

**Exploring Experiences of Parent-Students, Seeking Graduate Education at a
Highly Selective Public Institution in Kazakhstan**

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in

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Date: 27 April, 2026

Ethical Approval



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NUGSE IREC Protocol Approval

Date: 30 October 2025

To the attention of Fazilat Raimberdiyeva, MSc in Educational Leadership Program

Dear Fazilat,

This letter confirms that your research project titled “**Exploring Experiences of Parent-Students Seeking Graduate Education at a Highly Selective Public Institution in Kazakhstan**” has been approved by the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education Institutional Research Ethics Committee (NUGSE IREC). You may now proceed with your fieldwork and data collection as indicated in your ethics application. Please note that the NUGSE IREC must be contacted if there are any changes to the protocol during the period of your fieldwork.

As the Principal Investigator of record for this protocol, you are required to:

- Use current, up-to-date NUGSE IREC-approved documents
- Notify the NUGSE IREC of any changes or modifications to your study procedures
- Alert the NUGSE IREC of any adverse events

Should you have any questions or concerns related to this protocol or fieldwork, please let me know. The approval is effective until **28/02/2026**.

Best wishes for your research work!

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Abstract

Exploring Experiences of Parent-Students, Seeking Graduate Education at a Highly Selective Public Institution in Kazakhstan

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of parent-students (mothers and fathers) pursuing graduate education (master's and doctoral programmes) at Nazarbayev University, a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan. Through semi-structured interviews with six participants, the research examined how they navigated the intersection of rigorous academic demands and active parenthood within Kazakhstan's socio-cultural context, where traditional gender roles remain strong. The findings revealed that participants faced significant challenges, including severe time poverty, emotional strain, and gendered role expectations—mothers often bearing the double burden of caregiving and daughter-in-law duties, while fathers carried the primary responsibility as breadwinners. Despite these pressures, participants demonstrated notable resilience through structured time management, heavy reliance on extended family support, external childcare, and proactive financial planning. Importantly, many also described positive experiences, such as increased motivation, discipline, purpose, and personal growth, which were often fueled by their desire to build a better future for their children. The study highlights the relational nature of academic success for parent-students and underscores the current invisibility of this group within institutional structures. It calls for more inclusive policies, particularly affordable on-campus childcare, flexible academic arrangements, and greater recognition of parent-students' realities.

Keywords: parent-students, graduate education, role conflict, gender roles, Kazakhstan, higher education equity, balancing parenthood and academia, lived experiences

Аңдатпа

Қазақстандағы жоғары селективті мемлекеттік жоғары оқу орнында магистратура және докторантурада оқитын ата-ана-студенттердің тәжірибесін зерттеу

Бұл сапалық феноменологиялық зерттеу Қазақстандағы жоғары селективті мемлекеттік жоғары оқу орны – Назарбаев Университетінде магистратура және докторантура бағдарламаларында оқитын ата-ана-студенттердің (аналар мен әкелердің) өмірлік тәжірибесін зерттейді. Алты қатысушымен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар арқылы зерттеу олардың қатаң академиялық талаптар мен белсенді ата-ана рөлінің қиылысын қалай басқаратынын Қазақстанның әлеуметтік-мәдени контекстінде, дәстүрлі гендерлік рөлдер әлі де күшті болып тұрған жағдайда талдады. Нәтижелер қатысушылар уақыттың қатты тапшылығы, эмоционалдық шиеленіс және гендерлік рөлдік күтулер сияқты маңызды қиындықтарға тап болғанын көрсетті – аналар көбінесе балаларға күтім жасау және келін міндеттерін қоса алғанда қос жүкті көтереді, ал әкелер отбасын қамтамасыз етуші ретінде негізгі жауапкершілікті алады. Осы қиындықтарға қарамастан, қатысушылар уақытты құрылымдау, кеңейтілген отбасының қолдауына сүйену, сыртқы күтім көмегі және алдын ала қаржылық жоспарлау арқылы елеулі төзімділік танытты. Маңыздысы, көптеген қатысушылар мотивацияның артуы, тәртіптілік, мақсаттылық және жеке өсу сияқты оң тәжірибелерді сипаттады, олар көбінесе балалары үшін жақсы болашақ құруға деген ұмтылыстан туындаған. Зерттеу ата-ана-студенттердің академиялық табысының реляциялық сипатын атап көрсетеді және бұл топтың университеттік құрылымдардағы қазіргі көрінбестігін баса көрсетеді. Онда университет аумағында қолжетімді балалар күтімі қызметтері, икемді академиялық

шарттар және ата-ана-студенттердің шындығын мойындауды қамтитын инклюзивті саясаттарға шақыру бар.

Кілт сөздер: *ата-ана-студенттер, магистратура және докторантура, рөлдік қақтығыс, гендерлік рөлдер, Қазақстан, жоғары білімдегі теңдік, ата-ана рөлі мен академиялық өмірді теңестіру, өмірлік тәжірибе*

Аннотация

Изучение опыта студентов-родителей, получающих высшее образование в высокоселективном государственном вузе Казахстана

Данное качественное феноменологическое исследование изучает жизненный опыт студентов-родителей (матерей и отцов), получающих высшее образование (магистратура и докторантура) в Назарбаев Университете — высокоселективном государственном вузе Казахстана. С помощью полуструктурированных интервью с шестью участниками исследование проанализировало, как они справляются с пересечением строгих академических требований и активного родительства в социально-культурном контексте Казахстана, где традиционные гендерные роли остаются сильными. Результаты показали, что участники сталкиваются со значительными трудностями, включая острую нехватку времени, эмоциональное напряжение и гендерные ролевые ожидания — матери часто несут двойную нагрузку по уходу за детьми и выполнению обязанностей келин, в то время как отцы несут основную ответственность как кормильцы семьи. Несмотря на эти трудности, участники продемонстрировали заметную устойчивость благодаря структурированному управлению временем, сильной опоре на поддержку расширенной семьи, внешней помощи по уходу за детьми и продуманному финансовому планированию. Важно отметить, что многие также описали позитивные переживания, такие как повышение мотивации, дисциплины, осознанности и личностного роста, которые часто были обусловлены желанием построить лучшее будущее для своих детей. Исследование подчеркивает реляционный характер академического успеха студентов-родителей и акцентирует внимание на текущей невидимости этой группы в институциональных структурах. В нем содержится призыв к более инклюзивным политикам, в частности к доступным

услугам по уходу за детьми на территории университета, гибким академическим условиям и большему признанию реальности студентов-родителей.

Ключевые слова: *студенты-родители, аспирантура, ролевой конфликт, гендерные роли, Казахстан, равенство в высшем образовании, баланс между родительство и академической жизнью, жизненный опыт*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explores the lived experiences of parent-students (both mothers and fathers) who are pursuing graduate education (master's and doctoral programmes) at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan. In this chapter, the research is introduced. It begins by providing the background and context of the study. The chapter then presents the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Key terms are defined, and the significance and potential benefits of the research are discussed. The chapter concludes with an outline of the overall structure of the thesis.

Background of Study

Higher education is now regarded as an ever more important asset by nations worldwide. Tight (2012) argues that the motivations behind government allocations to education and training are often rooted in the dynamics of heightened global competition, rapid technological progress, and the effects of globalization. These driving factors remain relevant today, as governments increasingly prioritize and recognize the need to invest in education to enhance their competitive edge and harness technological advancements for economic growth (Chang & Chang, 2024). Graduate education is widely recognized as a critical driver of personal and professional advancement, especially within highly competitive institutions where the standards and demands for academic achievement are increasingly rigorous. Consequently, motivated by such factors, and the evolving demands of the labor market, many adults are returning to graduate school while simultaneously fulfilling caregiving responsibilities (Wladis et al., 2018; Yoo & Marshall, 2024).

According to Yoo and Marshall (2024), a graduate parent-student is the one who "...have dependent children while pursuing a degree in either master's or doctoral program (p. 260)". Parent-students represent a distinct and demographically diverse subgroup within the broader student body, characterized by circumstances and needs unique to their

dual roles (Dolson & Deemer, 2020). While they often exhibit remarkable motivation and resilience, parent-students must navigate a complex array of challenges that arise from balancing academic, professional, and parenting responsibilities (Yoo & Marshall, 2024). These challenges frequently include financial pressures, concerns about securing adequate childcare, limited time and flexibility to complete academic work, and insufficient institutional or social support tailored to their specific situation (Roy et al., 2023; Springer et al., 2009, Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025). As a result, the experiences of student parents are shaped by the ongoing negotiation of these overlapping demands, underscoring the importance of recognizing and addressing their unique needs within higher education.

Despite their growing presence in graduate programs, most higher education institutions remain structured around the ideal of the so-called “traditional” students, who are young, full-time, financially dependent, and without significant caregiving responsibilities (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). As a result, institutional frameworks, academic schedules, and program requirements are often not aligned with the needs of parent-students, particularly those juggling multiple roles. For this group, pursuing a graduate degree can become a complex negotiation of time, energy, and identity, where the rigorous demands of academia frequently conflict with the fluid and unpredictable nature of parenting. Structural limitations such as lack of on-campus childcare, inflexible assignment deadlines, and the absence of family leave policies within graduate programs can exacerbate the pressures faced by parent-students (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Roy et al., 2023).

These challenges are not merely logistical - they are embedded in broader institutional cultures that often render caregiving responsibilities invisible or secondary to academic success. Parent-students may experience isolation from peer networks, diminished opportunities for participation in academic events, and stigmatization due to

assumptions that they are less committed to their studies (Dolson & Deemer, 2020). In some cases, they may also internalize these perceptions, leading to guilt, self-doubt, and reduced academic confidence. Such dynamics highlight the ways in which graduate education can reproduce inequalities by privileging students who are able to meet its demands without accommodation.

Increasingly, scholars and policymakers are calling for higher education institutions to adopt more inclusive policies that recognize the diversity of the graduate student population. Supporting parent-students is not only a matter of academic retention and success but also of educational justice and gender equity (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). The burden of caregiving often falls disproportionately on women, particularly in societies where traditional gender roles remain dominant (Springer et al., 2009). As such, a lack of institutional support for parent-students contributes to the perpetuation of gender disparities in educational attainment and professional advancement (Andrade & Matias, 2017; Yoo & Marshall, 2024).

While these concerns have received increasing attention in North American and European contexts, they remain largely underexplored in Central Asia, and in Kazakhstan specifically. Kazakhstan's cultural and social landscape presents unique tensions for parent-students.

On the one hand, the country's education reforms and internationalization agenda have elevated the importance of graduate education for national development (Azhibayeva et al., 2024). In Kazakhstan, enrolment in master's and doctoral programs has grown steadily, reaching 68,792 graduate students in the 2024-2025 academic year, marking a 12.3% increase from 61,251 in 2022-2023 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2025; Taldau Information-Analytical System, 2025). At the same time, Kazakhstan's fertility rate of 2.9 children per woman (World Bank, 2024) and cultural emphasis on early marriage and

parenthood mean that many women and men enter graduate programs while raising young children. Consequently, the experiences of parent-students at highly selective public institutions have become increasingly relevant.

On the other, although there is a promotion of women's education and integration into the workforce, it did not fully dismantle traditional gender expectations, and, as a result, mothers in Kazakhstan often face heightened stress and conflict when pursuing professional or academic careers, as caregiving and domestic responsibilities continue to be perceived primarily as their domain (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025). This dual expectation creates a double burden for parent-students who are expected to excel academically in competitive environments while simultaneously upholding traditional family roles.

