

Capstone Seminar SOC 499

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**EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY KAZAKH WOMEN FACE
IN THE FIRST 3 YEARS OF MARRIAGE?**

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Abstract

This research project explores the complexities of Kazakh marriage, centered particularly on the expectations and realities that Kazakh women experience during their first three years of marriage. Drawing on qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews, the study investigates several aspects of the early phases of marriage, such as the impact of regional customs, age of the couples, dating dynamics, living arrangements, family responsibilities, and the transition into motherhood. The findings show that Kazakh women's experiences vary depending on their geographical background, age, and cultural environment. Despite differences, common themes emerge about the difficulties and joys of married life, offering light on Kazakh society's complicated balance between tradition and modernization. This study serves as a guideline for the young girls to better understand and be prepared for what is anticipating in Kazakh marriage.

Keywords: Kazakh marriage, expectations and realities, early stages, marital experiences, qualitative research, regional customs, dating dynamics, household responsibilities, transition to motherhood, tradition and modernity.

Introduction

Marriage is a significant institution in Kazakh society, since it is the foundation of societal conventions and cultural expectations. Young girls in Kazakhstan mostly start their marriage in their early 20s, sometimes even before graduation or a stable career, because it is expected more to have found your husband for girls before the age of 25. The reason for marriage to be a big part of our culture is not only in the festivity of that occasion. It is also a big system of gender roles, interpersonal relationships and the need for continuation of family's legacy (reproduction) that play into the topic of marriage. Under the surface of festive customs there is a complex tapestry of personal experiences, particularly for women in the early stages of marriage. This study explores the subtle interplay between anticipated goals and lived reality in Kazakh marriages over the critical first three years. Marriage, which is firmly ingrained in Kazakh society, not only symbolizes togetherness but also has substantial cultural implications, designating specified roles and responsibilities and shaping individuals' identities and relationships within marital partnerships. Behind the systematic rule that marriage is a logical continuation of life stages in the

early 20s and most couples getting married within the first 2 years of knowing each other, the importance of proper emotional and social preparation for what marriage brings into your life feels rather neglected. Especially from the perspective of traditional customs where a woman plays a significant cultural role in marriage and is often presented with numerous strict obligations, it is noteworthy to be prepared for how your life might change in the span of the first 3 years of marriage.

Literature Review

This type of research requires a thorough examination of the already existing data about marriage in Kazakhstan, gender roles, family systems and particularly transition to parenthood/motherhood. Kazakh culture has traditionally been patriarchal and hierarchical, with strongly embedded cultural norms that assign specific responsibilities and expectations to women, particularly in the context of marriage and family life. The "kelin" or daughter-in-law is expected to take on substantial obligations within her husband's family, often adhering to strict roles that emphasise obedience, respect for elders, and the preservation of family history and traditions (Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2020). These expectations can put a lot of strain on young women, especially as new members of their husbands' extended families. Kazakh marriages are not just unions of two people, but of entire families, and the kelin plays an important role in preserving family peace and traditions. This job is so crucial that it is widely praised and ritualised in Kazakh culture, emphasising the importance of the kelin in the household hierarchy and the greater social fabric of Kazakhstan.

Theoretical framework

Gender theory provides a perspective through which to study the role of the kelin, emphasising how gender norms and expectations impact Kazakh women's lives. In Kazakhstan's patriarchal society, men are typically seen as heads of households and decision-makers, while women are often relegated to caregiving and domestic responsibilities

Family systems theory is useful in understanding the dynamics that exist among Kazakh households, specifically how the family unit influences and is influenced by the kelin. According to this view, families operate like systems, with each member playing a distinct role in ensuring

the family's stability and functioning. Kelins must navigate difficult interpersonal interactions and fit their positions with their new family's expectations. There are whole families, with 75.9–81.9% of parents living together with their children. There are also instances in which a single guy or widow lives with children. The proportion of related families in the region is between 11.7 and 20.1%. Such families are frequently referred to as middle-generation bereaved households (Baudiyarova & Meirmanova, 2023, p.3).

The shift to parenthood is an important milestone for the daughter in law, as it is characterized by cultural expectations to carry on the family bloodline. This phase is often marked by significant changes as the kelin adjusts to her new roles as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Kelins' experiences and well-being during early marriage can be significantly impacted by their support structures. Mothers find it more difficult and stressful to have a baby than fathers do. Mothers, more than fathers, may enhance trust in their relationship as a strategy to overcome concerns and better adjust to motherhood (Zhang et al., 2024, p.7).

