to Bishkek's Dordoy bazaar she brought hats, as the winters in Aqmola were fiercely cold. Tamara is also a divorced women, has two adult children, one boy and one girl.

The fourth participant is Klara, mother of five children. She is a 51 year old women from Taldyqorgan city, South Kazakhstan. Her career in trade business started in 1997, when she went to China to assist her husband in his business. She is the only participant whose husband has also been involved in trade for over 30 years. He is one of the biggest importers of toothbrushes from

China, Urumqi in Kazakhstan. Starting from 1997, she sold bed linens, towels and other various items for bathrooms. Only after 2005 she switched to the shuttle trading. Her current business is very similar to Rakhilya and Svetlana's. She has two fashion stores with female garments from Turkey. Her two out of five children are studying abroad, on a paid basis. Klara express gratitude to her husband for his constant support.

The fifth participant of the study is Alma, a 53 years old woman from Zhanaqorgan, Kyzylorda region, south Kazakhstan. Alma is owner of a chain of boutiques that offers lux and branded clothes, shoes and accessories for man in Nur-Sultan and Almaty. She started her trade activities in 1995 with selling her own hand knitted sweater by her mother. She is also a divorced woman and has two adult sons, who help her in her business.

The sixth woman is Zaure. At 47 years old, she is the youngest woman among other participants. She is a successful business owner of two boutiques that offer Italian clothes, suits, accessories and bags for both women and men. She started doing shuttle trade in the beginning of 1995, when she brought clothes for Moscow with her neighbors. She was born and raised in Shymkent, get married at 19 years old and today she has four children. She and her husband moved to Nur-Sultan (Astana) in 2010. Her husband is an eye doctor in one of the hospitals of the capital city. Two of her eldest children are studying abroad, on a paid basis. Zaure seems satisfied with her work and market situation. Moreover, despite long work hours, she believes that her business involvement has only positively affected her family relations.

The final participant of the study is Ayzada, a 49 years old woman, successful business owner of Italian boutique of female garments. Her involvement in shuttle trade started in 1997, when she moved to Almaty from a small town near Shymkent, seeking a better livelihood. She divorced her first husband in 1997, when they had a 1-year-old son and is now remarried. Her business is located only in Nur-Sultan (Astana), but she also has another types of business besides the Italian clothing boutique. Moreover, Ayzada has an active social position and does

charity for single mothers, who were thrown in tough life situations. Currently she is a mother of three children and lives with her second husband. Ayzada states that she is a 100% self-made woman.

The main similarity between these women is that all of them except one are from the rural parts of South Kazakhstan and all of them migrated to the capital city of Kazakhstan. All of them specialize in retail type of trading that offers lux quality clothing, some participants offer for men, while other part for women and one participant for both. All of the participants are Kazakh women, apart Tamara, who has Tatar roots from her mother's side.

Chapter 2. Is the collapse of Soviet Union a loss or blessing?

- Mom, let us play a game of shops, you will be a seller and I will be your customer, I want to buy an ice cream, will you give me an ice cream please?

- I cannot get you an ice-cream, my dear...

So, begins the story of Svetlana who spent 25 years of her life in shuttle trade.

Svetlana, by passport Sovetkul, is a merchant woman under her 60s, who recently moved to Nur-Sultan (Astana), capital of Kazakhstan. She was born and brought up in a small town near Taraz, in the South of Kazakhstan, where she spent most of her life. Before the collapse of USSR she worked as a math teacher at a local school. She and her three siblings were raised in a Kazakh traditional manner, where honesty and respect to elders were the main component of child upbringing. Today she has a nice big apartment in Nur-Sultan (Astana), four well-run clothing boutiques in three different cities and two adult children. She is an authoritative sympathetic woman with a few “worry lines” on her forehead, around her eyes and lips. It is hard to imagine what a thorny path that she had to walk in order to get where she is now and to feed her children. As Svetlana recalls from her memory, there was a time when she could not afford to buy her little daughter even a small piece of ice cream, not to mention other items. The deprivation of the 1990s affected not only the household where Svetlana lived, but all the people across ex-Soviet Union countries. As she says:

- Mass unemployment, households that attempted to survive and keep their livelihoods with nothing but “black tea and black bread” [*qara nan men qara shay*] on their tables...for mere existence

These words depict the conditions of Svetlana and of many households in the 1990s. Life has thrown Svetlana and her family not only into the crisis of the regime collapse but also made her feel the taste of pain of losing a child in a car accident and family break up. Despite these blows, Svetlana was able to find the strength to stand against these challenges

and move forward. Certainly, the level of financial success she could achieve does not give her full sense of contentment, as her success in shuttle trade came at a huge personal price.

In this chapter, I write about the role of ethnic Kazakh women in a shuttle trade focusing on the challenges and difficulties that they had to go through in their pursuits. My goal is to capture the “spirit of the time” of the Post-Soviet shuttle-trade phenomena, explain the motivations of the women involved in such trade, and the variety of personal experience of female shuttle traders. With a claim that the shuttle-trade has a gendered aspect to it, I also assume that the shuttle trade had become a platform for the female self-realization in the so-called “roaring” (*dikiye*) 90-s.

2.1 Economy in the transition period

Before we start writing the history of shuttle traders in Kazakhstan, we need to get back to the end of the 1980s, to the period when the shuttle trade started in Kazakhstan. In his book *The Transition in Kazakhstan – from Command to Market Economy*, Johan Larsson states that on the way to building a new and independent country, Kazakhstan has been undertaking transformative reforms aimed at dismantling the command economy and creating a new market economy (Larsson, 2010). As the economic transformation of Kazakhstan coincided with the time of getting independence, the process of transition eventually led not to the creation of institutions such as an open and almost unregulated trade. (Larsson, 2010). According to the new reforms, prices had to be set up by the meeting of supply and demand in the market, not by administrative bureaucrats. Another author on economic reforms in Central Asia, Boris Rumer notes that the key problem of the economic transition that emerged after the USSR demise was the disappearance of formerly centralized management and distribution system (Rumer, 2003). The largest part of the economy, the state owned enterprises, were replaced by private enterprises that followed own private interests. (Larsson, 2010).

However, some of these private enterprises sprang from the shadowy economy that already existed in the Soviet Union despite all the repressive measures against it.

The shadow economy in the Soviet Union was also called a “second economy”, the term introduced by Gregory Grossman. In his seminal article, Grossman defines the so-called “second economy” as all production and exchange activities, which were either directly undertaken for personal gain and interests, that violates the state imposed laws and regulations (Grossman, 1977). This economy is also referred as “unofficial economy”, “parallel economy”, “informal economy” or “private enterprise” (Grossman, 1977). Tinuke Fapohunda, who wrote extensively on Nigerian women’s involvement in shadowy economy, defined informal sector as ‘the part of an economy that is not taxed or monitored by any form of the government or included in any gross national product (GNP), unlike the formal economy’ (Fapohunda, 2012). Dennis O’Hearn, who further developed Grossman’s work on second economy, argued that in many cases, second economy activities involved misappropriation (*khishchenie*) of public or state properties (O’Hearn, 1986). According to Vladimir Trembl and Michael Alexeev, who continued investigating the state of the “second economy” in the late Soviet period (1997), the rapid increase of underground economy between 1970 and 1980 destabilized the Soviet economy and weakened the reach of the central planning system. Alexeev additionally argued that the key factors that affected the growth of the Soviet underground economy were strict price controls coupled with the deficits of goods and the general lack of responsiveness of the state production system to popular demand (1995).

Prior to Perestroika, the state economy was entirely centrally planned and had almost an exclusive control over the domestic and international trade activities. Violating state-imposed rules and its monopoly was considered to be “speculation”³ and led to criminal

³ Speculation was accounted as one of the most dangerous economic crimes that violates the normal functioning of the Soviet trading and interest of buyers (Kaiser, 1997). It was punishable with imprisonment up to 2 years or fine up to 300 rubles (Criminal Code of RSFSR from 27.10.1960 § 154.) see <https://base.garant.ru/3983897/055d1b82a84145ca60b96f2b0fee8ae8/>

prosecution and, which was counted as a criminal act and form of shadow economy (Kaiser, 1997). Vera Skvirskaya in her article on the post-Soviet trade with China (2018) states that the idea to “buy cheap and sell expensive” was cultivated by illegal “speculation” activities in the late Soviet period, contributed to the rapid spread of Post –Soviet market traders. Markus Kaiser, who wrote on an informal sector trade in Uzbekistan (1997), states that informal trading activities in this period were mainly based on the *fartsovka*-model, in which goods were brought into the USSR by *fartsovshchiki*, who either lived or could travel abroad. One of the neatest definitions of *fartsovshchiki* was given by Vasilyev, who stated *fartsovshchiki* as those USSR citizens, who are engaged in illegal activities as buying, exchanging or luring consumer goods from the foreign citizens for the purpose of subsequent use or for the purpose of their further resale (Vasil'ev, 2007). According to Katherine Verdery (1996), one of the few Western anthropologists who studied socialism during the period of socialism, states that the country felt a huge shortage of consumer goods due to the slowness of the Soviet industries to respond to the mass consumer demands, and state's preference of heavy industry. So, the mass deficit situation brought *fartsovshchiks* to the top of economic hierarchy.

Polyakov (2014) states that if during the years of famine after the Revolution and World War II people bought only the most necessary things from speculators, in Brezhnev's era the range of illegal trade activities have expanded significantly. Despite its illegal nature, speculative trade was very wide spread and was conducted almost openly (Alexeev, 1995). The range of goods that were bought at its highest bidder by the law abiding citizens of socialist country varied greatly: chewing gum, jeans, Adidas sneakers, Japanese tape recorders, cosmetics, jewelry, antiques etc. In general, Soviet people demonstrated high interest in western culture and in goods from the western countries (Kaiser, 1997). William Fierman (1988), who among other things studied the influence of Western culture on the Soviet youth, also wrote that Soviet people considered any product produced in the West to have a superior quality.

At the end of 1980-es, when Kazakhstan was still a part of USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev launched new reforms to make Soviet planned economy more flexible. When he came to power in 1985 the economy of the Soviet Union was wasteful and poorly managed. In his book “*The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy...*” (2016), Chris Miller (2016) writes that Gorbachev understood that in order to recover economically, the situation in the country needs some intervention and actions to strengthen the industries. Indeed, since 1986, the USSR government feverishly made one decision after another in order to stop the growing decline in the production growth and economic efficiency. David Marples in his book on the collapse of the USSR (2013), describes how the state organized the *Gospriyemka* (State Inspection of Production) in order to monitor the quality of production. The same year, the state decided to invest in the development of mechanical engineering, science, and technology, however this later in 1989 failed (Marples, 2013). The economic slowdown continued. Then in 1987, the leaders of USSR adopted an unprepared and radical reform (1987) that proclaimed the expansion of the autonomy and independence of enterprises through self-financing, development of the private sectors of economy in the form of cooperatives in the city and farming in the countryside. Further, their practical implementation, the country began to lose control of the national economy. None of the reforms worked as planned (Kiselev & Popov, 2013). According to Marples, the reports of the late 1987 on the mass layoffs in the production sphere, possibly resulted in the unemployment of 16 million people (Marples, 2013).

