

Capstone Final Draft

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Title: Denying Motherhood: Experience of Childfree Women in Kazakhstan

Abstract

Childfree people often underrepresented in the official governmental statistics and censuses, and thus they become “invisible” members of our society. It is essential to study the experiences of childfree people to better understand the reasons for becoming childfree, what challenges they face and how they cope with negative attitudes and stereotypes. Especially, it is vital to study childfree women as it is believed that motherhood is essential part of feminine identity. Consequently, this paper is comprised of qualitative research methods and secondary data research. Overall 5 semi-structured interviews were conducted with childfree women from Kazakhstan. It was identified that age, birth order and marriage status play important roles not only in developing reasons to become childfree, but also how they are perceived by other people and how they cope with the negative questions and attitudes. Additionally, challenges such as negative social attitudes and limitations of regulations regarding the sterilization were found. Moreover, interviewees believed that motherhood is too responsible and that there is choice in front of women to have a career or a family. It was investigated that, childfree women do not feel stigmatized, because their whole identity is not based solely on being childfree. They do not allow others’ negative opinions and stereotypes to have an effect on their decision and self-perception. This paper is based on the theoretical frameworks such as modernization theory, gender equity theory by Peter Macdonald, a stalled gender revolution, the theory of Gary Becker, the concept of intensive motherhood, and “doing gender”.

Keywords: childfree, childfree women, denying motherhood, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Often, when people hear the word “family” they imagine families which consist of two adults and one or more children. Since childhood, people believe that this is a “normal” structure of the family and that being married and having children is as vital for adults as having a job. But why it is considered to be essential to have children at some point in a life? The case is that, the society we live in is highly pronatalist, which means that there is a social requirement to want to have children. However, not all people want to enter parenthood for various reasons. Such people are often referred to as voluntarily childless or childfree. They do not want to have children even though they might be biologically capable of doing so.

Unfortunately, because of the “naturalness” of wanting to have children, childfree individuals are considered to be “deviant”. For example, they can be viewed as evil or egoistic. Especially, women are subjected to judgment, as feminine identity is highly tied to the notion of motherhood. This is related to the fact that fatherhood is less salient to the male’s role than motherhood is to the female’s role (Veevers, 1980). It is believed that every woman must become a mother and take care of the children.

Thus, the main scope of this research is childfree women in Kazakhstan. It could be mistakenly believed that the childfree phenomenon is more prevalent in Western countries, but this trend is also becoming widespread in Kazakhstan. Therefore, it is essential to study the childfree phenomenon here too. Because unfortunately, it is impossible to tell the exact number of childfree individuals in Kazakhstan due to the absence of official statistics and excluding such demographic criteria from governmental censuses. Even though some data could be found about the number of childless people, there is no distinguishment between the voluntarily and involuntarily childless. Such unavailability of the data makes childfree people “invisible” members of our society. Therefore, this capstone project aims to explore the *experience* of childfree women in Kazakhstan to make their voices heard.

Consequently, the research question like “What is the experience of the women who reject motherhood in the highly gender-normative, pronatalist, and patriarchal society of Kazakhstan?” will be explored in this capstone project. Additionally,

reasons for becoming childfree, and how childfree women feel about how they are perceived by others in this pronatalist society will be investigated as “sub-questions” during the research. This study is significant as the topic of childfree is highly underrepresented in Kazakhstani academia and will allow the researchers to understand the experience of childfree women better. Theoretical frameworks of modernization theory, gender equity theory by Peter Macdonald, a stalled gender revolution, the theory of Gary Becker, the concept of intensive motherhood, and “doing gender” will be used to help answer the research question.

Literature review

Research context

What is childfree?

Childfree people are individuals, who voluntarily reject the possibility of becoming a parent (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). It is important to emphasize that they are voluntarily childless; the main difference is that involuntarily childless individuals are people who have a physical inability to produce offspring such as being infertile (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Agrillo and Nelini, 2008). Also, it is vital to highlight that it is better to refer to the people, who voluntarily do not want to have children, as childfree. Because as stated by Kreyenfeld & Konietzka (2017) and Settle (2014), the suffix “less” has negative connotations, which implies that these people are lacking something. At the same time, the suffix “free” connotes that they made a conscious choice not to have children. The term “childfree” was first used in the 1970s by the National Organization for Non-Parents as a more “right” substitute for the term “childless”(Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Some people think that “childfree” is a new phenomenon; however, throughout human history, there have always been people who did not want to be parents (Veevers, 1980). But back in the day, such people just did not have possibilities and access for fertility control. Therefore, with various contraceptives becoming available, people started to have more opportunities to prevent pregnancy.

Typology of childfree people

One of the first researchers who studied childfree people in detail was Jean Veevers. Veevers (1980) divided childfree people into two groups in terms of the

main motivations for not wanting to have children. This typology will be used in the following research, as it is still relevant from 1980 and other scientists in this sphere still refer to this exact typology or even base their own typologies on that one done by Veevers in their works. Veevers (1980) stated that they are childfree people who are “rejectors”; they are people who have an aversion to the process of giving birth and to children as such. The second group was named “aficionados”; they are those who are attracted by the delights of a carefree childless lifestyle (Veevers, 1980). For instance, they do not want to lose opportunities to travel, and entertainment (Isupova, 2010). Since then, Kneale & Joshi (2008) identified two more categories of childfree people. There are “perpetual postponers”, who may have a latent desire to have children, but they postpone it until a “better time” (Kneale & Joshi, 2008). However, as time goes on, they might change their mind about never having children or they may become biologically incapable of doing so (Kneale & Joshi, 2008). The second group identified by Kneale & Joshi (2008) are “wave-like refusers”. These childfree people might have periods when they want to have children, but other factors that affect the decision to not have children outweigh this desire (Isupova, 2010).