Gender theory offers a critical framework for examining the complex interplay of cultural traditions and gender roles in Kazakh culture, with a special emphasis on the experiences of kelins, or daughters-in-law. This analysis demonstrates how gender expectations are not only socially manufactured, but also profoundly rooted in women's daily life and the societal responsibilities expected of them after marriage. In traditional Kazakh culture, the societal structure is clearly patriarchal. Men are often the heads of families, making the key decisions and representing the family in public. Despite the fact that working women's average income climbed from 62% in 2006 to 67% in 2015, the wage gap between men and women remained 33% (Buribayev & Khamzina, 2019). Women, on the other hand, are expected to focus largely on domestic responsibilities such as childrearing, family care, and household management. These duties are more than social expectations; they are deeply embedded cultural standards that shape Kazakh women's identities and life paths from an early age. The function of a kelin in Kazakh families is particularly representative of these gendered norms. After marriage, a kelin is customarily absorbed not just into her husband's immediate family but also into a larger network of relatives, where she is frequently at the bottom of the family hierarchy. This integration is followed by the assumption that the kelin will follow her new family's established norms and customs, which include respecting elders and performing certain chores that help the family function and maintain its reputation. Despite multiple local customs and religious interpretations have historically

contributed to discrimination and undermined women's equal rights, rather than seeking authentic and authoritative sources that promote women's dignity, today's conservative Muslim interpretation of Islam advocates for a more relativistic approach to women's human rights (Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2020, p.5). These expectations are exacerbated by the kelin's ritualistic and symbolic significance in Kazakh weddings and family traditions. Kelins are frequently key figures in marriage rituals, representing the union of two families and the preservation of cultural and familial traditions. However, this symbolic role can result in tremendous pressure to match both explicit and implicit expectations about behaviour, fertility, and family traditions. Gender theory also gives light on the power dynamics that underpin these partnerships. Adapting to the role of kelin can be a significant change for many women, impacting their personal identity and sense of autonomy. This change is rarely easy, and it may require negotiations over authority, identity, and responsibility. The daughter in law must navigate these issues while adhering to cultural norms, which can be especially difficult in the face of modernising influences and shifting ideas of gender roles in contemporary Kazakhstan.

Family systems theory changes the emphasis away from the parent-child relationship and towards the family as a social system. A family is conceptualised as having its own traits, laws, duties, communication patterns, and power structure beyond the individual (Friedman & Markey, 2023). The family systems theory stresses that each member's behaviour influences the others, which is especially visible in how kelins are incorporated into their new families. For example, the kelin's relationship with her mother-in-law can be crucial. Often, the kelin's mother-in-law is the major figure with whom she interacts, and this bond might influence her general transition to her new family life. A loving mother-in-law can help with this transition, but a critical or demanding one can worsen the kelin's stress and struggles. The theory underlines the concept of homeostasis in family systems. In the context of Kazakh households, this may emerge as a refusal to change the traditional roles and expectations of the kelin, even in the face of current society changes. This resistance can cause stress and conflict, especially among younger, more educated women who may demand a more equitable role in their marriages and family structures. The function of the kelin is also important in preserving the family's cultural history. She is frequently expected to bear children and nurture them according to the cultural and religious traditions of her husband's family. This component of her duty is critical for the preservation of family lineage and tradition,

and her ability to meet these expectations can have a considerable impact on her position within the family. Kelins' adaptation to these duties and the stress that comes with them can vary greatly, depending on factors such as their personal origins, the flexibility of their husbands and in-laws, and the level of support they receive from other family members. According to Milberg et al. (2020), the findings indicated that many family members of dying patients cared for by palliative home care units frequently sense support within their families, and that those family members who do not sense such support may feel stress, anxiety, depression, have a lower quality of life, or have negative perceptions of being a family caregiver, which is supported by previous studies. Some may discover ways to negotiate their roles and duties, looking for concessions that allow them to keep their sense of self and personal goals. Others may struggle with a loss of autonomy and the weight of expectations, leading to feelings of loneliness or unhappiness.

In Kazakhstan, becoming a parent, particularly a mother, is a highly valued position that is frequently accompanied by a set of expectations. The societal perception of motherhood is connected with cultural narratives that place a high priority on family lineage and child rearing within the society's cultural and moral frameworks. For many Kazakh women, the journey to motherhood is marked by a mix of joy, responsibility, and, at times, overwhelming pressure to meet idealised parental and familial tasks. But there is also an emotional side to that period of time. There was a discovery that women felt more concerned about attachment as they entered motherhood and perceived less support from their partners and more marital resentment. Furthermore, women who began parenting with less spousal support became more avoidant of attachment during the transition (Gillath et al., 2016, p.135).

Methodology

The topic that dives into the personal aspect of young women's lives required a qualitative method that allowed each participant of the study to be thoroughly immersed in the idea of the study and fully open up about what their past three years looked like. The study's focus on in-depth interviews seeks to capture the personal experiences and viewpoints of young women in their first three years of marriage. All of the interviews were conducted online, through zoom calls in which each participant was fully informed and given the opportunity to be completely free and comfortable during the interview.