After all, the Soviet government started to understand the importance of the underground economy (Alexeev, 1995). Later in 1987, the Soviet Union policy adopted Perestroika and Publicity (*glasnost*) programs that were focused on rebuilding economy (Ustinkin & Ul'mayeva, 2009). Marples, (2013), claims that Perestroika gave freedom to a range of economic agents including petty traders and merchants. According to him, Perestroika was designed to expand the autonomy and independence of enterprises through

self-financing, to develop the private sectors of the economy in the form of cooperatives in the cities and farming in the countryside. Ustinkinn and Ul'mayeva (2009) explain that the main principles of *Glasnost*, were openness and transparency, that gave right to every citizen to receive reliable and complete information on any issue of a public life. The liberalization of a planned economy created a huge demand for basic consumer goods. In their article on the labour market in the transition economies, Bah and Brada (2014) state, that there were no small and medium sized enterprises, but country urgently needed them for further developing. In 1988, the government adopted a new Law on Cooperatives, which opened many sides of the economy to ordinary people that previously used to be controlled only by the state.⁴

The implemented policies affected not only the political power but also the daily lives of ordinary people. They were forced to face all the challenges of transition from socialism to capitalism. People tried to cope with the situation. Feeling the deterioration in in labor market, a great number of people with different economic and social backgrounds at their own risk entered the novel area of entrepreneurship, overcoming the stigma of the label of the *speculyant* (Skvirskaja, 2018). Spector in her study of Kyrgyz bazaars reveals the negative associations regarding the bazaar that existed earlier in 1990s: for people to be labeled as trader or speculator was more humiliating than to be shot by gun (2017, p. 37). So, speculation was an act that Soviet people were shamed of and tried to stay away from those who were dealing in trade or speculative activities.

2.2 The emergence of Shuttle trade

The Law “On the Measures aimed to simplify the order of departure of USSR citizens abroad” adopted in September 1988 gave Soviet citizens the right to freely cross borders and to

⁴ Zakon O poryadke vvedeniya v deystviye Zakona SSSR “O vnesenii izmeneniy I dopolneniy v Zakon SSSR “O Kooperatsii v SSSR. See <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/9003176>

emigrate. The relaxation of border restrictions and simplification of visa requirements allowed many Soviet people, who previously did not have such an opportunity, to easily cross borders and travel abroad. Under the “*Svoboda luchshe chem nesvoboda!*” [Freedom is better than no freedom] slogan, the main thing that Gorbachev was counting on was freedom, which he wanted to give, in order to fill people with new hope for a fairness in such a multinational community.

In her book *Women and the Birth of Russian Capitalism* Irina Mukhina (2009) describes the state of crisis in the middle of the 1990s when trade expanded and included more than 30 million⁵ people who were in trade, all ordinary citizens of ex-soviet countries. Thousands of people saw the cross border exchanges as one of the most profitable ways of earning money. Moreover, the ambiguity and even non-existence of certain regulations and requirements regarding the transferred goods gave opportunity for more and more people to participate in shuttle trade. According to the definition of Zabyelina (2012), shuttle trade is an activity when shuttle traders or *chelnoki* “shuttle” (similar to the shuttle in a loom or a sewing machine, which moves back and forth) from the place of procurement of goods at cheap sources abroad or in major wholesale markets locally and then return to the point where they can resell those goods at a higher price (p. 98). “Petty traders”, “suitcase traders”, “trading tourists” or *chelnoki* and other terms are usually used to refer to people involved in this type of activities. Thus, shuttle trade had become the backbone of economy for many of post-soviet countries.

Most private form of businesses that operated under former communist USSR belonged to so-called underground economy, or shadow economy. In other words, it was illegal trade, as most items were brought from foreign countries as for personal use, not for resale, and traders did not pay any custom service taxes for the goods. Zabyelina (2012) emphasizes on the importance of differentiating between legal, semi-legal and illegal (criminal) trade activities. According to her, any economic transaction can be assessed based on the nature of production,

⁵ The population of the Soviet Union in 1990 was 287.728 million people.
<https://www.reinifischer.com/population-changes-former-soviet-union>

realization, distribution and legal status of the goods and services (p. 96). For instance, there is a huge difference between the non-compliance with the state registration or failing in tax filing and the trade activities related with contraband, money laundering or drug distribution, etc. Clothing and textiles are categorized under the legal type of commodities, but they can originate from illicit sources and the distribution of these goods can be unlawful (Zabyelina, 2012). For instance, assume the street seller of cheap clothes, who sells seemingly legal product, which he bought from someone at a cheaper price, so he probably is already engaged in illegal activity. However, to assess this form of trade activities as a form of private entrepreneurship would be a mistake; his business does not have any legal or formal characteristics that has an established business (Mukhina, 2009). Nevertheless, he has income from selling the legal product but in illegal way.

Despite these challenges, shuttle trade was vital for local people, as it helped to survive to those who had “fallen from grace” and the state was aware of this. New traders (*torgovtsy*) are consisted of mainly former teachers, nurses, workers of factories and those who were called suitcase traders (*chelnoki*) (Skvirskaja, 2018). In addition, as Anna Cieslewka writes in her chapter on women traders in Kyrgyzstan, the participation of USSR women in the shuttle trade during this period ranked the highest among any other countries (Cieslewka, 2014). They regularly needed to cross borders to bring goods for resale. However, there also were those who sold produces grown or made at home. For instance, elder grandmothers (*babushka*) as usual sold their homemade flowers, vegetables or marinade in most crowded places. All this and other forms of commercial activities in post-Soviet states were often perceived as humiliation or professional denigration (Skvirskaja, 2018).

2.3 Chelnoks

The opening up of the new trading opportunities also included Kazakhstan. With the announcement of independence in December of 1991, new leaders of new Kazakhstan

decided to embrace a capitalist market economy. Further, the introduction of a new Kazakh national currency in 1993 was a part of the structural reform program. According to Cynthia Werner, an anthropologist who studied Kazakhstan since the 1990s (2000), the reforms included privatization of state owned enterprises, liberalization of market prices and cut of subsidies in the housing and transportation sector. Despite the fact that Kazakhstan was one of the most resource rich countries among the ex-member states of the USSR and had a great economic potential, the situation of households in the country was desperate. Most of my interviewees recall the mass unemployment of that time - how they themselves and their spouses lost their jobs or struggled with the delayed payments for their work. 50-years old Rakhilya, who became a shuttle trader in the 1990s recalls:

- My husband was an engineer at a local factory; he graduated from hydrotechnic (*gidrotehnicheskiy*) college. The salaries were already meager and even these meager salaries were delayed for 3- 5 months, paid once in a while and then again delayed. My husband was worried that he can be affected by the retrenchment. We did not even have electricity at home, used candles or coil oil lamps and it was normal. Poor me, used to coal the stove, pump and draw water from the well, ran to hospital to work, and be back and prepare the meal for everyone.

Rakhilya at that time lived in a rural part of Kyzyl-Orda oblast, where households tried to cope with the new challenges of economic transition. The regions of south Kazakhstan even before the transition period struggled with the economic constraints. Most households used to combine the wages with domestic production as a survival strategy. Many people grew onion, potatoes, corn and/or other type of vegetables for their own consumption and for sale. Pursuing the survival strategy and frustrated by husband's idleness, Rakhilya who was sitting at home on a child care leave, decided to help her younger brother turn his onion produce that he used to grow on their father's field into a new source of income.

- My daughter was born, and I used to sit with her at home. As always we were broke - no money, no job, no salaries, in addition the factory, where my

husband worked, closed. All of us were sitting at home ...I was desperate. My daughter and I did not have any clothes to wear. I did not have money to buy food or clothes, I wanted to earn money, did not matter how, was thinking all the time, day and nights...Everyone was deprived (Rakhilya, 53)

Despite the fact that she had own family and a little baby, she decided to move to Pavlodar in the North of Kazakhstan to sell onions which were grown in their village. It seemed it was the most viable option for them to sell the onions in Pavlodar's market rather than sit and wait until they would rot.

Another interviewee Svetlana explains how she became exhausted with the misery of poverty that was escalating by the alcoholic habits of her husband, his ignorance of his own family and decided to sell homegrown potatoes. Despite the fact that her son was only one-year toddler, she locked her son and two elder daughters alone at home and went to market to sell her potatoes. Svetlana's husband was against her new trade and, instead of worrying about the wellbeing of the family, was worried what society would think about him, Svetlana says about her going into petty trade:.

- No one has chosen it, destiny choses, as my mom tells me "it does not matter if you like your job or not, in the end you will like it"

From the stories that my informants tell, their involvement at the bazaar and commerce activities was mainly a survival strategy rather than a conscious choice.

A trade hub of Kazakhstan Almaty's Barakholka is one of the largest centers of more than twenty five wholesale markets and retail trade in Central Asia. Regine Spector in her article on bazaar politics (2008) depicts the organization of life in Almaty barakholka. She reveals that the majority of sellers in Almaty barakholka were shuttle traders who travel mainly to China, Turkey, India and Western Europe (2008, p. 45). Saule Yessenova, who studied Almaty barakholka in the end of 1990s, wrote the barakholka carried the function of supplying people with any type of goods, from clothes to construction materials and food. The

wide availability of imported goods that were sold in the bazaars made it look like a crowded environment and an epitome of disorder. At the same time, it became the most dynamic place where everyone could find a job even if it was a casual and low skilled employment (Yessenova, 2015).

In her book *Order at the bazaar*, Regine Spector showed how various actors – trade members, bazar elders and local seller have been establishing and maintaining order at the two largest bazaars of Kyrgyzstan – Osh and Dordoi (Spector R. , 2017). She finds that despite the low accountability and corrupted nature of the state authorities under which the bazaar is functioning there is an “order” at the bazaar and this order is rooted in the Soviet ways of negotiating and making deals.