At public elite institutions like Nazarbayev University, which attract high-achieving students and maintain demanding academic requirements, these tensions can be particularly pronounced. While the university is often perceived as progressive and internationally aligned, there is a limited understanding of how its structures accommodate or overlook the needs of students with caregiving responsibilities. Given the lack of institutional data and academic research on this population, it is critical to explore their challenges and strategies for ensuring equitable access, reducing attrition, and aligning institutional policies with the country's goals of gender equity and human capital development in higher education.

Problem Statement

Although parent-students are becoming an increasingly visible demographic in graduate education, their realities remain insufficiently acknowledged within the academic structures and cultures of many universities. While international literature has begun to illuminate the struggles and needs of parent-students in Western contexts, the existing literature offers little insight into the understanding of how these individuals navigate the

pressures of graduate education within Kazakhstan's post-socialist, mainly Muslim, Asian, family-centric social structure.

The dual demands of academic performance and caregiving are intensified by cultural expectations that continue to cast caregiving, especially mothering, as women's primary responsibility (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025). Many empirical studies primarily center on the experiences of mother-students. There is a notable lack of comprehensive research that includes both father-students and mother-students, limiting our understanding of how gender roles, institutional expectations, and support structures affect students with caregiving responsibilities across diverse family arrangements. In Kazakhstan, this gap is particularly pronounced, where traditional norms still assign the bulk of caregiving to women, yet working fathers may also face pressures that are overlooked in academic discourse. As a result, parent-students, regardless of gender and socio-economic status, may experience isolation, time pressure, emotional stress, and reduced academic performance due to the absence of inclusive institutional policies such as flexible scheduling, childcare support, or peer networks.

Given the lack of empirical and gender-inclusive research in the Kazakhstani context, especially within highly selective institutions, there is a pressing need to examine these students' lived realities. Addressing this gap can help inform institutional policies, promote educational equity, and contribute to the broader discourse on student diversity in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of parent-students, both mothers and fathers, who are currently pursuing graduate education at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan. Specifically, this research seeks to understand how these individuals navigate the demands of academic life alongside their

caregiving responsibilities within the socio-cultural and institutional context of Kazakhstani higher education.

By adopting a qualitative approach, the study aims to uncover the challenges parent-students face, the strategies they employ to manage their dual roles, and the kinds of institutional and personal support systems that influence their ability to succeed. This research also seeks to examine how gendered expectations shape the experiences of mother- and father-students differently, and how these differences manifest in their perceptions of academic inclusion, time management, and emotional well-being.

Ultimately, this study intends to generate insights that can inform the development of more responsive university policies, practices, and support services that acknowledge and address the realities of parenthood in graduate education. In this way, it contributes to broader efforts to promote educational equity and enhance the academic experiences of non-traditional student populations in Kazakhstan and similar contexts.

Research Questions

The overarching research question of the current study is: How do graduate parent-students in Kazakhstan experience the intersection of parenting and academic life? This question is then followed by three sub-questions:

1. What challenges do they encounter in balancing academic expectations with family responsibilities?

This question aims to uncover the specific difficulties that parent-students face as they attempt to meet the demands of graduate education while fulfilling caregiving roles. By identifying these challenges, the study seeks to understand the barriers that may hinder academic performance, well-being, or persistence in higher education.

2. What coping strategies and support systems (e.g., institutional, peer, familial) do parent-students rely on?

This question explores the ways in which parent-students manage the demands of dual roles. It focuses on the types of support they seek or receive, including family help, peer networks, or formal university services. Understanding these strategies will provide insight into how parent-students sustain their engagement and navigate the pressures of graduate study, and which forms of support are most effective or needed.

3. How do cultural and institutional contexts shape their identities and engagement with graduate education?

This question examines how broader cultural norms and institutional structures influence how parent-students perceive themselves and interact with the academic environment. It considers how gender roles, societal expectations, and university policies affect their academic identity, sense of belonging, and participation. The findings will help reveal the socio-cultural forces that shape the graduate school experience for parent-students in Kazakhstan.

Significance and Benefits of the Study

This study addresses a critical gap in the Kazakhstani higher education context by exploring the experiences of parent-students, both mothers and fathers, pursuing graduate education at a highly selective public institution. While international research on student-parents is growing (Dolson & Deemer, 2020; Yoo & Marshall, 2024), little is known about how caregiving responsibilities intersect with academic demands in Central Asia, particularly in competitive academic environments.

The study contributes to broader conversations on educational equity, gender roles, and access to graduate education. It provides valuable insights for administrators,

policymakers, and educators seeking to build more responsive and supportive learning environments. Additionally, by focusing on both genders, this study challenges the notion that caregiving is traditionally associated with women, offering a more inclusive understanding of how cultural expectations and institutional structures shape academic engagement. The findings can inform university policies and practices aimed at supporting parent-students through greater flexibility, targeted services, and inclusive academic planning.

Finally, by amplifying the voices of parent-students, this research empowers them with greater visibility and encourages the development of structures that support academic success alongside family life.

Outline of the Thesis

This study is organized into six main chapters. Chapter one outlines the background and context of the study, and includes the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, as well as the significance and anticipated contributions of the study. Chapter two offers a review of the literature, exploring the key concepts underpinning the research and examining related themes through relevant scholarly sources. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology and justifies the choice of a qualitative research approach as the most suitable means to capture the lived experiences of parent-students, details the data collection procedures, explains the thematic analysis process, and discusses ethical considerations. Chapter four presents the results by systematically organising and richly illustrating the core themes that emerged from parent-students' accounts of pursuing graduate education at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan. Chapter five interprets these findings in relation to the broader literature on student-parents, gender roles, work-life-study balance, and institutional support systems, while highlighting implications for theory, university policy, and practice within the

Kazakhstani higher education context. Finally, chapter six synthesises the key insights into the lived realities of parent-students at this elite institution, acknowledges the study's limitations, and offers recommendations for future qualitative research and for institutional strategies to better support parent-students in Kazakhstan and similar contexts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter examines existing literature on key concepts and discussions from national and international scholars, aiming to help readers understand the nature of being a graduate student with dependent children.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Several theories help explain the experiences of parent-students, seeking a graduate education in Kazakhstan. The study is grounded in two complementary key theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon: *Role Conflict Theory* (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and *Social Role Theory* (Eagly et al., 2000). These theories provide a robust framework for understanding the challenges, strategies, and cultural dynamics faced by parent-students as they navigate the competing demands of their academic, familial, and gendered roles within a rigid educational context. By combining these theories, this study seeks to clearly understand the challenges and strategies of parent-students, using a phenomenological approach to explore their experiences within Kazakhstan's unique cultural and social context.

Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985)

Role Conflict Theory, as articulated by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), posits that work-family conflict arises when the demands of one role are incompatible with those of another, resulting in strain and diminished well-being. The theory delineates three distinct forms of conflict:

1. Time-based
2. Strain-based
3. Behavior-based

The time-based conflict

It arises when the time demands of one role, such as parenting, interfere with fulfilling another role, such as academic responsibilities (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). For parent-students, particularly those with young children, this conflict is pronounced due to the intensive time requirements of childcare. Wladis et al. (2018) found that students with children under 6 years old spent an average of 45 hours per week on childcare, significantly reducing their discretionary time - often called free time, "...is the time remaining after completing some set of necessary activities (p.813)" - for academic pursuits. The significant time demands of childcare resulted in parent-students being 3.8% less likely to re-enroll in college and accumulating 1.25 fewer credits per semester compared to students without children (Wladis et al., 2018). The study further revealed that childcare responsibilities accounted for 93.1% of the difference in discretionary time between parent-students and their childless peers, with paid work contributing an additional 6.9% (Wladis et al., 2018). These findings underscore how time-based conflict, driven by childcare demands, hinders parent-students' ability to dedicate sufficient time to their graduate studies, particularly in the demanding environment of a highly selective institution.

The strain-based conflict

As conceptualized by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), it occurs when stress or strain arising from one role impairs an individual's functioning in another. For parent-students pursuing graduate education, this means that emotional exhaustion, anxiety, or fatigue stemming from either their academic or parenting responsibilities can significantly hinder their effectiveness in the other domain. Research illustrates that graduate student-parents frequently experience strain-based conflicts due to the heightened stress associated with meeting the expectations of both their academic roles and their parental duties (Dolson & Deemer, 2020). This tension is further exacerbated during critical periods, such as exam

seasons or assignment deadlines, when time becomes limited, leading to increased levels of fatigue and emotional burnout that spill over into family life (Dolson & Deemer, 2020; Springer et al., 2009; Wladis et al., 2018).

The behavior-based conflict

It arises when the expectations and behaviors required in one role contradict those needed in another, creating a challenging environment for individuals trying to simultaneously fulfill multiple roles (Clayton et al, 2014; Greenhaus & Beutell 1985). For parent-students, these challenges may manifest as conflicts between the demands of academic responsibilities and parenting expectations, where behaviors suitable for academia, such as analytical thinking or collaboration, may conflict with the nurturing and caregiving behaviors required at home (Zulkarnain et al., 2015). This conflict can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and stress as parent-students navigate these incompatible roles, potentially leading to burnout (Hetrick, 2024).

Clashing roles of being a parent and a graduate student may lead to bias, discrimination and neglect towards parent-students. According to Mottarella et al. (2009), graduate student mothers often face societal biases, being perceived as less serious students and, when continuing their education post-childbirth, as less feminine, more dominant, colder, and less warm compared to women who discontinue their studies after giving birth. Research indicates that doctoral student-parents, like faculty parents, often hesitate to utilize institutional family-friendly policies due to concerns about being perceived as less committed to their academic work compared to their childless peers (Serrano, 2008).

Due to the limited research on graduate parent-students, we may apply findings from studies on working parents as there are many commonalities between these topics. Research by Fuegen et al. (2004) indicates that working parents are often perceived as less

driven and less committed to their professional responsibilities compared to non-parents, reducing their likelihood of job promotion due to assumptions that familial obligations hinder job performance (Williams & Segal, 2003). Consequently, these perceptions contribute to experiences of discrimination, which were found to be positively correlated with work-family conflict among working parents (Dolson & Deemer, 2020).

Social Role Theory (Eagly et al, 2000)

The study is underpinned by Social Role Theory, as articulated by Eagly et al. (2000), which posits that gendered behaviors and expectations are shaped by the division of labor between men and women in society, rather than by innate biological differences. This framework is particularly relevant in examining the experiences of parent-students, especially mothers, within graduate education in Kazakhstan. According to Social Role Theory, societal structures and cultural norms allocate caregiving responsibilities primarily to women, while associating men with roles in the public, economic, or academic spheres (Eagly et al., 2000). In the context of Kazakhstani society, this division remains deeply entrenched, as a Kazakh culture has long been shaped by patriarchal and hierarchical norms that assign women specific roles and expectations, especially in marriage and family life. In particular, the *kelin* - or daughter-in-law - is often expected to perform extensive responsibilities within her husband's family, including obedience, respect for elders, and the preservation of family traditions and continuity (Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2020). After marriage, a *kelin* is typically absorbed not only into her husband's immediate family but also into a wider kin network, where she often occupies one of the lowest positions in the family hierarchy. Therefore, it places an additional burden on women, who, alongside their responsibilities as *kelin*, must also balance parenting and the academic demands of graduate study. It is evidenced by the experiences of PhD mother-

students described by Tabaeva and Durrani (2025), who navigate a persistent expectation to prioritize family responsibilities even while engaged in demanding academic programs.

