

30+ and Single? Shame on You!

Experiences of Social Pressure Among Unmarried Women in Kazakhstan

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This thesis explores how unmarried women aged 30–48 in Kazakhstan experience and navigate social pressure to marry. It situates these experiences within the context of local cultural norms, simultaneous retraditionalisation and postmodernisation processes, and the enduring legacies of Soviet-era gender policy, with particular attention to how patriarchal norms are sustained and reproduced in everyday life. Based on 15 in-depth interviews with urban women, the study examines how social pressure is applied, who exerts it, and how women internalise, resist, or negotiate these expectations.

Using Walby's (1990) structures of patriarchy, the concept of hegemonic femininity (Schipper, 2007), and the culturally specific notion of *uyat* (shame), the thesis analyses both the locations and mechanisms through which gender norms are maintained and social pressure is exerted. The findings reveal that social pressure to marry is widespread and multi-layered, with mothers, grandmothers, and aunts often playing a central role in its reproduction. Three common types of social pressure are identified: direct, indirect, and guilt-based. Many women develop coping strategies ranging from avoidance to confrontation, with financial independence emerging as a crucial condition in resisting societal norms.

By focusing on women who remain unmarried, this thesis offers insight into how gender expectations are experienced and negotiated through personal coping strategies, familial relations, and cultural expectations. It shows that gender roles are not fixed but shaped through interactions between traditional expectations, societal norms, and individual aspirations.

30+ и не замужем? Позор!

Опыт социального давления среди незамужних женщин в Казахстане

Предлагаемое вниманию научное исследование посвящено анализу опыта социального давления, связанного с институтом брака, оказываемого на незамужних женщин в возрасте от 30 до 48 лет, проживающих в Казахстане. Рассмотрение данного феномена осуществляется в контексте и с учётом локальных культурных норм, параллельных процессов ретрадиционализации и постмодернизации, а также устойчивого влияния гендерной политики советского периода. Особое внимание уделяется механизмам воспроизводства патриархальных норм в повседневной жизни.

Эмпирической основой исследования послужили 15 подробных интервью с городскими жительницами. На их основе проводится анализ форм и источников социального давления, а также стратегий, посредством которых женщины его интериоризируют, отвергают или переосмысляют. В теоретической части используются концепция структур патриархата (Уолби, 1990), теория гегемонической феминности (Шипперс, 2007) и культурно-обусловленное понятие *ұят* (стыд).

Результаты исследования демонстрируют, что давление на женщин с целью вступления в брак носит повсеместный и многоуровневый характер. Центральную роль в его

воспроизводстве часто играют матери, бабушки и тёти. Выделяются три основные формы давления: прямое, косвенное и основанное на чувстве вины. В ответ на данные процессы у женщин формируются разнообразные стратегии взаимодействия с имеющимся опытом давления со стороны социума: от избегания до открытого противостояния. При этом финансовая независимость оказывается значимым условием в сопротивлении нарастающим и преобладающим общественным ожиданиям.

Сосредоточив внимание на женщинах, не состоящих в браке, исследование раскрывает, каким образом гендерные ожидания переживаются и трансформируются в ходе повседневных практик, семейных взаимодействий и под влиянием таких социокультурных ожиданий. Работа демонстрирует, что гендерные роли не являются статичными, а формируются в результате сложного взаимодействия традиционных представлений, социальных норм и индивидуальных устремлений.

30+ En nog steeds single? Schaam je!

Ervaringen van alleenstaande Kazachstaanse vrouwen met sociale druk

Deze scriptie onderzoekt hoe ongehuwde Kazachstaanse vrouwen tussen de 30 en 48 jaar sociale druk om te trouwen ervaren en ermee omgaan. Deze ervaringen worden binnen de bredere context van lokale culturele normen, gelijktijdige processen van retraditionalisering en postmodernisering, en de blijvende invloed van de Sovjetperiode op genderverhoudingen geplaatst. Er gaat in het bijzonder aandacht uit naar de mechanismen waarmee patriarchale en traditionele normen in het dagelijks leven in stand worden gehouden en worden voortgezet.

Op basis van vijftien diepte-interviews met lokale inwonsters uit stedelijk gebied wordt onderzocht hoe sociale druk rond genderrollen wordt uitgeoefend, door wie, en welke copingstrategieën vrouwen hanteren om deze verwachtingen het hoofd te bieden. Hierbij wordt gebruikgemaakt van Walby's (1990) conceptualisering van patriarchale structuren, Schippers' (2007) concept van hegemonische femininiteit, en het cultureel specifieke begrip *uyat* (schaamte).

De bevindingen tonen aan dat sociale druk wijdverbreid is, zich manifesteert in directe, indirecte en op schuldgevoel gebaseerde vormen, en vooral via moeders, grootmoeders en tantes wordt overgedragen. Financiële onafhankelijkheid blijkt een belangrijke voorwaarde voor het kunnen weerstaan van deze druk.

Het onderzoek biedt inzichten in hoe ongehuwde vrouwen verwachtingen omtrent gender ervaren, strategieën ontwikkelen om hiermee om te gaan, en omgaan met druk vanuit culturele opvattingen en familiebanden. De resultaten maken duidelijk dat genderrollen niet bij voorbaat vastliggen, maar door interacties tussen traditionele verwachtingen, huidige maatschappelijke normen en individuele aspiraties gevormd worden.

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my main supervisor Dr. H el ene Thibault for accompanying me during this thesis-writing process. Your expertise and guidance helped me tremendously to structure all ideas in fitting frameworks and make a whole picture of all these loose elements. Your feedback and patience have been deeply appreciated and truly contributed to making this thesis a more nuanced and meaningful piece of work; thank you. I would also like to thank my second supervisor, Dr. Saltanat Akhmetova, for her helpful suggestions, both in terms of academic content and in pointing me towards relevant concepts and materials.

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Table of contents

Introduction	1
1. Theoretical framework: patriarchy	3
1.1. Defining patriarchy.....	3
1.2. Patriarchy: structure vs. ideology.....	5
1.3 Alternative conceptualisations: feminism and patriarchy.....	6
1.4. Walby’s materialist and universalist framework: what and where is patriarchy?.....	12
1.5. Chapter conclusion.....	19
2. Contextual influences	20
2.1. Soviet legacies on gender roles.....	20
2.2. Post-Soviet nationalism: retraditionalisation from above.....	22
2.3. Social dynamics.....	26
2.4. Uyat.....	30
2.5. Intersectionality: Understanding variations in perceptions on gender roles.....	33
2.6. Conclusion: Contextual Influences to understand gender roles in Kazakhstan.....	36
3. How social pressure manifests: Hegemonic femininity.	36
3.1. Origin of the concept: Gramsci’s cultural hegemony.....	37
3.2 Hegemonic masculinity.....	38
3.3. Hegemonic femininity: defining the concept.....	39
3.4. Criticism of hegemonic femininity: Paechter’s perspective.....	41
3.5. Hegemonic femininity and social pressure in Kazakhstan.....	42
3.6. Concluding the chapter: connecting <i>how</i> and <i>where</i>	44
4. Methodology and results	45
4.1. Experiences of external social pressure.....	46
4.1.1. <i>Direct, indirect and guilt-based pressure</i>	47
4.1.2. <i>How and why does pressure differ between immediate and extended family?</i>	51
4.1.3. <i>Development of social pressure</i>	52
4.1.4. <i>Why would women enforce this social pressure?</i>	55
4.2. Perceptions of participants on hegemonic femininity.....	57
4.2.1. <i>Cultural expectations and femininity in Kazakhstan</i>	57
4.2.2. <i>Marriage and social status</i>	58
4.3. Coping with social pressure: strategies of navigation and resistance.....	60

4.4. Perceiving social pressure: how does it make you feel?	63
4.4.1. <i>Guilt, shame and stigmatisation</i>	64
4.4.2. <i>From external to internal pressure</i>	65
Conclusion and discussion	67
Bibliography	72

Introduction

Not long after arriving in Kazakhstan for the first time, I was having dinner with my friend; a Kazakh woman in her late 30s. She got a phone call from her mother. Slightly annoyed, she picked up and gave some brief answers. Meanwhile, I waved to the waiter to order another drink. Apparently, her mother heard my voice in the background and, with some more excitement, started asking my friend if she was out with a man: “was it a date? Is he a colleague? A decent man? Would he not be suitable for marriage?” Although my friend replied that she was just out with a friend, and quickly ended the call, I could not help but laugh a little. To me, the content of the conversation seemed unimaginable; it leapt from a casual outing to the prospect of a marriage in a second. My friend, however, explained that her mom regularly called, often asking whether she had found a man yet. For years, her mother had been encouraging her to settle down. Two years later, I decided to write my thesis inspired by this event.

This interaction, though surprising to me, reflects a common reality for numerous unmarried women in Kazakhstan. Marriage, as one of the key manifestations of gender roles, remains central to the social expectations placed on women in Kazakhstan, despite the influences of globalisation and social change. For many women, the pressure to marry is not merely a personal or familial expectation but a deeply embedded societal norm that prioritises family cohesion and stability. In this context, marriage is not just a personal achievement, but a social obligation, deeply interwoven with the ideals of femininity, family values and cultural expectations.

Research on gender norms in Kazakhstan highlights how these roles have developed through a combination of historical, socio-cultural, and political influences. The Soviet legacy played an important role in shaping gender dynamics by promoting equality in the public sphere, such as education and employment, while simultaneously promoting traditional roles within the private sphere, leading to a ‘double burden’ for women (Kandiyoti, 1999, 2007; Sancak & Finke, 2007; Constantine, 2007; Sukovataya, 2012; Tyomkina & Zdravomyslova, 2005).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, discussions around retraditionalisation in Kazakhstan have become an important focus in scholarly discussions. Scholars have examined how nationalist movements and the resurgence of traditional values shape contemporary gender roles in Kazakhstan. While some argue that these developments promote women’s roles as wives and mothers, moving away from Soviet-era norms, others point to signs of detraditionalisation, particularly in urban areas, indicating that the process is not uniform across the country (Kabylova, 2022; Cleuziou & Drenberger, 2016; Beyer & Finke, 2019; Dall’Agnola, 2024; Cleuziou, 2020).

Furthermore, the state has played a significant role in shaping and reinforcing these norms through policies and discourses that support traditional family values and gender roles (Khairullayeva et al., 2022; Kuzhabekova et al., 2018; Kim, 2020). It is important to note, however, that many research shows overlap between these themes. It shows how historical

legacies, socio-cultural processes, and state policies are interconnected in shaping contemporary gender roles in Kazakhstan.

Marriage is a central theme in understanding gender roles in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. A considerable amount of research has examined cultural and social expectations related to marriage, particularly regarding women's roles as wives and mothers. Studies have explored how societal expectations to marry continue to influence women's lives (Dall'Agnola & Thibault, 2021; Dittrich & Schrader, 2018; Thibault, 2018). Within this context, specific roles related to marriage have also received attention, such as the role of *kelins*¹ (Kudaibergenova, 2018; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021), as well as contentious marital practices, such as bride kidnapping (Werner, 2009; Absatar & Alishayeva, 2023) and polygyny (Commercio, 2020), which reflect the persistence of patriarchal norms that prioritise men's control over women's marital choices. Additionally, cultural mechanisms that regulate gender expectations, such as social pressure to get married, will be explored more in-depth in the following chapters.

Despite the extensive literature on gender norms and marital expectations in Kazakhstan, there is limited research on how women beyond the average age of marriage experience and navigate social pressure. The average age of marriage for women in Kazakhstan is approximately 25, yet the experiences of women who remain unmarried beyond this age remain underexplored. While similar studies have been conducted in East Asia, for instance, on long-term single women in Japan (Maeda & Hecht, 2012) and single career-oriented women in China (Gui, 2020), such research is scarce within the Central Asian context. To address this gap, this thesis attempts to answer the following research question:

"In what ways do single Kazakhstani women aged 30-48 experience or perceive social pressure to get married, and how do they navigate and resist this pressure?"