Up until 2010, travelling to Dordoi “for buying goods” was a part of everyday routine for many Kazakhstani people, particularly in the South. Despite the fact that the Kazakh trade market is incomparable in terms of its trade volumes with the Kyrgyz market, the model of “ordering” and organization is similar to that of Dordoi due to the common Soviet past. For instance, Almaty *barakholka* is a trade hub for many regional merchants, a place where they can stock up from the wholesale markets. The corridors with iron rented containers on both sides, covered with tents often appear as a classic image of bazaars in Kazakhstan, that are slowly being replaced by covered markets, with more comfortable conditions inside. However, most of the study participants recall the bazaars of that container type or iron desk type without containers, as renting of containers usually were higher than that of stances and iron desks where merchants unrolled their goods. Until 2005-2007 there was no electricity available in the bazaars, so usually the working hours of the bazaar was until it gets dark.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union state, Kazakhstan remained in the ruble zone and was not able to effectively restrain price hikes. The process of privatization of state owned enterprises in post-socialist transition period came accompanied by the inflation crisis,

when money lost its function of being a medium of exchange. Non-payments and barter were flourishing all around and goods did not have reliable markets (Esentugelov, 2013). Only after the introduction of the national currency, the *tenge*, at the end of 1993, Kazakhstan had an opportunity to pursue its own monetary policy.

Hyperinflation and the lack of liquidity led to the spread of barter deals. In 1990s, the barter represented a main form of transaction between the economic actors (Yakovlev, 2000). Even today, in rural parts of Kazakhstan, barter is conspicuously present as a mode of exchange. For instance, my uncle has a huge field in the countryside near the city of Taraz, where he grows special grass called “alfalfa” to feed his cattle during the falls and winters. In order to collect the hay he needs to hire people who mow the grass with a tractor. As a payment, he gives them ready made hay. Moreover, as they have cattle, they have milk and other dairy products that they give to their neighbors, and in return get vegetables from the neighbors’ garden. Gabriel McGuire, who studied sheep farming in the Zhambul region, notes that in villages, sheep serves as a constant exchange unit and depository of value that remains stable regardless of any inflations and devaluations. (McGuire, 2016). Sheep continues to function as tokens in barter exchanges, precisely because it will not lose its value even if *Tenge* will (p. 55).

Most of my informants also made their first steps in trade with barter deals. The first barter deal of Rakhilya was an exchange of the three tons of onion for a ton of firewood logs. Bartering onions for firewood logs lasted for 3 years as it was quite profitable to resell them in Almaty, former capital city of Kazakhstan, but not without problems. The problem was racketeers. There is a very little official set of data on the racketeers in Kazakhstan but they existed and put on to the scare all the people who had business or entrepreneurship. After the fall of the USSR in 1991 criminal gangs began to form in sovereign Kazakhstan, who were engaged in a criminal acts and racketeering and were simply called “racketeers.” They controlled and protected over 35% of commercial banks, 40% of state owned enterprises, 35

% of private companies and 60% of private enterprises (Komkov, 2016). In Kazakhstan, a protection form of racket was popular, where a group of racketeers would provide protection to businesses from other groups using violence. As Vadim Volkov wrote in his book *Violent Entrepreneurs*” racketeers would sell security, traditional form of physical security as well the security of good and sometimes would help their clients to ensure and guarantee contracts (Volkov, 1999). Cooperatives and small-scale traders became a subject of those who previously engaged in collecting of gambling debts or racketeering of shadowy and illegal business (Volkov, 1999).

At the same time, new communities were formed that began to derive income from sales of (initially imaginary) security services to small-scale entrepreneurs (Kleymenov & Dmitriyev, 1995). Rakhilya, who worked in Almaty barakholka in 1990s, recalls:

-In Almaty and elsewhere rackets started to pursue my brother and me, not me ...but they followed after Rahim, pestered him, extorted money, endless threats...used to come during at nights looking for him... Gangs and mafia kept people under the constant threat.

According to Rakhilya, her younger brother that sold firewood logs in Almaty had to pay “protection money” to the racketeers because he entered the market that they were “protecting”. It was risky for his life. Moreover, no one gives a guarantee on a safe receipt of money.

In 2000, after returning from Pavlodar she moved to Almaty and started working in *barakholka*. In Almaty *barakholka* Rakhilya rented a container, where she sold her goods brought from China. Many studies have been done on *barakholka*, but it remains an ambivalent place with its chaos and disorder that on the one hand attracts thousands of people to make exchanges but at same time scares them. It is considered that the economic form of life cannot be separated from cultural and political ones, which stresses the need to approach

the market exchanges from within and from below (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999). Instead of using the word “market”, “bazaar” is a more relevant for this study as it is closer to the participants that worked there and were “made” in the bazaar. The bazaar for them is not the same as for other people. “Bazaar” is a Persian origin word (bozor) that was adopted in the same form in both Kazakh and Russian languages⁶. However, in Russian language it implies a meaning of chaos and disorder, or quarrel and dispute as in *bazar-vokzal*. Most ethnographic research on the condition of Central Asia after the Soviet Union collapse were focused mainly on the response of local community to the newly established bazaars (Mandel & Humphrey, 2002) (Ilkhamov, 2011). According to western economic reformers, bazaars in Central Asia represent a cultural form in the region, existing along the Silk Road, which linked the Asia with Europe long before the Soviet system came to the power (Spector R. , 2017, p. 7). Thus, bazaars were controlled by adopted cultural routines and patterns of exchange of that region, while the Soviet command economy only stifled the natural entrepreneurial skills of regional traders. Moreover, The World bank analysis states that bazaars enjoy more advantages than any mall centers, as it is cheaper and able to bring a wide range of buyers and sellers in one place (World Bank, 2009). Moreover, given the Central Asian people’s cultural tendency to engage in trade and entrepreneurial activity made it inevitable to again flourishing of bazaars after the USSR demise (Spector R. , 2017). The new policies as liberalization of borders and tariffs facilitated the renewal of entrepreneurial potential of Central Asian people. The bazaar and the commerce in small-scale trades was vital for the economic activities in the region.

Barakholka functions as a representation of Kazakhstan’s involvement in the global economy (Yessenova, 2015). After independence and the opening of borders, goods from China, Kyrgyzstan, Moscow, Poland, and Turkey flowed into Almaty’s *barakholka*.

⁶ Bazaar (Persian: بازار) is a permanent merchandizing area, marketplace, or street of various shops where goods and services are exchanged or sold. Bazaar originates from ancient Islamic civilization, and is a precursor of today’s shopping malls, market and supermarket and has a significant impact on the economic development of the world.

My participants recall that containers in *barakholka* were quite convenient as they just open and close and no need for folding the goods up and down as they used to with iron desks. In *barakholka* Rakhilya rented a container where she sold her goods from China and from Bishkek. Rent payments varied according to the location of the container at the bazaar. Regine Spector (2008) in one of her articles, also noted some of the problems with renting containers, boutiques and/or just places at the bazaar without any leasing agreements (p. 46). The sellers were forced to agree with the conditions of the owners and bazar management, as they feared losing their place in the bazaar and their job.

However, apart from renting the place and dealing with racketeers, according to the study participants, importing and transporting goods was probably the harshest part of trading. It involved back and forth travel, across the borders and through customs control, which sometimes took more than two or three days.

- A shiver runs down my body when I start to recall my days that I spent in the customs office for getting in my goods, so many nights on chair, bribes to custom officials, lines of people the same as me...(Rakhilya,53)

At the same time, I do not want to categorically argue that women started to participate in trade only during the crisis. Women's participation in labor market of Soviet Union also included a private trade – for example, selling domestically grown products started and it started long before the Union demise (Hessler, 2004) . The difference is that in the 1990s shuttle traders got an opportunity to travel abroad, cross borders to import goods and resell at home, rather than just sell only domestically produced goods (Mukhina, 2009). Moreover, most of these traders were new in the market and never had been involved in Soviet underground trade before. Female predominance in shuttle trade activities in post-Soviet transition period can be explained in a number of ways. Primarily, it is related with the collapse of a huge empire that created massive economic crisis and was followed by the years of economic depression with hyperinflation and

negative economic indicators (Mukhina, 2014b). Factories were shut down and workers laid off. The harsh cutback in a social nursery and kindergarten system that was fully state subsidized in the Soviet period affected women employability as the employability of women mainly depended on the existence of a childcare options. The cost of caring and nursing of children had become more expensive and even unaffordable, so women were forced to look for other jobs which would be more flexible for working with child (Werner, 2000). The unemployment of that time had become a significant problem “with a women’s face”. Most of the merchants had professional training and school education and most of them had families and children. In addition to these economic factors there is a wide range of socio-cultural factors related to gender roles that could explain female predominance in a shuttle trade.

As I mentioned previously, the Soviet perception regarding the shuttle trade was negative, as the trade itself was approached as *spekulyatsiya* and just standing in the street, selling something was seen as shameful. People who lived during the Soviet Union period had feeling that trade is something equal to stealing and cheating or begging (Mukhina, 2014b).

- When I started to sell potatoes on a street my husband used to get extremely angry and yell at me: What if people see you, what would they think about me...they are going to tell everyone that the Atabek’s wife is involved in *speculyatsiya* and treat me as a cheater. (Svetlana, 57)

It was believed, that men did not want to deal with “*torgovtsy*” label that could denigrate men’s honor. Many men saw petty trade activity as “beneath them” and a form of free-loafing. Very few men were ready to lose their status of respected workers at production sites and join groups of petty traders (Ashwin, 2006). So then women stepped into this new walk-of-life - semi-legal and unknown type of business, as they were used to having a broader range of identities as mothers, daughters, wives, kelins (daughters in law), sometimes part-time workers and part-time traders. Women used to play multiple roles at home and it was women who had to

swallow their pride for the family wellbeing (Mukhina, 2014b). Even the simple act of shopping for basic everyday needs of household had different meaning for men and women, endorsing the passivity of men and responsibility of women within family (Stiazhkina, 2002). While Stiazhkina calls this round of everyday life of women as a “gender contract”, Temkina and Rotkrich (1997) call it as a “shadow contract”. This metaphor precisely underlines the “shadowy areas” of working mothers and her connection with various and confusing forms of gender identities and behavioral forms (Stiazhkina, 2002) .

3.4 Women as a strong sex

In Kazakhstan, which is often considered to be a patriarchal society, men usually do not intervene with the domestic works or have very minimal engagements there, relying mostly on women to do the household chores (Stiazhkina, 2002). Cross-cultural studies on gender ideologies demonstrate that the work at home performed by women, preparing meal, cleaning the house, and caring after the children and elderly parents, considered to have less value and importance in comparing with men (Werner, 2015).

In her study of women traders in rural Kazakhstan, Cynthia Werner states that all that work that are important for household maintenance are not even regarded as work (p. 109). This work usually includes all home related functions carried by women such as caring, cleaning, nursing, preparing meals. Surveys indicate that women accomplished 60-70 % of household works (Stiazhkina, 2002). In situations when women work outside the home, the positive impact of wage employment on women’s lives is still under debate. For instance, Janet Salaf in her study of working women, states that job allows women to be more free and autonomous, however the benefits from such employment are temporary and it does not significantly change the patriarchal gender relations in the society (Salaff, 1992). Hoodfar, in his book on women’s social position, indicates that women’s primary contribution to the household is considered to be

domestic work and child care (Hoodfar, 1997, p. 81). Further, Kilbiltskaya (2000) in considering the male far standing from the household functions suggests that it may be due to the Soviet government insurance of childcare during the daytime, so that men's role in childcare became minimal, and the pledging of their self-identification with their work highlighted the core of their masculinity.