Participant Selection

Due to the fact that the study required women who were:

- 20-25 years old
- Married in the last 3 years
- Possibly pregnant or already have a child
- Different regions of Kazakhstan

Participants were chosen through snowball sampling, a process in which current study participants recruit potential participants from their connections. This strategy was especially beneficial for reaching difficult-to-sample populations when no sampling frame is available. The initial participant was chosen through personal connections and networking. After that each of the respondent was willing to speak to their friends and offer them to be interviewed in the study.

Data Collection

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews, which were done in either Kazakh or Russian, depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, allowing participants to express their opinions and experiences in depth. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis. The interview guide contained open-ended questions intended to elicit extensive replies regarding the participants' marriage experiences, including expectations, realities, problems, and the impact of cultural customs.

Ethical considerations

The study followed ethical rules to preserve the participants' rights and well-being. Prior to the interviews, all participants were told of the study's goal, the nature of their participation, and their freedom to withdraw at any moment without consequence. All participants provided informed consent. To maintain anonymity, names and identifying information have been modified or withheld in the presentation of the findings.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used on the transcribed interviews to discover common themes and patterns in the responses of the participants. This strategy allowed for a thorough examination of the data, resulting in the discovery of significant themes connected to marriage experience. Coding was done manually, and topics were developed iteratively by comparing data from multiple interviewees.

Limitations

Although the qualitative methodology used in this study provides useful insights into the complexity of early marriage in Kazakhstan, it is important to recognise its limitations. While snowball sampling can reach a wide range of people, it may not produce a perfectly representative sample of the Kazakh population. Participants in this sort of sampling may have similar social networks or cultural attitudes, which could result in selection bias. Furthermore, the sample size was small, with in-depth interviews with only a few participants, which may limit the findings' applicability to the larger community of Kazakh women. The dependence on self-reported data raises the possibility of response bias, as individuals may have portrayed their marital experiences in a more positive or socially acceptable way. The subjective character of interview responses may further limit the data's interpretability, as participants' memories and perceptions of their experiences may differ. Finally, while the study followed ethical guidelines to protect participants' confidentiality and autonomy, the sensitive nature of discussing personal marital experiences may have caused some participants to withhold full disclosure or avoid discussing particularly negative or private aspects of their marriages.

Findings and collected data

Interview questions:

General questions:

- Your age and where you are from?
- When did you get married?
- Where is your husband from and how old is he?
- How many years have you been married?
- What did you do before marriage: your job/place of study, etc.

Relationship before marriage:

- How long were you in a relationship with your boyfriend before marriage?
- How did your relationship begin: were you friends before, how did you know this person, etc.
- How would you characterize your relationship before marriage?
- What made you realize that you are ready to marry this particular person? What qualities in a husband were important to you?
- How did you resolve fights and conflicts?
- Did you talk about marriage before the proposal?
- What were your ideas about married life before marriage?
- Were there any agreements about what your married life would be like: roles/relationships with parents/where you will live/motherhood, etc.?
- Did the parents know that there would be a proposal? How did they react to this?
- Were they financially prepared for the wedding?

Wedding and afterwards:

- Please tell us about the wedding process: meeting your husband's family, getting used to the traditions of the new family, etc.
- How is the financial part of the wedding divided? Which party pays for what?
- What changes have occurred in your life after the wedding?
- What was your relationship like with your relatives after the wedding?
- Where and with whom do you live now?

- What do you do for a living now?
- Were there any changes in your daily habits when you got married?
- Have there been any changes in your relationship with your husband?
- How did you distribute household responsibilities? What exactly do you do?
- Do you have a child?
- If yes, tell us about how your pregnancy went? Did your relationship with your husband change during this period?
- Did you prepare physically for pregnancy?
- How would you describe the experience of motherhood now?
- How do you raise your child? Is the child going to be religious?
- How do you usually resolve your disagreements and conflicts?
- What do you consider the most difficult period in your marriage over the years?
- How would you describe your marriage today?
- What would you tell yourself before marriage? Any advice?

Coding

General questions:

First respondent:

- [22 years old, I'm from Taraz, but lived in Almaty the most of my life, approximately 20 years. My husband is from Uralsk and he is 24 years old. I got married 1 month before I turned 21 years old, it may sound scary that I got married this young, but fortunately I was lucky enough to get married to the person that I love dearly. So, I got married at 19. We have been married for almost 3 years now. Before marriage, I was studying at a university in my third year.]

Second respondent:

- [I'm 21 years old, I'm from Uralsk, but have been living in Almaty for 4 years because of my university studies. I got married last summer in August, 2023. My husband is from Taraz and he is 26 years old. So we've been married for 7 months. Before marriage I was working as a designer in the office and then went for freelancing. Also, I was studying at a university, working at coworking places. By evenings we usually met with my (at the time) boyfriend. I was living with my brother and his wife.]