Social Role Theory provides a robust framework for understanding gender inequality in academia, particularly for graduate mother-students, by highlighting how societal expectations shape gender roles and influence role conflict. Existing literature underscores the structural barriers these women face in balancing their roles as idealized mothers and students, often leading to feelings of guilt when failing to meet these expectations (Springer et al., 2009). Female student parents encounter additional pressures from childcare and household responsibilities compared to male students, exacerbating role conflict and stress (Lyonette, 2015; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Gender differences further exacerbate time-based conflict. Wladis et al. (2018) noted that mothers, compared to fathers, reported being more time-poor, spending significantly more hours on childcare. This aligns with broader research indicating that mothers allocate a larger proportion of their time to unpaid childcare tasks, further limiting their study time (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012, as cited in Wladis et al., 2018, p. 810). For example, mothers often face fragmented or lower-quality study time due to frequent interruptions from childcare duties, such as attending to a child's needs during study hours (Wladis et al., 2018). Fathers, while also affected, typically experience less intense childcare demands, allowing relatively more time for academic tasks. This gender disparity reflects societal expectations, where mothers are often primary caregivers, intensifying time-based conflict for female parent-students. In Kazakhstan's cultural context, where traditional gender roles may be prominent, these differences could be even more pronounced, warranting further exploration. In their study, Tabaeva and Durrani (2025) revealed how Kazakhstani women in doctoral programs often encountered a "double shift" of responsibilities - pursuing academic excellence while simultaneously managing

expectations of intensive motherhood. This dual burden is emblematic of Social Role Theory's core claim: that structural roles in society reinforce gendered behavior and choices, often limiting the agency of women in male-dominated or high-status environments like academia.

Moreover, these PhD mother-students frequently experienced institutional neglect, with limited access to childcare, inflexible academic timelines, and a lack of targeted support structures within higher education institutions (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025). Such barriers reflect how institutional cultures can internalize and reproduce societal gender norms, implicitly assuming that graduate students are unencumbered by caregiving roles - a reflection of the historically male-centric model of higher education. Brown and Watson (2010) note that balancing academic and home life is a significant source of stress, which contributes to attrition in case of inadequate support (Lynch, 2008). However, some studies suggest that family support can enhance motivation and commitment to studies (Webber & Dismore, 2020). Furthermore, Moreau and Kerner (2015) found out that parenting may foster creative research ideas and deeper familial bonds. These dynamics illustrate how societal norms assign disproportionate domestic responsibilities to women, intensifying role strain in academia, particularly in contexts like Kazakhstan where traditional gender roles remain prominent.

Applying Social Role Theory to this research provides a valuable lens for understanding not only the behaviors of parent-students but also the institutional and cultural structures that shape their experiences. In Kazakhstan's case, the continued valorization of traditional family roles and a rigid gender order create a tension between societal expectations and the ambitions of women pursuing advanced degrees.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Graduate Parent-Students

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the lives of graduate parent-students, particularly mothers, who navigated unique challenges in balancing their roles as students, parents, and often workers. This section integrates findings from international articles to provide rich and deep insights into the challenges, opportunities, and coping strategies of graduate parent-students during the pandemic.

Challenges

The pandemic intensified pre-existing tensions for graduate parent-students, particularly through family-work conflict (FWC) and gendered caregiving responsibilities. DeKeseredy (2025) notes that the closure of schools and daycare facilities forced graduate student mothers to prioritize homeschooling, significantly reducing time for academic work. Similarly, Evans (2025) highlights how student-parents, particularly mothers, faced overwhelming temporal demands due to online schooling and childcare. For instance, a student mother described studying from 9 pm to 2 am after managing her children's online education, illustrating the exhausting balancing act (Evans, 2025). This aligns with DeKeseredy's findings, where participants paused academic work to focus on children's schooling, highlighting the disproportionate burden on mothers (2025).

Both studies emphasize the gendered nature of care, rooted in societal expectations of "intensive mothering" (Evans, 2025; DeKeseredy, 2025). Evans (2025) reports that even when partners were home, mothers shouldered 60% of homeschooling and 30% of domestic tasks, leaving little time for studies. DeKeseredy (2025) echoes this, noting limited spousal support, with one mother reporting minimal assistance from her husband despite his presence at home. Intersectional inequalities further compounded these challenges. Evans (2025) highlights how race, class, disability, and gender intersected, particularly for student-parents from marginalized backgrounds. For example, a student

father with a refugee background faced financial hardship and studied in his car due to cramped living conditions, exacerbating time constraints (Evans, 2025).

Financial pressures were another significant challenge. DeKeseredy (2025) notes that women accounted for 45% of employment losses in March 2020, impacting graduate parent-students' access to scholarships due to delayed academic progress. Evans (2025) elaborates on this, describing how student-parents lost income from precarious jobs and faced increased costs for utilities and technology. Both studies underscore how institutional structures, rooted in neoliberal meritocracy, failed to accommodate non-traditional students, with Evans (2025) noting the lack of childcare facilities and late timetables as barriers, and DeKeseredy (2025) highlighting rigid academic deadlines post-pandemic.

The emotional toll was significant. DeKeseredy (2025) does not explicitly focus on mental health, but Evans (2025) details how student-parents experienced guilt, stress, and sleep deprivation. For example, one postgraduate student felt guilty for not excelling as a mother, student, or worker, while another used all her annual leave before summer, leaving her without respite (Evans, 2025). These findings highlight the mental health burden amplified by the pandemic's disruptions.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, both studies identify opportunities arising from the pandemic, particularly through remote learning. DeKeseredy (2025) emphasizes that online coursework provided flexibility, enabling graduate parent-students, such as one music major, to complete her degree by studying from home. Similarly, Evans (2025) notes that online learning alleviated some barriers, such as travel to campus. For instance, one student accessed a placement opportunity in England that would have been infeasible

without virtual options (Evans, 2025). This flexibility allowed some student-parents to better manage their roles, reducing conflicts between parenting and studying.

Both articles also highlight strengthened family connections as an unintended benefit. DeKeseredy (2025) cites participants who valued extra family time and spousal support, while Evans (2025) describes how lockdown enabled some parents to provide direct educational support to their children, such as helping a child with special needs catch up academically. These opportunities, though limited, offered emotional and practical benefits amidst the crisis.

Coping and Support Strategies

Graduate parent-students employed various coping strategies to navigate the pandemic's challenges. DeKeseredy (2025) emphasizes the role of remote learning in allowing mothers to schedule academic work around family responsibilities, particularly for those in coursework phases. Evans (2025) supports this, noting that student-parents studied at night or when children were asleep to cope with daytime demands. For example, some students prioritized domestic tasks during the day and studied overnight (Evans, 2025). Reciprocal care arrangements with friends or neighbors, as noted by Evans (2025), also helped mitigate childcare challenges, though these were less feasible during lockdown.

Both studies stress the need for institutional support. DeKeseredy (2025) highlights calls for flexible academic policies, such as part-time options, to sustain the benefits of remote learning. Evans (2025) similarly advocates for inclusive policies recognizing the diverse needs of student-parents, particularly those with intersecting identities. However, institutional support was inconsistent; Evans (2025) notes that while some lecturers offered flexibility in grading or deadlines, this was not universal and often required individual negotiation. Both studies suggest that universities must address the "ideal worker" norm

and adopt targeted support mechanisms, such as extended deadlines and accessible childcare, to better support graduate parent-students.

Experiences of Father-Students in Higher Education

In the context of my research topic, which explores the experiences, challenges and support systems for minority student parents of both genders in higher education to improve their retention and equity, it was noticed that the majority of scholar works focus on mother-students, while father-students are often overlooked. The study by Roy et al. (2022) provides critical insights into the lived experiences of Hispanic and African American father-students. This qualitative investigation, grounded in a risk and resilience framework, examines 17 full-time student-fathers attending Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), all parenting children aged six or younger. By highlighting both barriers and protective factors, the article aligns with my broader inquiry into how systemic inequalities affect minority parent-students' academic persistence, while also underscoring the motivational role of parenthood in fostering resilience.

The study identifies six key themes that encapsulate the dual demands of fatherhood and academia: family support systems, uncertainty in parenting practices, co-parenting relationships, role responsibilities as a father, negative stereotypes about young fathers of color, and fatherhood as a motivational factor. Family support emerges as a pivotal resilience factor, with fathers relying on extended networks: including partners, parents, siblings, and aunts - for childcare and emotional backing. Residential fathers, often married or partnered, reported stronger support, enabling them to prioritize studies, while non-residential fathers occasionally faced gaps that exacerbated role strain. This echoes broader literature on collectivist cultural values in African American and Hispanic families, where kinship networks buffer stressors like financial instability and time

constraints (Ellerbe et al., 2018). However, the article reveals a stark disparity: while child-focused support (e.g., babysitting) is abundant, father-focused support, such as peer groups for discussing parenting doubts is scarce, leaving many feeling isolated on campus.

Uncertainty in parenting practices and co-parenting relationships further illustrate the emotional toll of balancing roles. Fathers expressed self-doubt about their decisions, often turning to family for guidance, yet they valued the validation from focus groups, suggesting a need for father-specific forums. Positive co-parenting, marked by communication and mutual reliance, acted as a buffer allowing fathers to delegate tasks without conflict. In contrast, role responsibilities as fathers prioritizing children's needs over academic deadlines created ongoing tension, with guilt arising from divided time. The role strain reflected in experiences of men of color, navigating "breadwinner" expectations amid educational pursuits (Brooks, 2014) mirrors the findings on how mother-students are expected to fulfil their caregiving responsibilities while pursuing academic studies (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025).

A particularly poignant theme is the prevalence of negative stereotypes, where non-residential Black fathers felt judged by peers and media portrayals as "absent" or irresponsible, deterring them from disclosing their parental status. This internalized stigma, rooted in racial biases, compounds the invisibility of student-fathers on campuses, as noted in this study. Despite these risks, fatherhood serves as a profound motivator, with participants viewing their degrees as pathways to better provide for and model success for their children, transforming potential dropout risks into drivers of perseverance.

Reflecting on these experiences, Roy et al. (2022) highlight the resilience of minority father-students, who demonstrate agency through cultural strengths like familism and determination, yet face institutional shortcomings. For instance, while programs like Howard University's Early Learning Program offer childcare, fathers reported that campus

resources often target mothers, rendering them "invisible." This analysis underscores a key gap in higher education: the lack of tailored supports, such as fatherhood groups or flexible policies, which could mitigate disparities. These findings advocate for equity-focused interventions at HSIs and HBCUs, including mentorship programs and awareness campaigns to combat stereotypes, ultimately enhancing retention for underrepresented student parents and addressing racial/ethnic gaps in degree completion (Roy et al., 2022). By integrating such insights, institutions can foster environments where fatherhood empowers rather than impedes academic success.

Summary

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the theoretical and empirical literature on the experiences of graduate parent-students, establishing a strong foundation for the present study. The review introduced two complementary theoretical frameworks - Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000) - which together highlight the multifaceted nature of the challenges encountered by individuals who simultaneously navigate the demands of parenting and graduate-level academic study. Furthermore, the chapter examined the broader empirical landscape, highlighting the pervasive institutional invisibility of parent-students, the disproportionate burden of caregiving carried by women, and the distinct yet equally overlooked challenges faced by father-students in higher education. By synthesizing these key theoretical and empirical insights, this chapter lays the foundation for a contextually reasoned and gender-inclusive investigation into the lived experiences of graduate parent-students at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan, as explored in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to investigate experiences of parent-students, studying at graduate school in a highly selective higher education institution in Kazakhstan. It provides an extensive description of the qualitative research design and justification of its suitability for the research aims. The chapter then explains the research site, participant recruitment and sampling strategy, including participant profiles and selection criteria. This is followed by a detailed account of the data collection methods and instruments employed, as well as the procedures for data analysis. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a thorough discussion of the ethical considerations and protocols that guided the research, covering issues of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the protection of participant well-being throughout the study.