The formulated slogan of late Soviet times "Take care of Men!"⁷ already confirms the fragile position of the Soviet man in the Soviet discourse. In this discourse, which has been studied in-depth by gender scholars as Zdravomyslova and Temkina, the late Soviet man is presented as lost, miserable and experiencing a deep masculinity crisis (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013). The Soviet man appears as "unsuccessful" in comparing with the normative models of *others*⁸. Zdravomyslova and Temkina, the authors of "Crisis of Masculinity in Late Soviet Discourse" relate this crisis with an assumption that men became quantitative minority of the population, especially after World War II (p. 44). They suggest that the demographic deficit of men led to the increase of the male's symbolic value in the society, which also brought complexities in their masculinity as well. From the biological perspective, scholars assume that men are less biologically viable and resistant than women⁹ and their life expectancy is lower than that of women for 10 years on average, which makes men more valuable in the society (p. 44). Demographer Uralnis in his article "Save men" attempted to prove that men are "weaker sex" by demonstrating the reasons that bring to the high mortality of men and factors as alcoholic, smoking habits, greater interest in cars, bikes that increases the death rate of men that contribute to "masculinity crisis" of Soviet men.

⁷ The slogan was borrowed from a popular Soviet comedy directed by Alexander Seri in 1982 at the Mosfilm film studio.

⁸ Here, the authors compare various discourses about the crisis of masculinity described by both Soviet and Western scholars.

⁹ In Soviet times there was a higher mortality of infant boys, which is explained by greater biological resilience of the female organism to external factors (Uralnis, 1969).

Building on the logic of Uralis, Zdravomyslova and Temkina, the crisis of masculinity manifests in a number of various psychological factors. They assume that the degradation of the Soviet man is a result of the impossibility of their sole performance in a role of a family breadwinner in current conditions, their intransigence with the female earning abilities and finally a violation of paternal rights (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013). Scholars explain that there is inherent sense of paternal “heroism” in Soviet man, which is achieved through combating a visible enemy, with his readiness to self-sacrifice for the wellbeing of his fatherland and denying a private life for himself. In other words, men are designed to fight in external world, be breadwinner and hero for his family for what he was celebrated. Meshcherkina, for instance, considers that the basic masculine archetype of a warrior, of soldier, of a fighter was the base for constructing the fortress of totalitarianism (Meshcherkina, 1996). Woman, in turn, was the helper of man, the one who had to be protected, the one who waited for her man’s brief visits at home, but she is also the one, who at the same time performs all the non-heroic labor for the good of motherland (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013).

At the same time, Zdravomyslova and Temkina note that the crisis of masculinity can be interpreted as a result of the Soviet emancipation of women. Social policies were designed specifically to protect women (who were considered vulnerable in relation to men) and role of the mother was valorized by the state (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013). Consequently, men’s position as a father were infringed compared to the position of a socially protected mother, especially in private life where women had another role as of a mother (p. 53). That emancipation created an image of publicly protected superwoman or “working mother”. Baranskaya, in her short book which is called “A week like any other”, describes the daily life of a Soviet women with high education, who works and has to remain feminine at the same time (Baranskaya, 1974). It was acknowledged, that Soviet gender policies ushered women into the public sphere and created an imbalance in private realm: women had more irreplaceable and dominant roles in the household, while men were ineffective there (Zdravomyslova & Temkina,

2013). Moreover Soviet social policy ensured women with various forms of privileges, one of which was favoring women in divorce processes and dismissing the fathers' rights, which let women to manipulate men if conflicts were to take place (p. 53).

Another possible gender related stereotype that women are better suited for the shuttle trade activities, is that it involves semi-formal, informal or even illegal aspects of trade, and an ability of women to better deal with them. Cynthia Werner (2015) in her study also reveals that men do not have the ability to be aggressive or pushy with customers, like an ability to convince that a product has certain desirable features for the customer as well as women do. Moreover, even though there are men in bazaar, they do not have the patience to sit as long as women do (p. 116)

The imported goods were declared to be brought for personal use not for resale, as it was illegal to resell them. Mukhina (2014) argues that, the skill of bribing custom officials for letting one to have a bigger bag, avoiding physical harassment by racketeers, and/or negotiating the amount of bribe suited better for women rather than men. Women could make miserable face and pretend be poor women aiming to survive for the last money she will get from selling the goods. Moreover, there was a prosecution of men who were dealing with trade or speculative activities, punishment of which was based on a criminal code of USSR that required imprisonment for not less of five years (RSFSR, 1932). Thus, it had generated a common belief that unemployed men who were involved in a shuttle trade would be perceived as *spekulyanty* and would be prosecuted while women could be regarded as just victims of economic and domestic volatilities.

In some cases, it is assumed that female characteristics as negotiators and their higher interest in fashion and style can be the cause of male-female imbalance in trade business (Mukhina, 2009). Particularly, the sale of lux type of textile to which the study participants are involved in demands greater attention. The scrupulous nature of retail textiles, especially of

branded clothing includes the ability not only to sell but coordinate all the nuances of the design and size, in which rarely men will succeed. Moreover, women, as the one with more sense of household responsibility, can be more prudent in spending money, while men is at risk spending them on unworthy friends or alcohol (Mukhina, 2014; Werner, 2015). It should also be noted that the 1990s were characterized by a rapid increase of alcoholism rate. Nashkenova et.al (2015) relate this with the fact of sharp destabilization of political situation in country in that period, as authorities lost control over the changing situation and economic difficulties turned into a full blown crisis. They state that Perestroika uplift in society was replaced with disappointment and uncertainty about tomorrow (p. 1).

Children that grew in a family with parental alcoholism, experience deep emotional crisis. Studies on this issue suggest that children's development problems including, physical, emotional can be the result of parental drinking habits (Ofrood, 2013). Fathers drinking problems can lead to increasing neurotic behavior and memory and attention disturbance in children (Stankoushev & Chinova, 1974). The study of Barnow et.al by analyzing the behavioral problems of children with alcoholic parents, states that they represent high-risk group in terms of the development of behavioral and attention problems (Barnow, et.al, 2007). As the USSR collapse was a personal deep trauma for many of Soviet Union people, everyone survived it in a way as they could. Many people lost their jobs and were left without any income source. To deal with this loss some of them went forgotten in alcohol; others gave up their families and children (Nashkenova, et.al, 2015).

One of my informants, Svetlana, recalls the days when her husband used to be drunk for weeks or more and how it affected her and her children:

- He was always drunk and wondering who knows where. When he came he used to beat me and children, scolded me for my desire to earn money for children and family in this way [buying and selling]. He bravely spent money that he

took somewhere for vodka, without thinking about his three children. My eldest daughter used to tremble when she saw her father. Because of him, she was afraid of all the people who smelled vodka...

This was Svetlana's family situation and it was echoed in the stories of other women regarding the alcoholism in their lives. Unfortunately, Alma, Rakhilya, Tamara and Ayzada also were victims of alcoholic problems of their husbands. One of the founders of Soviet ideology, Kharchev claimed that the excessive drinking of married men served as a first reason for divorces initiated by women (Kharchev, 1979). The rate of alcoholism in most parts of Kazakhstan was appalling (Nashkenova, et.al , 2015). In many cases alcoholism lead to cheating and health problems such as liver diseases and impotence (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013). Followed with divorces and broken families alcoholism is regarded as the most severe disease of that time. Alcohol destroyed not only the families of most study participants, but also of those who had no relation to trade.

2.5 Women on the road

Women shuttle-traders had to spend most of their time on the road, buying goods in the closest trade hub or in abroad wholesale market and selling them at home in local markets. They usually used buses and trains for trips within the country and for short distances. One of the destinations of several of my informants was Dordoy bazaar in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan. Dordoy is the largest shopping center in Central Asia, and very close to borders of Kazakhstan, particularly to the Zhambyl region where several of my informants come from. Svetlana for instance, who almost all her life spent in Merke, before her trips to Istanbul, practiced going to Dordoy from 1996 as it was the closest wholesale market for her. Even when she moved to Almaty she continued to bring the goods from Dordoy. Kyrgyzstan was the first country that became a WTO member to where Chinese goods started to flow (Abdukadyrov & Daly, 2012).

Not only Svetlana, but also those from other regions travelled to Dordoy market with their checkered bags to buy the goods for resale. Alma, in the beginning of her career, brought sport clothes for both women and men, tights and socks from Dordoy and sold them in Almaty *barakholka*. Participants recall Dordoy as a huge wholesale market that had everything and they also tried to buy and bring as much as they could. The main problem was the transportation of those goods through two customs points. In the shuttle trade, the amount of bags and their weight was proportional to the expected profit from its sale. Women preferred to carry heavy, approximately each for 40 – 50 kilos of bag with themselves. They were afraid to lose their business as have invested all their money to buy these goods and did not trust to Cargo transportation. Therefore, instead of hiring cargo services, they would organize shuttle trips for several destinations. Such shuttle service is affordable but there is no guarantee that you will not be robbed and killed on the way. Only recently from 2008 it became unprofitable and exhausting to carry the goods with themselves. Nevertheless, the tradition to go abroad for goods still remains. My interviewees, at least once or twice a year, go abroad to bring the new collections, in order to choose the quality and models of clothing and deal with the supplier. They no longer carry bags with themselves, as the logistic companies work started to provide high quality service more transparently and honestly. In addition, shipping organizations offer to merchants the ability to track their shipment online, which is very convenient. In the 1990s, according to my informants, not many people dared to cross the Chinese border to go to Urumqi and get goods from there. However, first shuttle trip of Rakhilya was to Urumqi, China, from where she brought shoes and casual clothes for men. She states that it was risky and complicated and one of the most difficult trips ever in her life. She was afraid of being lost and cheated there, as she did not understand the local language. The expensive visa costs and language issues act as disincentives for many shuttle traders from Kazakhstan. Only Klara among my informants had a

lucrative business deals there¹⁰ for many years. Her husband for approximately 30 years has been bringing toothbrushes to Kazakhstan and has become one of the biggest wholesale merchant of toothbrushes from China. However, for most of my informants, as Svetlana, Rakhilya, Alma, Tamara. Zaure, it was easier to go to Bishkek, as Dordoy in Bishkek was serving as a proxy to China. Tamara, one of the traders who used to regularly go to Bishkek from Akmola, recalls:

- I went to Bishkek in 1994 for the first time in my life. That time was very tough and difficult. Money just converted to *tenge*, and people were losing their savings.