By addressing this question, the study aims to shed light on the experiences and perceptions of unmarried women, particularly those women beyond the 'socially acceptable' marriage age in Kazakhstan.

This research also holds broader social relevance. By focusing on the personal narratives of these single women, this study gives voice to those whose perspectives are often overlooked both in society and academic discourse. Capturing these individual experiences allows for a more nuanced understanding of how social pressure to marry is perceived and navigated, moving beyond abstract theories and generalisations. These narratives provide valuable insights into how societal expectations are internalised, resisted, or negotiated in everyday life.

Moreover, shedding light on these personal stories contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of gender norms in contemporary Kazakhstan. It highlights how social norms impact individual lives, giving this group of women a voice that complements existing statistics. As the analysis of the interviews will show, social pressure on women to marry is commonly

¹ *Kelin*: the Kazakh word *kelin* is derived from "kelgin/kelgen", literally: "the one who came", i.e. the outsider, and translates usually as 'daughter-in-law and in some cases as 'bride'

experienced, widespread, and often perceived negatively. By presenting these narratives, this thesis aims not only to contribute to academic discussions but also to challenge societal perceptions, fostering a more inclusive mindset. Additionally, it seeks to offer unmarried women insight into the shared nature of their experiences, potentially empowering them by recognising that they are not alone in facing these challenges.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical framework on patriarchy, discussing various feminist perspectives on patriarchy and situating the study within the context of Kazakhstan. Walby's (1990) framework on universalist patriarchy will be used to explain in which structures patriarchy takes place. In addition to the critique of post-Soviet feminism, Walby's theoretical framework will be expanded to make the framework applicable in the Kazakhstani context. Therefore, Chapter 2 provides the contextual background, examining the socio-historical, cultural, and political influences that shape gender norms in Kazakhstan. Chapter 3 focuses on the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and femininity (Schippers, 2007), exploring how these ideals of hegemonic femininity manifest in Kazakhstani society and how they influence social expectations regarding marriage. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, analysing how unmarried women aged 30–48 in Kazakhstan experience and navigate social pressure to marry.

1. Theoretical framework: patriarchy

This chapter serves as the theoretical framework for understanding patriarchy and analysing where patriarchal norms operate in society. To do so, this chapter will first draw on Sylvia Walby's (1990) universalist approach, as the main theory, to understand and define patriarchy. Then, the chapter critically examines alternative feminist perspectives on patriarchy, highlighting their respective strengths and limitations in analysing patriarchal structures. As Walby's (1990) approach has faced criticism for its universalist scope, this chapter also considers critiques from post-Soviet feminist perspectives. By acknowledging these critiques, the framework is refined to better capture the specific cultural and historical context of Kazakhstan.

Following on this, the chapter delves deeper into Walby's conceptualisation by identifying six structures where patriarchy operates. These structures provide a comprehensive framework for identifying the spaces in which patriarchal norms are maintained and reproduced within (Kazakhstani) society. This theoretical foundation is important for understanding the empirical findings later, as it helps identify the places where patriarchal norms are rooted, providing a basis for exploring how these norms affect the lives of unmarried women in Kazakhstan.

1.1. Defining patriarchy

To begin with, it is important to have a clear understanding and definition of the concept of patriarchy. Broadly speaking, patriarchy is a pervasive system of social organisation in which men hold primary power, and dominate across the social structures (Walby, 1990). Various scholars have contributed to defining, conceptualising, theorising, and operationalising patriarchy. In this research, I will draw on Walby's (1990) work *Theorizing Patriarchy* for the

definition.

Walby's work offers a comprehensive framework for understanding patriarchy as a complex and interconnected system, instead of considering patriarchy as an explanation based on a single factor. She rejects the idea that any single idea fully explains gender inequality, like culture, economics, or biology. She rather argues that multiple (six to be precise) structures work together to sustain patriarchy. These structures will be discussed later in the conceptualisation. This is important, as viewing patriarchy as a system acknowledges its complexity and adaptability; it is a combination of forces that work together and often reinforces one another. This interconnectivity will be useful later to examine how social pressure to get married can be connected to, for example, economic structures and cultural ideas.

Moreover, Walby's work acknowledges the interaction between patriarchy and other systems of power, such as capitalism and social class. It suggests that other systems can either reinforce or undermine patriarchal systems. Although Walby focused on Western countries, her intersectionality with other systems and connectivity between social structures makes her framework adaptable to diverse contexts. This is important for this research, as Walby's framework allows me to analyse the manifestation of patriarchy in the Kazakhstani context. For example, the social pressure that women experience to get married can be examined through her framework as cultural and economic manifestations of patriarchy, but also in connection to state policies and narratives. Walby's book is grounded in theory, but her framework is flexible enough to apply it to the experiences of the interview participants of this research, meaning that her work is a great link between explaining theory and connecting it to the practicalities of this thesis.

Definition

Now that it is clear why Walby's work has a solid foundation, it is important to get a better understanding of patriarchy. She defines patriarchy as follows: "*I shall define patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.*" (Walby, 1990, p.20). However, this might raise new questions as to what is meant exactly with terms such as system, social structures, and practices. Based on Walby's definition, I created a more extensive definition, in which the terms are elaborated in more detail.

Patriarchy is a system² that organises and regulates relationships within a society³, a system that privileges the authority of men and the subordination of women. Patriarchy operates at two levels: firstly, through social structures⁴, that create the framework for men to dominate and limit

² System: an overarching framework or mechanism that organises and regulates how people and groups interact and relate to each other in society.

³ Society: a group of people who live in a definable community and share the same culture. A society exists in two levels: institutions (also called social structures) and individuals.

⁴ Social structures: also, institutions: education, government, family, economic, religion, and media are the six social structures of the society. These six social structures create the framework within which individuals act (often limiting women's opportunities and autonomy while prioritising male authority.)

women's opportunities, and secondly, through practices, like actions, behaviours, and rituals that reinforce patriarchal norms in the daily life of individuals. Society enforces these norms collectively in order to align individual behaviours with institutional expectations, meaning that a society imposes norms on individuals to make them behave as expected by others. This is in order to preserve male dominance and women's exploitation; and preserves inequality between men and women.

1.2. Patriarchy: structure vs. ideology

While this thesis assumes the existence of patriarchy as a social system, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone shares this perspective. After all, like in Kazakhstan, and many other countries, equality between and same rights for both men and women are guaranteed by law. From a structural point of view, equality is thus ensured. However, this legal framework does not necessarily translate into social equality in practice.

To understand this discrepancy, it is essential to distinguish between patriarchy as a structure and patriarchy as an ideology. Structural patriarchy refers to the institutional and legal frameworks that formalise gender inequality, such as discriminatory laws or policies. On the other hand, ideological patriarchy encompasses the belief systems, cultural norms, and social expectations that continue to position men as dominant, even when formal equality is achieved.

This perspective aligns with Hunnicutt's (2009) argument. She argues that a theory of patriarchy must account for the potential divergence between structure and ideology. Patriarchal ideologies can continue to exist despite structural improvements towards gender equality. Moreover, she emphasises that the concept of patriarchy should be understood as a dynamic rather than a static system (Hunnicutt, 2009, p.555; pp.561-562). Patriarchy varies in intensity and form across different cultural and historical contexts, sometimes appearing more entrenched and at other times less prominent, but almost always maintaining some level of presence.

In practice, this means that even when structural equality exists (on paper), patriarchal ideologies can still influence how men and women are expected to behave (in practice). In Kazakhstan, for example, despite equal rights being protected by law (Adilet, 2009a), social norms often continue to place pressure on women to marry and take primary responsibility for household duties. This demonstrates how patriarchal ideology can persist independently of structural conditions

Thus, when examining patriarchy, it is crucial to consider both its structural and ideological dimensions. While structural changes, such as legal reforms, may reduce formal inequality, they do not automatically eliminate the cultural beliefs and practices that continue to privilege men over women. Recognising this distinction is essential for understanding how patriarchal norms endure and adapt within different societies, including Kazakhstan.

1.3 Alternative conceptualisations: feminism and patriarchy

Before elaborating on the universalist and materialist framework of Walby (1990) on patriarchy, that I consider the most applicable for this research, it is important to explore and discuss multiple perspectives on patriarchy. Comparing and contrasting various feminist perspectives contribute to assessing their applicability on this research. Moreover, it will be important to discuss critiques of universal feminist frameworks, of which Walby's conceptualisation is one, in order to identify what shortcomings, there are in universal feminist frameworks, and how these shortcomings can be addressed. In this section, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, intersectionality, and post-Soviet perspectives, including its critiques on universal feminist frameworks will be briefly discussed as alternative perspectives on patriarchy⁵.

Marxist feminism: the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism

Not surprisingly, Marxist feminism focuses on the interdependence between capitalism and patriarchy, arguing that gender oppression is deeply connected to economic systems. Central to this perspective is the idea that unpaid domestic labour by women forms the foundation of capitalist productivity, creating economic dependency that reinforces gender inequality. Or as Hartmann (1979), one of the foundational theorists in Marxist feminism, described the manifestation of 'patriarchal social relations in capitalist societies' in plain and clear words: "the vast majority of men might want their women at home to personally service them." (Hartmann, 1979, p.14). This statement highlights how patriarchy normalises unpaid domestic labour, which in turn serves capitalist interests by maintaining the workforce. However, this perspective is increasingly contested, even in societies where patriarchal norms are strongly present, as many women work outside the home.

In her essay, Hartmann (1979) critiques traditional Marxist theory for overlooking gender as a key factor in oppression. She argues that while capitalism and patriarchy are distinct systems, they are deeply interconnected: capitalism thrives on the exploitation of women's unpaid domestic labour, which sustains the workforce, and in the meanwhile perpetuates women's economic dependence on men. Similarly, Federici (2004) delves into the historical roots of women's economic exploitation, expanding on Hartmann's critique by examining how capitalism systematically devalued reproductive and domestic labour. Federici's analysis reveals how this devaluation confined women to traditional roles, further entrenching patriarchal expectations, including marriage. Both Hartmann and Federici highlight how economic systems exploit women's labour while reinforcing patriarchal norms. By analysing the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, Marxist feminists offer a strong critique of how economic dependency maintains gender inequality and perpetuates societal expectations that prioritise women's roles as wives and caregivers.

⁵ There exist a wide variety of fully formed feminist frameworks in the world, which are still developing. New frameworks are also likely to emerge in the future. Based on the topic and context of this research, and for the sake of time and space, I have decided to not dive into all forms of feminism, but those that seemed most relevant to this thesis. Other variants of feminist frameworks that people might be interested in are among others: liberal feminism, ecofeminism, psychoanalytic feminism, cultural feminism, post-colonial feminism and postmodern/queer feminism.

Marxist feminism views patriarchy as fundamentally intertwined with capitalism, arguing that male dominance is sustained through women's economic dependency. In this perspective, patriarchy is not an isolated structure but is interdependent with class oppression. While Walby also acknowledges the economic dimension of patriarchy (through the structure of paid work), her framework is broader, examining multiple interconnected structures, such as culture, sexuality, state, rather than focusing solely on the capitalist economy as the root cause. Marxist feminism helps to understand how economic dependency reinforces patriarchal expectations, like the need for women to marry for financial stability. However, its focus on economics alone limits its applicability to non-economic cultural pressure.

Radical feminism: patriarchy as the root system of oppression

An answer to Marxist feminism was developed by theorists of radical feminism from the 1960s. This perspective identifies patriarchy as the central and most deeply entrenched system of oppression, shaping all aspects of society. While Marxist feminism focuses on the interdependence between capitalism and patriarchy, radical feminism focuses solely on the personal and systemic dominance of men over women. The only way to solve this personal and systemic dominance, according to radical feminism, is by dismantling the patriarchal norms that sustain gender oppression.