Pronatalism vs Childfree

Most societies, if not all of them, are pronatalist; there is an expectation that people should have children (Veevers, 1980). Following Veevers (1980), people are required not only to have children but also, they are required to want them. She also stated that “parenthood is almost universally lauded as an intrinsically desirable social role” (Veevers, 1980, p. 1). In addition, it is believed that being a parent is necessary for the self-actualization of the person (Veevers, 1980). This is consistent with Harrington (2019), who declared that according to developmental and psychoanalytic theories, parenthood is a developmental achievement. It also was indicated by Erikson (1963, as cited in Harrington, 2019) that the reproduction and upbringing of the child are crucial for the psychosocial stage of the adult. So, it could be clearly seen that becoming a parent is considered to be crucial for adults.

With such beliefs and a pronatalist agenda, people who do not want to have children are viewed as “deviant” (Veevers, 1980; Keizer & Ivanova, 2017). Because it is believed that there is something wrong with the people who do not have children as it is “natural” for people to want them. Therefore, despite the

increasing number of childfree people, they are often stereotyped and face negative attitudes from society (Harrington, 2019). To exemplify, research done by Ashburn-Nardo (2017, as cited in Harrington, 2019), identified that childfree people cause in other “normal” people (individuals who want to have children) anger, disgust, disapproval, and moral outrage. Also, Park (2002, as cited in Harrington, 2019) identified that childfree people are viewed as “cold, materialistic, and selfish”. While Koropecyj-Cox, Çopur, Romano, and Cody-Rydzewski (2018, as cited in Harrington, 2019) found that parents are viewed as “warmer, kinder, more caring, and more nurturing” rather than non-parents.

Pronatalism in Kazakhstan

Similar research was done by Smagambet & Ashirbayeva (2022) in Kazakhstan. They used the method of free association to examine the attitude of Kazakhstani citizens toward childfree people. Even though the sample size is small and not homogeneous, Smagambet & Ashirbayeva (2022) made a good starting point in researching childfree in the Kazakhstani context. As a result, Smagambet & Ashirbayeva (2022) identified that more than half of the respondents’ associations with the word “childfree” were negative. While 30 out of 120 associations were neutral or people indicated that they were unaware of this phenomenon (Smagambet & Ashirbayeva, 2022).

The case is that, historically, Kazakhstani society is highly gender-normative (Kabatova, 2022). Males are considered to be the breadwinners of the family and females are responsible for domestic chores and childcare (Kabatova, 2022). Some people might argue that it is our tradition, that women should be a good “kelin” (daughter-in-law), and of course, it implies being a mother. In Kazakhstani society, it is believed that kelin should produce a new generation to continue the lineage of her husband. In a pilot study by Smagambet and Ashirbayeva (2022), 80% of respondents’ associations with multiple children families were positive, while almost 87% of associations with childless families were negative. These results demonstrate that Kazakhstan’s society is strongly pronatalist and that childless and childfree people are perceived negatively.

Overall, it is even not questioned whether you want to have children or not; there is no choice, a woman must be a mother in Kazakhstan. As Kazakhstani society cherishes traditional and family values, almost anybody can ask you when you will get married or when will you have children. There are no boundaries about reproductive choices; young married couples who do not have a child within the 1 year of marriage are always under the pressure as they don't have children. Because of such sociocultural context of Kazakhstan, childfree people can face pressure and negative attitudes from the society.

Limitations of existing literature

As it was mentioned in previous sections childfree people are often stereotyped as being egoistic and selfish. This implies that there is a stigmatization of childfree people and thus leads to the marginalization of childfree people. However, there are lack of studies on how childfree people themselves react to these stereotypes and other negative attitudes. Most of the articles focus on how childfree people are perceived by others. However limited literature was identified on whether childfree people themselves found this stigmatization problematic or not. Therefore, the current research will try to explore the question “how childfree people feel about how they are perceived by others in this pronatalist society” while exploring the main research question about the overall experience of childfree women in Kazakhstan.

Theoretical Framework

Modernization theory, Gender equity theory, and Stalled Gender Revolution

One of the contextual factors that affect the rate of childfree people is the transition to modernity and the theory that explains the transitions from pre-modern society to modern society is the modernization theory (Mayowa, 2019). The authors who conceptualized modernization theory are Inglehart and Welzel. In 2010, they revised their modernization theory and addressed issues like non-linearity and not irreversibility of modernization. As a result, Inglehart and Welzely (2010) concluded by saying “...revised version of modernization theory implies that economic development tends to bring enduring changes in a society's values that, at high levels of development, make the emergence and survival of democratic institutions increasingly likely” (p. 563). Thus, the application of technology and

mechanization, industrialization, urbanization, rise in national and per capita income, increase in literacy, political participation, and development of mass media are characteristics of modernization (Mayowa, 2019). This is especially true as modernization led to the increased employment and literacy among women.

Because females started to actively enter the labor force in the 1960s, relationships between husband and wife changed drastically (England, 2010). The marital relationships started to become more or less egalitarian, as the women started to provide for the family too. These changes in private and public spheres are referred to as the “gender revolution” (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). However, the uneven and stalled gender revolution theory will be used since females still do the majority of domestic chores despite being employed. According to Charmes (2019), although females actively participate in the labor force, males are not actively involved in domestic chores and childcare. Women worldwide do 75% of all unpaid care work. So, there is a dilemma that occurs among women: how to combine work, domestic world and children’s upbringing. Therefore, some women tend to postpone motherhood or even reject motherhood for work success, career, and higher income. This is seen from the research conducted by Park (2005), who identified as a result of in-depth interviews and focus groups that women see parenthood as conflicting with their careers (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008).

This is also supported by the Gender Equity theory by McDonald (2001). As modernization led to more or less existing gender equity in social institutions since in the 1960s women have defended their rights as individuals to be able to receive education and have employment opportunities as men (McDonald, 2001). So, the countries where gender equity rates are high fertility rates become lower. Because women choose to pursue careers or get graduate degrees, as such opportunities became largely accessible. Subsequently, this capstone project will relate the development of education among women, levels of gender equity, and the overall modernization process with the reasons for becoming childfree. Moreover, one of the consequences of modernization is that it made contraceptives more accessible and women became more educated and independent from men who were considered to be the only breadwinners of the family before the 1960s. Consequently, many of them postpone motherhood, and some of them do not want to have children at all.