Third respondent:

- [I'm 23 years old, I'm from Karaganda. I got married in September, 2022. My husband is also from Karaganda and he is 24 years old. We've been married for 1.5 years. Before marriage I was studying as a masters student. I didn't really work, because after my masters I got married and got pregnant.]

Fourth respondent:

- [I'm 24 years old, I'm from South Kazakhstan, village Orday, but mostly lived in Almaty. I got married in 2020, I was 20 years old, pretty early. My husband is from Shymkent and he is 25 years old. We've been married for 3 years. Before marriage I was a 2nd year student, was only studying, plus hobbies]

Relationship before marriage:

In this part answers will be written shortly, detailed answers will only be quoted.

First respondent:

- Were in a relationship for 2 years
- Were friends for 1 year before the relationship [We even called each other "brother/sister"]
- [Because of the fact that I was living outside of the city, I couldn't be in the city until dark, so we only hung out once or twice a week. I think my life got better after the wedding, because before that there was something missing, like we couldn't be fully together. We were dating also during the quarantine period]
- [Yes, we talked about marriage during the relationship. From the beginning of our relationship, after 6 months, we were already talking about how we're going to live as a married couple. So we talked and agreed on household responsibilities, whether or not I'm going to be working.]
- [Before the relationship I thought that marriage was going to be very traditional, I will have to sit at home. But that was because of the fact that I was shown an example like that. But after meeting my husband I understood that it doesn't have to be like that.]
- [Yes, I asked about whether if we're going to be living together with the parents or alone. Because I was having a hard time picturing myself as a "kelin" all the time, who's going to be on duty and on call 5 times a day pouring tea and etc. I asked about the plans for the future, what we're going to do for a living. I knew exactly that right after the marriage, I won't get pregnant immediately, because I was the constant older sister who was looking

after a lot of my younger siblings and it would be hard for me. So I said that I wasn't ready for that. Because of that I only got pregnant after a year into marriage. Now we have a daughter, she is almost 11 months.]

Second respondent:

- 2 years of dating period, 1.5 years before the proposal
- The husband was the best friend of her brother she was living with, and they got introduced when the brother was proposing to his wife. [I got my job at the place where he also worked and we were colleagues for half a year. Then after that, on the wedding day of my brother we started talking more and started dating after the wedding.]
- Healthy and adequate relationship. [Before that, I was in an abusive relationship, and the relationship with my husband opened my eyes for a healthy communication and freedom]
- [We agreed at the beginning of the relationship that if we're going to do this, we're going date until marriage]
- [We didn't live together, but could sleepover at his place]
- [I lived with my brother and his wife before our relationship, and I knew what to look for in a good relationship because they were a healthy couple who loved each other and each other's company. Before that I thought I would get married after 30 years old, didn't think it for was me to get married that early. I heard that in the South of Kazakhstan everything was going to be strict with the "kelins" and that we are going to be the another "sort" of people, however my in-laws turned out to be amazingly open and less strict people. They never pressured me and never asked for anything more than I can do. They treat me as their own daughter.]
- [We initially agreed to live in Almaty, but then the family told us to live in Taraz because there's a big family house there. However, we ended up deciding to live in Almaty and buy our own place and take my mother-in-law with us. We knew that I'm not going to be always at home, being a housewife, I will also work and we are partners.]
- [We didn't really have big differences in world views and we were pretty similar in that case. I am not a religious person, regular Kazakh girl from a traditional family and my husband is religious and Muslim. I was scared of that at first, because in Uralsk there's a different understanding of that and it's not very welcomed to perform namaz. But then we

talked and he said that it's only his choice and he's not going to force that on me. If I ever decide to also be fully Muslim, then it's only going to be my choice.]

Third respondent:

- 3 years of relationship before marriage
- [We were introduced in a mutual group of friends, and we were friends at first. It was in June of 2019.]
- [Our relationship was usual, we didn't really think at first that we're going to be marrying each other, it was gradual. My husband had serious intentions, but us, women, I think we still analyze and look for that moment and think. After 3 years he proposed and we started to prepare for the wedding.]
- [I didn't really have any expectations, but we started to discuss what would be comfortable for us in the long run, whether if I want to work or not, the kids, therefore everything that I planned to have in the marriage, I told him that in the beginning. Everything was in the form of dialogue and communication, so I wouldn't say I was just sitting and expecting everything.]
- [In Karaganda, we are the Northerners, we are not that strict with traditions and customs, and everyone agrees on the important thing in the family should be the fact that each partner should listen to each other and put each other first.]
- [We agreed that first we will live together with the in-laws, and everything related to finances will be his duty because after the university I didn't want to work. My money was mine, and his money was everything for domestic needs and etc.]
- [Yes, the parents knew everything, and our parents have met before the proposal, so everyone knew it was leading up to that as well.]