In her work, Firestone (1970) argues that the subordination of women by men is caused by biological determinants, especially reproduction, which confined women to dependent roles. Firestone asserts in her book that the only solution to the problem is to overcome the vulnerability of women in reproduction. She argues that technological advancements, such as contraception, abortion, and artificial reproductive technologies, could free women from the biological limitations imposed by childbirth, providing a pathway to equality. Similarly, Millett (1970) criticises in her book cultural and literary representations of gender. She exposes, among other ways by literature, how patriarchy sustains power dynamics in daily interactions. Millet highlights how social institutions reinforce male dominance through normative ideals of masculinity and femininity.

Radical feminism posits patriarchy as the most fundamental system of oppression, one that existed before and takes precedence over other forms of inequality, such as class or race. It sees male dominance over women as the root cause of women's subordination, manifesting through control over women's bodies, sexuality, and reproductive roles. In contrast, Walby's framework recognises male dominance as central to patriarchy but views it as one of several interconnected structures rather than the sole root of all oppression.

The focus on women's sexuality is important, if not the main focus in the radical feminist perspective. Also, Dworkin (1989) critiques cultural narratives that objectify women and normalise violence in her book. Dworkin explores the connection between violence and sex by arguing that pornography incorporates the violent domination of women as a central element of sexual fantasy. She asserts that this portrayal not only normalises such domination but also incites men to commit acts of sexual violence.

Altogether, these theorists illustrate how patriarchy operates at both systemic and personal levels, sustaining women's subordination through cultural, literary, sexual, and familial norms. The radical feminist perspective reveals well how patriarchy extends to both the public and private sphere and stresses the influence of male dominance through cultural practices and sexual politics. However, the overemphasis of radical feminism on biological principles, like the reproductive role of women, and sexuality, risks the chance of overlooking other factors that can play a role in men's dominance over women. Insufficient account is taken of the existence of other systems, such as capitalism, culture, or the state, which also can influence the patriarchal system. A complementary or alternative perspective is thus needed.

Intersectionalist feminism: understanding overlapping systems of oppression

Intersectional feminism provides, contrary to radical and Marxist feminism, a multidimensional approach to understanding patriarchy by recognising how gender interacts with other forms of oppression, such as class, ethnicity, race, and colonialism. Intersectional feminism critiques single and bi-dimensional frameworks, like Marxist and radical feminism; the core idea of intersectional feminists is that different forms of oppression, like sexism, racism, and classism, are interconnected and cannot be fully understood if studied separately. Instead of the assumption that women share a universal experience of patriarchy, intersectional feminism argues that factors like socioeconomic status, ethnicity, cultural background, and so on, shape women's experiences differently.

An illustrating example is shown in Crenshaw's work (1991), the foundational theorist of intersectional feminism. She described how women of colour in the United States often experience both racial and gender-based discrimination, which other feminist perspectives and antiracist discourses insufficiently address (Crenshaw, 1991, pp.1242-1243). Additionally, Collins (1990) explored the intersection of race, class, and gender in the United States, with a focus on black women. In her work, she emphasises how *domains of power*, as Collins refers to, or social structures, as I refer to them in this research, like education and media, work together to reinforce overlapping forms of oppression (Collins, 1990).

This perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of the role of patriarchy in shaping the society. Together, these theorists demonstrate how patriarchy interacts with other societal systems, resulting in diverse experiences of inequality. Until then, feminist thought had primarily been developed by and focused on the experiences of white women, which partly explains the neglect of intersecting oppressions faced by non-white women. Intersectional feminism, therefore, emerged as a response to this gap, aims to address the complexity of multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination.

Intersectional feminism does not consider patriarchy as a standalone or dominant system of oppression. Instead, it views patriarchy as one of many interconnected systems that together shape women's lived experiences. It emphasises how patriarchy interacts with other forms of discrimination, such as racism, classism, and colonialism, leading to diverse and complex forms of inequality. While Walby's framework focuses on identifying the structures in which patriarchy

operates, intersectional feminism highlights how these structures intersect with other social hierarchies, shaping individual experiences in different ways. The intersectional perspective focuses on individual experiences and identity-based nuances, which also suit my research question. Nevertheless, there are a few reasons why I prefer the combination of the materialist/universalist approach of Walby, added with elements of the post-Soviet perspective (about which more in the following section), over the intersectional feminist approach.

Intersectional feminism often centres on the individual experiences of oppression within specific contexts. But this strength could become a limitation for this research, which has as its goal to examine its larger societal structures. Intersectional analysis risks fragmenting the broader picture, focusing on identity-based differences rather than systemic mechanisms that sustain patriarchy. For example, in this study, intersectional feminism might explore how social pressure varies for Kazakhstani women based on class, ethnicity or urban/rural divides but would struggle to provide a structural analysis of the overarching structures, such as family, culture, and state, that create and sustain these pressures.

Moreover, intersectional feminism does not focus on identifying the specific societal structures or spaces where patriarchy operates; it does not answer the question of 'where'. Instead, its primary focus is on individual experiences and identity-based differences. In contrast, Walby's materialist/universalist approach explicitly examines where patriarchy is embedded, providing a framework to locate 'where' patriarchy operates. Furthermore, intersectional feminism focuses on answering the question 'how' intersecting identities shape individual experiences. But this is different from the 'how' question addressed in this research. This research focuses on 'how' societal norms and ideals are internalised and reinforced by individuals and through social structures.

Additionally, the focus of intersectional feminism of individual identities can distract the attention of the shared experiences of social pressure that women experience. In this research, the participants, despite their differences, for example in ethnicity, experience similar social pressures tied to marriage expectations. A structural approach, like Walby's, is better suited to analyse these shared experiences, as it examines how societal systems perpetuate norms that affect all unmarried women, regardless of individual differences.

Post-Soviet perspective: A regional branch of decolonial feminism and critique

Unlike the other three frameworks that were just discussed, the post-Soviet perspective is not a standalone framework. Instead, it can be seen as a regional adaptation of broader feminist theories, including intersectional feminism, materialist feminism, Marxist feminism, and decolonial feminism. This perspective offers different insights into how gender norms and patriarchy are shaped by the historical, cultural, and political legacies of the Soviet Union, and (re-)shaped in the post-Soviet context.

The post-Soviet perspective questions the applicability of Western feminist theories by stressing that patriarchy should be understood within its specific historical and cultural context. It

challenges the idea of patriarchy as a single, uniform system by demonstrating how Soviet and post-Soviet gender norms produce distinct forms of male dominance. Unlike Walby's universalist framework, which aims to identify overarching structures of patriarchy, the post-Soviet perspective highlights the importance of considering regional and cultural variations.

In this thesis, the post-Soviet perspective will be used in two ways. First, it serves as a regional adaptation of decolonial feminism⁶, that critiques universal frameworks, such as Walby's approach. Following on this, secondly, this thesis will use the post-Soviet perspective as a regional supplement to Walby's framework. To make Walby's framework appropriate to the critique of the post-Soviet perspective, it will integrate elements from Soviet legacies, post-Soviet nationalism, and local cultural concepts. By incorporating these elements, this research ensures that the theoretical framework remains both globally relevant and locally specific. We cannot understand social pressure and gender inequality, without looking at the global existence of the patriarchal system, nor can we understand Kazakhstan, without looking at its (post-)Soviet history and its local cultural concepts.

Critique on universal frameworks of patriarchy

One of the main contributions of the post-Soviet perspective is its critique of universal frameworks. These universal frameworks often fail to account for the specificities in the post-Soviet region, according to post-Soviet feminists. Tlostanova, a prominent postcolonial feminist scholar specialised in the post-Soviet region, also criticises universal feminist theories for their Western-centric assumptions. Tlostanova highlights how frameworks developed in Western or colonial contexts overlook the distinct experiences of post-socialist societies, in particular the legacies of Soviet-era policies and the challenges of post-Soviet transitions (Tlostanova, 2012). She decries the 'western monopoly of knowledge' and criticises that the discussion on the logic of modernity and coloniality is dominated by western thinking and how this shapes academic disciplines. Even questioning this remains too often undiscussed in universal approaches (Tlostanova, 2012, p.133).

In another work, Tlostanova (2015) expands on this critique. She argues that Western and Soviet frameworks and ideologies are imposed on the whole region, marginalising the voices and knowledge systems of the post-Soviet region. This marginalisation⁷ has left the region

⁶ This thesis adopts the post-Soviet perspective as a regional adaptation of decolonial feminism. While post-colonial feminism critiques Western imperialism, decolonial feminism extends this critique to include internal colonialism and the imposition of (gender) policies in Central Asia, that could be observed in the Soviet Union. This distinction ensures that the framework accounts for the unique legacies of Soviet influence on (gender) norms in Kazakhstan., and not just focuses on anti-Western imperialism.

⁷ In this thesis, the term 'marginalisation' refers to the way unmarried women are symbolically and socially positioned on the periphery of dominant gender norms; they are not central to the dominant narrative of what a woman 'should be'. It does not imply complete social exclusion or deviance, but rather a reduced access to social legitimacy, visibility, and valued positions within family and society. This includes underrepresentation in public discourse and reduced symbolic recognition for women who do not conform to dominant gender ideals. While the Russian term 'маргинализация' [marginalizatsiya] may carry a more negative or stigmatising connotation, my usage aligns with the

struggling to develop its own narratives, as the region's historical and cultural experiences are often overlooked, ignored, or reinterpreted to fit within the Soviet or Western frameworks (Tlostanova, 2015). For instance, while Soviet gender policies promoted equality between men and women, they also reinforced patriarchal norms by idealising women's roles as mothers and caregivers. Such complexities, as Tlostanova (2015) argues, are often neglected or differently interpreted in universal feminist theories, because they fail to understand the nuances in the post-Soviet context.

Tlostanova's works, as examples of the post-Soviet feminist approach, show that applying universal frameworks, like Walby's, lead to limitations because regional specificities are insufficiently acknowledged. While Walby's framework provides a valuable structural analysis, it nevertheless risks erasing the regional specificities and cultural nuances that are so important to understand the Kazakhstani case better. Therefore, to address this limitation, it is essential to supplement Walby's with cultural, historical, and political nuances to ensure that this research captures the unique setting of patriarchy, gender roles, and social pressure in Kazakhstan.

Correcting the universal perspective: integrating post-Soviet insights

To address this critique from the post-Soviet perspective on universal frameworks, this thesis will enhance Walby's universal/materialist approach by incorporating five context-specific elements from the post-Soviet perspective. These elements will add nuance to Walby's framework, making it both globally relevant and culturally specific. While this section will briefly introduce these elements, a more comprehensive discussion will follow in chapter 2, where they will be contextualised within Kazakhstan's context.

Firstly, Soviet legacies on gender norms in Central Asia will be discussed. Although Soviet policies promoted gender equality in the public sphere, the policies simultaneously reinforced traditional roles in the private sphere, especially in the household. This created a double role and a double burden for women as both workers and caregivers. Secondly, post-Soviet nationalism and the discussion on the 'return to tradition' will be discussed. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, newly emerged nationalist movements in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, emphasised the importance of promoting traditional values. This section will focus on the role of the state in top-down retraditionalisation of gender norms. Thirdly, there will be a focus on the Kazakhstani society and processes of bottom-up retraditionalisation will be discussed. Fourthly, the local concept of *uyat*⁸ will be elaborated. This cultural mechanism plays a key role as the manifestation of social pressure regulating women's behaviour, enforcing them to societal expectations such as around marriage, chastity, and motherhood. And fifthly, regional diversity and intersectionality will be discussed. Intersectional and post-Soviet feminism recognise and emphasise the importance of diversity within the region. It will be important to keep in mind the existence of differences as ethnicity and socioeconomic status among the participants and other women; such factors might become important to understand the capability of the women to

sociological understanding of marginalisation as a structural and symbolic positioning rather than a moral judgement.

⁸ Kazakh word for 'shame'; will be discussed more extensively in section 2.4.

remain unmarried.

In the next section, Walby's conceptualisation of patriarchy will be examined in detail, highlighting how her materialist and universal framework provides a structural understanding of where patriarchal norms operate. This discussion will set the stage for integrating the post-Soviet elements, creating a stronger theoretical foundation for this research.