Theory of Gary Becker

Back in the day, childbearing was associated only with one variable - economic prosperity (Shiriaeva & Zaostrovstev, 2019). Theorists like Malthus believed that the rate of giving birth would be enhanced in connection with the future improvement of society (Shiriaeva & Zaostrovstev, 2019). As he believed that people would have more resources to sustain more children in the future and therefore families would have multiple children (Shiriaeva & Zaostrovstev, 2019). Because then, having children was considered to be “profitable”, since children could help and provide care for elderly parents, do domestic chores, and work to sustain the family (Shiriaeva & Zaostrovstev, 2019). However, it could be said that the opposite trend is occurring. Because of economic growth and capitalistic mode of production, adults have more resources but at the same time, they tend to have fewer children.

The case is that it is not completely right to consider only the economic value of children. According to Becker (2004, as cited in Shiriaeva & Zaostrovstev, 2019): “economic development has raised the relative value of children, as the value of parents’ time has increased” (p. 101). Therefore, nowadays people value their time as much as they used to value finances. Because more people enter the labor force and have opportunities to increase their incomes. Also, Becker’s (1981) main argument is that, unlike material goods, children demand a significant amount of time. As wages rise, the value of parents’ time also rises (Becker, 1981). If children demand more time compared to typical consumer goods, and if the actual worth of human time increases, then the expenses associated with raising children will rise in comparison to other commodities (Becker, 1981). Therefore, nowadays it is “unprofitable” to have children. Because parents not only lose money for the upbringing of the child, which is quite expensive nowadays, but also lose time which can be much more valued by people nowadays.

Also, it is important to consider that in the present days, time is very essential in professional development. If the person wants to be competitive in their work field, they need to improve their skills almost constantly. However, if a person has children, which demands a lot of time, it is almost impossible to develop professionally in an effective rate. Adda, Dustmann, and Stevens (2019) refer to this as the “career cost of children” and especially it is relevant for women. Firstly,

mothers have to take breaks from work due to maternity leave or having sick leave when children are ill (Adda, Dustmann, and Stevens, 2019). In these periods, women are unable to engage in work, resulting in a lack of skill accumulation, and the skills possessed may depreciate in value and become irrelevant (Adda, Dustmann, and Stevens, 2019). Research conducted by Adda, Dustmann, and Stevens (2019) revealed that as mothers reach the retirement age of 60, they generally have around $\frac{1}{4}$ less work experience for each child they have. The similar findings were reported by Shiriaeva & Zaoostrovstsev (2019), who stated that when focusing on childcare, a highly compensated and educated woman loses much more in income and career advancement than a less educated, rural woman. For the former, the difference between lost money and lost career chances is noticeably greater (Shiriaeva & Zaoostrovstsev, 2019)

Intensive Motherhood

This concept of “intensive motherhood” is the cultural model that “dictates” that mothers should invest themselves in their children at an extremely high level (Verniers, Bonnot, and Assilaméhou-Kunz, 2022). Brown (2014) stated that intensive motherhood assumes that children are priceless and almost “sacred” and that mothers should be only child-centered. Moreover, the mother should do everything in the best possible manner, buy expensive products for childcare, and not be tired at all. There is an assumption that mothers currently spend a lot of time, emotional resources, and energy, which leads to exhaustion of mothers and a general decrease in the status of women (Brown, 2014). This capstone project will relate the concept of intensive motherhood with the childfree phenomenon, in a way of explaining the reasons women do not want to be mothers because of too many responsibilities and expectations of being “perfect mothers”. Again it could be related to the modernization theory, because of economic development the products for childcare are expensive and there is a belief made by marketing companies that “the more expensive the better”. And if a woman wants to be a “perfect mother” she should buy everything costly to show love to the “sacred” child. Additionally, social media as it was mentioned is one of the characteristics of modernity, and through their means, women have constant streaming of who is a “perfect mother”. There are different mom blogs, books, and guides on how to be an ideal mother. Some women just may believe that they are not ready to have all those responsibilities and in fact, they are not even capable of satisfying these

“requirements” of intensive motherhood. Therefore, some women become childfree, because they are not ready to invest themselves in the child 100% and they believe if they will not be such a mother, then they will be bad mothers. Consequently, it is better to not be a mother at all.

Doing gender

West and Zimmerman (1987) stated that people constantly “do gender”, which means that women do “feminine” things like being ladylike, kind, and empathetic; while men do “masculinity” by being brave, strong, and confident. Also, according to this concept, motherhood became an important part of feminine identity. And when women deny motherhood and do not want to bring the children they could be viewed as “fighting” social norms of being a female. Because such women reject motherhood, and some people believe that by doing so they reject their femininity (Gillespie, 2003). This concept will be used in exploring the gender identity of childfree women in Kazakhstan and whether such beliefs as being a mother is essential to being a woman affect their feeling of being a “complete” woman.

Research Design

Research methods

Even though quantitative research is also used in exploring childfree, it is mainly used to identify trends and prevalence of childfree phenomena in particular regions or countries. Therefore, qualitative research will be more suitable for the sake of the capstone which focuses on exploring the experience of childfree people. In particular, in-depth semi-structured interviews are chosen as main research methods, as they allow the researcher to have extended conversations with research participants and the researcher will be able to know what childfree people think and what are their beliefs and experiences (Knott et al., 2022). Quantitative surveys can also provide this kind of insightful information, but they use predefined questions and scales “giving preference to breadth rather than depth” (Knott et al., 2022, p. 1). Semi-structured interviews, this is a “middle-ground” kind of interview, they are not as “rigid” as structured interviews but simultaneously are not completely missing the guide and particular structure (Leech, 2002). As Knott et al. (2022) stated this type of interview will help to follow the open-ended questions that are prepared in advance, but there will be some flexibility to change

the order of the questions, and even not ask some questions or oppositely add new questions during the interview. This type of research method is widely used for exploring the experience of childfree people. To exemplify, Bimha and Chadwick (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 South African women who identify as childfree. Even though the sample size of this research is small, the author stated that semi-guided interviews allowed them to gain “insight into the world of respondents” (Bimha and Chadwick, 2016).