Fourth respondent:

- [We met in a student club at the university, he was the president and I was a member. We started getting closer and literally after a week we started dating. So our relationship was moving pretty fast, very romantic and very exciting. We were studying together, living together, hung out together a lot.]

- [Yes, there were a lot of differences in us and I'm surprised that didn't scare me at that point. He is pretty religious and I'm not. He has a more traditional family and they speak in Kazakh, and I'm from a more "Russianized" family. At the beginning I was having some fears, but they didn't really bother to the point where I wanted to stop the relationship. He's more outgoing and I'm more of an introvert. But these differences were more like a connecting point for us, because we were interesting to each other. I was curious to see the world differently.]
- [We started to talk about marriage pretty early, couple of months after we started dating. So the proposal was not sudden. All of our families met and everything was in advance and planned out.]
- [Before I met my husband, I didn't really think about marriage and didn't want to get married until 30. But then I fell in love. We were always together, I was super attached and was emotionally dependent on him. I was always kind of scared to be alone without him. Therefore I pictured my married life was always going to be like that, I pictured us always together and I didn't really know anything about family finances, like all those serious stuff. I was thinking more about the emotional aspect of the marriage. I was only thinking about the fact that we're going to be together and that kept me going.]
- [Yes, there were a lot of conversations about how we pictured married life. The main question was about living with the in-laws. I was worried about the fact whether if I'm going to live in a completely new and different household. We agreed on the fact that we're going to live with them for about two months. Motherhood was not the first thing we planned, it was kind of in the back plans. When it comes to domestic roles, it was an easy conversation, because we didn't think it was a big deal.]
- [My relationship with his family was okay, because we met only a couple of times during the time of planning the wedding. The relationship was good, but not close].

Further answers will be written inside the results and discussion.

Results and discussion

Relationship with the husband and the in-laws

The transition to marriage and the subsequent positions within the family unit have a significant impact on personal relationships, notably those between the kelin (daughter-in-law) and her husband, as well as her in-laws. One of the findings showed that these dynamics can considerably alter the marriage experience, affecting both personal well-being and overall familial harmony. One of the study's respondents stated that her relationship with her spouse worsened when they were forced to live with his parents for an extended period of time during the quarantine. This arrangement, while culturally acceptable in many Kazakh households, caused substantial stress owing to the increased expectations placed on her as a kelin. The confinement, compounded by quarantine procedures, meant that established roles and responsibilities felt heightened. Respondent #4 said that:

“Initially we did agree on living with the parents only for two months, but nobody expected quarantine. Because of that, right after the wedding we lived together with the in-laws for almost half a year. This was one of the hardest periods of my marriage. My husband was working a lot and during this time I was going through a lot of changes as well. I was often in the kitchen or doing household chores because this was what was required of me as a kelin. Or at least I thought like that. The whole day I was cooking, cleaning, and mainly was being alone and when my husband arrived home, it would be late in the evening when all we had was just those 2 hours, where we barely could talk due to exhaustion.”

The respondent stated that her husband's long working hours left her alone to manage domestic responsibilities and match cultural expectations of an ideal daughter-in-law, primary among which was the constant availability to cook and maintain the household. This event emphasises a crucial friction point in Kazakh marital dynamics: the kelin's expectation to smoothly integrate into and uphold the family's way of life and values, even if it means sacrificing her own personal and marital fulfillment. Emotionally she felt drained and was always on the verge of an emotional breakdown due to this pressure. The psychological impact of these expectations cannot be underestimated. The respondent described feeling enormous pressure to fulfil her tasks precisely, which was

exacerbated by her lack of autonomy and the frequent presence of her in-laws. The lack of her husband's support owing to his work responsibilities exacerbated her feelings of loneliness and stress, demonstrating how traditional family structures can often fail to adapt to the demands of the individual, especially during times of crisis.

“It’s not like my mother in law was constantly nagging me or showing a bad support, she was trying to talk to me, calm me down and often times I have felt guilty because of the way I felt this way. I just did not feel comfortable, although everything seemed alright from the outside.”

The emotional toll of fulfilling an idealised position that prioritises familial responsibilities over individual well-being can cause major marital conflict. The respondent's experience echoes a larger issue in the data: that the satisfaction and stability of a marriage can be significantly influenced by the familial environment and the roles assigned to women. This emphasises the significance of maintaining a supportive marriage relationship as well as establishing familial limits. Mostly she felt guarded and was often overthinking a lot of her doings just because she didn't feel like she was enough of a “good kelin”. The cultural script for kelins is strongly embedded in Kazakh society. However, as this case shows, adherence to these traditional roles without flexibility might result in negative consequences. The expectation that the kelin must always prioritise family responsibilities over personal or marital demands might result in an unsustainable equilibrium, leading to resentment and poor marital satisfaction. This situation emphasises the importance of cultural adaptation to contemporary reality. As Kazakhstan modernises, so will its notions of marriage responsibilities and family life. The addition of support systems, such as family counselling, community support groups, or marital health education programmes, may assist couples in navigating the complications of living with extended family.