1.4. Walby's materialist and universalist framework: what and where is patriarchy?

Walby's work does not just offer a useful definition of patriarchy but also offers a framework of patriarchy that is suitable for this research. It helps to understand what patriarchy is and where it operates. Her conceptualisation highlights that patriarchy is not simply about individual actions, like a man dominating a woman in a household, but that patriarchy is embedded in broader societal mechanisms that shape relationships and expectations between men and women; patriarchy is built into the structures, institutions and daily practices of society, and is about how social structures like education, culture, and religion work together to normalise and perpetuate male dominance. She focuses on patriarchy particularly through the lens of these different mechanisms, and this will be helpful to examine social pressure experienced by unmarried Kazakhstani women; not as the actions of individuals, but as a product of interconnected societal structures that sustain male dominance.

Walby discusses six structures through which patriarchy is organised and perpetuated; we can see patriarchy operating in these structures. The six structures are: 1) paid work; 2) household; 3) culture; 4) sexuality; 5) male violence; and 6) the state. These structures help us understand how male dominance manifests itself and is sustained across different spaces of society. Although the structures work relatively independently, they nevertheless have both reinforcing and blocking effects on each other (Walby, 1990, p.20). These six structures are helpful to realise *where* social pressure operates; the structures help to identify the spaces where social pressure on unmarried women happens. Below is a brief discussion of each structure in Walby's conceptualisation and its relevance to this research.

Paid work

The structure of paid employment focuses on, among other issues, the wage gap between men and women, job segregation, and the lower chance of high ranked job opportunities for women (Walby, 1990, p.25). Consequences of these issues, such as economic dependency and limited access to higher-paying jobs or less secure roles, can reinforce social expectation that women marry for financial stability. These tendencies can also be observed in Kazakhstan. Research shows that the most common form of discrimination in the workforce is still based on gender in Kazakhstan's labour market: "women of any age, with and without children, have far less chances to receive a job offer if their competitor is a man, even if the latter is less qualified or has less experience..." (Khamzina et al. 2021, p.2).

The gender wage gap in Kazakhstan remains persistent, reflecting structural inequalities within the labour market. According to Yemelina, Kemelbayeva, and Roshchin (2024), married women

tend to earn significantly less than unmarried women. This difference can be explained by the productivity theory, which suggests that married women, due to their childcare and housework responsibilities, may allocate less effort to paid work, resulting in lower productivity and wages. In contrast, married men tend to earn more than unmarried men (Yemelina et al., 2024, p.58).

On average, the gender wage gap in Kazakhstan was on average 28.7% during the period 2011-2019, with the gap ranging from 23.9% in 2012 to 32.4% in 2018. The study found no consistent trend of the gap either increasing or decreasing over time. While the explained part of the gap, factors such as education and age, became less significant, the unexplained part, likely due to discrimination or segregation, remained substantial throughout the period (Yemelina, et al., 2024, pp.61-62).

Yemelina et al. (2024) highlight that the gender wage gap in Kazakhstan is comparable to other former Soviet Union countries. One of the key factors contributing to the gap is industrial segregation, where women are more likely to work in lower-paid industries and sectors, such as education, healthcare, and social services, than men, who are overrepresented in more profitable work sectors, like the gas and oil industry, construction, and extractive industries. Moreover, the role of industrial segregation in the gender wage gap has increased over time, from 9.5% in 2011 to 22.8% in 2019, indicating that the persistence of the wage gap is mainly driven by structural inequalities within the labour market rather than differences in qualifications or experience (Khamzina et al., 2021, pp.2-5; Yemelina et al., 2024, pp.67-68). Additionally, women remain to be underrepresented in high-profile functions and key decision-making posts in the bank and public sector (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018, p.2).

Household

This structure of Walby (1990) reflects that unpaid domestic labour is disproportionately performed by women, including caregiving and housework. Walby highlights how household production strengthens broader patriarchal systems by ensuring men have more time and resources for public life and paid work.

In Kazakhstan, cultural norms place women usually as primary caregivers in families. Despite an increasing number of women in Kazakhstan that are engaged in paid employment, and a decline in the unemployment rate among women, there remains a significant difference between the unemployment rates of women (5,5%) and men (4,5%) (Yanovskaya et al., 2020, p.19). And although these trends are related to paid labour, it also has an influence on the household structure. There remains to exist an unequal distribution between women and men in doing household work. Women in Kazakhstan spend about two additional hours daily on unpaid domestic work compared to men. This includes tasks such as housekeeping work, childcare, and serving other family members (Yanovskaya et a, 2020, pp.17-19). This position of women, in which they are overrepresented in unpaid household work and are considered to be the caregivers in families, reinforces expectations that women marry to fulfil domestic roles, making the family structure central to patriarchy.

Violence

Another structure of Walby is (male) violence. She explains how violence is not only an individual act but also a structural tool used to sustain male dominance. She highlights how patriarchal systems tolerate or normalise violence to reinforce women's subordination and maintain gendered power dynamics (Walby, 1990, pp.128-130).

Although not the direct focus of this thesis, intimate partner violence and societal tolerance for it are examples of how patriarchy enforces control. The threat of violence also contributes to pressures for women to conform to traditional roles. Extreme forms of male violence are, unfortunately, not uncommon in Kazakhstan. After the murder of Saltanat Nukenova by her husband, and former government minister in Kazakhstan, Kuandyk Bishimbayev (Kumenov, 2024), a public outcry led to the introduction of legislation criminalising domestic violence, which was decriminalised in 2017. However, the law "fails to explicitly make domestic violence a stand-alone offense in the criminal code or elsewhere." (HRW, 2024). UN-statistics show that 'at least 80 women are killed every year in Kazakhstan by partners. The police receive around 300 domestic violence reports daily.' (UN Women, 2024a). The Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan (2024a) reported a sharp decline in the number of cases of violence (registered crimes) against women, with over 50.000 cases over 2023, compared to over 60.000 in 2022 and nearly 100.000 in 2019. However, the actual number of unreported cases is very likely much higher, and the report does not explain the significant decrease in registered cases.

Women are the primary victims of domestic violence, but children, particularly minors, are also frequently affected. According to Zhakysh et al. (2023), since 2017, there has been a steady increase in domestic violence offences, to over 1,000 reported cases in 2021, marking a rise by 2.8 times compared to 2017. Women account for the majority of domestic violence victims, with reported cases. Additionally, minors also form a significant portion of victims, with domestic crimes against minors increasing from 9 cases in 2017 to 69 cases in 2021 (Zhakysh et al., 2023, pp.114; 116). However, it is crucial to note that also these numbers reflect only the reported cases, while the actual prevalence of violence is likely much higher. This gap between reported and actual cases is likely to have grown further in this period given that domestic violence was decriminalised in 2017, making it less likely for women to report violence against themselves or their children. However, more recently in 2024 domestic violence was again legally criminalised in Kazakhstan (Sakenova, 2024). Therefore, it will be interesting to observe whether the number of reported cases of domestic violence will rise again in the coming years.

Furthermore, research indicates that in-laws also contribute to domestic violence against women. According to Zhussipbek & Nagayeva (2021), in-laws may exert control or even perpetrate violence against women, reinforcing patriarchal family norms and expectations. This highlights that violence against women is not solely inflicted by intimate partners but can also stem from extended family members.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasise that domestic violence predominantly occurs in the home, which, ironically, is the most dangerous place for women worldwide. According to the UN Women (2024b) report the home is often the most unsafe place for women, as intimate partner

violence and family violence are prevalent. This reality underscores the pervasive nature of male violence within patriarchal structures, as well as in Kazakhstan.

Culture

Cultural notions influence gender expectations. Social institutions, such as media, education and religion, play an important role in the shaping of societal attitudes that uphold male dominance. Biological structures, although often criticised, play an important role in the upholding of traditional approaches; the importance of biological structures as hormones, genetics, muscles, sexual characteristics uphold in many cultures notions about masculinity and femininity (Walby, 1990, p.90). Consequently, cultural narratives often idealise submissive and nurturing roles for women while celebrating men's leadership and independence. Cultural values, like shaming, can strongly affect the behaviour of individuals. In the Kazakhstani context, one might also think of *kelins*. The role of the *kelin* in Kazakhstan reflects patriarchal culture; *kelins* are often expected to prioritise family duties like caregiving and household chores, reinforcing traditional gender roles. This cultural norm positions women as subordinate within the family and limits their autonomy, illustrating how patriarchal values are maintained through everyday practices. In section 2.3. the topic and position of *kelins* will be discussed more extensively.

Sexuality

Control over women's sexuality is another mechanism of patriarchy. Walby examines whether sexuality is "the foundation of men's control over women." (Walby, 1990, p.109). This control over women is exercised through cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social practices that regulate women's sexual behaviour, such as chastity and moral purity. These rules restrict women's independence, tying their value to how well they submit to these societal standards (Walby, 1990. pp.124-127). This reinforces gender inequality and supports patriarchal systems of dominance, as also can be seen in Kazakhstan. Themes in relation to sexuality are underexposed in Kazakhstan and often are dominated by shame. Sexual education is not obligatory to be offered by schools, meaning that education about sexuality is often conveyed, or rather not conveyed, through cultural norms (Arystanbek, 2021), as well as self-exploration. In the Kazakhstani cultural context, heterosexism and homophobia are the dominant norms and affect all individuals within the society (Aitbayeva, 2024, pp.4-5). The existing ideas about the female's sexuality are generally conservative and moderated through the cultural notions that exist in Kazakhstan, that focus on norms such as chastity and virginity.

However, it is important to acknowledge that despite these dominant cultural norms, there is evidence of women (and men) negotiating these expectations. Thibault (2022a) highlights that while conservative views on female sexuality persist, there is also a desire for sexual emancipation among some women. To navigate societal expectations while exploring their sexual desires, some women opt for discreet sexual encounters, such as with professional male escorts, rather than engaging in casual sex with acquaintances. The Kazakhstani online sex market consist of a relatively high proportion of male sex workers (over 35%) compared to other

countries (often not beyond 5% and on average 20%), is largely heterosexual, and appears to be 'tailored for local women only' (Thibault, 2022a, p.386).

Contrary to the common stereotype that Kazakhstan is uniformly socially conservative, urban centres in Kazakhstan demonstrate more liberal behaviours among the youth. Although conservative attitudes towards premarital sexuality persist (Thibault, 2022a, pp.396-397), studies indicate that the average age of the first sexual experience is 16,5 years old, that about a third of the girls 15-19 have sexual experience, and over half of the 19 year old girls is sexually active, while at the same time a significant number of Kazakhstani women undergo surgical procedures such as hymenoplasty to repair the hymen and 'restore' their virginity. (Zhulmuhametova, 2018; Zanina, 2025). This nuance illustrates that despite conservative societal norms, there is a complex interplay between traditional values and individual agency. This paradox, where conservative ideals coexist with more liberal behaviours and practices, suggests that sexual behaviours and norms in (urban) Kazakhstan are more dynamic and nuanced than often assumed.

State

The state shapes and reinforces patriarchal norms through laws, policies, and institutional practices. Walby argues that state mechanisms often prioritise male authority and traditional family structures. She states that although state policies allowed women to enter the public sphere, few state policies have actually improved the position of women in the public sphere (Walby, 1990, p.171). In post-Soviet Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, state policies and nationalist movements often reinforce patriarchal norms under the guise of "returning to tradition." (Cleuziou & Dierenberger, 2016, p.196). This rhetoric of promoting tradition seeks to move away from Soviet-era efforts towards gender equality by implementing policies that limit women's independence. In practice, this means promoting family-centric and natalist policies that reinforce traditional gender roles.

The state and nationalist organisations tend to control views on women's bodies, limit their mobility, and normalise conservative norms such as early marriage, having (many) children, and bearing the primary responsibility for the family (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p.318; Tabyshalieva, 2000, p.55; Arystanbek, 2020). This trend becomes more obvious by analysing various state incentives and policies that encourage large families and specifically support mothers. Women are seen as central to maintaining family stability, which in turn is framed as crucial for social cohesion.