Research Design

A research design functions as the structural framework that guides an entire study. As it was described by Akhtar et al. (2016), the design acts as the “glue” that binds all elements of the research process into a coherent and unified whole. This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants’ perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as it seeks to explore the lived experiences of parent-students pursuing graduate education at a highly selective public university in Kazakhstan. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable because it enables participants to express their experiences, emotions, and coping strategies in their own words, reducing the power imbalance between the researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary objective is to understand how these individuals make sense of and navigate their dual

roles as caregivers and graduate students within a demanding academic and cultural context.

Phenomenology is particularly suitable for this research because it seeks to uncover the essence of shared experiences among individuals who have encountered a common phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the phenomenon is the experience of balancing academic and parenting responsibilities in a competitive academic environment. Additionally, this qualitative research approach focuses on understanding the essence of human experiences as they are lived and perceived (Van Manen, 2016). The focus is not on testing hypotheses or establishing causal relationships, but rather on understanding participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative inquiry is also appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and its emphasis on contextual depth over generalizability. The goal of exploratory research is to enhance insight into a subject instead of delivering conclusive evidence (Saunders et al., 2009). It allows for rich, detailed data collection through semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to express their experiences in their own words. Such an approach is essential for capturing the emotional, institutional, and cultural dimensions that shape the realities of parent-students in Kazakhstan. By focusing on how parent-students perceive and navigate their challenges, this design aligns with the study's goals of generating nuanced insights that can inform policymakers and better practices in higher education.

Sampling and Participants

This section outlines the participant group and the sampling strategies employed for their selection. As it was emphasized by Creswell and Plano Clarke (2017), research is inseparable from the researcher, meaning that the selection of the research site and

participants is influenced by the researcher's own background and perspective. Therefore, the research was conducted at Nazarbayev University, located in Astana city, Kazakhstan.

To ensure the relevance and richness of the data, this study employed purposive sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative research to intentionally select participants who possess specific characteristics aligned with the research focus (Creswell, 2014). This sampling strategy allows the researcher to engage with individuals who are most likely to provide detailed experiences and insights into the phenomenon. As Campbell et al. (2020) note, purposive sampling enhances both the alignment between the sample and the research objectives and contributes to the overall validity and credibility of the study's findings. In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was employed to complement it and enhance sample diversity (Patton, 2014). According to Creswell (2015), it "... occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled" (p. 208).

Since this study explores the lived experiences of parent-students pursuing graduate education at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan, participants were selected purposively based on specific inclusion criteria rather than choosing them randomly (Bryman, 2012).

The selection criteria of participants included:

- All participants are supposed to be graduate parent-students from Graduate School of Education, Graduate School of Business and Graduate School of Public Policy;
- Some participants are supposed to be fully employed to examine the difference in experiences of employed and non-employed graduate parent-students;
- Participants should have dependent children under the age of 6. Parents of children under the age of 6 were selected as participants because they tend to experience lower academic motivation and attainment goals compared to parents of older

children, likely due to the more demanding and time-intensive nature of caring for young children (Lovell, 2014).

To recruit the initial participants, I relied on my own professional and personal networks, as well as relevant social-media groups, where I have sent my recruitment letter (see Appendix D) that included research details and my contact information, enabling interested graduate parent-students to reach out to me directly. From those who expressed interest, I purposively selected participants who best met the established inclusion criteria.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Number of Children	Type of Graduate Program
Participant 1	Female	40-45	5	Master's
Participant 2	Male	40-45	2	Master's
Participant 3	Female	25-30	1	Master's
Participant 4	Male	35-40	1	Master's
Participant 5	Male	35-40	1	Master's
Participant 6	Female	35-40	3	PhD

In total, six parent-students were chosen (see Table 1), ensuring diversity in terms of gender, age, number of children, and discipline of study, thereby enriching the range of experiences captured in the study. The sample size is consistent with phenomenological research recommendations, which emphasize depth over breadth to achieve data saturation (Creswell, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Saturation was achieved when new interviews yielded no significant additional insights into the phenomenon.

Research Methods

This section outlines the methods and procedures that were used to gather data for the study. It begins by describing the qualitative data collection instrument selected to explore the experiences of parent-students in graduate education and explains its relevance to the research objectives. The section then details the characteristics of this instrument and discusses how it was applied throughout the data collection process. This includes a step-by-step explanation of the procedures, ensuring alignment with the study's phenomenological approach and ethical considerations.

Data Collection Tools

As described above, this study utilized the qualitative phenomenological approach. Data collection primarily included semi-structured interviews, which are well-suited for capturing the rich, detailed narratives central to phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 2014). The reason behind choosing it as the primary data collection method was to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while allowing flexibility to pursue emergent themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach aligns with phenomenological research, which seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences through participants' subjective perspectives (Creswell, 2014). As Cohen et al. (2018) note, interviews transcend mere data collection, fostering a dynamic exchange of perspectives between the researcher and participant on a shared topic of interest. This process enables participants to articulate their unique worldviews, offering insights into their experiences from their own vantage points (Cohen et al., 2018). The adaptability of interviews allows data to be gathered through both verbal and nonverbal cues, with the semi-structured format providing spontaneity and the opportunity for the researcher to probe deeper into responses, yielding richer and more nuanced insights (Cohen et al., 2018).

The interview protocol was carefully designed to address the study's research questions, focusing on the challenges, motivations, and strategies of parent-students navigating graduate education. The protocol included a set of open-ended questions organized into thematic blocks aligned with the study's sub-questions, such as balancing academic and parenting responsibilities, accessing institutional support, and navigating cultural expectations. It also incorporated introductory questions to build rapport and elicit participants' broader perspectives on their roles as parent-students. The protocol provided space for additional notes and reflections to capture spontaneous insights during interviews (Creswell, 2014). A total of approximately 15–18 questions was included, with flexibility to adjust based on pilot testing with a small group of parent-students who met study's criteria to ensure clarity and relevance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). See Appendix B.

Data Collection Procedures

Once eligible participants who expressed interest contacted me, I provided them with necessary study information, including the research purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Along with this information, I attached the informed consent form (available in both Kazakh and Russian) via email. After receiving signed consent forms, I proceeded to schedule individual interview appointments at a time and place (or online platform) convenient to each participant.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one in a private, comfortable setting, such as a reserved room at the institution and via a secure online platform (Zoom), depending on participants' preferences and logistical constraints. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes to allow sufficient time for participants to share their experiences in depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture.

Data Analysis

An automated voice-recognition software was utilized to transcribe recordings verbatim - to convert audio records of interviews into written text data - and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by researcher.

I maintained a reflexive journal to document personal biases and assumptions, which was critical in phenomenological research to bracket preconceptions and focus on participants' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). To conceal the identities of participants, their names were changed and coded.

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis for data analysis, which offers a flexible yet rigorous approach to identifying, examining, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data, making it well-suited for exploring the detailed lived experiences of parent-students in a phenomenological framework.

The first phase, familiarization, involved transcribing the semi-structured interviews verbatim, translating them into English where necessary, and reviewing them repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data, while noting initial ideas and reflexive insights to deepen understanding of participants' narratives (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

During the second phase, generating initial codes, an inductive strategy was applied to derive codes organically from the data, focusing on meaningful segments of text that captured key elements of parent-students' challenges and strategies in balancing graduate education with family life at a highly selective Kazakhstani institution; NVivo software facilitated the organization and refinement of these codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In the third phase, searching for themes, I grouped related codes together and looked closely for recurring patterns across the data. This step helped me develop initial

(or "candidate") themes that captured both the obvious surface-level details and the deeper, more hidden meanings in what the parent-students shared about their experiences.

In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, I carefully checked whether these themes made sense as a whole: were they clear and distinct from one another, did they truly fit the data, and did they connect well to my original research questions? As part of this review, I also carried out an in-depth member checking inspired by Synthesised Member Checking (SMC), where, several months post-interview, participants received a clear report synthesising anonymised themes and illustrative quotes, allowing them to confirm or challenge that interpretations felt accurate and true to their own experiences, suggest changes, and add reflections to co-construct knowledge and to ensure that experiences of parent-students were accurately represented (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell, 2014). This process helped strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings and reduced the chance that my own perspective as the researcher would overshadow theirs.

In the fifth phase, defining and naming themes, the themes were refined and polished carefully; it included sharpening their labels and making sure each one truly captured the heart of what the data was showing. The special attention was paid to how these themes reflected the unique socio-cultural expectations and institutional realities in Kazakhstan that shape parent-students' daily lives. See Appendix E.

Finally, in the sixth phase, producing the report, the themes were interpreted into a clear, flowing story that directly answered the main research questions. I used rich, detailed descriptions - often called "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) and included plenty of direct quotes from the participants to let their own words shine through and keep their voices central. At the same time, these findings were placed in the wider context of Kazakhstan's higher education system, including its cultural norms around family, gender

roles, and the demands of elite graduate programs (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the institution's ethics review board prior to data collection activities. This formal process ensured compliance with national guidelines on research involving human participants, institutional policies, and international standards for qualitative research in higher education context.

Participants were provided with informed consent form (See Appendix C). The information about the study included its purpose (to explore the lived experiences of parent-students pursuing graduate education while balancing family responsibilities), procedures (semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, conducted in Kazakh or Russian at a mutually convenient time and location or via secure online platform), potential risks (e.g., emotional discomfort when discussing personal challenges such as time conflicts, stress, or institutional barriers), benefits (contribution to improved support for parent-students in Kazakhstan), and their rights. Participants were given sufficient time to read the form, ask questions, and sign it before the interview began; ongoing verbal consent was reconfirmed at the start of each session.

Recognizing the potentially sensitive nature of the topic - encompassing personal family dynamics, academic pressures, gender role expectations, and work-life-study balance in a culturally conservative post-Soviet context - I prioritized creating a supportive, non-judgmental, and empathetic interview environment. Interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting chosen by the participant to promote openness and psychological safety. To mitigate any risk of distress, participants were provided with contact details for institutional counselling services and external resources if emotional

issues arose during or after the interview. No participant reported needing referral, but this provision was in place as a precautionary measure.

All data (audio recordings, verbatim transcripts, field notes, and any related documents) were stored securely on a password-protected computer and encrypted cloud storage system to protect participants' confidentiality. Pseudonyms to participants were assigned immediately after the interviews to ensure anonymity in reporting findings. Audio recordings were destroyed after transcription and verification, and other data will be retained for five years post-study, per institutional ethical guidelines. No breaches of confidentiality occurred during the study.

These ethical safeguards aligned with the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, ensuring participant autonomy, minimizing harm, and maximizing the study's potential societal value in advocating for better institutional support for parent-students in Kazakhstan's evolving higher education landscape.

Researcher Positionality

According to Holmes (2020), researchers must recognise that their positionality is unique to them and inevitably shapes every stage of the research process. As the researcher of this study, my understanding and interpretation are deeply informed by my own lived experience as a mother-student. I am a Central-Asian woman currently completing my Master's degree in Educational Leadership at Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Education while raising two children under the age of three. This dual role has given me an insider perspective on the daily realities, emotional demands, and practical challenges that the participants described.

My personal situation as a parent-student at the same institution provided me with immediate empathy and a nuanced understanding of the tensions between academic responsibilities and parenting. It also enabled me to conduct a more reflexive thematic

analysis, as I could relate directly to many of the experiences shared by participants. At the same time, I remained conscious that my own positionality could introduce bias, particularly in interpreting accounts of emotional strain, time poverty, and gender expectations. To address this, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, engaged in regular bracketing of my assumptions, and prioritised participants' voices over my own preconceptions. This combination of insider insight and deliberate reflexivity strengthened both the depth and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with six parent-students (mothers and fathers) pursuing graduate education (master's and PhD programs) at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to deeply explore the lived experiences of these participants as they navigated the dual demands of advanced academic study and active parenthood in a culturally and institutionally challenging context.

Guided by the central research question and three sub-questions, the data analysis through Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes with detailed sub-themes (See Appendix E).