Sampling Method

The sample was made up of 5 women living in Kazakhstan (see Table 1). Three participants were born in Astana and currently residing there. While two other participants were born in Semey and Karaganda, but are currently living in Astana and plan to live there in the future. The selection criteria included identifying as a part of the childfree community, being a citizen of Kazakhstan, and being 18 years old or above (as it is a legal age in Kazakhstan). Educational levels of participants varied; at the time of the interview, one woman had not completed undergraduate studies; one was on the way to receiving her Bachelor’s degree, and three of them finished their Bachelor’s degree. Two of the three participants who have higher education, now studying for a Master’s degree (Participants 1 and 4). All participants identified themselves as a woman.

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

| | Age | Ethnicity | Sexual Orientation | Relationship Status | Highest Education Level | Current Occupation |
|----------------------|-----|-----------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Participant 1 | 25 | Chechen | Bisexual | Married (5*) | Bachelor | Part-time teacher |
| Participant 2 | 29 | Russian | Heterosexual | Civil marriage | Not finished bachelor | Individual entrepreneur |
| Participant 3 | 33 | Russian | Heterosexual | Married (12*) | Bachelor | Individual entrepreneur |
| Participant 4 | 22 | Kazakh | Heterosexual | Single | Bachelor | Teacher Assistant |
| Participant 5 | 20 | Kazakh | Bisexual | Dating | High School | Student |

*is the number of years in the marriage

Data Collection

As mentioned, in-depth interviews were used as the method of data collection. Three research participants were located through convenience sampling, which means the researcher asked people from the surroundings whether they had childfree people in their networks. If yes, they were asked to share the contacts of childfree people by previously obtaining the permission to share the contact. Other two participants were reached by snowball sampling: Participant 1 shared the contacts of Participant 2 and she in turn helped to reach Participant 3. The interview questions were conditionally divided into four blocks: personal information, personal experience of being childfree, stigmatization, and personal opinion about gender roles and having children (for more details see Appendix 1). Every interview was conducted in the Russian language and lasted from 50 to 80 minutes online via Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded using Zoom software.

Data Analysis

The methodology utilized in this study incorporated elements of inductive reasoning, as the findings and interpretations were predominantly derived from verbatim transcripts. Recorded audios were uploaded to “Trint” software to receive transcripts. While listening to the audio recording of the interview and editing the transcripts first stage of data analysis was conducted, as the researcher became more familiar with data. Then, edited interview transcripts were uploaded to “atlas.ti” software to conduct thematic data analysis. This software allowed the researcher to identify keywords and sentences, and assign different codes to them. Next, themes were made as a result of a combination of related codes. These themes and quotes were reviewed whether they were suitable for the main research question and sub-questions of the research.

Methodological Limitations

As this research is based on the qualitative design, the findings cannot be generalize to the larger population. The following study is explorative in nature. The main purpose was to explore the experience of childfree women in Kazkashtan; however, overall trends in Kazakshtan cannot be identified. Also, due to the limited access to the childfree people it was difficult to reach childfree people who could

participate in the interview and talk in the Kazakh language. This would give more information about the effects of Kazakh culture and values on childfree identity in particular. In addition, the researcher had not personal access to childfree people, only childfree people from urban area as Astana were recruited for the interviews. It would be beneficial to include childfree women from rural areas to the sample too.

Ethical considerations

The following research was reviewed and approved by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee. The date for obtaining IREC Approval is February 5, 2024. The oral consent to participate in the interview and permission to record the audio were collected from all the research participants (see Appendix 2 for an oral consent). Even though participation in this research is not anonymous, the obtained answers are totally confidential. The names of the research participants will not be indicated anywhere; pseudonyms like “Participant 1”, “Participant 2”, and etc. will be used while reporting the findings. Personal information like workplaces and institutions where they received education are not published anywhere and are available only to the researcher.

The data such as audio recordings and transcripts are protected on the personal laptop which is accessible only to the researcher via using the fingerprint. The video recordings which were made by the Zoom platform (which are recorded by default while recording the audio), are deleted right after the interview to not see the names of the interviewees from the screen and identify the person by appearance. All information related to the interview is stored on a Google Drive account which is protected by a double-authentication system. To minimize any risks, the chat with a research participant and their phone numbers/social media accounts were deleted after the interview was conducted. The “Trint” app, where audio recordings were uploaded for making the transcripts, does not publish the audio recordings on the internet or save the transcripts. The “atlas.ti” software also does not publish the transcripts anywhere. The results obtained will be published as combined data of all participants; no data about individual persons will be published.

Regarding the research's feasibility, despite the limited access to Kazakhstani childfree individuals; personal connections assisted in reaching the target community. About the risks associated with the participation in the interview, there could have been some psychological risk because research participants may feel uncomfortable answering questions about contraceptives, as this is very sensitive and personal questions. Or bringing up the memories about the negative attitudes and reactions of parents and relatives towards their decision to be childfree could cause emotional risks. However, all research participants were aware that they have a rights skip any question they did not want to answer or withdraw from the study without any consequences for them.

Findings

What are the reasons for becoming childfree?

Role of birth order and number of siblings

For the question “Why did you decide to become childfree?” some participants answered that they are oldest children in the family and that they had certain responsibilities related to it. For instance, Participant 1 stated:

“I’m actually the eldest daughter in my family, I have four siblings. That is, in fact, I nursed each of them, raised them, and so on. That is, in fact, I was a second mother to them. And from that time I knew that I didn’t really like it. I mean, I love them, of course, as they are my siblings, and all that. But even if, for example, I was asked to look after my relatives’ children, I really did not want to do this.”