The Kazakhstani state actively supports large families through a range of awards, allowances, and other benefits aimed at mothers of multiple children. These initiatives explicitly encourage motherhood and the formation of large families, reinforcing the notion that women's primary role is to bear and raise children. The following benefits and policies illustrate this stance: 1) awards for mothers with many children: mothers who have given birth and raised six children receive the *Kumis Alka* (Silver Pendant Ornament), and seven children the *Altyn Alka* (Golden Pendant Ornament) (Gov.kz, 2025a); recognising them as exemplary mothers; 2) monthly state allowance for awarded mothers: mothers who have received the *Altyn Alka* or *Kumis Alka* award

are entitled to a monthly allowance as recognition of their contribution to the state (Gov.kz, 2025b); 3) housing prioritisation: awarded mothers with many children receive priority in receiving state-provided housing (Gov.kz, 2025c); 4) tax exemptions: these mothers are also exempt from paying certain taxes, including those related to land plots and vehicle ownership (Gov.kz, 2025c); 5) early pension rights: women who have given birth or adopted at least five children are eligible for pension payments when they turn 53, rather than the standard age of 61 for women (Gov.kz, 2025d); 6) Allowance for large families: families with four or more children are eligible for allowance, increasing for every addition child (Gov.kz, 2025e) .

These welfare policies highlight that, although the Kazakhstani constitution formally supports gender equality, the state's policies for large families and mothers implicitly position women primarily as mothers and caretakers, contrasting with the more economically oriented role often assigned to men. In this way, the state subtly upholds a patriarchal model by embedding traditional family norms into legal and social frameworks.

Private versus public patriarchy

A final important aspect of Walby's (1990) that must be made, is the existence of two forms of patriarchy: private and public. She reasons that private patriarchy operates primarily within the household, where men exert direct and individual control over women in the domestic sphere. In contrast, public patriarchy functions through structures outside the household, with institutions traditionally considered part of the public domain, such as workplaces, media, and the state, playing a central role in sustaining male dominance (Walby, 1990, p.178).

When talking about private patriarchy in relation to this thesis topic, one could think of family pressure on women to marry by a certain age to maintain family honour, or control over women's decisions by male relatives, such as discouraging them from striving for independence outside of the family/household framework. It is widespread for women in Kazakhstan after marriage and getting children to stop working entirely or find a job that allows them to come home 'early' to fulfil gendered duties, such as cooking, household tasks, and taking care of their family (Dittrich & Schrader, 2018, pp.320-321). It is relevant to mention that these duties regularly also include the care of parents-in-law, as Kazakh women traditionally start living in the family of the husband. Dittrich and Schrader argue that despite Kazakhstan's past in the Soviet Union, in which women showed relatively much progress in the public working sphere, "emancipation in the private sphere of the households lacked and lacks far behind... The conception of head of household is in most cases still attributed to males." (Dittrich & Schrader, 2018, p.329). However, their research also reveals that in some households, especially in urban areas or where women are the main breadwinners, decision-making can be more egalitarian or shared, even if the patriarchal model is maintained as a façade (Dittrich & Schrader, 2018, pp.329-331).

When discussing public patriarchy, one could think of efforts of the government to stress the importance of traditionalisation. In the government report 'The strategy of gender equality in

Kazakhstan: 2006-2016⁹ the Kazakhstani authorities pledge “to revive moral values, cultivate a positive image of family and marriage” (Akorda. 2005, p.9),¹⁰ which strengthens the vision on the norm that women should get married (Arystanbek, 2023, pp.312-313). But also, the norms in workplaces that favour men over women for leadership roles or the significant gender income gap, are examples of public patriarchy that might make marriage seem like a safer economic option, and thus pushing women to conform to the social patriarchal norms.

To analyse the social pressure that unmarried women in Kazakhstan experience, this study primarily focuses on the ways patriarchal norms are enforced in the private sphere. The private sphere is where familial expectations and direct control over women’s choices are most evident. Within the private sphere, family members act as key agents in enforcing societal norms around marriage, creating significant pressure for women to conform to social expectations, and thus to marry. However, it is important to acknowledge the influence of the public sphere of patriarchy. Public institutions, such as the media, education systems, and state policies, perpetuate patriarchal values by reinforcing traditional gender roles and idealising marriage.

Therefore, it is essential to recognise the interconnectedness of the private and public spheres of the patriarchal system, as well as it is essential to recognise the interconnectedness of the six different structures where patriarchy takes place. A representation of the six structures and two spheres in the patriarchal system can be seen in figure 1. By understanding private and public patriarchy as overlapping systems, this study highlights that the social pressure unmarried women face is not just an individual matter or family issue, but part of a larger cultural and institutional framework that maintains patriarchal dominance.

Explanation of the figure 1

The six structures of patriarchy in Walby’s conceptualisation are divided across the private and public spheres. The structures of household, sexuality, and male violence primarily fall within the private sphere, while paid work, culture, and the state belong mostly to the public sphere. However, these spheres are interconnected, as depicted by the overlapping purple ellipses. This overlap illustrates how Walby’s structures influence and reinforce each other. For example, family dynamics in the household (private sphere) may be shaped by public narratives like cultural norms or government policies.

In the interviews conducted for this thesis, the focus lies on the household structure within the private sphere. Nevertheless, the interconnectedness of the spheres and structures require attention to how public sphere dynamics, such as cultural ideologies or state practices, shape and sustain patriarchal pressures within the household. Simply said: the other structures and the public sphere help to understand the household structure in the private sphere better. This figure illustrates how patriarchal norms flow between the private and public spheres in Kazakhstani society. Family expectations in the private sphere, such as those related to

⁹ СТРАТЕГИЯ ГЕНДЕРНОГО РАВЕНСТВА В РЕСПУБЛИКЕ КАЗАХСТАН НА 2006 - 2016 ГОДЫ

¹⁰ «Возродить нравственные ценности, культивировать позитивный образ семьи и брака.»

marriage, are shaped and reinforced by societal expectations from the public sphere, like cultural values or state policies. These interactions create a cycle where traditional ideals are continuously upheld, making it challenging for unmarried women to resist societal pressures.

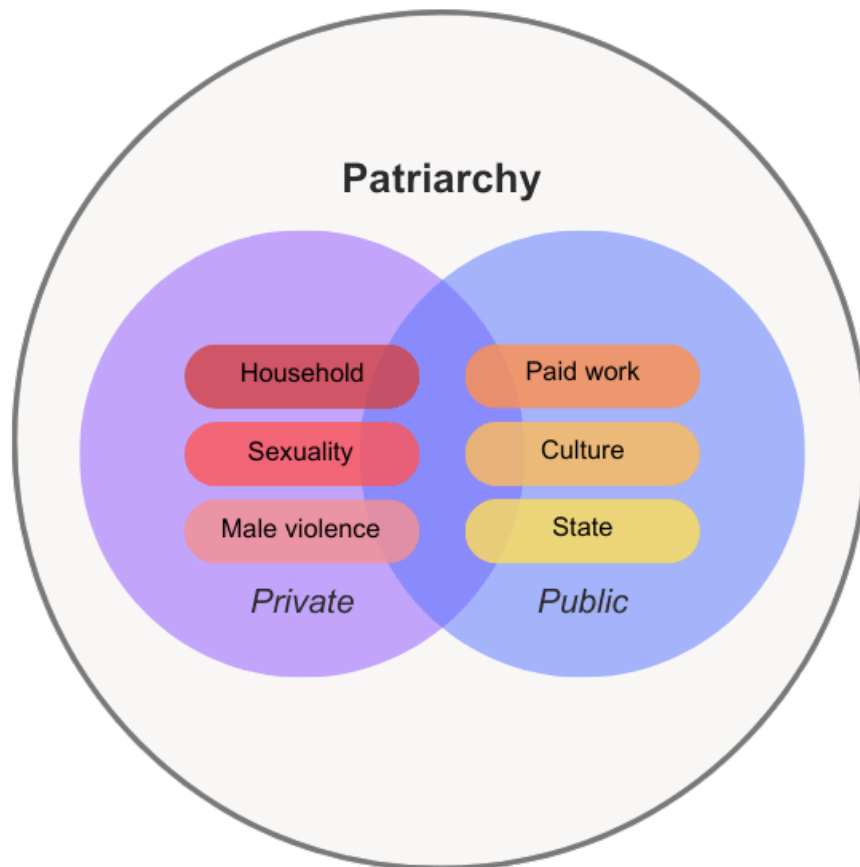


Figure 1: Sylvia Walby's conceptualisation of Patriarchy: Six structures across public and private spheres

1.5. Chapter conclusion

This chapter established a foundation for understanding patriarchy by defining the concept, examining and critiquing various feminist perspectives, and outlining a theoretical framework suitable for analysing patriarchal norms in the Kazakhstani context. Drawing primarily on Walby's materialist and universalist approach, the framework helps to identify where patriarchal norms operate and how societal structures perpetuate male dominance. Additionally, while not adopting post-Soviet feminism as a standalone theory, this chapter acknowledges insights from post-Soviet feminist critiques to better understand the specific cultural and historical dynamics relevant to Kazakhstan.

However, understanding the concept of patriarchy and identifying where it manifests alone is not sufficient to fully comprehend how gender norms operate in Kazakhstan. To gain a more specific and nuanced understanding, it is essential to consider the contextual influences that shape these norms. Therefore, the next chapter will explore the cultural, historical, and social contexts that influence gender expectations in Kazakhstan. In line with the critique of post-Soviet feminism, discussed in 1.3, it will address the legacy of Soviet gender norms, the impact of post-Soviet nationalism, the role of the state, the cultural mechanism of *uyat*, and the importance of intersectionality and regional diversity. This contextual background will lay the groundwork for understanding how patriarchal ideals have been shaped and reinforced over time, and how they continue to impact unmarried women today in Kazakhstan.

2. Contextual influences

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is impossible to understand attitudes towards gender roles and the experiences and forms of social pressure on unmarried women without taking a closer look at contextual influences in the region and in Kazakhstan. Gender roles in present-day Kazakhstan are shaped by a complex legal past, including Soviet-era lawmaking, post-Soviet reforms with nationalist undertones, and changing social dynamics.

With the Soviet Union's collapse, newly independent states across Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, emphasised the promotion of traditional values, moving away from Soviet-inspired social transformation. This chapter builds on those continuities and shifts by examining how patriarchal norms are reinforced both from above, through government policies and nationalist rhetoric, and from below, through societal expectations and cultural narratives. Drawing on Walby's (1990) framework of the six structures of patriarchy, it explores how the Kazakhstani state promotes ideals of marriage, motherhood, and family, while also analysing how social norms shape women's everyday experiences and decisions.

Moreover, the chapter highlights how intersecting factors such as language, ethnicity, and urban-rural divides influence women's experiences, particularly around marriage, family, and personal freedom. By considering these overlapping aspects, this chapter sets the stage for understanding the gender expectations that many Kazakhstani women encounter and how they may adopt, adapt, or challenge these constraints.

2.1. Soviet legacies on gender roles

To better understand the current practices and perspectives on gender roles in Kazakhstan, it is necessary to look at the Soviet legacies and how these significantly influenced and changed the (current) gender roles. The Soviet regime ought to promote gender equality by integrating women into the workforce, education, and political life, and by doing so, they undermined patriarchal and religious traditions. This all was part of the Soviet Union's broader ideological project to modernise, secularise, and industrialise its society. Although the policies were often framed as liberatory for women, they introduced their own contradictions. Addressing and incorporating the Soviet legacy in this thesis is critical for contextualising and understanding the

contemporary gender dynamics and the experiences of Kazakhstani women today, as the Soviet past still continues to influence societal expectations and the legal corpus. Using Walby's six structures of patriarchy as an analytical lens, this section examines how Soviet policies reshaped women's roles in the workforce, household, culture, state policies, and sexuality, creating both opportunities and constraints for women in (Soviet) Kazakhstan.