“At one point I was consulting with a therapist, because I could not control my emotions for the longest time and I felt like I needed a break. That’s when I turned to online zoom calls where I could talk about how I feel without feeling like I’m complaining for nothing. I often did not want to bother my husband because I saw how much he was working for us. Of course he saw me being upset most of the time and that also translated to his mood as well.”

The findings point to the need for a change in the traditional understanding of the kelin's function in Kazakh families. Promoting more equitable allocation of home tasks, encouraging open

communication between couples about their expectations and challenges, and establishing clear boundaries with extended family members are all critical steps towards modernising family dynamics. Her experience was clearly mostly coming from her own expectations of herself in this new stage of life and she needed that reassurance from the people around.

However, there was a respondent that have said the opposite about this experience. Respondent #3 claimed that living with her in-laws initially helped her understand her husband's tastes and routines. Living in close quarters with her husband's parents allowed her to learn about his likes and dislikes, such as how he liked his belongings organised, his washing done, and his food prepared. Such insights were aided by her interactions with her mother-in-law, with whom she bonded over her husband's habits. This period of cohabitation allowed her to more easily transition into her role as a wife by aligning her domestic routines with her husband's established preferences, which is critical in the context of Kazakh marital standards. This integration is frequently regarded as an important part of marital success in Kazakh society, where familial relationships and communal life are highly prized.

“One time we had a little fight about the tap water. I was used to getting tap water and he was appalled by that. Because of the fact he was raised to drink water from the filters inside the house and it’s a special construction part that can be added. After that I started to drink from the filter as well”.

However, there was also a drawback, despite these advantages, the respondent identified substantial obstacles with extended cohabitation. She noticed a clear change in her husband's behaviour over time, as he got lazier and less interested in his family chores. This shift was linked to his lack of need to take active roles inside the household or in the broader obligations that come with being the head of the family. The presence of his parents may have reduced his perceived need to assert his role as a provider and caretaker, which is normally required of a husband in Kazakh culture. The couple's transfer from Karaganda to Astana marked a turning point. This move signified a substantial shift from a joint family structure to a nuclear family system, with the husband serving as the sole working member while the woman was pregnant and homebound. This new situation pushed the husband to take a more proactive position, as he recognised the need to

be the major provider and take on additional tasks. The respondent stated that this change resulted in a system that ultimately satisfied her the most, implying that while initial integration into the husband's family was beneficial for cultural and relational reasons, the establishment of an independent household was critical to the couple's long-term marital satisfaction and stability.

Household responsibilities and gender roles

This section of the research looks into respondents' experiences with family duties and responsibilities, with a special emphasis on how gender roles influence the distribution of household chores and marital dynamics.

The study's findings show that wives are responsible for the majority of home chores, which is consistent with conventional gender norms in many Kazakh households. However, respondents acknowledged a flexible approach towards sharing these responsibilities with their husbands when necessary. This flexibility indicates a progressive shift in traditional gender norms, with household tasks becoming more of a shared domain rather than solely women's job.

One respondent's experience vividly illustrates these shifting relationships. Coming from a southern region of Kazakhstan, she was accustomed to taking on a full role in household management from an early age, including cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. Such early conditioning to domestic tasks is widespread in more traditional areas, where girls are frequently groomed to be the primary carers in the household. Despite her traditional background, the respondent's experience in her marital home differed significantly from her expectations. Her in-laws, who are from Uralsk, prioritised her comfort and well-being, defying traditional standards that would have compelled her to carefully conform to rigid home routines. For example, despite expectations that she would get up earlier than everyone else to prepare meals, her mother-in-law urged her to relax and advised ordering food if required. Her in-laws' progressive approach was essential in changing her understanding of her role in the family.

The supportive environment created by her in-laws allowed her to feel like the "boss" of her own home, a sentiment that represents a dramatic shift in power dynamics that is common in traditional Kazakh households. This empowerment is an important component of how familial support structures can impact the redefining of gender roles in the home.

Another major finding is a collaborative approach to managing household tasks while the wife is working or has other commitments. The responder stated that when she was too busy or weary to

cook, her husband would gladly order food for the family. This willingness to adapt and share chores reflects a modern, more egalitarian attitude to marriage, in which activities are assigned based on practicality and mutual support rather than fixed gender stereotypes.