The similar case happened with Participant 2, who said:

“I started thinking about being childfree around the age of 13, since I have two younger brothers. I learned the “delights” of interacting with children early enough and realized for myself that it was quite difficult and energy-consuming.”

In addition, it was investigated that, even though older sisters were not involved in the upbringing of younger siblings, it also affected their attitude towards childbearing. For example, Participant 4 reported that she did not have

responsibilities concerning the younger sibling but her mother's experience demonstrated that it is difficult to be a mother:

“Well, I've had a little sister, let's say I've seen her grow up. It turns out that I saw how my mother had all these responsibilities of the birth of a child and how it takes a huge responsibility, not only physical, but also material, and psychological resources. That is, motherhood is millions of different responsibilities and so on.”

Ecological, ethical, physical and financial reasons

It is difficult for childfree people to highlight only one reason behind the choice of being childfree. This section presents the reasons mentioned by interviewees such as ecological, physical, financial and ethical. Participant 2 reported that she has ecological reasons to be childfree, as she is worried about the overpopulation and does not want to contribute to that issue. In turn, Participant 3 stated that she has health issues and she does not want to sacrifice her health for giving birth to a child. Also, this participant reported that it is unethical to bring the child to the conditions “with what's going on in the world around us”. She stated:

“That is, I realized at some point that the world is quite hostile for children. I probably wouldn't want to raise a child in exactly the social and historical conditions that are happening now.”

Participant 4 also was concerned with ethical sides of having children:

“I'm not sure, probably, how good it will be for the child. It's really hard to imagine how much the child would actually want to live in such a world and be born at all.”

“Aficionados” and “rejectors”

All research participants reported that they do not particularly hate children or parenthood. On the contrary, they have friendly relationships with children and are not against children who can be in public places. For example, Participant 3 reported:

“In general, I have a good attitude towards children. The only thing is that I have never had a strong attraction to small children. It happens

that people like to babysit small children, and they are moved by them. I've never noticed this about myself... but in general, I'm friendly to children."

Also, participant 2 said that she has a neutral attitude toward children:

"There are moments of love for some children of my close friends, for example, or family. But it's like a couple of hours of coddling (сюсюкаться) and that's it. That's enough. But in general, I can't say that I don't like children very much. I just treat them neutrally."

The similar attitude was reported by Participant 4 too:

"I don't have any kind of hate, and such a strong dislike for children and for their presence in any places. It seems to me that this is just everyone's choice, I have such a neutral attitude more."

In addition, Participant 5 reported that she likes children very much and even has "baby fever" sometimes. Baby fever means having physical and/or emotional desire to have children (Brase & Brase, 2012). Participant 5 said:

"I love children very much. Sometimes I have a baby fever, it often happens to me when I scroll through social media, when I see children of relatives, children on the street, I want to pick them up, talk to them. That is, I have no rejection for children, for their existence. Even as a child, I grew up in a big, noisy extended family. That is, I always helped my relatives, and my parents to take care of small children. That is, it never bothered me or annoyed me."

So, it was found that interviewees are affectionados rather than rejectors. These people may love children, but they are not ready to change their lifestyle and sacrifice freedom for the sake of a child. These findings will be reported in the next section.

"Career vs Family" and Freedom

All participants agreed that there is a choice in front of the women, to have a career or a family. Participant 5 even said:

“There is unfair pressure on women in Kazakhstan; they must work and at the same time be a mother, and exactly because of this many women become childfree because they don’t want to sacrifice their career”.

All participants agreed with that point of view and said that education, career, and self-realization are their first priority. And that if they have children, they will not be able to achieve their goals. Also, it was identified that women become childfree because of “career vs family” choices, and are willing to not depend on anyone.

Intensive motherhood

Research participants reported that being a mother is very responsible nowadays and they are not ready to have such serious responsibility. They stated if someone wants to become a mother, they should dedicate themselves fully to the childcare. This is related to the concept of “intensive motherhood”, which imposes too many expectations on mothers to be ideal. To exemplify, Participant 1 stated:

“Even just imagining that I have a child right now, I would think, too much. Well, no. Too much. For me, it’s a very, very big responsibility. I would like to spend more time specifically with the child, then. That is, to teach, raise, nurture. To be with them for some time. Because it seems to me that it would be strange for me to leave them with a babysitter or someone else from the age of one and focus on my own affairs. Because I would like the child to receive maximum care from me at an early age so that there is some connection between us, and I could give them the best of myself. The very best that I can.”

Participant 4 in turn said that if she had a child, she would leave work to be with the child all the time. Possibly, it is because “intensive motherhood” says so. However, Participant 4 does not want to leave the career, even for the period of maternity leave. Because as she said: “After maternity leave, you should work even harder to return to the status you had before giving birth, and when women go on maternity leave they are lagging behind”.

The similar was reported by Participant 2:

“Motherhood demands a lot of energy, time, and strength. Let’s put it this way, personally for me, it would be impossible to build my career at the same level of efficiency if I had a child.”

Participant 5 reflected on her own relationships with parents and stated:

“As a teenager, I faced depression, and it was very difficult for me to find understanding from my parents. Later, in such a smooth way, I found more and more reasons why some parents simply do not cope with their roles, that they do not support such a level of commitment and do not bear that responsibility. And, accordingly, I wondered if I could. And later I came to the conclusion that I might not be able to become an exemplary parent, or at least I don’t have the resources for it at the moment.”