Under Soviet rule, significant efforts were made to transform traditional attitudes and practices on gender roles. Women were actively mobilised to participate in public life; the concept of a 'new Soviet woman' (Constantine, 2007, p.115) that was educated, employed, and politically active was created. Newly defined roles and expectations of women in Central Asia were introduced and intended to symbolise progress and a break with the 'backward' past of the Islamic Central Asians; women were to be liberated. This liberation of women from patriarchal oppression was presented not only as a moral imperative, but also as a strategic aspect of the Soviet project of modernisation. Laws promoting women's rights to education, divorce, and abortion were adopted early on, reflecting the Soviet commitment to reshape the family and gender roles (Thibault, 2018, pp. 38–39). In the Muslim regions of the Soviet Union, including Central Asia, the promotion of women's rights served a dual purpose: firstly, to achieve gender equality and, secondly, perhaps more importantly, to weaken the authority of the Islamic clergy and religious customs. As Thibault notes, Central Asian women were identified as a "surrogate proletariat" because of their subordinate position within both family and society; their liberation was seen as essential to the construction of a modern socialist order (Thibault, 2018, p. 38).

Women in the workforce? Household: the double burden

Using Walby's framework, these transformations primarily affected two patriarchal structures: paid work and the household. Despite the ideological aim at gender equality, the realities of Soviet policies were often more complex. Traditional gender norms persisted in many areas, particularly in rural Kazakhstan, where the state's influence was less visible. Practices such as arranged marriages and the expectation for women to prioritise family roles remained prevalent, creating a tension between Soviet ideals and local practices.

Under the Soviet Union, literacy among Central Asian women increased rapidly and women gained wider access to university education. Nevertheless, while the Soviet state condemned and targeted religious and traditional Central Asian practices, it remained emphasising the importance of motherhood for women; women in Kazakhstan were not expected to just become a worker and politically active, but also to be the housekeeper and caretaker of their family (Urbaeva, 2019, p.208).

The Soviet woman was thus ought to be active in both the private and public spheres. This apparently paradoxical result is examined by Kandiyoti (2007) and further discussed by Cleuziou and Direnberger (2016). Kandiyoti (2007) argues that three key aspects of this paradox stand out. First, the integration of women into the workforce, which offered them opportunities for economic participation but also identified their responsibilities. Women gained access to employment and became integrated in the workforce. However, their responsibilities were not reduced but rather expanded instead. Second, the Soviet state's promotion of

motherhood as a social duty, which reinforced traditional gender roles despite the state's promotion of equality between men and women. Women were expected to contribute to the economy while simultaneously fulfilling traditional maternal roles. Third, the Soviet state's control over family life, where it replaced traditional patriarchal authority with its own 'modern' paternalistic governance, leaving women caught between public and private expectations. By doing so, the Soviet state dictated both women's roles and behaviour. Women were granted access to the public sphere, their position in the private sphere remained subordinate in the 'modernised' patriarchal Soviet society (Cleuziou & Dirgenberger, 2016, p.199). The development of the double burden in post-Soviet Kazakhstan will be discussed in 2.3.

Legacy and continuity

The Soviet Union's contradictory gender policies did not eliminate patriarchy but instead reorganised it under state control. These policies laid the groundwork for both women's emancipation and their continued subordination, creating a structural foundation for retraditionalisation in the post-Soviet period. It is obvious that the (Soviet) state, also a key structure of Walby's conceptualisation, played an immense role in the transformation of gender roles during Soviet times but also in the post-Soviet period. Key Soviet legacies that continue to persist in contemporary Kazakhstan include the expectation that women must balance professional and domestic responsibilities; they continue to endure the double burden. Moreover, the state's role in regulating gender norms is taken over by post-Soviet Central Asian regimes, albeit in different forms, and the perception of women's value being tied to their reproductive and family roles continue to play significant legacies.

As Kazakhstan transitioned to independence, these Soviet structures did not disappear, but rather transformed and were adapted to new political, economic and cultural forces that emerged in post-Soviet states. The next section explores how these post-Soviet transformations shaped processes of top-down retraditionalisation, focusing on how the Kazakhstani state has actively redefined gender roles through nationalist discourse, policy strategies, and legal reforms. It demonstrates how the legacy of Soviet gender regulation has contributed to a state-led revival and promotion of traditional values, particularly through an emphasis on family, motherhood, and prescribed roles for women in society.

2.2. Post-Soviet nationalism: retraditionalisation from above

Although the analysis of this research, as mentioned before, will focus on social pressure in the family and in the private sphere, it is necessary to also take a glance at the public sphere, since the different structures interact with each other. An important role in the transformation of gender roles in present-day Kazakhstan is played by the Kazakhstani state. This section will focus on the position of the Kazakhstani state in influencing gender roles through its public discourse on retraditionalisation.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the newly emerged independent Central Asian states sought to develop new national narratives to distance themselves from their Soviet past. This process of nation-building relied heavily on developing and redefining the 'national identity' of the states.

Tradition was promoted and introduced by the authorities of Central Asian states to “establish national(ist) narratives that helped legitimise their claims over a certain territory.” (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p.311).

A central aspect to this nation-building narrative was the revival of traditional narratives and gender roles; this process of ‘returning to tradition’ or ‘retraditionalising’ was an answer of Central Asian regimes to distance themselves of the progressive Soviet policies regarding the ‘women’s question’ (Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016, p.196). This retraditionalisation process was not merely a nostalgic return to the pre-Soviet past and to distance the state from its Soviet legacy, but also a politically motivated strategy to consolidate power and foster national cohesion (Beyer & Finke, 2019, pp.318-322).

Women as symbols of the nation: motherhood and marriage

In post-Soviet Central Asia, women, and their femininity, were often positioned as central symbols of the nation, embodying aspects such as honour, purity, morality, and cultural essence. Cleuziou and Direnberger (2016) describe how women’s roles as mothers and caregivers became essential to the nationalist agenda. Considering and promoting motherhood as a national duty emphasised the reproductive role of women, which was seen as a way to ensure demographic growth and cultural continuity, but also to replace the provisions that were no longer provided by the post-socialist states. This narrative limited women’s opportunities for social and political participation, reinforcing traditional roles within the family and community. This emphasis on women as symbols of the nation is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions. By presenting women as the embodiment of cultural values and morality, states effectively policed women’s behaviour to align with national ideals. For example, practices such as virginity and chastity were glorified as markers of cultural authenticity in Kyrgyzstan (Kim, 2020), but to a lesser degree in Kazakhstan (Thibault, 2022a).

Similarly, in Kazakhstan, state narratives promoted new nationalist discourses promoting traditional gender ideals, rooted in modesty, obedience, and domesticity. This shapes women’s roles in line with these nationalist projects. The narratives are largely constructed by male political elites, who dominate the nation-building process and define the symbolic role of women within it, often positioning them in subordinate and supportive roles (Ozawa, Durrani & Thibault, 2024, p.5; Kudaibergenova, 2018). As Peshkova (2021) argues, such re-traditionalist gender discourses reflect a selective revival of customs and gender roles, where women are framed as supporters within the family while men are positioned as financial and public leaders. This revival aligns closely with post-Soviet nationalism across the region, reinforcing patriarchal structures by framing traditional gender roles as central to national identity and cultural preservation (Peshkova, 2021, p. 370).

In the context of post-Soviet nation-building, women are often encouraged to embody culturally acceptable roles aligned with state-defined ideals of femininity. While this is not enforced through direct state control, deviations from these norms, such as delaying marriage or rejecting motherhood, are at times framed in public discourse as problematic, not only for the individual

but for the cultural integrity of the nation (Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016, p.198). As an example, the women's march in Almaty on International Women's Day 2021, in which hundreds of women marched for gender equality, faced backlash from certain political figures. For instance, Isa Kazybek, a Member of the Mazhilis for the Ak Zhol party publicly criticised the event, calling it "an act that destroys our national mentality, destroys our national code"¹¹ and Aigul Orynbek, a Member of the National Council of Public Trust under the President of Kazakhstan, reacted that participants "'confused the rights of women' and 'the rights of wombs': 'There are many wombs, but it is disgusting to think about what a lustful womb is capable of. It contradicts our mentality. This is not women's rights, but sexual desire'"¹² (Mamashuly, 2021). These reactions exemplify how women's public actions and calls for equal gender rights can be framed by some political figures as threats to national values and cultural norms. Such framing serves to discourage deviations from traditional gender roles by portraying them as not merely personal choices but as challenges to the nation's cultural integrity.

Kazakhstani policy on gender roles

Despite various strategies and laws that have been adopted and aim to institutionalise gender equality in contemporary Kazakhstan, such as the earlier mentioned *Strategy of Gender Equality in Kazakhstan: 2006–2016*, but also the *Law On State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women* (Adilet, 2009a)¹³, *the Law Concerning Prevention of Domestic Violence* (Adilet, 2009b)¹⁴, *the Code on Marriage and Family* (Adilet, 2011)¹⁵, and the *Concept of family and gender policies in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030* (Adilet, 2016)¹⁶, gender inequality remains a persistent issue in practice. This gap between legal commitments and societal outcomes reflects what Hunnicutt (2009) has described as a situation in which the state outwardly promotes gender equality, yet in practice upholds and reproduces patriarchal structures, meaning there is a gap between patriarchal structure and ideology.

A notable example of this is the continued underrepresentation of women in political institutions. In recent years, a quota was introduced requiring that at least 30% of candidates on party lists for the Mazhilis represent one of three categories: women, youth, or persons with disabilities¹⁷(Adilet, 1995). While framed as a step toward political inclusivity, the fact that this

¹¹ «Актом, который разрушает наш национальный менталитет, разрушает наш национальный код»

¹² «смешали права женщин» «права матки». «Есть много маток, но отвратительно думать о том, что способна воделеющая матка. Это противоречит нашему менталитету. Это — не права женщин, а сексуальное желание.»

¹³ О государственных гарантиях равных прав и равных возможностей мужчин и женщин

¹⁴ О профилактике бытового насилия

¹⁵ О браке (супружестве) и семье

¹⁶ Концепции семейной и гендерной политики в Республике Казахстан до 2030 года

¹⁷ The Constitutional Law on Elections has been regularly amended since its introduction in 1995. It refers to the quota as following: «В партийном списке количество представителей трех категорий: женщин, молодежи, лиц с инвалидностью – по совокупности должно составлять не менее тридцати процентов от общего числа включенных в него лиц.» [“In the party list, the number of representatives of three categories: women, youth, and persons with disabilities - in total must be at least thirty percent of the total number of persons included in it.”] Stipulated in Article 89(4) of the Constitutional Law on Elections.

quota is shared among three groups, rather than applying specifically to women, indicates that the legal framework does not directly prioritise full gender equality in political representation. Nevertheless, research by Assylgozhina, Gaur and Kalenova (2023) show that a majority of the population supports maintaining the quota, as they believe that its removal would only deepen existing inequalities. In practice, women remain underrepresented in political office. Following the 2021 parliamentary elections, women held just under a quarter of the seats in the Mazhilis (Assylgozhina et al., 2023, p. 21).

The state's active role in promoting traditional family roles through policy and legislation should not be overlooked. Since independence, Kazakhstan's government has frequently framed social development around family-centred values, promoting traditional and cultural traditions that implicitly reinforce gendered expectations. This tendency is reflected in long-term strategies, such as the *Strategy of Gender Equality in Kazakhstan: 2006–2016*. Although presumably aimed at achieving gender equality, the Strategy simultaneously promoted a vision of society where traditional family values played a central role. As mentioned in 1.4, the document pledged “to revive moral values, cultivate a positive image of family and marriage” (Akorda, 2005, p.9), revealing a state vision of social development that places the family at its centre. While not explicitly prescribing gender roles, such framing implicitly reinforces traditional expectations, particularly by upholding marriage and motherhood as normative ideals, potentially marginalising women who do not conform to this model.