Svetlana, who then lived in Merke, noted that Dordoy for her was closer than Almaty *barakholka*, but transportation there was more difficult. To get on the bus to Dordoi she needed to be at the bus station at the midnight. The bus arrived to the market between 3-4 a.m. Dordoy bazaar opens at 4 a.m. and works until 2 p.m. To work according to this schedule entailed huge risks and demanded full dedication of time. Svetlana, who traveled to Dordoi from Merke from 1996, recalls:

- We went by bus and would leave to Bishkek from Merke during the night as the bazaar opens at 4 a.m. and works until 2 p.m. The bus was full of women traders... (*chelnoki*). The trip usually takes 3 hours as we need to cross double borders, exit Kazakhstan and enter Kyrgyzstan. On the way back to home the road can take more than a day as we will be with bags and we need to deal with Customs officials. In order to register our goods and have permission to go home we stood for days and nights. As usual I did not send them by the logistic company as I was always afraid that my bags could get lost...I could not afford to lose my good as I invested all my money in them.

¹⁰ Participants Rakhilya and Klara started their shuttle trade activities going to China. Rakhilya for the first time went with her younger brother and Klara with her husband who sells toothbrushes and Klara herself for many years imported bed linens and different textile commodities for bathroom.

Most importantly, women needed to be on alert for their money, as all the trade transaction were in cash. They tried to hide their money from the street thefts and frauds. Cheaters and robbers were all around, as they knew that people come to the wholesale market with good money. The corrupted nature of custom officers brought another challenges for the women. *Chelnok* women call them just “state racketeers”, whose aim was to collect money from the merchants. Customs officials could take all the extra money that was not shown in declaration. In addition, in order to get through the borders on the way back to Kazakhstan all women of the bus¹¹ had to collect money to bribe custom officials. Each custom officer had his own “bet” and usually this amount used to increase with every trip. There was no other ways to trade “legally”. If women would act in accordance with the law, they would have had to submit a customs declaration, which would have entailed baggage inspection and payment for each kilogram of the imported goods. So, the “legal” way would have been too expensive and all the trip would have lost its meaning. According to women, the customs officers had a perfect understanding of their situation and wanted only to extort money. Zaire, one of my study informants, recall:

- Several times, I had problems with my suppliers; they screwed me out of money and got lost. Many times I lost the shipment with my goods for which I had paid through the nose (qyp –qyzyl aqshaga). I also remember the days when I spent days and nights at Custom authorities...each official had his own “bet”
...Thanks God time changes, there no such wildness as before

They would keep shuttle traders on purpose at the border for long period of time, pretending as if they could not go against the law and let traders get inside with unknown stuff from the neighboring country. Nevertheless, the merchant women are glad, albeit corrupt, way of saving their money. The lower the cost, the better it is - one of the unwritten laws of the market.

¹¹ In the shuttle buses usually were women traders from different regions of Kazakhstan

The current destination for women trading in textiles are Turkey, Italy and other European countries. Zaur, who imports female garments from Italy states that nowadays people started to pay more attention on the quality of the clothes:

- The clothes in my shop are from premium segment and, of course, not everyone can afford it, but there are many people who value the quality and take them even if it costs more. Today we have Kaspi Bank and Kaspi Red, where from people easily can take loans if they do not have or have not enough money to buy clothes from my shop.

In her own turn, Rakhilya who imports similar female clothing and shoes from Turkey, notes that women in Kazakhstan love to dress well and look expensive:

- The price is not as important as the design and style of the item. They would not find my clothes anywhere else here. They are exclusive. The most important thing is that it should look good on women. If woman likes she will certainly buy, even if she gets into the debts or take loans. My clothes are designed for those who love and appreciate themselves.

Kazakhstani people pay a lot of attention to style and love expensive brands, love luxury and understand high fashion. In addition, Alma, who sells Turkish male clothes, admits that even men express a distinct interest in high quality clothes. However, the informants themselves prefer to buy clothes for themselves and their family abroad.

2.6. In the maze of bazaar economy

People saw a shuttle trade as a way of quick recovery from a long lasted disease of the crisis depression. The shuttle trips brought not only the mean for livelihood but also new acquaintances in the business, with whom they could share ideas and experiences. Svetlana, who

used to take regular trips to Dordoy wholesale market emphasized the role of trips in acquiring good friend:

- Everyone needs relationships and communication. It is a business, it is great when you have many contacts. It is never too many. People need each other. You never know what will happen tomorrow and who could help you when things get hard to everyone...Once I met one women during my shop trip to Bishkek to Dordoy, we had become good friend later, she helped me and my daughter when we opened a shop in Almaty as she had moved there long before us. She found a good place for us...even your close relative would not do this things for you...(Svetlana. 57)

Strong and friendly relations between shuttle traders is a rare phenomenon and Svetlana was fortunate to have been able to find and benefit from such connection. Rakhilya, on the other hand, says that she distrusts people in the same type of business:

- I am reluctant to have friendship relations with those who also bring goods from where I bring...I was burned once when I did so, most of such “false friends” would want to learn the business secrets that I myself learned from long years of experience and then use my secrets to beat their rivals including me...this is a long story, even do not want to think about them.

However, informal kinship and social networks are very valuable for these women. In the beginning of the market relations, there was no institution for regulating them and many deals were made on trust. It should be noted that one of the main features of the informal economy then was the use of cash, no bank card or online transfers (Losby, et.al, 2002). It is convenient in a way that cash does not leave any evidence of the transaction and the deals stay off the books (Losby, et.al., 2002, p.7). Thus, the merchants can avoid the income tax, as transactions are not

recorded and state cannot control their income. However, nowadays most of them use bank services. Svetlana highlights the benefits of doing business this way.

- Now we have Kaspi bank service. Earlier there were a lot of people who would take clothes and then disappear without paying their debts to me. Now it is very different. I can relax and be sure that I will get my money (Svetlana, 57).

As shuttle trade and retail trade together compose a lion part of the shadow economy, the government is interested in legalizing this business and imposing taxes on them. From 2010 onward, the state started its mass legalization process of small-scale traders, by taking different forms of encouraging policies. The policies varied from increasing duties on imported goods by individuals from abroad to simplifying the procedures of business registration in the Tax offices (Paltasheva, 2009). All of my interviewees have legalized the status of their businesses and pay taxes as sole proprietors. However, according to informant women, the off booking of some of their sales are not done for the purpose of tax avoidance, but to allow certain transactions to take place based on the trust between the trader and customer. Traders used to sell their goods to people even when they did not have the money to pay them upfront, trusting a word that they would pay them later – in the next few weeks or even months. Sometimes there are customers who tries to bypass those boutiques or containers in the market where they borrowed a good and have to pay the debts. From the traders perspective it is done in order to get rid of the goods and sell them as soon as possible to accelerate business and bring new goods again. The wide availability of bank loans for consumer spending, with no interest rates and down payments, significantly facilitates such trade deals. Merchant women highlighted the service of Kaspi Bank that has a wide range of options available for traders as well as customers. It is convenient in a form that customers are able to buy their goods in installments¹². Bank transfers money to trader for the purchased good of customer if it has a registered bank account. Based on an agreement,

¹² <https://kaspi.kz/guide/red/receive/general/q1459/>

customer repays the debt to the Bank and there is no need for trader to worry about his money as it was before.

There are probably a very few shuttle traders, who had not experienced the pain of bankruptcies. The crisis of 2008 and 2014¹³ particularly hit small and medium business owners. Their businesses were directly dependent on the exchange rate of the dollar to *tenge*, and the price of the goods they buy increased a lot. Increased value of dollars, lowered the activity of business deals in the market. Many had loans and no one expected such price shocks. Rakhilya, who at the time of the crisis was importing and selling goods from Turkey, Istanbul recalls:

- Several times I had to go through bankruptcies. If you bring the wrong style or the wrong color, you will sell longer and you will be at a loss. We need intuition in our business. I had times when I could not sell anything, even a piece from my goods, for the whole two month. In such times I lent my goods imprudently. Debtors would feed me with tomorrows ...and, in the end, I had neither money nor my goods. Crisis of 2008 and 2009 in the country significantly undercut people's ability to buy.

Alma who has a fashion boutique for men both in Nur-Sultan (Astana) and Almaty also experienced hard financial crisis of 2008. The male clothing business was new for her at that time. She recalls:

- I got bankrupted for 18 million *tenge*, could you imagine how much money that was in 2008. Dollar fluctuations just killed me. I took loans from Turkish supplier in dollars, and after the devaluation of *tenge*, my amount of debt had increased. Today, probably it is good but tomorrow the situation could get worse just in one day, so I never knew what would happen in future. I could lose my customers or my money, save God, would not be able to afford the rent of

¹³ The dollar exchange rate for 2008 and 2014 can be seen [here](#)

my boutiques. Moreover, the preferences of the customers are not constant and tomorrow they could choose another shop... Trust on God, but rely on yourself.

From this, it is obvious that shuttle trade does not involve only importing and reselling goods at hometown, but also of continuous self-commitment and devotion to business, even relegating themselves and their families to a second place. The constant risk, uncertainty, and heavy physical labor like carrying and setting up goods that accompanied this business led to many emotional and physical health problems for my informants. As markets in post-Soviet bazaars, were open and not covered, women traders were forced to stand in hard weather conditions, regardless of whether it was snowing or raining, intolerably hot or bitterly cold. They had to disregard their health problems. Svetlana's current health problems, due to which they were forced to move to North Kazakhstan, started from the days of her work in the open bazaar:

- Who cared about my problems? I told my husband to look after the children while I was at the bazaar selling potatoes, but he wanted me to give up my idea of trading and for that he used to lock the children and leave the house... What have I not done to make a living? I sold potatoes, then took some fruits and vegetables for retailing at the local bazaar in but the crates were heavy and big, I could not lift them alone. I had to carry them in and out before and after the workday. So, I earned back pain and other health problems. I used to leave my two younger children to my eldest daughter's care and I stood in bazaar until the evening and I knew that they were waiting for me the whole day and I had to bring them something to make them happy and to compensate for my absence. Who would take care of them if I took a sick leave... how many times I was taken urgently to the hospital with the kidney attacks. In winters, even if I dressed very warmly, I felt constant cold in my legs and earned arthritis.