These themes encompass:

1. Significant challenges arising from time poverty, emotional strain, gender role expectations in Kazakhstan, and institutional inflexibility;
2. Adaptive strategies and support mechanisms that enabled participants to persist and thrive despite these obstacles.
3. Enriching positive experiences and motivations to study at graduate school;

Challenges

The analysis identified four interrelated subthemes that capture the complexity of participants' experiences in balancing academic aspirations with parenting - and, for some, professional responsibilities: time poverty, emotional strain, gendered role expectations in Kazakhstan, and institutional inflexibility. These challenges did not operate in isolation; rather, they intersected and often intensified one another, shaping participants' daily routines and overall well-being.

Time Poverty

One of the most pervasive challenges faced by parent-students in this study was time poverty, understood as a chronic shortage of time available for sustained academic work due to the demanding requirements of childcare, household responsibilities, and (for some) employment. Participants consistently described their study time as fragmented and unpredictable, often confined to early mornings or late nights. This pattern not only reduced the quality of academic work but also came at the expense of rest and recovery, contributing to cumulative fatigue.

Mothers, in particular, shared how their schedules were tightly organized around their children's routines. Participant 1 explained how she structured her days around her children's sleep and school schedules:

I usually did my homework early in the morning while all the kids were asleep, or in the afternoon when half the kids were at school and the youngest was having her lunch nap. Or I have to write everything late at night to get everything done.

This account reflects not simply time management, but the necessity of aligning academic work with moments of temporary quiet, suggesting that study time was contingent rather than guaranteed. Similarly, Participant 6 shared a vivid illustration of multitasking under pressure:

I didn't have time to fully pay attention to the academic assignments during the day. Therefore, at night, I tied a rope to the *besyk* [Kazakh traditional cradle] and rocked the baby in it, and at the same time I was typing my thesis. Because of this, I had a lot of stress.

This image captures the physical and emotional intensity of simultaneously fulfilling caregiving and academic roles, revealing fragmented, low-quality study periods,

and the way how productivity was often achieved through personal strain, often at the expense of rest and well-being.

Fathers also experienced time-related tensions, though often framed through competing expectations of presence and responsibility. Participant 5 described the constant negotiation between spending quality family time and academic deadlines. Similarly, Participant 4 illustrated the social and emotional toll:

Sometimes, as a student, I am expected to stay after lectures to complete some kind of group project or presentation. But I need to go straight to pick up my son from kindergarten at a certain time. Therefore, I mostly do my part at night and sometimes I feel disapproved of by my classmates who are not burdened with parental obligations.

Across the sample, time-based conflicts were frequent and disruptive. Participant 3 further emphasized the recurring nature of these conflicts:

Time-based conflicts occur frequently, particularly when deadlines overlap with childcare needs or unexpected situations involving my daughter. In such cases, I often have to postpone academic tasks or work late into the night, which directly affects my energy levels and overall productivity.

These accounts suggest that time poverty is not merely a logistical issue, but a structural condition that shapes both academic engagement and emotional well-being.

Emotional Strain

Another major challenge for parent-students was the way how stress, exhaustion, and guilt from one role spilled over into the other, leaving them feeling mentally and emotionally stretched thin which limited their ability to be fully present in either domain.

Mothers often described how academic pressure drained their emotional energy at home. Participant 3 reflected: “When academic pressure is high, such as major deadlines, I

may feel mentally exhausted and less emotionally present at home.” Similarly, Participant 1 shared that persistent anxiety followed her into lectures: “I can't help but think about my children during lectures, especially when they're sick. On the contrary, I'm doubly worried, I'm constantly thinking about how they are while I'm sitting here.” This suggests that physical separation from children does not translate into psychological detachment, as caregiving concerns remain ever-present.

Fathers also expressed feelings of guilt when academic responsibilities conflicted with parenting. Participant 5 highlighted: “My daughter always wants to play with me. Now she's at an age when she needs her dad's attention. I often feel guilty because I can't give her the proper attention because sometimes I urgently need to complete an assignment or prepare a presentation. After all, our program is intensive.” His reflection reveals an emerging tension between traditional student role and increased emotional involvement in childcare.

For some participants, prolonged stress had tangible health consequences. Participant 6 revealed: “Due to severe emotional stress, I had health problems with my thyroid gland. And I had to have an emergency surgery.” These experiences show how the constant juggling of roles created deep emotional pressure, guilt, and worry that affected participants' well-being and their ability to be fully present as parents and students.

Gender Role Expectations in Kazakhstan

Surprisingly, the findings reveal that gender role expectations remain a powerful force shaping the experiences of both mother- and father-students. While pursuing graduate education, participants continued to navigate deeply embedded cultural norms that prescribe distinct family roles, often adding emotional and practical pressures, such as additional layers of guilt, criticism, and emotional labor.

Mother-students, in particular, described the expectation to simultaneously fulfill multiple identities - graduate student, mother, wife, and, crucially, *kelin* [daughter-in-law] -which demanded full dedication to serving their husband's parents and extended family. This traditional obligation frequently clashed with the time and energy required for academic work. Participant 6 explained the cultural weight of marriage in her region: "I married a man from South Kazakhstan. Our culture is like that - when a girl marries, she doesn't marry just a man, she marries his whole family, an *aulet* [tribe], that's what I've always been told." This reflects the collectivist cultural context, where obligations extend beyond the nuclear family.

Societal criticism was especially intense toward mothers with larger families or those using external childcare. Participants reported social criticism, particularly when deviating from traditional caregiving norms. For instance, Participant 1 recalled direct disapproval from others: "When I enrolled, yes, there were people there, talking, why do you need this? Especially since you have five children, what are you going to do about it? You have a husband, children, stay at home." Similarly, Participant 3 described disapproval for using childcare support, highlighting intergenerational expectations that mothers should manage independently, particularly when it's related to nighttime care, emotional labour, and daily childcare routines:

For example, when we decided to rely on a nanny and later enrolled our daughter in kindergarten, some female relatives expressed strong disapproval. They framed these choices as a sign of laziness, often comparing my situation to their own experiences and emphasising that 'in their time,' women managed childcare without external help.

These narratives suggest that academic participation can be perceived as conflicting with culturally valued forms of femininity.

In contrast to the intense caregiving and household-service expectations placed on mothers, father-students described how Kazakh cultural norms positioned them primarily as the breadwinner - the main financial provider and protector of the family. This traditional role shaped their academic decisions, often leading them to weigh every step of their graduate journey against its potential impact on family stability and well-being. The pressure to ensure long-term financial security added a layer of responsibility that influenced their motivations, risk tolerance, and time allocation.

Participant 2 expressed this cultural expectation clearly: “Everything about finances is on me. As it is based in our culture - Men should provide for the family, I'm probably playing that role.” Similarly, Participant 5 reflected on how family came first in framing his academic decisions: “When I think about my academic future, I think first of all about the financial well-being of my family, how it will affect them. I always wonder if my desires in the academic sphere will be worth for my family to experience some kind of stress, sufferings.”

These accounts illustrate how traditional Kazakh gender norms create complementary yet unequal pressures: mothers face intense domestic and relational demands, while fathers carry the weight of sustained financial responsibility, often constraining their choices while simultaneously motivating their persistence as parent-students in elite graduate programs.

Adaptive Strategies and Support Mechanisms

In response to these challenges, participants developed a range of adaptive strategies and support mechanisms to sustain their academic engagement in a highly demanding Kazakhstani institution. These included structured time management, reliance on family support, use of external assistance, and efforts to maintain financial stability.

These strategies reflect not only individual resilience but also the importance of relational and contextual resources.

Structured Time-Management

Structured time management emerged as a key adaptive strategy for parent-students, enabling them to navigate fragmented schedules and sustain progress in their graduate work despite unpredictable family demands. Participants described adopting intentional and proactive approaches to organizing their time, which helped them reduce stress, avoid last-minute pressure, and maintain a sense of control over their academic responsibilities. Participant 2, a father-student, described his adaptive approach approach:

Generally speaking, I have a well-defined time management. I feel every minute where I should be in advance, so I don't feel too stressed. I'd rather do it in small steps, but at the end of the week I'll finish it, without putting it off until tomorrow. Because if it accumulates, then there will be a stress.

In contrast, mothers often described a more flexible, opportunity-based approach shaped by parenting realities, taking advantage of short breaks in childcare. Participant 6 explained:

I've learned the concept that there's no perfect moment. Sometimes people wait for the perfect moment, but I don't expect it. The baby has fallen asleep, that's it, this is the perfect moment for me. 15-20 minutes is the perfect moment for me. I don't wait for the muse to visit me to write a chapter.

This perspective highlights an adaptive mindset, where productivity is achieved through short, opportunistic intervals rather than extended periods of uninterrupted work and shows how participants adapted by planning ahead where possible (as fathers emphasized) or embracing micro-sessions of productivity (as mothers often did), turning limited time into consistent advancement and lowering overall pressure in their dual roles.

Reliance on Family Support

Family support - especially from spouses, parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended relatives - stood out as one of the most essential lifelines for parent-students to persist in graduate education. Participants consistently described familial assistance not as supplementary, but as foundational to their academic survival. Without it, many indicated managing the heavy load of graduate studies and raising young children would have been unsustainable.

Spousal support functioned as a central mechanism for negotiating dual-role responsibilities. For couples in which both partners were parent-students, caregiving and household chores were described as dynamically distributed rather than strictly assigned. Participant 3, for example, explained that she and her husband adjusted their roles in response to shifting academic schedules and personal demands, thus engaging in a flexible and situational division of labor. This adaptive arrangement enabled both partners to sustain academic engagement while maintaining family functioning.

Other participants similarly emphasized the significance of their partners' contributions. Reflecting on the thesis-writing stage, Participant 5 (father-student) gave huge appreciation and credit to his wife: "If I get my diploma, half the credit goes to my wife. Because during the tough period of writing my thesis, she took over all the household chores and childcare duties." This statement illustrates how academic success for parent-students is rarely a purely individual achievement. Instead, it is deeply relational - quietly co-produced through the often invisible, gendered forms of domestic and emotional labor that others (usually family members, especially spouses, mothers, or sisters) contribute behind the scenes.

Grandparents and members of the extended family frequently emerged indispensable sources of support and often functioned as a safety net when immediate

arrangements proved insufficient. For many participants the presence of grandparents and relatives transformed what could have been an overwhelming experience into a manageable one. Participant 1 described her mother's involvement in simple yet crucial terms: "Well, during the day, for example, my mother helps me... when I have studies, I go to university, and she looks after my youngest daughter until the evening." This everyday routine illustrates how academic participation is often made possible through quiet, consistent acts of care that occur behind the scenes. The ability to attend lectures or focus on coursework was directly linked to having someone trustworthy assume childcare responsibilities during those hours.

Participant 2 highlighted the collective nature of this support system, emphasizing that caregiving responsibilities circulated among family members: "If the spouse can't manage, then grandma; if one can't, then the other. Alone, of course, in my situation it would be impossible." His reflection underscores the reality that graduate study with young children is rarely an individual endeavor; rather, it depends on a network of shared responsibility. The phrase "it would be impossible" conveys not exaggeration, but a sincere recognition of structural dependence on familial support.

Participant 4 expressed this sense of communal presence warmly: "Grandpa and grandma cook something for us, they're here. Plus nephews come over, so it's not like I'm alone in the woods." This metaphor reflects not only practical assistance but also the emotional comfort derived from being embedded in a supportive family environment. Together, these accounts demonstrate that extended family networks serve as both logistical and psychological anchors, enabling parent-students to sustain their academic journeys while staying present for the children.