This vision was reiterated in 2024, when the *Law on Ensuring the Rights of Women and the Safety of Children* (Adilet, 2024)¹⁸ introduced amendments to the 2011 *Code on marriage (matrimony) and family* (Adilet, 2011). These amendments explicitly promote traditional family values as a core principle of national policy. Subclauses 9 and 10, which were added to Article 2 of the Code, state:

“Protection, preservation, strengthening, and promotion of traditional family values, based on the reinforcement of the institution of marriage and family, fatherhood, motherhood, and childhood.”¹⁹

“Ensuring the moral and spiritual upbringing of children in the spirit of respect for universal, national, traditional, cultural, and family values, insofar as they do not contradict the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan.”(Adilet, 2024)²⁰

In addition, over the years, several legislative proposals and discussions have emerged that would disadvantage childless and unmarried individuals and seek to make divorce

¹⁸ О внесении ... обеспечения прав женщин и безопасности детей

¹⁹ «Защиты, сохранения, укрепления и продвижения традиционных семейных ценностей, основанных на укреплении института брака и семьи, отцовства, материнства и детства.»

²⁰ «Обеспечения нравственного и духовного воспитания детей в духе уважения к общечеловеческим, национальным, традиционным, культурным и семейным ценностям в части, не противоречащей Конституции Республики Казахстан и законодательству Республики Казахстан.»

more difficult. For example, in 2003, 2010 and 2014 (Kosenov, 2010; Yesenkulova, 2014) an initiative was discussed that proposed to raise taxes on childless and unmarried people; an idea that resurfaced in February 2025 following public remarks by Member of Parliament Bolat Kerimbek (Shashkina, 2025). A second proposal, put forward by Member of Parliament Berik Beysengaliev, suggested significantly increasing the costs of formalising divorce (Zhulmuhametova, 2025).

Although these proposals have not been formalised, they reflect a state logic that prioritises traditional family structures and reinforces marriage and parenthood as the preferred life path within the framework of national identity. The suggestion to financially penalise single or childless individuals further contributes to the normalisation of marriage and motherhood in Kazakhstani society and may heighten the pressure experienced by women who do not conform to this ideal. In addition, current existing welfare policies tend to promote the role of women as mothers more strongly than that of childless women, for instance by awarding specific benefits and honours to women who raise multiple children (see section 1.4). These examples show that the Kazakhstani state continues to play an active role in shaping gender norms through policies that idealise family life and motherhood, yet this top-down retraditionalisation is closely intertwined with bottom-up societal dynamics, which will be the focus of the following section.

2.3. Social dynamics

Besides exertion from the state, the retraditionalisation process and focus on gender roles should also be examined from within society. This section focuses on bottom-up retraditionalisation, illustrating how the 'return to tradition', or promotion of tradition, is a process shaped by both the state and Kazakhstani society. While state policies have played a significant role in shaping gender roles, societal norms and expectations also contribute to the persistence of traditional values. This section examines how social pressures, particularly surrounding marriage and motherhood, continue to reinforce patriarchal structures. The concepts of the double burden and the *kelin* system highlight the way cultural expectations persist and evolve, impacting women's roles within the family and society. Through these processes, women navigate societal demands regarding marriage and motherhood, balancing personal aspirations with the pressures of conforming to deeply ingrained and internalised norms.

To better understand the societal emphasis on marriage and the persistence of traditional gender expectations, it is helpful to first briefly consider some demographic indicators. These figures provide a comparative view of marriage patterns in Kazakhstan and the European Union, and help to place the social pressures discussed in this study into context. In Kazakhstan, marriage remains a central societal expectation, particularly for women. In 2024, the average age at first marriage for women was 25,2 years (The Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2024b), significantly lower than in European countries, where the youngest recorded average was 28,3 years in Romania and the oldest 36,9 years in Spain in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024a)²¹. The marriage rate in Kazakhstan stood at 6,13 marriages per 1000

²¹ Due to the absence of EU averages for the average age at first marriage for women, the lowest and highest recorded values have been used.

inhabitants (The Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2024c), compared to an average of 4,0 marriages per 1000 inhabitants across the European Union in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024b). While the divorce rate in Kazakhstan was slightly higher at 2,01 divorces per 1000 inhabitants (The Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2024c) compared to 1,6 in the EU (Eurostat, 2024b), marriage continues to be a socially dominant institution. At the same time, divorce has become relatively common and is increasingly socially accepted (Dall’Agnola & Thibault, 2021). These figures illustrate that, although attitudes toward divorce are shifting, strong societal expectations around marriage persist, which helps to explain the considerable social pressure unmarried women experience in Kazakhstan.

The development of the double burden

The double burden, previously discussed as a Soviet legacy, has not disappeared in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Instead, it has remained relevant, and the double burden of balancing professional and domestic responsibilities persisted as the norm for many women. It can be argued that the burden on women in Central Asia became heavier due to the collapse of the Soviet welfare state. As McMann (2007, p.234) observes: “Central Asians remember the Soviet ‘nanny’ state that met essential needs. Led by the Communist Party, the state provided extensive social services to the population... Soviet citizens could expect basic cradle to grave support”. Where the Soviet-government provided free or subsidised child support, education, healthcare, jobs, and much more, were these services no longer, or insufficiently, provided by the independent Central Asian republics. Families now had to provide themselves with such services (McMann, 2007, p.235; Beyer & Finke, 2019, p.319), resulting often in expecting women to compensate for such losses within the household sphere, all while maintaining professional roles outside the household as well.

The interaction of economic instability and cultural retraditionalisation has reinforced the expectation that women should be both economic providers and primary caretakers, making gender roles more rigid rather than more flexible in the post-Soviet period. According to Walby’s framework, this reflects the intersection of household patriarchy and economic constraints, where unpaid domestic labour continues to be feminised, despite women’s increasing participation in the workforce.

Family dynamics

Another important manifestation of retraditionalisation in Kazakhstan is the reinforcement of the concept of *kelin*, particularly in the context of gender norms and patriarchal values. The concept of *kelin* has deep historical roots in Kazakh family structures, where newly married women are traditionally expected to assume subordinate roles within their husband’s family. These responsibilities typically include household chores, caregiving and serving their husband and in-laws, preparing food, and showing respect to family members (Kudaibergenova, 2018, p.380).

Based on this, one might think that the role of *kelin* is merely reinforcing patriarchal family structures and contributes to economically marginalising the *kelin* by prioritising domestic duties

and subordinating her personal aspirations. However, the role of the *kelin* as being solely submissive overlooks the more nuanced ways in which women navigate these expectations. Nurtas-Kalikeyeva (2024) argues that while the *kelin* role can be restrictive, it can offer a platform for women to gain respect by managing their duties and demonstrates nuanced forms of individual agency within the boundaries of the *kelin*'s living situation in her husband's family (Nurtas-Kalikeyeva, 2024, p.139). This perspective challenges the perception of the *kelin* role as only oppressive and subordinated, highlighting that it can also serve as a means for women to navigate family expectations while exercising agency within the framework of traditional family dynamics.

An important factor in understanding the complexity of the *kelin* role is recognising that the choice of living with the husband's family is not always rooted in tradition alone. As Nurtas-Kalikeyeva (2024) points out, some newlywed couples purposefully opted for living with the husband's family, not simply to conform to traditional norms, but as a practical strategy to save money for future independence (Nurtas-Kalikeyeva, 2024, pp. 149-151). This choice reflects how urbanisation and social change have shaped the way couples navigate economic and social realities; taking the role of *kelin* is no longer in every case merely based on traditional grounds. In this context, living with the husband's family becomes a temporary and pragmatic solution rather than a rigid adherence to patriarchal expectations. This demonstrates that while the *kelin* role may appear to reinforce traditional values, it is also shaped by modern socioeconomic considerations.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the portrayal of the *kelin* as a subordinate and self-sacrificing figure, as depicted in cultural media, is not entirely detached from reality. While some women strategically navigate their roles or make pragmatic choices regarding living in their husband's family, many others continue to face significant pressure to conform to traditional expectations. As Kudaibergenova (2018) points out, the persistent depiction of the *kelin* as an obedient, submissive and compliant daughter-in-law reflects the lived experiences of numerous women who struggle with balancing personal aspirations and familial duties. This indicates that, despite examples of agency and adaptation, the *kelin* role often remains rooted in patriarchal values that can marginalise women economically and socially; a role, as is shown in Kudaibergenova's work, that is internalised by many married women and actively reinforced by them.

There still exists a traditional and subordinated image of the *kelin*, which is also widely present in societal perceptions. These traditional norms are often reinforced by women themselves, and the role of the *kelin* continues to play a significant part in Kazakh society Kudaibergenova, (2018). However, research at the individual level shows that there are cases where *kelins* demonstrate more agency than might initially be expected from the traditional perspective (Nurtas-Kalikeyeva, 2024). This indicates that the traditional concept of the *kelin* is being reshaped; while traditional norms are being reinforced, modern elements of agency and decision-making are also emerging. Women navigate this role in various ways, blending elements of tradition with modern aspirations. This shows that developments in gender norms

are not solely imposed from above but also shaped from within society itself, indicating that bottom-up processes are an essential part of the ongoing discussion around retraditionalisation.

Moreover, although the concept of *kelin* primarily encompasses married women, the prospect of becoming a *kelin* also affects some unmarried women. Several participants shared that they consciously avoid dating men from conservative families, particularly ethnic Kazakhs from South Kazakhstan, because they do not want to take on the *kelin* role. It shows how for these women, the prospect of becoming a *kelin* still plays an important role in partner choice, and thus sometimes in getting married or not.

Marriage and motherhood: social status

Marriage and motherhood remain central to women's social status in Kazakhstan, shaping expectations about their roles within the family and society. While state policies reinforce these norms from above, societal attitudes also play a crucial role in bottom-up retraditionalisation, where families, communities, and cultural narratives sustain and reproduce traditional gender roles. Marriage is not simply a personal choice but a societal expectation, particularly for women. Unmarried women beyond their mid-20s often face social scrutiny and pressure, as their single status is perceived as a failure to fulfil expected gender roles (Werner, 2009). Families and communities actively encourage marriage, seeing it as essential for securing economic stability, family honour, and social acceptance. These expectations are particularly strong in rural areas, though they persist in urban settings as well, especially in southern Kazakhstan, and in cities like Shymkent (Kabylova, 2022; Saparova, 2024).

Commercio (2020) explains that many women view marriage as a strategic decision, shaped by economic dependence and social security concerns. Although she focuses on Kyrgyzstan, the context is similar to that of south Kazakhstan. In contexts where job opportunities and state welfare support for women are limited, marriage provides a form of protection; not just financially but also in terms of social belonging. This reflects Walby's (1990) argument that economic dependency sustains patriarchal structures, as women's access to resources is often mediated through marriage.

Beyond marriage, motherhood is viewed as a woman's ultimate purpose, with childbearing seen as both a personal duty and a national contribution (Cleuziou & Dierenberger, 2016). Women who delay, reject or forgo motherhood risk facing social stigma, as bearing children is deeply ingrained in public consciousness and narrowly related to upholding cultural values. Research by Smagambet and Ashirbayeva (2022) on public perceptions on childfree families show that almost 90% of the respondents held negative associations, while an almost as big percentage held positive attitudes towards families with multiple children (Smagambet & Ashirbayeva, 2022, pp.86-87). These findings suggest that societal norms continue to play a significant role in shaping expectations around womanhood and reproduction; women being childless remains to be broadly socially stigmatised, considered as selfish and seen as a failure (Dall'Agnola & Thibault, 2021, p.4).

This societal norm of becoming a mother was also described by some of the participants of this thesis. One participant shared: “In theory, I could become the next president of Kazakhstan. But if I am not married and not a mother, people would still look down on me, as if I have nothing achieved in life”. This quote illustrates how motherhood continues to be seen as a central achievement in defining female success in Kazakhstani society, regardless of other accomplishments.