The Experience of childfree women in the Pronatal Society of Kazakhstan

Questions and Interest from Others

Generally, the participants do not face judgment too much on a daily basis. They stated that there is more interest. People question their decision and wonder about the childfree phenomenon. So, it shows that the childfree phenomenon is kind of new or people do not talk about it to a high degree. For instance, Participant 4 reported:

“I really had to explain what childfree is. Where does it come from? That’s about literally every year the same conversation repeats itself. That is, at some point, usually when we gather with friends, play or something else, a conversation about family and children comes up. For the first time, it aroused the interest of everyone, that is, even my closest friends, who were like, well, they seemed to know before, but they were interested to know why. There were guys, my friends, who were just super interested in it. They asked “Why you are childfree?”, “Will you change your mind if your husband wants children?” So they asked a lot of different such tricky and personal questions. But no one openly said that they were condemning.”

But there was found a more negative fact too. The case is that childfree women are often questioned about whether they will have children more often than their male spouses. This could be an indicator that being a parent is perceived to be more essential to women's social role of being mothers. For example, Participant 1 reported:

“One hundred percent I get more questions, there are usually never any questions for my husband. That is, in this case, I receive all the questions, and I have to somehow have a dialogue with everyone.”

However, the birth order of the spouse is also matters. Because Participant 3 reported that she is youngest sibling in her family and she does not receive questions about when she will have kids as older sisters already have ones. But her husband is the oldest child, so, his parents and grandfather always question him whether they will have children or not.

Reaction to Stereotypes and Negative Attitudes

Surprisingly, all participants reported that they are not dependent on societal opinion, they are self-sufficient and do not allow others to affect their personality or mood. Participant 1 said that relatives called her selfish, but she said “Aren't all people selfish?”. Participant 1 did not see anything offensive in such comments. She just ignores such statements and negative attitudes do not make her question her childfree identity. Participant 5 reported:

“And there are no people in my circle who hate child free, all my friends treat this with enough understanding and support. That is, there is no such heated argument between us. No one tried to change my mind. But, you see, I most likely created a bubble for myself where I feel comfortable being the person I am..”

This is consistent with Participant 3, who did not explicitly say that there is a “bubble” of closest ones, but also stated:

“No, I did not face negative attitudes. But then again, I sort of associate it with the fact that I am very selective in my surroundings. That is if I meet a person who is tactless, for example, and I feel that he violates my personal boundaries, this person will simply not be in my

environment anymore. That is, I do not, do not continue to keep in touch with such people. It seems to me that I practically do not encounter such people with negative attitudes, because I simply do not have such people in my environment. I can't stand them.. Well, yes, if person allows himself to make some comments. I just don't accept that. Therefore, if such a person appears in my environment, I simply stop communicating with him.”

Participant 4 shared her experience on how not to allow people’s negative attitudes to doubt your decision:

“Well, at first, yes, there was such an unusual feeling that it was as if I did not fit into society. But it went away quickly enough. I think it was enough to literally study the topic and understand how important it is to me for self-acceptance. Probably, for people, I think this is very closely related to how much you prioritize your own opinion and whether you know how to set priorities. Because if not, then it’s probably much harder to come to your decision and not be influenced by other people or society, and so on. Therefore, it seems to me that at first there was a feeling that I was somehow isolated or something else. Then it passed and did not have much effect.”

In turn, Participant 2 answered that she has different attitudes towards different people depending on the relations she has with them. Also, she shared the resistance mechanism toward inappropriate questions:

“My answer is mainly that, first of all, it’s none of your business. Depending on the person’s proximity to me. I can answer someone, it's none of your business at all and it’s not tactful to ask such questions. There were cases when I had such, let’s say, a bad mood, and a stranger asked me why I don’t have children. I replied: “Why are you asking me about this? I actually can’t have children. These are painful questions for me. Aren’t you ashamed to get into my soul with such trembling questions?” And to someone closer, I answer: “well, everyone has their own pace of development, for now with my

husband we have some plans in career”. That is, somehow more gently.”

Feminine Identity and Motherhood

It was identified that participants do not relate being a mother to a gender identity. Participants reported that not being a mother does not mean that they are not women. One participant even said: “Women in Kazakhstan are always blamed and judged, for having too many children or for not having enough children, therefore it is not right to listen to all people. You should be confident in your decision and not be fragile”. Surprisingly, all participants reported that public opinion is not something they are worried about, they are confident in their choice and in their personality. So, negative attitudes do not make them feel like “incomplete” women. For instance, Participant 4 stated:

“Negative statements about being childfree affect my sense of “worthiness” to a lesser extent. That is, again, I will not say 100%, because I do not know how everything will turn out, but so far there is no special strong influence, because it seems to me that value is determined by one’s decisions. And I feel like a fairly “complete” person when I realize myself as a professional, how my career is being built. Or when you study something new, or I get to go somewhere. For me, such priorities define me as a person, and I feel comfortable living with it. But I know that many people don’t always have a comfortable life, because pressure can have a big impact for some.”

Participant 1 stated:

“No, well, not at all. It has never happened that I feel like an inferior woman because I do not have children. Because to be a woman, you don't need to have any. Don't know. This is not a list of some things that you have to stick to. Something like this. That is, to be a woman, it is not necessary to have long hair, or something else. That is, starting with such little things and motherhood, that is, there are a lot of women who do not have children, and they do not become less women because of this.

Participant 2 even responded that : “I would have the opposite. My life would be incomplete if I had children. ”

Age, Marriage, and Childfree

20 and 22-year-old participants reported that their decision to be childfree is not taken seriously by their parents and relatives. As they think their decision will change soon, therefore, young childfree women are not pressured too much. I guess it also demonstrates that there are some “standards” in Kazakhstan of when people should marry and have children. For instance, one participant said: “I think that when I turn 25 I will face more questions and pressure from society than now when I am 20”. Older childfree participants are questioned more, possibly because of the belief that “time has come” (“часики тикают”). Also, participant 5 shared that possibly she does not face pressure too much because she is not married yet, now people are questioning her when she will marry, and she thinks that after she marries, people will start to ask when she will have children.

Rationality

All of the participants were rational in their decision and on the question “Do you think that your decision will change”, they reported that everything is possible. They are conscious about their choice of being childfree and understand that it can change. This is related to the fact they are educated and have contemporary (not conservative) liberal views.