Use of External Help

When family support was limited or unavailable, participants increasingly relied on external childcare arrangements, such as nannies and kindergartens, as a necessary solution. These arrangements provided essential relief, enabling participants to attend classes, meet academic deadlines, and engage more fully in their studies. However, they were frequently accompanied by financial strain, logistical challenges, and, at times, emotional ambivalence.

Participant 3 reflected on her earlier reliance on a nanny as: “although this arrangement was financially challenging for us as students, it was a necessary decision.” Her account illustrates how external childcare was not a matter of preference but of necessity, highlighting the trade-offs parent-students are often required to make between financial stability and academic participation. Her later transition to kindergarten suggests a search for greater routine and affordability, pointing to the importance of stable and structured childcare systems in supporting student-parents.

Similarly, Participant 6 described her current arrangement: “I now have a babysitter who has been looking after the child for these 3 days while I go to school.” This example reflects a more short-term and flexible approach, tailored to immediate academic needs. It also suggests that childcare solutions are often fluid, adapting to changing schedules and demands rather than remaining fixed.

These accounts underscore that external childcare functions as a critical, yet unevenly accessible, support mechanism. While it creates “breathing space” for academic engagement, it also introduces new pressures, particularly financial and organizational. As such, these arrangements represent a pragmatic compromise rather than an ideal solution, revealing broader structural gaps in institutional support for parent-students in higher education contexts.

Financial Security Net

Another important adaptive strategy was the creation of a financial security net, which participants developed to safeguard their families during the demanding period of graduate study. Given that academic commitments often limited opportunities for full-time employment, having a financial buffer allowed participants to reduce immediate economic pressure and focus more fully on their studies.

Participant 4, a father-student, described a highly intentional approach to financial planning: “I already have some savings... I have allocated money for myself as a financial cushion... I can write research and not work for a year or two, and we will have money for all our needs.” His account presents a long-term, strategic mindset, where financial preparedness becomes a prerequisite for academic engagement. It also highlights how the role of financial provider shapes decision-making, particularly for male participants navigating both cultural expectations and academic ambitions.

Similarly, Participant 6 emphasized sustained financial preparation as part of her educational trajectory: “I knew that I would go further to PhD... While I've been working for 7 years, I've been saving up all this time.” It demonstrates foresight and commitment, suggesting that participation in advanced education is often contingent upon years of prior economic planning.

These narratives indicate that financial stability is not merely a background condition but an active and carefully constructed resource. Building a financial cushion enabled participants to reduce uncertainty, maintain family well-being, and engage more confidently in their academic work. At the same time, this strategy may not be equally accessible to all, pointing to underlying inequalities in who is able to pursue and sustain graduate education.

Positive Experiences and Motivations to Study at Graduate School

Although balancing graduate study with parenthood presented significant challenges, many participants also described deeply rewarding and motivating aspects of their dual roles. Rather than viewing parenthood solely as a burden, they frequently spoke of it as a powerful source of purpose, drive, and personal growth. Three main sub-themes emerged from their accounts: 1) enhanced professional development and career progress, where the experience of being a parent-student sharpened their focus, discipline, and strategic thinking; ; 2) children as a central source of motivation, giving their studies greater meaning and long-term direction; and 3) personal growth and resilience, including improved time-management skills, greater intentionality, and a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Additionally, the supportive academic environment at the institution - particularly encouragement from professors - often provided emotional uplift and a sense of validation. These positive dimensions helped participants reframe difficulties as opportunities and reinforced their commitment to completing their degrees.

Professional Development and Career Progress

For most participants, pursuing graduate education was strongly linked to clear professional goals, including developing expertise, expanding career opportunities, and advancing within their fields. Four participants were employed full-time during their graduate studies, having the complex interplay of professional commitments, family responsibilities, and academic demands in their journey of pursuing a graduate education. Their motivations appeared purposeful and shaped by prior work experience rather than abstract academic interest. As Participant 6, a mother-student, noted, "I already had a specific goal when I came to work, that I wanted to grow up on the career ladder and I was looking for ways to do it." This reflects a strategic orientation toward graduate study, where education is viewed as a pathway to career progression.

Several participants held leadership or specialized roles that required solid research-based academic knowledge. For instance, Participant 2, a father-student, emphasized:

I work in a school where the atmosphere itself, the culture at school, should develop in an environment where everything is based on research, so as the first head, I am most likely the first to know all the methods that researchers use.

Similarly, Participant 5, a father-student, highlighted a significant moment of self-reflection while mentoring teachers, recognizing gaps in his knowledge:

At that time, I was working on a project where I would mentor teachers. There were a lot of difficult things in this case. Then I realized that I did not have enough knowledge and skills to change something in school and in the education system. So I decided that I needed something else, something extra.”

Children as a Source of Motivation

In terms of family background, all participants were married, with the number of children ranging from one (three participants) to two, three, or five. Parenthood itself proved to be a powerful motivator and source of discipline. Participant 1, a mother-student, shared her motivation to study at graduate school in a way like: “After I became a mom, all I do in the first place is for my children. They are my biggest catalyst.”

Participant 3 explained how family life reshaped her approach: “Being a parent has made my academic path more focused and intentional. I prioritise efficiency, plan my tasks carefully, and value flexibility more than I did before.” She added that it deepened her drive: “Being a parent has increased my motivation and sense of purpose in graduate studies. It has helped me become more focused, disciplined, and intentional, and it has given me a broader perspective on why my education matters for my family’s future.” Her family situation strengthened long-term goals:

My family situation influenced this decision in two key ways: first, it strengthened my motivation to build a stable and meaningful professional future; and second, it required me to be more strategic and intentional in managing my time, support systems, and institutional choices.

Personal Growth and Resilience

The graduate program itself provided strong emotional and intellectual uplift. One participant shared how interactions with professors left her feeling empowered and valued: “You leave there with feeling like you have wings, that I can not only stay at home, but keep developing further. With them (the professors), they give such support, as if you're the smartest, the most brilliant.” Another participant highlighted the broader impact: “They give not only quality education, but also good and positive thinking.”

Participant 6 reflected on skill-building that carried forward: “I am grateful to the master's experience for the time-management skills acquired, so now in my PhD everything is more or less structured.”

These accounts reveal how the dual role fostered greater resilience, clearer priorities, and a stronger “why” behind their studies - turning what could have been overwhelming into a source of inspiration, efficiency, and long-term family benefit in Kazakhstan's demanding higher education context. Additionally, these profiles reflect broader patterns among parent-students in Kazakhstan's elite institutions, where ambitious career goals intersect with active parenting roles, often requiring strategic time management and support systems to sustain progress. Therefore, this intersection of roles is not incidental but central to understanding participants' experiences, as their educational journeys are deeply embedded within their motivations, family, and work contexts.

Summary

The study's key findings were illustrated in this chapter. The findings reveal that the academic journeys of parent-students are closely intertwined with professional aspirations, family responsibilities, and deeply rooted sociocultural expectations. While participants demonstrated strong motivation and a clear sense of purpose, they faced persistent and intersecting challenges, including time poverty, emotional strain, gendered role expectations, and institutional inflexibility.

At the same time, the accounts highlight notable resilience and adaptability. Participants actively developed strategies such as structured and flexible time management, reliance on family and external support, and careful financial planning to sustain their studies. Importantly, these experiences were not solely defined by difficulty - many participants described personal growth, strengthened discipline, and a deeper sense of meaning in their educational pursuits.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the existing literature on parent-students, drawing on the conceptual framework of Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000). The discussion addresses the overarching research question: How do graduate parent-students in Kazakhstan experience the intersection of parenting and academic life? Then it is followed by addressing three research sub-questions, which are:

1. What challenges do they encounter in balancing academic expectations with family responsibilities?
2. What coping strategies and support systems (e.g., institutional, peer, familial) do parent-students rely on?
3. How do cultural and institutional contexts shape their identities and engagement with graduate education?

By connecting the lived experiences of the six participants (three mothers and three fathers enrolled in master's and PhD programs at Nazarbayev University) to broader scholarly discussions, this chapter illuminates the central phenomenon of the study: the lived experience of parent-students navigating the complex intersection of active parenthood and demanding graduate education within Kazakhstan's socio-cultural and institutional landscape.

The findings reveal how traditional gender norms and institutional rigidity amplify role conflicts, while also fostering resilience and adaptive strategies. Implications for theory and practice are explored, emphasizing the need for inclusive reforms in Kazakhstani higher education.

Challenges in Balancing Academic and Family Responsibilities

One of the research sub-questions focused on the challenges parent-students face in managing their dual roles. The findings underscore time poverty, emotional strain, and behaviour-based conflicts as primary barriers, aligning closely with Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This theory posits that conflicts arise when the demands of one role (e.g., academia) are incompatible with another (e.g., parenting), manifesting in time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based forms. Participants' accounts vividly illustrate these conflicts, often exacerbated by the intensive academic demands of a highly selective institution like Nazarbayev University and Kazakhstan's cultural emphasis on family obligations.

Time poverty emerged as the most pervasive challenge, with participants describing fragmented study sessions squeezed into early mornings, nap times, or late nights. For instance, mothers like Participant 1 and Participant 6 recounted extreme multitasking, such as rocking a cradle while typing a thesis or working during children's naps. This echoes Wladis et al. (2018), who found that parent-students, especially those with young children, spend significantly more hours on childcare (up to 45 hours weekly for children under six), reducing discretionary time for academics and increasing dropout risks. In the Kazakhstani context, where fertility rates are high (2.9 children per woman; World Bank, 2024) and early parenthood is common, these findings extend the literature by showing how cultural norms amplify time-based conflicts. Fathers, too, reported scheduling clashes, such as Participant 4's need to leave group projects early for kindergarten pickups, leading to perceived disapproval from peers. This aligns with Roy et al. (2022), who noted that minority father-students in U.S. institutions face similar time tensions, but in Kazakhstan, the post-Soviet legacy of collectivist family values (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025) adds pressure to maintain provider roles without external aid.

Emotional strain, or strain-based conflict, was equally prominent, with participants feeling guilty, worried, or exhausted from spillover effects. Mothers like Participant 3 and Participant 1 described mental exhaustion from academic deadlines affecting home presence, or constant worry about sick children during lectures. Participant 6's account of stress-induced thyroid issues requiring surgery highlights the physical toll, resonating with Dolson and Deemer (2020), who link such conflicts to burnout among graduate parent-students. Fathers, such as Participant 5, expressed guilt over missing playtime with children due to intensive programs, mirroring Springer et al. (2009), who argue that emotional fatigue intensifies during high-stakes periods like exams. In Kazakhstan's socio-cultural context, where intensive mothering norms (Evans, 2025) and breadwinner expectations for fathers persist, these strains reflect internalized gender roles (Eagly et al., 2000), leading to a double shift for women (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025) and emotional regulation for men (Roy et al., 2022).

Behavior-based conflicts, though less frequently articulated, involved rapid role switches that clashed with expected behaviors. Mothers noted the difficulty of transitioning from focused academic professionalism to nurturing flexibility at home, as Participant 3 described. This supports Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), who explain such incompatibilities as sources of inadequacy and stress. In Kazakhstan, where societal biases view student-mothers as less serious (Mottarella et al., 2009), these conflicts compound feelings of neglect or discrimination, as seen in relatives' disapproval of childcare choices (Participant 3) and from some of the professors' prejudices towards the mother-students (Participant 6). Overall, the findings confirm Role Conflict Theory's applicability but extend it to a non-Western context, where institutional neglect, such as inflexible schedules, and cultural norms heighten all three conflict types, contributing to higher attrition risks (Lynch, 2008).

Coping Strategies and Support Systems

The second research question examined the strategies and supports parent-students utilized in balancing the academic life and familial obligations. Findings reveal a mix of personal adaptations (e.g., time management), familial networks, external help, and financial planning, aligning with coping mechanisms in the literature while highlighting Kazakhstan's collectivist cultural influences.