For women it was impossible to find any tradeoff in this challenging situation, as the lives of their children henceforth were totally dependent on their decisions. In many cases, women were forced to work despite their health conditions - with aches in their body, with high temperature and fever. Moreover, women said that it was hard to eat properly and on

time and mostly they were eating dry food, which they think brought them other health and weight problems. All the difficulties that these women are talking about confirm the differences between the actual experiences and the existing discourses (Vakulchuk, 2014) on the free market economy of a post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Urmanov in his article of the role of small-scale trade (2019) considers that state on purpose choose not to intervene in that shadowy part of market economy because it helps to pursue the global agenda of liberalization by stimulating the growth of market economy and satisfying the demand for low cost goods and services in a market. Austrian economics professor Friedrich Schneider believes that the shadow economy is the best way to counter decline and the unobserved sector is like an safety airbag for the people (Schneider, 2012). People usually do not save money from illegal work in banks, as they are spent immediately, increasing consumer demand (Urmanov, 2019). After the collapse of USSR many people in Kazakhstan find their means to survive in the streets of bazaar and market. Earned money they used to spend to cover their daily spending as food and shelter and thus increase the consumer demand.

Despite the fact that capitalism gave hope and assurance for the brighter future, the real experience of women significantly differed from the promised and expected new future. These women were the pioneers of today's fully functioning market system, no one showed them the right way, they learned from their own experiences. And they do not feel uncomfortable or regret on their past, as they admit that a shuttle trade is their destiny and a place where they were able to fulfill their potential. Alma considers her occupation as part of her life and her involvement in it as a stroke of luck.

- It is all that I can do. It is my life, I really feel grateful to my husband who once supported me in the beginning even if he left us later. He supported my attempts to sell, when even myself did not believe that I will be able to make it up. It is said that there is no good without bad (*jamansyz jaqsy joq*).

Chapter 3. Chelnok identity

The emergence of shuttle trade as a new employment venue in Kazakhstan and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space has been discussed in the first chapter. Considering the nature of *chelnok* woman, at a first sign, she appears as a person who on the basis of her accumulated capital and experience was able to transform her small-scale trade activities to a successful business enterprise. However in this chapter, I am going to discuss the shuttle trade's impacts on women's identity from the perspective of their own life stories, their unique path to the point at which they are now. Their personal evaluation of their experience is very important, as it gives a broader sense of understanding of their perception of their work and its effect on their lives. That small-scale trade practices, often referred to as shuttle trade, were widely spread through the post socialist space, from large cities to small towns. Today, those shuttle trade activities have not disappeared, but gained new structures and merchant identities. Even today we see on a daily basis how thousands of petty traders (*chelnoks*) go to the main cities of country or to the trade hubs that in the neighboring countries, sometimes even further abroad to Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Europe and China. This pattern usually supposes that merchants spend several days or even the weeks on their business trips. In many cases traders prefer to trade in large cities, as the price of their goods were higher there than at home town (Mukhina, 2014). Shuttle trading also supposes long days of separation from their family members and children. Certainly, this choice was not from easy ones for those women traders that had children. As all the participants of my study have children, they tell me with the remorse that they have spent and continue to spend too much time outside and away from their children and have not noticed how they have grown. Most of the women think that their frequent absence from home, is interpreted by their children as neglect and could be a possible reason for cold relations between them now. Therefore, many women, even those who are not the only breadwinners in family, are consumed with the sense of guilt toward their children. They believe that the job they have chosen in trade, have stolen them from

their children. They apprehend that they, kind of, neglected their own children for their entire life and now try to compensate that absence by showering their children with different types of gifts and other material assets.

Alma, is a single middle aged women in her 50-ies, has over 20 years of experience in trade business and clothing sector. She has two already adult sons, a father of whom she divorced many years ago. In early 1994, she with her ex-husband moved to Almaty from Zhanakorgan, district of Kyzyl Orda region, seeking a better livelihood. They were forced to leave their two children in Zhanakorgan aul to their parents, as the life in Almaty they expected to be high, and they would not be able to afford all expenses.

- My eldest son was 5- or 6 years old, he did not yet go to school, and my younger son was only three. We left them to parents of my husband and went to Almaty to find job and earn money. In Almaty we could afford only a small *vremyanka* with a toilet was outside, we had only small sink inside the room. I found a job in the hospital as a nurse and husband as a handyman (*raznorabochiy*). The life there was expensive for us,- we had to buy even milk that was free in aul and again my salary was delayed, It was 1995, I think, when I for the first time sold the jumper that my mother hand-knitted for a very good price. Then I thought that it is profitable. I saved money from our salaries went to Barakholka and observed what people sell and buy...I did not tell anyone, only my husband knew, he supported. Then I went to Bishkek, bought different clothes, for children, for men and women, started selling them, to colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances. I quickly sold them all and had good profit. I get driven (laughs) I went again and again, bought similar clothes to previous trip, I sold them quickly as my prices were a little cheaper rather than in the bazaars

From this excerpt, we see that in order to find the means for life the woman crosses borders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to bring the goods and sell them in the local bazaar. This small-scale trade practice implies a constant back and forth mobility, which is on one hand can be interpreted as an important resource for their economic sustainability, however on the other hand it can be the reason of family related problems. Tamara a study participants, admits that her

involvement in trade were likely the main reason of misunderstanding between them and their husbands.

- My husband told me to give up my delusions and hopes regarding the trade, he called rubbish everything that I did since he was uncomfortable to tell his parents that I was engaged in shuttle trade and sometimes was absent for weeks doing trips to get the goods. I think that there is no shame; I brought all my income to home. He drank, and drank like a fish. Children always cried, turned around, did not talk, they were afraid of him. We quarreled and fought a bunch of times. He once burned a part of my goods that I brought from Almaty. I, too, was young, and my emotions went off scale, too, but this is already in the past. So, in 2001, we have divorced.

In pre soviet times, Kazakh people used to lead nomadic style of life with a patriarchal culture strongly consolidated by a hierarchy and social status based on sex and age. Traditionally raised men in many cases do not tolerate any initiative from women, which could create various family problems. The strong sense of masculinity did not let them to interfere themselves with women and women related works. As man is a head of household women were dependent on his decisions regarding the family issues. But over the time this pattern of life has changed. The post-Soviet realm gave a huge opportunity for women to use their potentials. They obtained the right to vote, to work, to earn and most importantly to demand the rights equal with men's. However, it made them alienated from their families, as most women have taken a role of a breadwinner (Gabitov & Shamahay, 2014).

Klara is a 51 years old women and is an only participant with a husband who is also a businessperson. They live with her parents- in-law and have benefits from such living arrangements, as they help her in raising her children. Klara's husband actively involved her to his business to work and assist him. Almost 30 years he brings toothbrushes from China to Kazakhstan and works on a wholesale basis. Klara, a former teacher of a junior school, was not afraid to throw herself in this lucrative business, mainly because her husband was near. They

regularly went to Chinese trade hubs for getting toothbrushes in a huge number, only by time they added another bathroom commodities. However, toothbrushes still remain the chief items in their assortment.

- It was the summer of 1997, when I am with my husband went to Urumqi to get the toothbrushes. I was there for the first time, while my husband already had established a smooth process of buying toothbrushes there. I only added some other stuffs for the bathrooms just to expand our assortment, like different types of towels, combs, mirrors etc. Over time, I was offered to get bed linens, which was very popular, and kind of, steered a path for my separation from the husband's business.

Klara says that her extraordinary story of success is due to her husband and his support. As both of them are dark and “dirty” *chelnoks* with years of experience, they invest the lion part of their income to the tuition of their children, as two out of four of their children are studying abroad, they have to pay for their accommodation as well. Klara considers that by investing into the future of her children they can add value to their brighter future, not as if they have studied in Kazakhstan.

- My eldest daughter studies psychology in Hungary... My son is studying in China at Wuhan University in the Commerce and Business Department, which he has chosen himself. We wanted him to be a doctor, but what we could do, if he wants this profession?

Despite the fact that she can afford the education of her children abroad, Klara emphasizes that her children were raised in a modest manner.

- We never give them free money, they move by bus around the city. None of them have iPhone or any fancy gadgets that today's youth have. We never buy them expensive clothes or other expensive things, despite that I walk in the heart of

different types of wholesale bazaars. I do not want them to get used to ready and easy life. Each of them have own piggybanks to which they put their earned money. My son studies in Wuhan and he is working as an English teacher and earns \$1000 and I am proud of him.

Remarkably, the deficit and crisis of the 90-s instilled the sense of saving and frugality in many people's minds. John Keynes in his book on the impressions about the Soviet Russia (2017) commends on the need for lean lifestyle after the Union demise, and states that abstinence under new capitalism is related with total uncertainty about the future (p. 23). Keynes (2017) noted that the threat of devastation constantly hanged over the heads of entrepreneurs, the same as a threat of losing a job over the heads of employees. Everyone lived in a constant fear that the crisis will blow out at any time and it will be ruthless, as it has been before in the life of everyone. Consequently, it generated the psychology of saving on everything, saving what you can for a rainy day (p. 23).

Klara loves her occupation and grateful that her husband involved her to the world of business.

- Sometimes people do not know what our names are. For instance, my husband's name is Arman, but many people call him just "Toothbrush King" (*Shchetochniy Korol*) and accordingly me as "Toothbrush Queen" (*Shchetochnaya Koroleva*)... We are so many years there, that it became a part of us and we like that people associate us with our business.

But now, well-off *chelnok* women, understand that today the ways of merchant or shuttle traders is already a thing of the past, even when trade remains trade the ways of doing it and its returns have changed. Today, it is hard to get rich through only trade, as the value of the goods today is different from the value of the goods in the times of deficit in the 1990s. Today's markets are saturated with goods. Many of women traders try not to involve their own children in their business – instead sending to study or to find a job in a different sphere. Some of the

participants, like Rakhilya, Klara, and Zaure openly said that their children are studying abroad and they are proud with this fact. They have admitted that they invest lion part of their income on the tuition and accommodation expenses of their children.

The family dynamic and family relations changed under pressure of new realities, new occupation conditions. If women entered a shuttle trade business, she acquired a sense of financial independence from her husband or any male partner in her family. This sense of financial independence certainly goes along with the sense of self-sufficiency and rises her self-esteem. It was common for women to make trips and leave all her domestic duties to a family member, if she had any. As was already mentioned in Kazakh families after marriage woman in many cases lives with parent of her husband and is expected to respect all her in-laws and gain the respect and recognition of the her new family by providing unpaid household services for all of them. (Werner, 2015). As in case of Klara, Zaure from Chimkent, south Kazakhstan, also many years lives with her parent in law. She also had very tough relations with her mother in law, as Zaure could not fulfill her obligations according to traditions that the daughter in laws has to do. However, merchant women are always able to gain social credits by getting different consumer goods for their relatives and family or non-merchant friends. As practice shows, it considerably can change their relationship. For Zaure, it was not a big problem, but it solved all the tensions between her and her mother in law:

- At first we could not tolerate each other, the relations were little bit tight and I was always busy with my business, could not properly look after my children, forced to ask for help from my mother in law. She knew that every month I am going for business trips to Almaty, to Bishkek, not important to where, and she in a very subtly way started to ask me to bring to her and her daughters some of their orders, clothes, shoes... And, of course, I did that, all the time, even when she does not ask, just to have her good relation to me and in order shw would

take care after my children when I am away. We Kazakhs say, if the faithless is well fed, than faithful will be in glad. (Kapir toq bolsa, musylman tynysh)

Likewise, in families in which women are the only breadwinners, women mark that they have very strong and good relationship with their children. Previously mentioned study participant Alma, also notes on sensitivity and responsiveness in characters of her sons. She lovingly tells how her children help and support her since their childhood, despite they were raised without their father.