There was a respondent who had the opposite experience. She herself was from Uralsk residency who married into a Taraz family, a city famed for its commitment to traditional practices, notably the role of the kelin (daughter-in-law). Her story sheds light on the expectations and realities of marriage in a culturally rigid setting, as well as how familial support may greatly influence the experience.

The respondent from Uralsk was aware of the hard nature of the role she was expected to play after marrying into a southern Kazakh household. Southern cities like as Taraz are known for their strict devotion to ancient conventions, with the kelin expected to play a vital role in maintaining domestic order and cultural rituals. Anticipating these problems, she planned to meet these rigorous traditional standards, which frequently included managing vast domestic duties, hosting, and actively engaging in family rituals. Despite her preparation for a tight set of expectations, her new family life was vastly different. Unlike her expectations, her mother-in-law took a far less stringent approach. This unexpected flexibility helped her acclimatise to married life. Her mother-in-law encouraged bonding through meaningful conversations and treated her as a daughter rather than a typical kelin. This treatment considerably aided the respondent's integration into the family and helped her to feel appreciated and respected as an individual, rather than just as a kelin performing her responsibilities.

“I love my mom (referring to her mother in law). She is very kind with me and every time we meet each other, it's like we find new spots of connection that we could talk about over at dinner. The traditional customs do not bother me, but rather put us in the journey of getting to know more about each other side of customs”.

Her mother-in-law's support was critical in redefining her role in the home. Her mother-in-law contributed to the creation of a caring environment by treating her with love and respect, in contrast to the rigid traditional roles she expected. This strategy not only facilitated a better transition to her new life, but it also enhanced her relationship with her spouse. These nurturing interactions helped the husband achieve his aim of developing a solid bond between his wife and his mother,

emphasising the significance of support and understanding when integrating a new person into the family.

Transition to motherhood

The final section of our discussion focuses on the enormous impact of the transition to parenting, as stated by a responder who underwent considerable changes in her marriage and personal life during this time. This transformation not only changed her family life, but it also triggered deeper personal growth and a rethinking of her priorities and relationships.

The responder described a dramatic change in her living condition and marital relationship after she and her spouse relocated from Almaty to Astana. This move coincided with her pregnancy, signalling a watershed moment in her life. Living apart from their parents provided a new beginning and an opportunity to redefine their relationship free of the direct impact and expectations of their extended families. This independence was critical because it allowed the couple to manage their responsibilities without the additional demands and difficulties that sometimes come with living with in-laws.

The respondent's life changed dramatically as a result of her pregnancy. She experienced a "epiphany of her different self," in which petty disagreements and daily worries were insignificant in light of her new objectives. Her attention moved to self-care and the health of her unborn child, emphasising her innate goal to provide a supportive environment for her baby. This adjustment in focus considerably reduced marital friction while also providing her with a feeling of purpose and direction.

“I felt that my old codependency was starting to disappear. The times when I needed my husband 24/7 around me were fading away as I realized that I’m going to have my own little human who would need me in their constant presence. This gave me a new sense of responsibility and weight and love of motherhood that I have never felt before. The pregnancy was also going smoothly, I did not have any extreme health issues. My husband was always around and helping with everything I needed. Also the relationship with my in-laws got a lot better. My mother in law always helped me with everything which was exactly what I needed as a first time mother”.

The birth of their first child was described as a watershed moment in the respondent's life, acting as a stimulus for personal development and growth. Parenthood naturally introduces new problems and obligations, but it also provides a unique opportunity to enhance marital bonds and realign life priorities. Motherhood was a transformational experience for this respondent, giving her a stronger sense of identity and purpose, ultimately leading to a more peaceful and organic family. The move to motherhood frequently tests the resilience and adaptability of marriage partnerships. In this example, it created an environment in which both spouses were encouraged to collaborate and assist one another more successfully. The shared duty of raising a child can strengthen emotional bonds between couples and encourage a more equal attitude to family and home tasks.

One respondent from Karaganda mentioned that living with her in-laws during the early stages of parenting was advantageous, particularly in terms of mental and physical support. She described a strong bond with her kid, to the point where she felt apprehensive about leaving him even for a short time. This increased concern is normal among new mothers as they negotiate the unknowns of parenthood. In this situation, her mother-in-law's presence was quite beneficial. The seasoned knowledge and experience of a new grandma provides confidence and direction, easing some of the worry associated with new parenthood. This assistance not only benefited in practical ways, but it also built familial relationships, resulting in a loving atmosphere for both the mother and the kid. The intergenerational support emphasises the benefits of extended family living, where collective knowledge and care can greatly help new mothers.