Structured time management was a cornerstone strategy, with fathers like Participant 2 emphasizing proactive planning to avoid accumulation stress, and mothers like Participant 1 and Participant 6 seizing imperfect moments during naps. This opportunistic approach resonates with Wladis et al. (2018), who note fragmented study time for mothers due to childcare interruptions, and Webber and Dismore (2020), who link family support to enhanced motivation. In Kazakhstan's family-centric society, these strategies reflect adaptive resilience amid limited institutional flexibility (Tabaeva & Durrani, 2025).

Reliance on family support was crucial, with spouses, grandparents, and siblings acting as border-keepers (Clark, 2000). This mirrors Roy et al. (2022), who emphasize kinship networks in minority father-students' resilience, and Ellerbe et al. (2018), noting collectivist values in African American and Hispanic families. In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, extended family involvement extends this literature, buffering financial instability and time constraints in a context where nuclear families are common but traditional ties persist.

When family was insufficient, external help like nannies provided relief, though financially challenging. This aligns with Moreau and Kerner (2015), who discuss childcare pressures on female student-parents, and Evans (2025), who notes reciprocal care arrangements during pandemics. In Kazakhstan, where on-campus childcare is absent, these arrangements highlight institutional gaps, amplifying costs in a developing economy.

Financial security nets, built through savings, enabled focused study without immediate work pressures. This proactive strategy counters Williams and Segal (2003), who links familial obligations to promotion barriers. In Kazakhstan's knowledge-based economy push (Bureau of National Statistics, 2025), such planning reflects parent-students' strategic alignment of education with family provision.

Overall, these supports and strategies mitigate conflicts but reveal gender disparities: mothers leaned on emotional and domestic help, fathers on financial planning, per Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000). The findings extend the literature by showing how Kazakhstan's cultural emphasis on familism fosters resilience but underscores the need for institutional intervention to reduce over-reliance on personal networks.

Cultural and Institutional Contexts Shaping Identities and Engagement

The third research question explored how contexts shape parent-students' identities. Findings reveal stark gender role expectations, with mothers facing "kelin" duties and criticism for childcare choices (Participants 1, 3, 6), and fathers embodying breadwinner roles (Participants 2, 4, 5). This directly connects to Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000), which attributes gendered behaviours to societal labour divisions, with women assigned caregiving and men - public or economic spheres.

Mothers' experiences of disapproval for pursuing education with multiple children (Participant 1) or using nannies (Participant 3) echo Tabaeva and Durrani (2025), who describe Kazakhstani PhD mothers navigating double shifts amid intensive motherhood expectations. Criticism from female relatives (Participant 3) illustrates internalized norms transmitted across generations, aligning with Lyonette (2015) and Moreau and Kerner (2015), who note additional household pressures on women. In Kazakhstan's post-Soviet context, where gender equity policies coexist with traditional roles (Azhibayeva et al., 2024), this perpetuates inequality, as mothers internalize guilt (Springer et al., 2009).

Fathers' focus on financial well-being (Participant 5) and savings (Participant 4) reflects cultural provider expectations, complementing Roy et al. (2022), who discuss stereotypes of young fathers of color as absent. In Kazakhstan, this dynamic underscores complementary inequalities: mothers bear domestic/emotional loads, fathers economic ones, limiting agency in academia (Eagly et al., 2000).

Institutionally, invisibility (Participants 4 and 5) and lack of targeted support mirror Moreau and Kerner (2015), who critique neoliberal meritocracy favouring unencumbered students. In Nazarbayev University's elite setting, this reproduces biases, with positive experiences like motivational uplift from professors (Participant 1 and 4) offering counterpoints but not systemic change.

Positive experiences - enhanced focus, discipline, and purpose (Participant 3) - align with Webber and Dismore (2020), who note family as motivation, and Moreau and Kerner (2015), highlighting deeper bonds and creativity from parenting. Participant 6's time-management gains from master's to PhD extend Brown and Watson (2010), showing how dual roles build resilience in Kazakhstan's ambitious higher education landscape.

Implications for Theory and University Practice

Theoretically, the findings both affirm and extend Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000) within a non-Western, Central Asian context. Role Conflict Theory gains new nuance when applied to Kazakhstan, where strong cultural expectations around family, gender roles, and filial obligation amplify tensions between student and parental roles. This suggests that future conceptual models of role conflict should explicitly incorporate socio-cultural moderators such as collectivism, intergenerational obligations, and gendered norms (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hofstede, 2001). Social Role Theory, in turn, is enriched by evidence of intergenerational transmission of norms and the specific caregiving- role strain,

experienced by mother-students, and provider-role strain experienced by father-students, underscoring the need for more inclusive, gender-sensitive analyses of how social roles shape academic engagement (Eagly et al., 2000; Roy et al., 2022).

Drawing on Brooks (2012), the findings of the present study underscore the critical importance of institutional and governmental commitment to support parent-students, not only as an equity imperative but as a structural necessity. Brooks' cross-national comparison between the United Kingdom and Denmark powerfully illustrates that the visibility and well-being of parent-students within higher education are not merely a function of individual institutional goodwill but are fundamentally shaped by the broader policy environment within which universities operate. In Denmark, where state policy mandates flexible study arrangements, provides additional parental grants, and guarantees affordable childcare, parent-students are normalized within academic culture and, in some cases, even regarded as exemplary students - a stark contrast to the institutional invisibility and occasional hostility documented in the UK context (Brooks, 2012). This distinction carries direct implications for the Kazakhstani context. The challenges described by participants in the present study - the absence of on-campus childcare, inflexible academic deadlines, and a pervasive institutional culture built around the unencumbered student - cannot be addressed by Nazarbayev University in isolation. Rather, meaningful and sustainable change requires policy-level commitment from the state, including the subsidization of childcare provision and legislative requirements for flexible modes of study. As Brooks (2012) compellingly argues, where such provisions are prescribed at the governmental level, universities are relieved of the burden of acting alone and parent-students cease to be treated as exceptional or problematic cases. Situating Nazarbayev University within this broader policy context, the present study therefore calls not only for institutional reform, but for a coordinated national policy response that genuinely

recognizes parent-students as a legitimate and valued constituency within Kazakhstan's evolving higher education landscape.

In practical terms, the study calls on Nazarbayev University to organize family-friendly events that recognize the realities of parent-students. Participants highlighted the value of visibility-raising events that normalize parenting within graduate study (Participant 1). They suggested simple but meaningful steps: targeted surveys, a dedicated email list or newsletter for parent-students, a named contact person/liaison, or a short section on the university website explaining available (or planned) supports. Such measures align with broader evidence on institutional supports for parent-students and with recommendations from organizations such as Association for NonTraditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE), which has been established to support students and cultivate a sense of belonging within this group, on integrating family-sensitive structures into higher education (Brown & Nichols, 2012). Prior research indicates that these kinds of supports can reduce stress, improve retention, and lower attrition among parent-students (Lynch, 2008).

These recommendations are practical, low-to-medium cost in many cases, and directly responsive to participants' lived realities. Implementing even a subset of them would signal that the university recognises parent-students as a valuable and growing part of its community, rather than an invisible group left to cope alone. Such changes would likely improve retention, academic performance, mental health, and overall satisfaction among this group, while aligning with the institution's mission of excellence and equity in graduate education.

Summary

This chapter has interpreted the findings through Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000), revealing how parent-

students at Nazarbayev University navigate intense role tensions in Kazakhstan's family-centric, post-Soviet context. Time poverty, emotional strain, and behavior-based conflicts dominated, amplified by high fertility norms, traditional gender expectations, and institutional inflexibility. Mothers bore disproportionate caregiving and kelin duties, while fathers faced provider pressures - reflecting gendered divisions of labor.

Participants showed remarkable resilience through structured time management, heavy reliance on extended family, occasional external childcare, and financial planning. Positives included heightened motivation, discipline, purpose, and academic uplift from supportive faculty, turning dual roles into sources of growth.

The findings highlight the necessity for affordable on-campus childcare services and targeted visibility initiatives, such as family-friendly campus events where children can visit and observe their parents engaged in high-level academic work. These measures would help normalize the parent-student identity and reduce the strong sense of invisibility reported by many participants. Such reforms would reduce invisibility, attrition, and inequity, aligning with Kazakhstan's goals for gender equality and human capital development in higher education.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter synthesizes the main findings of the study, outlines its key strengths and limitations, offers recommendations, and presents personal reflections on the research process. The proposed recommendations are directed towards future research, policy development, and practical application.

Summary of Main Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of parent-students enrolled in graduate programmes at a highly selective university in Kazakhstan. The findings show that participants' engagement in advanced study was grounded in a strong sense of purpose, shaped by clear professional goals such as career progression, leadership development, and research-based practice. Based on interviews, participants' accounts revealed that they entered their programmes with a high degree of intentionality, which appears to sustain their persistence in the face of significant challenges.

At the same time, participants were navigating a dense web of overlapping constraints. Time poverty emerged not just as a practical difficulty but as a defining feature of daily life, with academic work constantly fitted around childcare, paid employment, and domestic responsibilities. This was closely linked to emotional strain, as participants described chronic fatigue, guilt, and a continual sense of being pulled in multiple directions. These pressures were intensified by entrenched gender norms that placed the bulk of caregiving and emotional labour on mothers, while positioning fathers primarily as financial providers. Rigid institutional structures further compounded these difficulties, exposing a mismatch between the design of graduate education and the realities of students with caregiving responsibilities.

A particularly important finding is that academic persistence for parent-students is not solely an individual achievement, but a relationally produced outcome. Across

participants' accounts, their ability to attend classes, meet deadlines, and stay intellectually engaged often depended on the largely unseen labour of spouses, grandparents, and other relatives who took on substantial childcare and household work. In the Kazakhstani context, where traditional family roles remain powerful, this pattern is especially visible, highlighting both the strength of family support networks and the unequal distribution of labour within them.

Despite these structural and emotional pressures, participants showed notable adaptability and agency. They developed a range of strategies, including careful and opportunistic time management, drawing on both family and external support systems, and deliberate financial planning. Their experiences were not only marked by constraint; many spoke about personal growth, including increased self-discipline, clearer priorities, and a deepened sense of purpose. Parenthood, while demanding, also served as a source of motivation, giving their studies a broader meaning tied to family well-being and future opportunities.

Taken together, the findings point to a significant gap in how institutions recognize and support parent-students. They remain largely invisible within formal university structures, indicating the need for more deliberate, responsive, and inclusive approaches that acknowledge their specific circumstances and contributions.

Strengths and Limitations

This study adds to a growing body of work on the intersection of higher education and family life, particularly in the under-researched context of Central Asia. Its qualitative, phenomenological design allows for a rich, context-sensitive understanding of participants' lived experiences, capturing the interplay between individual agency, family relationships, and wider sociocultural norms. Importantly, by including both mother-students and father-students, the study offers a more comprehensive and nuanced view of

how parenthood shapes graduate study across gendered and familial roles. By placing participants' voices at the centre, the study offers a more humanized and relational view of academic life that challenges purely individualistic accounts of success.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was drawn from a single, highly selective institution, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other university contexts and socio-economic settings. Because the data were self-reported, participants' accounts may also have been influenced by memory, interpretation, or a desire to present their experiences in a socially acceptable way. Finally, cross-sectional design captures experiences at one point in time, limiting insight into how challenges and coping strategies may evolve over the course of study and family life.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

At the policy level, the findings are consistent with Kazakhstan's wider commitments to gender equality and expanding access to education and employment. The evidence suggests that more structured and visible forms of support for parent-students, such as accessible and affordable childcare, flexible scheduling, and tailored mentoring programmes could meaningfully improve participation and retention, particularly for women. Given that the university operates three major graduate schools (Graduate School of Education, Graduate School of Business, and Graduate School of Public Policy), the current absence of affordable, accessible childcare severely restricts parent-students' ability to participate fully in academic life and persist in their programs, thus the provision of dedicated on-campus childcare facilities for parent-students is a critical issue requiring urgent attention.