Challenges Faced by Childfree Women

Legal Discrimination

Participants 1 and 4 reported that in Kazakhstan, there is no permission to do sterilization before the age of 35 or unless the person has 2 children. They believe that this discriminates childfree people who wish to undergo this procedure as a contraceptive method. Why exactly the age of 35 is chosen? Is it believed that until 35 childfree people will change their minds?

Social Attitude

In Kazakhstani society, there is intolerance towards childfree people. For instance, stereotypes about them being egoistic or evil. Participants 1 and 3 said that there

could be some social programs that will demonstrate that it is normal to not want to have children and illustrate that there is such a choice to be childfree. Participant 1 noticed that there is always pronatal propaganda as posters of families where parents with children are depicted. In her opinion, it limits the choices people can make about their reproductive life. For example, she did not know that childfree people existed and that there was a choice to not have children before she met her husband.

Additionally, a 20-year-old childfree woman reported that her opinion on child abuse and other topics related to children is not considered to be valuable in her surroundings, because she is childfree. Moreover, two respondents who are 20 and 22 years old reported that their decision to be childfree is not taken seriously by their parents and relatives. For example, the parents of the youngest interviewee believe that when their daughter will become older she will want to have children and that now her decision to be childfree is not serious. Such an attitude makes childfree women sad because they believe that their identity is in doubt and they are not taken seriously.

Discussion

Role of birth order and number of siblings

The findings related to the being oldest and youngest of the family are reported by Brown (2015). As it was found in this research, oldest children had responsibilities for younger siblings or witnessed the struggles of their mother in upbringing of the children and therefore decided to be childfree. Also, Brown (2015) explained why youngest siblings which are childfree are not questioned too much by their parents. It is related to the fact that youngest children are “off the hook”; which means they are not questioned for not having children because their older siblings already have children and therefore continued the parents’ lineage (Brown, 2015).

Career vs Family and Freedom

Because of modernization, women are actively entering the labor force. And the fact that participants reported that there is a choice between career and family for women, supports the theoretical framework of “uneven gender revolution” and as participants said this is the main reason why they became childfree. Women want

to develop their careers and achieve self-realization, and motherhood is becoming a barrier to doing so. Therefore, some women tend to postpone motherhood or even deny motherhood for work success, career, and income. Because if they would have children they would lose the opportunities.

These findings support the theory of Gary Becker about the concept of career cost of the children. As participants believed that if they had children they would not fully dedicate themselves to their career and develop necessary skills. And as one of the participants stated that maternity leave cause women lagging behind after the return to work, it also supports the career cost of the children. Because childfree women do not want to spend time that they could spend on the professional development to the childbearing activities. This is also related to the “uneven gender revolution” theoretical framework. Childfree women want to develop their careers and believe that it is not possible to realize fully if you have children.

Intensive motherhood

The participants mentioned that there are too many expectations from mothers. For instance, the mother should be always with her children and take care of him/her all the time. This indicated that there is a streaming of “intensive motherhood” in Kazakhstan. The participants said that they do not want to be mothers as they cannot take so many responsibilities and dedicate themselves only to a child. They want to pursue their career path, and they believe that it is impossible to be a good mother and have an good career simultaneously.

Age, Marriage and Childfree

Young childfree women reported that their decision to be childfree is not take seriously. It was also reported by Peterson (), who stated that young childfree people are expected to “grow out” of their decision to be childfree, because other people believe that it is kind of transitional stage. Also, findings that younger childfree women are questioned less that older childfree women illustrates how Kazakhstani society is seeing the family cycle. Firstly they must marry ideally by the age of 25 and then have children. So, young childfree women are not questioned too much yet, both because of believing that they are unserious about their decisions and that they should fulfill the “requirement” of being married prior to have children.

Future directions

As the sample size of this research is limited the study was exploratory. It is suggested to conduct more interviews with childfree people for future research. Also, it is essential to study childfree men too; their reasons for becoming childfree and whether they face social pressure about their decision. Additionally, it is essential to study LGBTQA+ community members who identify themselves as childfree to see how these identities intersect and what are their experiences in the pronatalist and heteronormative society of Kazakhstan. Moreover, it is vital to study the experience of childfree women who are middle children in their families. Because the current study only had a sample of childfree women who are oldest and youngest children.

Policy Recommendations

Kazakhstani people should have some social programs that can demonstrate that there is such an option as being childfree and there is nothing wrong with people who do not want to have children. Such programs should be intended to increase tolerance towards childfree people and illustrate that being childfree it is a reproductive decision and it is a human right to have it. Also, there should be an increased sensibility to the topics like reproductive life. Because as participants reported they are often questioned when they will have children and it causes discomfort as such information is sensitive and should be discussed privately with the partner.

Moreover, government should include the questions about childfree people in censuses and in other statistics collected. This will help the government to measure the rate of childless people and what are the reasons behind it. By exploring this, the government can identify the problems and possibly solve them to not drop the fertility rate significantly. For example, legislations of maternity leave discourage women to have children. Therefore, the government should change the laws regarding the maternity leave and encourage women to have children and possibly encourage people who are “wave-like refusers” or ambivalent about having children to have children in the future.

Last but not the least, government should consider to change policies regarding the sterilization. As for some childfree people it is preferable method of contraceptive,

but they cannot undergo it because of the regulations that do not allow to have sterilization until you are 35 years old or until you have 2 children. Such limitations discriminate childfree people and cause them discomfort by spending money on barrier or hormonal contraceptive and taking oral pills for women.