Another respondent discussed the emotional toll of being a mother. She expressed feeling overwhelmed by the obligations of caring for a new child, which contrasted sharply with her former outgoing lifestyle. The abrupt change in daily routines and her focused concentration on her child caused feelings of loneliness and postpartum stress. This experience exemplifies the enormous emotional changes that accompany the advent of a new kid. During this difficult time, her husband's support was invaluable. He offered both emotional support and practical assistance, such as encouraging her to take time for herself and creating a comfortable home environment. This type of cooperation can be crucial in reducing the impacts of postpartum depression and stress, emphasising the value of having a supportive spouse when navigating the challenges of new parenting. The experiences recounted by these individuals demonstrate the range of obstacles and assistance that new mothers may face. While one profited from the close-knit support of living with in-laws, another suffered severe emotional issues, which were mitigated by her partner's

support. These stories highlight the value of having a strong support system during the transition to motherhood. They emphasise the importance of both familial and spousal support in assisting new moms in managing the physical and emotional changes involved with this significant life shift.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study looked at Kazakh women's multidimensional experiences in their early marriages, concentrating on the complexity of negotiating traditional roles, shifting to parenting, and managing relationships with in-laws and spouses. These findings serve as an important narrative mosaic that portrays the various realities that women encounter as they enter the institution of marriage and parenting within the cultural framework of Kazakhstan.

Marriage and parenthood are two of the most important stages in a woman's life. This study emphasises the significance of making life decisions not only based on emotions, but also with a reasonable perspective. Young women are encouraged to communicate openly and honestly with their partners and family members. This conversation is critical for setting realistic expectations and developing a mutual knowledge of each other's duties and responsibilities within the marriage. The stories provided demonstrate the fundamental importance of having a supportive environment during the transition to marriage and parenthood. Families, particularly in-laws, have an important role in either easing or complicating this move. It is essential that families create a nurturing and supportive environment that respects the specific needs and boundaries of the new kelin. Encouraging a more flexible attitude to traditional duties and responsibilities can greatly improve the marriage experience and help to a healthier family dynamic.

Recommendations for Future Couples

1. **Pre-Marital Counselling:** Couples should obtain pre-marital counselling to better prepare for the reality of married life. Counselling can help you learn how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and make shared decisions, all of which are important skills for navigating the complexity of marriage.

2. Parenting information: Prospective parents should seek out resources and information about the reality of parenthood. Understanding the mental and physical needs of parenthood can help couples prepare for this huge change, decreasing the shock and stress that comes with having a new kid.

3. Community Support Systems: Creating or strengthening community support networks for young couples can be quite beneficial. Parenting programmes, support groups for young moms, and family planning tools are all options for providing direction and support during the early years of marriage and children.

4. Increasing Gender Equality in Household Responsibilities: Encouraging a more balanced distribution of domestic duties and caregiving obligations can help to improve marital relationships. Couples should discuss these roles early on in their relationship to make sure both partners feel respected and supported.

Marriage and parenthood are momentous decisions that influence the course of people's life. This study serves as a reminder of the necessity of approaching these seasons of life with the appropriate mindset, which includes support, understanding, and a solid foundation of love and mutual respect. The stories given by respondents provide essential lessons and insights that can help young girls and couples in Kazakhstan address these significant life transitions deliberately and successfully, ensuring that they have rich stories to tell their children in the future.

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Appendix A

Written Informed Consent Form

Introduction. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled **Expectations and Reality of The First 3 Years of Marriage for Women in Kazakhstan.**

Procedures. This interview will look into your thoughts and experiences with first 3 years of marriage as a woman in Kazakhstan. The interview will last roughly two hours. The goal is to get useful insights on the many perspectives on married life.

Risks. The potential risks of participating in this study are: The potential risks of participating in this study are minimal. All the answers will be anonymized. Unless the participant agrees to be in the video interview that will part of the social media content.

Benefits. Anticipated benefits from this study are add the potential benefits to Nazarbayev University's research efforts, advance scientific knowledge on gender roles, and provide you with the opportunity to express your unique perspective on womanhood. You will also receive a copy of the research findings once the study is completed.

Compensation. No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study. The results will be transmitted via a secure online platform to protect your privacy.

Confidentiality & Privacy. Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by the law. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your responses will be securely preserved on password-protected devices that only the researcher will have access to. During analysis, data will be anonymised, and any identifiable information will be kept separate from research findings. Your confidentiality is a key priority, and every precaution will be made to preserve it. Please share any concerns about confidentiality with the researcher before beginning.

Voluntary Nature of the Study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if agreement to participation is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without prejudice.

Points of Contact. It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research related injury is received, the Principal Investigator, *Nurbakyt Toksanova*, +775 285 5034, nurbakyt.toksanova@nu.edu.kz should be contacted. Any other questions or concerns may be addressed to the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, resethics@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of Consent.

I, _____,

Give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

The researcher clearly explained to me the background information and objectives of the study and what my participation in this study involves.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time and without giving any reasons withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for myself .

I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____