3.1 I cannot allow myself to be a woman

Being *chelnok* changes not only the life but also the character of those who do it more than any other profession. The trade demands a *carpe diem* attitude from those who decides to get involved in it. The decisions sometimes should be taken instantly and with full confidence. Merchants need to look for profitable acquaintances and contacts, which requires them to be open and friendly. From the positive effects, it made them more organized and efficient, in order to save time for their children. They developed their coping skills and learned to take quick decisions. However, trade is a place without gender identity. It is not important what is your gender, if you are a trader, which means that women have to behave in more decisive and confident way in order to succeed in their business. Svetlana states:

- Despite the fact that I am physiologically a woman, I am actually a man. I am both a father and mother for my children. I have spent many years to raise myself to this level. Probably no one would understand me, as now the life is a way easier rather than in my time. In bazaar, no one will care that you are a women and behave in a different manner. You will forget that you are women. But I never felt sorry for myself.

However, according to the feminist approach, the assumption of gender neutrality of trade both undervalues the women's labor implication in trade and obscures women's role as economic actors (Randriamaro, 2006). They argue that men and women have different social roles from their birth, and an unequal access of women to any economic resource, as technology, land or bank credits will have different impacts on both women and men. Moreover, the cultural peculiarities of Kazakhstan are closely intertwined with the Islamic norms, which also put men above women as breadwinners.

Tamara in turn recalls how it was hard for her to express her emotions in front of her children.

- Earlier I could not throw out my emotions in front of my children. I was afraid that after, and would feel sorry for me and refrain to tell me their problems in order to not make me upset etc. I was strong mother and used to always tell myself: "You went long way, just bear it a little longer". I was strict and sometimes could yell at children, that was my method of rising, because I think that life can be stricter than I am. I want them to have no difficulties in life. They say that I never regret myself. I had no choice. It is my life... Anyway, I am grateful that hard days is already in the past.

As every business, this job has some bewildering effects on the relation with relatives. According to Alma, her new acquired character affected her relations with her relatives and friends:

- I started to close myself from my relatives and friends, as I did not want them to ask money from me, some of them ask for business assistance, some of them for house... So, I decided not to respond to them, when I am alone, they have husbands and other people who surrounds them and could help them, why they should ask

money from me, if I am single women and raising two children. I am not a bank with a money printing machine

These considerations coincide with other participants' thoughts as well. Svetlana for instance does not want to host her relatives when they come to Nur-Sultan (Astana) from villages, with studying or working purposes, as she thinks that they will start a parasite life at her home. Their feeling of loneliness and expectation of external help when they were in poor conditions, from the government, husbands or relatives, have significantly changed their relation to life in many ways and often they do not notice how they have changed themselves. Despite the fact that Kazakhs have strong kin relations, the women prefer to keep subordination, as it can negatively affect on her relations with relatives. They explain it that people around them aim to use their relations for their own interest. Women believe that primarily such consumerist relations of relatives or friends make them more tough and does not allow them to live their own lives. The relatives or friends make women to be more engaged in the problems of others, particularly financial problems, which are recognized as male type problems, since men in Kazakh society are positioned as breadwinners. It is also possible that in such relations, woman acquires the sense of depreciation as of a woman, and will think that people or society need her only because of her money, not because of her personality. However, they also understand that the time of 1990 and 2000s were very tough to everyone, and even if someone wanted to help, he just could not afford, as many of them who asked for help had no jobs, but had little children to feed.

Besides, it is clear that women have a deep sense of proud of their achievements and acknowledge that all the challenges they had to face on their careers were useful for their mental growth.

3.2. Shuttle-trader women are also women

Women's self-sacrifice for the family is deeply embedded in the Kazakh society. The model of "working mother" has certain implication on the child development in the family. According to the study of Singh the model of working mother can serve as a good role model for her children, as they can create self-confidence, social awareness, and sense of commitment and struggle among her children with a lot of monetary of benefits (Singh, 2018).

Above discussed story of Svetlana with three children perfectly comes in line with this analysis of Singh (2018). Her younger daughter, according to Svetlana, prefers to follow her footstep and seems to enjoy that. However, Svetlana believes that it affects her not in positive way, as she still cannot get married even though she is 29 years old.

- I am nearly 60 years old, as any women of my age, I also want to see the happiness of my children, their spouses, want to have grandchildren and be a normal grandmother... But my daughter is still single and does not even want to think about family and children. All that she is concerned about is our business, bills, money etc. If I ask why, she starts to avoid me and any question related to her personal life. She cannot live all her life all alone. Her brother and I will not be here with her all her life but she does not understand that. She has everything except the family, I mean her own family.

General tendency of many Kazakhs during the Soviet times was to get married at their early age. The state had emphasized the value of a stable family, as a core moral value. Marriages were supposed to last long, preferably for the rest of the couple' lives. In building relationship, many Soviet people relied on the basic gender normative ideologies that were predominantly established in rural communities (Mukhina, 2014). Most Kazakh families lived in extended families, which means that parents of males live with the young family. Sometimes couple have to live in multigenerational families with parents of the man, his grandparents, and unmarried siblings of the husband (Wilson, Peterson, & Steinmetz, 2012).

If women had children, the practice of leaving children with their mothers or family member have become very common. For those who lived with the parents in law it was an opportunity to make profit out of it. They could leave them for a long period of time.

- I was not even able to come to see my daughter whom I left to my mother, sometimes even for two years. I had to work... and the distance was long

Rakhilya had left her daughter for more than five years in order to work in Pavlodar's market and could afford only once a year visit home to see her. She was the only participant who left her child for such long period. According to her words, long distance had negatively affected their relationships with daughter. Moreover, even after returning Rakhilya had to work hard in order to ensure her family with the basic needs as shelter and food. It involved long hours working outside, which caused, stress, fatigue and sleep deprivation. Standing in open-air market, as of Almaty barakholka, caused various health problems as well. After the divorce, children usually are left with their mothers, and fathers had only formal relation with them. Generally, fathers were already deeply depressed due to the cutback at job; and could not afford to pay child support payments after the divorce. In practice, many divorced husbands forcefully and naturally become disengaged from their children's lives (Kruk, 2012). It is almost impossible for divorced man to take a full responsibility of his children, as mother was considered naturally suitable for caregiving of her children irrespective of her social, financial and emotional state to do that (Mukhina, 2009). This makes women, a mother of those children to take doubled responsible for her children, which can affect her relationship with them in both positive and negative ways (Tanaka, 2000). Moreover, the trade, as women admit, has considerably changed their character. From the positive effects, it made them more organized and efficient, in order to save time for their children. They developed their coping skills and learned to take quick decisions.

Sometimes their involvement in shuttle trade was a consequence of a broken relationship with their husbands. Only one out of seven participants was able to build a family

with her second husband. Ayzada, who is from Kentau, is owner of an Italian shop for women in Nur-Sultan (Astana), once found herself on the street with a little son in her hands, as her husband used to get drunk and beat her. Tired from domestic violence and abuses she left her husband. She decided to go to Almaty in order to find a job and change her life. She left her son to her sister for a while, until she get settled in Almaty. Now she is 49 years old, successful women with three children, owner of a fashion shop with garments from Italy for women. She recalls those days as one of the best days when she acquired the freedom.

- I was selling tea, coffee, beverages and snacks in Almaty *barakholka*. I was walking through the bazaar with stroller with several thermoses inside and was shouting: Tea, coffee, beverages (*napitki*, kvas)... I remember once when it was cold, very cold; I had not warm shoes to wear and go to work. I knelt down and asked God to make me rich, very rich and in return I promised to help other women and teach them everything that I know. I was never uncomfortable with this fact of my past. It is my experience and I am grateful for that. People should know that I am a self-made woman.

Five out of seven participants of the study are divorced women having children. According to participants, the main reason of the divorce with their husbands is the inability of husbands to adopt to new realities of post-Soviet time, lack of financial resources and unwillingness to search for any compromise between couples. Beyond a doubt, the lifestyle of a shuttle trader added significant effect to these statistics. Their decision to be a shuttle trader was not a choice, but a necessary step that was dictated by external circumstances in the economy of that time. Soviet era men agreed with the female employment only if women will remain solely responsible for the domestic duties and all chores of the childcare (Kilbitskaya, 2000). Women adopted with this role and in order to fit with this, they have to be present at home some part of the day and only after they accomplish their domestic tasks they are allowed to go to work. This double

burden of work, at home and at work was impossible for those who worked as a shuttle trader. It was impossible to be trader and maintain all domestic operations at the same level as it once was.

Some husbands, as husband of Klara, who was in trade and let his wife to work by own choice, helped his wife to build her own business. United by a family relation, man and woman were engaged in the shuttle trade and joined their forces in the business as well. Similarly, Zaure has a full family with four children. Despite that her husband in a different sphere, Zaure emphasized his support to her, as she believes that everything that she could achieve is due to his support and faith to her.

- If he was against my business, I was not be able to earn as much as I do now, He knows my impatient character and that I could not probably work in other types of job, so ..You know there are some families that split the money: mine money his money... and even go to divorces cause of that...no we never do that, save us God! I am motivated to earn for my family and my money is my family's money. The most important thing is the harmony and trust in the family. Money is not eternal, your family their support and love are the most important things in life.

However, Zaure admits that the understanding the value of a family and ability to keep balance between the family and work demands some efforts and time, particularly in Kazakh families.

Finally, all the participants expressed their love and dedication to their work and type of their business. They state that trade became the part of their lifestyle and platform for self-realization. Even some of the participants believe that trade helped them to develop the qualities in character that are vital for the proper organization of life, such as time management and networking skills. According to women, the current various forms of trainings and seminars on trade education cannot be compared with their knowledge and experience in the field of trade.