Conclusion

Childfree is a new phenomenon in Kazakhstan, people still don't know about it. Childfree females are often questioned, which can cause some discomfort. However, they do not feel strong pressure as their surrounding is childfree-tolerant. The fact that participants reported that they do not face negative attitudes very often is related to having their own "bubble" of closed ones and these people do not judge them and their decisions. This capstone project attempted to make childfree people less "invisible", and to contribute to the underrepresented topic in academia. As it was identified, it is hard to highlight only one reason for being childfree; thus, participants reported multiple of them such as psychological, ecological, and financial. Possibly, the government can make conclusions about why women become childfree and how to change some policies not to allow a decrease in demography (for example change the legislations about maternity leave). Unfortunately, the sample size of this study is limited. Consequently, it is essential to further study childfree women in the context of Kazakshtan. Social programs to increase tolerance toward childfree people could be implemented. It is vital to tell that it is a reproductive right to not have children and it should not be judged.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

Block 1: Personal info - This block of questions is essential for the necessities of the theoretical analysis applied in the study. This data will not be published anywhere and will not be available to people despite the researcher.

How old are you?

What is your gender?

Where are you from?

Where do you live currently?

What is your educational background?

Are you employed? Where?

What is your marital status? (single/married/widowed)

Block 2: Personal experience of being childfree - This block is essential for the main research question, by asking about the reasons for becoming childfree and what their experience of being childfree I will try to explore their gender identity.

How did you become a childfree? What are the reasons?

(If it is difficult to answer for the participant mention financial/ecological/emotional reasons to help them to answer)

At what age did you decide to be childfree? Was it a smooth decision, which took several years or there was one moment when you realized that you would not have children?

Did your education or employment play a role while making the decision?

Did the structure of your family play any role in making the decision? For example, maybe you are the eldest child in the family or some other factors?

What is your attitude towards children?

Do your close people (parents/friends/relatives) know that you are childfree?

***If yes:** how did you tell them? What did you feel when were telling them?*

What is their attitude towards childfree people? Did your relationship with them change after you told them? How do you feel when you are around them? Were there some cases when you were judged or anything else?

***If no:** Do you hide this information or there was just not the right moment to tell your parents/friends about being childfree? Do you find it not necessary to tell your decision to be childfree? Do you think that they will judge you if they know it? How do you keep this in secret? How do you answer the questions about having children?*

If they have a partner:

How did you meet each other? Does your partner know that you are childfree? Is your partner a childfree? At what stage of the relationship you tell that you are childfree? Do you have an experience of dating a person who is not childfree? How this experience is different from dating a childfree person? How do you answer questions about having children from others? Did you notice, who is more subjected to such questions you or your partner?

How do you prevent pregnancy? What contraceptives do you use? What is your attitude towards sterilization? Did you consider such an option?

If they do not have a partner:

Are you searching for a partner now or do you prefer to stay single? Is being childfree an important criterion while searching for a partner? Do you imagine a dating partner who is not childfree?

Do you have people in your surroundings that are also childfree? Are there many childfree people? Do you have a separate chat? Is there a difference between communicating with childfree people in comparison to not childfree people? Do you visit online communities/websites dedicated to childfree people?

*Do you sometimes regret that you do not have children?
How do you imagine your older life?*

Block 3: Stigmatization - This block of questions will help to investigate the roles of traditional Kazakh values and norms. These questions will help to investigate do participants face “Uyat” and how they resist such social pressure. Questions about how the situation can become more advantageous are included to help childfree people cope with stigmatization and to know what are the problems they face.

How it is to be childfree in the pronatalist society of Kazakhstan?

Do you feel how Kazakh social norms and values affect you/your identity?

Did you face a negative attitude towards you because of being childfree? How do you respond to such people?

How do people react when they know that you are childfree?

Did you feel offended at some point in your life because you are childfree?

Were there cases when doctors/nurses are biased towards you because you don't have children?

What are the problems of being childfree in Kazakhstan? Do you think that your rights are violated?

Do you feel that they are stereotypes about childfree people?

How people can help to make a situation with childfree people better in Kazakhstan?

Block 4: Opinion about gender roles and having children - This block is important to know their opinion about gender roles in Kazakhstan. This is essential for answering the main research question, as I will understand how socio-cultural factors impact childfree people.

Do you feel that there are some expectations from women in Kazakhstan? What are they?

Do you think it is possible for women to be a mother and continue to pursue a career?

What about men?

Did you feel that childfree men are less stigmatized than childfree women?

How do you think our society assumes that it is important to have children?

Appendix 2

Consent Form: Oral Consent

Hello. I'm Ainur Saparova. I am conducting research about the gender identity of childfree females in Kazakhstan. I'm conducting this as part of my academic research as a sociology student, studying at Nazarbayev University, School of Science and Humanities, Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

I'm inviting you to participate in an interview that will take about 60 minutes. The questions are about childfree phenomenon, social norms and gender roles in Kazakhstan, difficulties associated with being childfree, and attitudes towards childfree people.

Participation in this interview is not associated with any risks that would be higher than those you might encounter in your daily life.

You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. And you can withdraw (stop taking part) at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

It is unlikely that there will be direct benefits to you, however, by better understanding the childfree phenomenon and gender identity of childfree people in Kazakhstan, researchers and others may be able to improve the situation of childfree people in this country more easily using policy mechanisms.

I will keep the information you tell me during the interview confidential. Information I put in my report that could identify you will not be published or shared beyond the research team unless we have your permission. Any data from this research that will be shared or published will be the combined data of all participants. That means it will be reported for the whole group, not for individual persons.

We will need to audio record our conversation with you and will need your agreement to that.

Your participation in this study is voluntary.

You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the questionnaire for whatever reason.

If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.

If you decide to stop we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point.

This could include returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.

If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can call or email me, Ainur Saparova, at +77087243204 or ainur.saparova@nu.edu.kz.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee

E-mail: resethics@nu.edu.kz

Consent questions:

Do you have any questions or would like any additional details? (answers to the questions)/

Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw at any point with no consequences to you?

[If yes, begin the interview.]

[If no, thank the participant for his/her time.]

Do you agree that this conversation will be audio recorded?

[If yes, begin the interview.]

[If no, thank the participant for his/her time.]