Lastly, supporting parent-students should be understood not only as an equity issue, but also as an investment in the country's long-term human capital and knowledge-based development.

Practice Recommendations

At the institutional level, there is a need to move beyond informal, case-by-case accommodations towards more systematic and transparent support structures. This could involve formalizing and creating dedicated communication channels for parent-students, and establishing peer-support groups or workshops that explicitly address their experiences. Crucially, universities need to recognize the relational nature of academic success by considering how their policies can better support the family systems that enable students to remain in their programmes.

Research Recommendations

Future studies would benefit from larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal designs that follow parent-students over time to examine how their experiences and strategies change. In addition, future research should extend this work across a wider range of institutions and disciplines, with particular attention to gender relations, mental health, and longer-term career pathways. Comparative and longitudinal studies would be especially useful in capturing how the intersection of parenthood and academic life develops over time. Further theoretical work is also needed to more fully integrate family, cultural, and relational dimensions into existing frameworks of higher education and academic mobility.

Personal Reflection

Conducting this research has been one of the most intellectually demanding and personally rewarding experiences of my academic journey. Analyzing participants' stories - stories of early morning study sessions, of guilt and sacrifice, of children used as

motivation rather than excuse - reminded me why research of this kind matters. The process has deepened my engagement with qualitative inquiry and theoretical frameworks, but it has also taught me something less easily measured: the profound responsibility that comes with bearing witness to others' experiences, which altogether helped me grow as a researcher. At the same time, working closely with participants' narratives has highlighted the importance of empathy, reflexivity, and sensitivity to context in educational research.

Above all, this study has reinforced my conviction that meaningful research must make room for voices that are too often absent from academic debate. The parent-students who generously shared their experiences with me did not speak only of hardship. They spoke of purpose, of love, of hard-won discipline, and of a quiet but fierce determination to build something better - for themselves and for the children watching them do it. Their stories have challenged narrow conceptions of what a so-called "ideal" student looks like and, in doing so, have expanded my own understanding of what academic success can mean. My hope is that this work contributes, even in a small way, to the creation of higher education environments that are not simply more flexible in policy, but more inclusive, and that see students whole, and support them accordingly.

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Appendix A: AI Declaration Form



Thesis Title:

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

- with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or
- without the use of artificial intelligence tools.

(If you have used AI tools as defined in the GSE policy document, please complete the rest of this form.)

During the preparation of this thesis/examination, I used Grok, ChatGPT [NAME of TOOL] to Brainstorm ideas and proofread my written work to eliminate grammar and spelling mistakes [REASON]¹.

I also declare that I

- am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),
- have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,
- am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,
- have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and
- acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding appropriate AI use.

Name: Fazilat Raimberdiyeva

Signature:

Date: 27 April, 2026

¹ Examples: brainstorm ideas / find or select sources on a topic / paraphrase / structure and organize the written text / edit the text for clarity and grammar / ask for tips to improve coherence / cite and reference sources

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Date:

Participant code:

Interview components:

- Welcoming the participants and expressing gratitude for their collaboration and support
- Explaining confidentiality, potential risks, and benefits of participation
- Notifying participants about the expected length of the interview: around 45-60 minutes
- Describing the interview process, including the use of audio recording
- Providing a hard copy of the consent form for review and signature
- Inviting participants to ask any questions they may have
- Conducting the interview
- Concluding with a farewell and thanks

The Possible Interview Questions for Participants

The following semi-structured questions are designed to explore the lived experiences of parent-students in graduate education at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan. They are informed by the phenomenological approach, aiming to elicit detailed descriptions of experiences, challenges, and strategies. Questions are grouped thematically for clarity, with probes suggested where appropriate. Follow-up probes (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?") will be used to deepen responses.

Background and Context

1. Can you walk me through your journey to becoming a graduate student while also being a parent? What motivated you to pursue graduate education at this institution? (*Probe: How did your family situation influence this decision?*)
2. Tell me about your family structure and daily routines as a parent-student. How has being a parent shaped your academic path so far?

Experiences of Role Conflicts

3. Can you describe a typical day where you balance your parenting and student responsibilities? Are there times when the demands of one role interfere with the other? (*Probe: Give an example of time-based conflict, like scheduling clashes between classes and childcare.*)
4. Have you experienced stress or exhaustion from your academic work that affects your parenting, or vice versa? How does that feel? (*Probe: This explores strain-based conflict—e.g., how academic pressure leads to emotional fatigue at home.*)

5. Do you ever find that the behaviors expected in your academic role (e.g., focused, professional) clash with those in your parenting role (e.g., nurturing, flexible)? Can you share an example? (*Probe: This addresses behavior-based conflict.*)

Boundary Management

6. How do you set boundaries between your family life and your graduate studies? For example, do you have specific times or spaces dedicated to each? (*Probe: How permeable or flexible are these boundaries? What helps or hinders maintaining them?*)
7. What role do institutional factors (e.g., class schedules, support services) or family members play in helping you manage these boundaries? (*Probe: Describe any "border-keepers" like childcare or flexible deadlines.*)

Gender Roles and Cultural Context

8. In your experience, how do societal or cultural expectations in Kazakhstan about gender roles influence your life as a parent-student? (*Probe: For example, do expectations around caregiving affect women differently than men?*)
9. Have you noticed any differences in how male and female parent-students navigate graduate education? How does this relate to your own experiences?

Challenges, Opportunities, and Coping Strategies

10. What are the biggest challenges you've faced as a parent pursuing graduate education here? (*Probe: How has the cultural or institutional context in Kazakhstan amplified these?*)
11. On the positive side, what opportunities or benefits have come from being a parent-student? (*Probe: Has it influenced your motivation or perspective on your studies?*)
12. What strategies do you use to cope with the demands of parenting and graduate work? (*Probe: For example, time management techniques, seeking support, or self-care practices.*)

Support and Recommendations

13. What kind of support have you received from the institution, family, or community? What has been most helpful? (*Probe: Are there gaps, like lack of childcare or flexible policies?*)
14. If you could suggest changes to better support parent-students like yourself at this institution, what would they be?
15. Is there anything else about your experiences as a parent-student that we haven't covered that you'd like to share?

Note: Questions are open-ended to align with phenomenological principles, allowing participants to describe their essence of experiences (Creswell, 2014). The sequence can be adjusted based on the flow of conversation. Data saturation will guide if additional probes are needed.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Exploring Experiences of Parent-Students Seeking Graduate Education at a Highly Selective Public Institution in Kazakhstan

DESCRIPTION:

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to explore the experiences of parent-students pursuing graduate education at a highly selective public institution in Kazakhstan. This study aims to understand the challenges, opportunities, and strategies you face, which will help improve support systems and resources for parent-students.

You will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview, which will be recorded with your permission. Your identity and confidentiality will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms. Recorded interviews will be deleted after transcription, and only the researcher and advisor will access the data during analysis. You may choose not to answer any questions you find uncomfortable during the interview.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

There are no potential risks to your personal or professional life, given the confidential nature of the study and the use of pseudonyms. However, participating may involve minor inconveniences, such as time away from your daily activities. To accommodate you, you may select the time and place for the interview, and the researcher will strive to align with your schedule.

Potential benefits include (1) an opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a parent-student, and (2) increased awareness of the factors influencing your graduate education journey. Your decision to participate or not will not impact your academic standing or employment.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:

If you have reviewed this form and choose to participate in this research project, please know that your involvement is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent or stop participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You can also decline to answer specific questions. The alternative is to not participate. Findings may be shared at academic conferences or published in scientific journals.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor for this student work, Kairat Kurakbayev at kkurakbayev@nu.edu.kz.

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your

rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee to speak to someone independent of the research team at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz

Please sign this form if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have thoroughly reviewed the provided information;
- I have received full details about the study's purpose and process;
- I understand how the collected data will be used, and that confidential information will only be accessed by the researcher and advisor, with no disclosure to others;
- I acknowledge my freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation;
- With full understanding of the above, I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: ____

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix D: Invitation Letter

Dear Fellow Graduate Parent-Student,

I am writing to invite you to take part in my Master's thesis research titled:

“Exploring Experiences of Parent-Students Seeking Graduate Education at a Highly Selective Public Institution in Kazakhstan”

My name is **Fazilat Raimberdiyeva**, and I am a mother of two young children and a Master's student in Educational Leadership at Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Education. As both a parent and a graduate student at NU, I am deeply interested in understanding the real experiences of other parent-students who are balancing family responsibilities with demanding graduate studies.

Purpose of the study The study aims to explore the lived experiences of mothers and fathers who are currently pursuing Master's or PhD programmes at Nazarbayev University while raising children. I want to understand the challenges you face, the strategies you use to cope, and what support would make your journey easier.

Who can participate? You are eligible if you:

- Are a current graduate student (Master's or PhD) at Nazarbayev University
- Have at least one child under the age of 6
- Are willing to share your experiences in a one-to-one interview

What does participation involve? Participation would consist of one semi-structured interview lasting approximately **60–90 minutes**. The interview can be conducted in person at a convenient location on campus, or online via Zoom, at a time that suits you best. The conversation will be audio-recorded (with your permission) and all information will be kept strictly confidential. You may withdraw at any time without any consequences.

Confidentiality Your identity will be fully protected. I will use pseudonyms in all reports and publications, and only I (the researcher) will have access to the raw data.

Why your voice matters Your experiences will help shed light on an often-overlooked group of students at our university and can contribute to improving support for parent-students in the future.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please feel free to contact me directly:

Nazarbayev University Email: fazilat.raimberdiyeva@nu.edu.kz

Phone / WhatsApp: +77058879033

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this invitation. I truly appreciate your consideration and would be honoured to hear your story.

Warm regards,

Fazilat Raimberdiyeva

Appendix E: Data Analysis Coding Samples

Overarching phenomenon
Lived experiences of graduate parent-students at a highly selective institution in Kazakhstan

SUPERORDINATE THEMES — CLICK TO EXPLORE

Theme 1 — Challenges
Role conflict & institutional barriers

Time poverty
Emotional strain

Gender role expectations

Institutional inflexibility

P1
P3
P6
P2
P4
P5

Theme 2 — Strategies
Adaptive coping & support systems

Structured time management

Family support networks

External childcare

Financial security net

P1
P3
P6
P2
P4
P5

Theme 3 — Positive experiences
Growth, motivation & transformation

Children as motivators

Academic uplift

Resilience & discipline

Recommendations to NU

P1
P3
P6
P4
P5

Participants: ● Mother-student ● Father-student

↓

Theme 1 — Challenges close X

Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) · Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2000) · All 6 participants

CODES — CLICK TO VIEW QUOTES

Time poverty (time-based conflict)
P1 (mother) · P3 (mother) · P4 (father) · P5 (father) · P6 (mother)

P1 — mother-student
"I usually did my homework early in the morning while all the kids were asleep, or in the afternoon when half the kids were at school and the youngest was having her lunch nap."

P6 — mother-student
"At night, I tied a rope to the besyk and rocked the baby in it and at the same time typed my thesis. Against this background, I had a lot of stress."

P4 — father-student
"I need to go straight to pick up my son from kindergarten at a certain time... I mostly do my part at night and sometimes I feel disapproved of by my classmates who are not burdened with parental obligations."

Emotional strain (strain-based conflict)
P1 (mother) · P3 (mother) · P5 (father) · P6 (mother)

↓