3.3 The role of women in Kazakh society

In many parts of Kazakhstan, especially in southern and rural areas, gender roles depend on strong patriarchal control of male over the female half of the household. Tursun and Shahanay in their article about women's symbolic image, state, that in oriental countries women have role of a keeper of a family traditions, children educator, the one who rises her husband's authority and respects him, and only by demonstrating the abilities to perform the abovementioned qualities, she is allowed to take part in social and political life (Gabitov & Shamahay, 2014). In Kazakhstan, as in other Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union, the era of so called neo-patriarchy, a new form of patriarchy, flourishes: women can work, participate in public life, vote, manage their choice about marriage and decide for themselves whether to chose a career or a to be a housewife (Yun, 2018). The system of patriarchy itself did not disappear; but was adapted to new realities and social values. Regarding the patriarchal social system in Kazakhstan, Zaure considers that today the situation is better than it was before:

- The society is different already, but honestly, I think, it has been modernized. Many people want to preserve their traditions, as can be seen in many today's weddings or toys¹⁴. People want to enhance the role of man as of a breadwinner, as it comes naturally from the culture and traditions. However, every one also knows that, the role of women is not less than those of men and the value of women should be recognized as well. Patriarchal system will exist for a long time and that is not bad. The importance is that women should stop being marginalized, they need to get more and more education. If every woman decides what to do with her life and take the responsibility for that decision the life of each women will change for better. More and more women now understand it and actively participate in many social projects.

According to the interviews, the contribution of women and men into a household economy is considerably differed in a way that men used to spend all earned money for drinking

¹⁴ Toy here refers to big joyous and happy event accompanied by music and dancing. It is a celebration form among people of Central Asian countries. There can be different occasions because of which people make toy: wedding, the birth of a baby, birthdays, etc.

and giving to his relatives, while women were concerned on the well-being of her children and family.

As the most traditional families are found in local auls, the rate of divorces there is expected to be lower than in cities. In case of participants, their spouses continued to live in auls while they moved to cities with children after the divorce. It should be noted that there are different attitudes toward divorces in auls and cities (Stasevich, 2011, p. 119). Since auls are small and many people know each other, women are afraid to be the subject of rumors and condemnations. Tamara, as a victim of a divorce drama says:

- Many things cannot be tolerated. I suffered from the drunkenness, abuses, violence to me and children from their father, all women in much or less extend suffer from their men. People have to wake up and be a broader look, realize that today time is different ...They have to express their positions, I know there is no fairness in our country, sometimes it is wild. I am aware that in regions like Shymkent, Aqtau, Kyzyl Orda people are too keen on the traditions in a pure form. I feel sorry for the women who live there, as they are forced to live with inequity, like literally discrimination.

To note, all the participants were born and raised in small auls¹⁵ in various parts of Kazakhstan. Interestingly, the majority of them are from the south Kazakhstan. For instance, Alma is from Zhanakorgan, Rakhilya is from Shieli, both of which are districts of Kyzylorda region. While Klara is from Taldykorgan, and Svetlana is from Merke, only Tamara is purely local. Zaure and Ayzada are from Shymkent region. We see that the capital is a place to where people migrate in search for a better livelihood. Most participants have experience of living in Almaty, which is considered as trade and financial hub of the country. However, their current destination is Nur Sultan (Astana), young and promising capital of Kazakhstan. Study participants were raised in very ordinary Kazakh families and were not spoiled with any type of wealth. They know the value of hard work and what life is like in auls. Svetlana misses her small

¹⁵ Aul is a small village in countryside

town Merke which is located between Taraz and Almaty. She fondly remembers the people in auls and juxtaposes the ideal portrait of women with aul women.

Patriarchal societal structure considers men superior than women and supposes that men can exploit and oppress women (Walby, 1990). Aksana Ismailbekova argues that culturally legitimate authority of women comes with advance in age and “bargaining with patriarchy”. the power and authority of women in the society is obtained through successive passing the roles as a wife (*kelin*), mother (*ana*) and mother in law (*kayin ene*) at home. According to Svetlana, in Kazakh society unequal relation arises even with the birth of a baby

- I personally think that it is related with unfair relation to men and women which starts with their birth. People are happy when boy comes to life rather than girl.

People organize toys and as he is the heir of a household. Poor girls have to live with the sense that they are not so much valuable as boys. Everything starts from this point...

In Kazakhstan, family relationships is organized around men or the one who takes the “breadwinner” role (Sydakhmetova, 2018). Indeed, for a long time the patriarchal social structure of Kazakhstan often served as one of the barriers in female entrepreneurship. Following excerpt of interview is how Alma thinks on the influence of patriarchal society on the development of women:

- I don't deny that it impedes many people from their development. Probably when women gets stronger and she will understand that she is able to live and ensure herself, men feel kind of weakness that women is at equal level with him. Loses masculinity, if they will let women to do what they want, as far as I know women survived the war (laughs), there are many *batyr* women. But traditionally, it is the man, who should be the head of house, family, business and etc. We now live in

modern world, so it is by nature, as man is physically stronger, man is designed for an upper position in the society.

In Soviet times, the question of inequality in the performance of both domestic and household responsibilities by men and women was simply glossed over, but in practice it turned out that even in everyday life the Soviet collective farmers continued to be guided by the traditional stereotypes of the division of labor duties (Stasevich, 2011, p. 63). Makaeva (2019) in her observation of business climate in Kazakhstan, indicated a number of difficulties that women face in launching their own business. Firstly, the lack of trust in loaning money from banks, due to her emotional nature; secondly, the double burden for women that makes her navigate between home and work; and third according to statistics women are more engaged in a service sector rather than in other types of business. Makaeva (2019) relates this with the fact that Kazakh girls in her childhood are taught that they should choose the directions to develop that are suitable for women. Consequently, women become more associated only with soft business. However today, as participant women say, the situation is far better. Despite that there is various challenges and obstacles in the market, women have a lot of opportunities as well (Gabitov & Shamahay, 2014). The state authorities has adopted various policies aimed at encouraging women entrepreneurship and balancing the gender identity in the marketplace.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

In some 28 years, the “face” of retail in Kazakhstani market has changed dramatically. Chaotic stumbling stalls, seller’s selling tables and drawers, and container markets are being replaced by modern retail formats: convenient and warm stores, supermarkets and hypermarkets, boutiques, fashion houses and even online markets.

This thesis has focused on the experience of women who used to be shuttle-traders and were a part of the transition process of Kazakhstan from socialist to capitalist market. When the policy of liberal individualism came to replace state paternalism, women had to solve many

problems for themselves, for the state, and often for men, because neither the state nor men were able to properly solve the problems that arose. When we consider their life circumstances through their own personal stories, the choices they made in the 1990s and their involvement in trade makes a lot of sense. I attempted to enhance the understanding of how shuttle trade, and particularly women's involvement in it in times of collapse of communism, shaped today's women's characters, which helped them to be turn from *speculyants* to business owners. It also illuminates how merchant women themselves experienced that transition period from communism to capitalism.

The times have changed now and the shuttle trade does not work the same way as it worked in the 1990s. However, women still remember the time when they slept little, when they dragged heavy loads, fought off bandits and dishonest custom officials. It still matters for them as it is the walk of life which they do not want to transfer to their children. The women stories that reflect the deep intertwining of personal life tragedies and joys, ups and downs brings out their inner emotions that was neglected even by themselves. Moreover, the lack of support from the male part, for some of the study participants was a primary motive for hard and risky work as they had full responsibility for their families. They had times when they were forced to deny themselves even in additional cup of tea in winters in open bazaars. However, women note that all that cost they had to pay for the future of their children is fair and do not regret any of their past days.

The role of shuttle women in post-socialist transition period was very significant. The Soviet men mainly associated himself with the state productions sites and state institutions that were closed after the collapse of the USSR. As a result, the men's main strategy was waiting and enduring. But, for women, who identified themselves primarily with the family, driven by maternal duty to their children, survival by any means became the first strategy. Women did not hold on to the state. Potatoes, not on a collective farm, but on a personal garden and private trade were the means of survival as a private affair. For men, undertaking the trade meant forever

losing his status of a skilled worker especially as of a specialist, in the eyes of his environment and family as well. A woman, regardless of her status, undertook any available work including petty trade. The main explanation she gives is that she was a mother and for the sake of her children – she was ready to do any work. Moreover, despite the male dominated power structure in Kazakhstani society, women are expected to work. Women do not avoid it, as they understand that for some it is the way to find means for life while for others it is the way to find the respect. They consider that hard work is only way to earn the recognition and appreciation of society in Kazakhstan.

Their contribution to the construction of market economy, even in a form of selling consumer goods, should not be left unnoticed. Moreover, today the shuttle trade has not disappeared; it exist but in a different legalized form. Today there is no need for women to carry huge Chinese checkered bags, as the world becomes more integrated, digitalized, and organized.

I believe that their road to success started in their small villages when they decided to change their lives and the lives of their children. Successful, effective and simply charming women - those whom society today call business women often come from former shuttle-traders. Their current stability and wealth is the result of their dedication and strong motivation to give a better future to their children. It is indeed a rare case when an ordinary traditionally raised women all by herself without any external help (except leaving children to one of the relatives), was be able to move to the capital city and successfully assimilate.

On a question would they like to change their work or something in their lives Alma answered: “It is my experience and it is my life, I cannot change it even if I wanted, but I do not want to change anything. Changing something means denying my experience, consequently denying my life. I love it in a way as it is”. Their path was not from easy, it was thorny and full of challenges. Many participants are divorced from their husbands - due to various reasons, such as their alcoholic habits, financial incapability, and other domestic issues. After divorce all of

these women (except one) remain single, having adult children. Dedication to their work, responsibility to their children, absorbed the lives of these women leaving no time and energy for their personal contentment. Besides, according cultural ideology, Kazakh women generally put the happiness and lives of their children above their personal lives.

For the most families, as of Klara or Zaure, the income that merchant women brings into the household outweighs the existing strains the trade activities place on family relationships. Women are no longer worried with the household chores or absence in family events. The only thing that women mainly are concerned is the relation with their children and their emotional wellbeing. Most of the study informants expressed their inner sense of guilt for their absence from their children's lives. However, the participants also notes the benefits from their shuttle trips which usually involve international trips, that could be combined with the cultural exchange and vacation, if they have time after work. For most women such combination is more convenient than spending money for vacations trips separately, as they see it as pampering and akin to throwing money out of the window.

The life trajectories of the women I interviewed are different but their experiences are also very similar in many ways. The range of personal experiences illustrate the variety of ways to become successful entrepreneurs, each had own path of growth, the cost of which also differs. The relation with their family members, with children, and husbands, the deteriorated health conditions are probably the cost that should be paid for getting such experience of a successful entrepreneur. All women started their business almost from nowhere, even been thrown in the middle of the street with little baby. Their current residence in Nur-Sultan (Astana) indicates their strength and competitiveness of their business enterprises. Could men have succeeded on the same level? No one knows. The men's experience and perspectives, especially of male traders can be an avenue for future researchers, interested in the experiences of shuttle traders. Tolerance, strong motivation, and full dedication of themselves were probably the key factors in the success of their enterprises, which currently have full legal status.

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