The expectation to marry and bear children is continuously reinforced through media, family traditions, and public discourse, making it a clear example of bottom-up retraditionalisation. Popular narratives in television, literature, and social media often romanticise marriage and motherhood as the natural goals of a woman’s life, subtly discouraging alternative life paths. As Kudaibergenova (2018) shows in her analysis of the *kelin* discourse, these gender ideals are not only shaped by formal institutions, but actively maintained and circulated through cultural products like comedy shows, mobile apps, and everyday humour. Moreover, as Rezvushkina (2020) notes, Kazakh women, particularly those from the urban middle class, not only experience societal pressure to become mothers, but also actively engage in what she terms “intensive motherhood”, which blends traditional maternal roles with modern ideals of educational ambition and class performance. These women take on the dual task of reproducing both the biological and cultural identity of the nation by raising children in ways that align with national ideals and community expectations (Rezvushkina, 2020, pp. 136, 139-140).

However, as Dall’Agnola and Thibault (2021) show, the societal reality is more complex. Although marriage and motherhood continue to hold high symbolic value, divorce has become increasingly common in Kazakhstan. Between 2014 and 2019, every third marriage ended in divorce, and most divorces occurred within the first decade of marriage (Dall’Agnola & Thibault, 2021, pp. 2–3). The authors show that while older generations often view divorce negatively, younger and university-educated women are more accepting of it. As previously mentioned, as divorce is so common in Kazakhstan, it has become more socially acceptable (Dall’Agnola & Thibault, 2021, p.4). Nevertheless, being childless remains highly stigmatised, stressing the importance of motherhood in Kazakhstan.

2.4. *Uyat*

Social pressure can take various forms, ranging from subtle persuasion strategies to straight on coercion, and is often used to influence the decision-making of individuals and make them adhere to societal norms. The existence of social pressure in Kazakhstan is not something unique, however, there is a concept in Kazakhstan, called ‘*uyat*’, through which social pressure is manifested regularly. *Uyat* is the Kazakh word for ‘shame’, and functions as a mechanism in Central Asian societies²² that regulates the people, “constrains individuals” behaviours, and encourage them to conform to the dominant social norms.” (Thibault & Caron, 2022, p.1)

Uyat is particularly significant in Kazakhstan (as well as in other Central Asian countries)

²² Like in Kazakh, the Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Turkmen languages use the word *uyat/uyat* to refer to shame, in Tajik the words *ayb* or *sharm* are used.

because it not only disapproves of actions deemed unacceptable but shames individuals until they conform, especially women. While social pressure exists in all societies, the local manifestation in Kazakhstan is often connected to this practice of public and familial shaming. As a result, failing to meet certain expectations, such as marrying by a socially prescribed age, may lead to consequences like exclusion, criticism, or humiliation.

From Walby's (1990) perspective, *uyat* can be seen as part of a broader patriarchal structure, operating in both public (media, social discourse) and private (family, community) spheres. By framing deviations from societal expectations as sources of shame, *uyat* normalises male dominance and compels women to internalise patriarchal norms, including the imperative to marry.

Defining Uyat

In essence, *uyat* is a form of collective shaming aimed at preserving specific social standards, often concerning femininity, marriage, and sexual conduct. The collective shaming takes place foremostly in the familial structure. Failure to conform is met with public censure, gossip, or moral condemnation, which can create intense pressure for women to marry 'on time' or behave in ways deemed appropriately feminine (Caron, 2022).

Specifically for unmarried women, *uyat* translates into constant reminders that they should marry, become dutiful wives, or refrain from 'indecent' actions such as living independently or dating openly. *Uyat* is used as a way to deter an individual from doing something that is considered harmful; the practice of *uyat* condemns people and places fear on them (Thibault & Caron, 2022, pp.1-2).

The practice of *uyat* can be considered as restrictive, repressive, and harmful (Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021). To understand this stance better, it is important to have a closer look at the conceptualisation of *uyat*. As Caron (2022) argues, guilt arises from an individual's conscience, where actions that conflict with personal moral principles cause discomfort, guiding behaviour through an internal sense of right and wrong. In contrast, fear originates from the anticipation of punishment, helping maintain social order but also potentially leading to (self-)oppression when imposed by societal norms rather than personal conscience. *Uyat* is a form of fear, not guilt, as it originates from the fear of being judged and ostracised by others for deviating from societal expectations. This form of fear is repressive because it subordinates individual autonomy, turning societal norms into a tool of control. In a culture like in Kazakhstan, *uyat* creates a system where fear of shame can override personal conscience, leading individuals to conform to restrictive norms. This can result in serious social consequences, including self-suppression and even extreme actions like suicide, as people fear rejection and loss of social status.

Manifestations of uyat in Kazakhstan

The use of *uyat* in Kazakhstan is widespread and not confined to private life or interpersonal relationships; it also appears in public spheres such as politics and education. Thibault (2022b) demonstrates how *uyat* is used as a method to tackle bad governance of public officials, and

observed two distinct patterns in how evident criticism and the leak of compromising materials on public officials are used to discipline them and manage public perceptions. Firstly, she shows how powerful political figures, such as the President or Prime Minister, publicly criticise high-ranking officials for failing to carry out their duties effectively. Yet, despite these displays of disapproval, the officials in question often remain in their positions. Rather than serving as genuine accountability, such criticism seems intended to signal to the public that the government recognises governance issues and is taking action; but without altering the actual power structure. Secondly, she observes that compromising material and publicised scandals more often target lower-ranking officials, particularly in cases involving personal or moral misconduct. These individuals are far more likely to be dismissed. In contrast, high-level figures are almost never exposed through such leaks, likely due to the risks involved in publicly criticising them, combined with self-censorship and tight media control (Thibault, 2022b, pp.158-159). These patterns reveal how public shaming in the political sphere, shaped by the cultural logic of *uyat*, is used in ways that preserve the existing political order.

Uyat, however, also manifests in private life and in interpersonal relationships, and manifests itself differently. Women in Kazakhstan may find themselves giving in to undesired marriages, including bride kidnappings, out of fear of bringing shame upon themselves or their families. In her research, Werner (2009) shows how women who got abducted against their will to marry a man, accepted their fate, nevertheless. She explains how abducted women resisting marriage could face detrimental consequences in the future; the fear of being shamed by the people in the woman's environment (family, groom and accomplices, and the groom's family,) is bigger than the fear to get married forcefully (Werner, 2009, p.323). It should be noted, however, that bride kidnapping is more prevalent in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and less in Kazakhstan. While kidnapping is criminalised in Kazakhstan²³ (Adilet, 2014), bride kidnapping remains to be a problem in Kazakhstani society and legislation. Under current laws "perpetrators can avoid criminal liability if the kidnapped individual is released unharmed." (EFE, 2024). Moreover, Murat Abenov, Member of Parliament for the ruling Amanat Party, stated that "In the past three years, there have been 214 official cases but I know there were many more attempts to file cases" (Weisskopf, 2025), suggesting that the actual number of bride kidnappings is higher.

These examples show that while *uyat* manifests differently in various domains, subtly reinforcing hierarchy in political life and exerting direct pressure on women's personal choices in the private sphere, it draws from the same cultural logic of public shaming. In this way, though its impact varies considerably across settings, *uyat* plays a role in regulating behaviour in both private relationships and public life.

²³ Статья 125, пункт 1 Уголовного кодекса Республики Казахстан: Похищение человека — наказывается лишением свободы на срок от четырех до семи лет. [Article 125(1) of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan states kidnapping is punishable by a prison sentence of four to seven years.]

Connecting uyat to Walby's framework

As the previous sections have shown, *uyat* is not confined to the private sphere, but plays a role across different layers of Kazakhstani society, including political and institutional settings. This aligns with Walby's (1990) understanding of patriarchy as a system reproduced through overlapping social structures and everyday practices. *Uyat* functions as a mechanism through which patriarchal norms are upheld and reproduced. It reinforces traditional expectations around appropriate gender roles, particularly for women, and ensures that deviations are met with shame or social disapproval. Whether through pressure to marry, the avoidance of public 'immodesty', or political shaming aimed at maintaining existing power structures, *uyat* encourages conformity and discourages autonomy.

What makes *uyat* particularly powerful is that it does not only rely on external enforcement, but is often internalised (Levitanus, 2022). In this way, it demonstrates how patriarchal values are not only imposed from above, but also reproduced from within society itself, through community expectations, family interactions, and individual behaviour. This reflects Walby's (1990) argument that patriarchy is sustained not only by institutions, but also by cultural norms and social practices. In this sense, *uyat* should not be seen as a cultural tradition in isolation, but as a factor in the continuation of gender inequality in contemporary Kazakhstan.

2.5. Intersectionality: Understanding variations in perceptions on gender roles

The way gender roles are perceived and how social pressure is exerted in Kazakhstan is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. While expectations regarding gender roles and marriage are pervasive throughout Kazakhstan, their specific manifestations differ across ethnic groups, geographic regions, and linguistic communities. For example, some scholars argue that the more Kazakh-dominated southern and western regions exhibit stronger patriarchal values than the more Russified northern regions, while others note that retraditionalisation processes are not strictly confined to rural areas (Kabylova, 2022; Commercio, 2015; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021). Moreover, even among non-Kazakh ethnic groups, conservative values regarding marriage and family life persist. Senggirbay (2019) highlights how Russian Kazakhstanis, despite their historical association with Soviet secularism, have increasingly aligned themselves with national narratives that embrace more traditional gender expectations.

Despite these differences, nearly all women in Kazakhstan, regardless of ethnic background, experience some form of social pressure regarding marriage, as the results will show in chapter 4. This suggests that while the intensity and mechanisms of social control may vary, patriarchal norms remain a structural force in Kazakhstani society. This aligns with Walby's (1990) conceptualisation of patriarchy as a system embedded in multiple structures, such as the household, the state, and culture rather than being tied to a single factor like ethnicity or region. While certain social factors may influence the intensity of social pressure in specific contexts, it is the overarching patriarchal structure that normalises and perpetuates male dominance throughout Kazakhstani society.

Regional differences: north-south or urban-rural?

The north-south cultural divide in Kazakhstan is often cited as a significant factor influencing gender norms, with the southern (and western) regions perceived as more conservative due to their stronger emphasis on Islamic traditions, patriarchal family structures, and being 'attached to traditions' while the northern regions are associated with more Russified and egalitarian social norms (Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021, p.237). This divide is largely shaped by historical Soviet policies, as the north experienced higher levels of Russian migration, industrial development, and urbanisation; being more Russified/Sovietised, while the south retained stronger pre-Soviet traditions, including clan-based social structures, pastoralist heritage, and Islamic cultural influences; being more Kazakhified, or remaining more Kazakh, reinforcing its more traditional outlook on gender and family roles.

Another commonly discussed division is based on urban centres and rural areas in Kazakhstan. There is the perception that urban areas tend to be more progressive than rural areas, as is a widely observed global phenomenon. Cities like Astana and Almaty are perceived as more progressive and open to egalitarian gender norms, while rural areas and small cities tend to maintain more conservative values where marriage pressure is stronger, community expectations heavily influence women's choices and patriarchal norms are more rigid.

However, there are important footnotes to be made in the Kazakhstani case. Kabylova's (2022, p.82) research shows that, in comparison to Astana and Almaty, citizens from Shymkent 'are more likely to show a preference for following social norms and prioritising collectivism over individualism.' Shymkent, with over a million inhabitants the third city of Kazakhstan, is located in south Kazakhstan and known for its reputation of conservative values and patriarchal structures (Kabylova, 2022, p.82). Her findings demonstrate that the assumption that big urban cities are less conservative than smaller cities or rural areas is not necessarily the case in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, Commercio (2015) complicates the debate even more by focusing on retraditionalisation forces within cities, showing even more nuance to the assumed progressiveness attitudes in cities. She found in her research results, conducted in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, that highly educated urban women in the big cities regularly actively embrace traditional religious and family values, even though this is a very contradictory finding of what one might expect of this social group (Commercio, 2015, p.21).

Although the north-south (Russified/Kazakhified) division seems to provide a better explanation in Kazakhstan's case than the urban-rural division, there are also other factors that seem to be important in helping explain differences in perceptions towards gender roles. Complicated enough, but not very surprisingly, these factors often overlap to some extent with the divisions just discussed. For a better contextual understanding of Kazakhstan, it is essential to still include the two factors of language and ethnicity.

Ethnicity and language

The post-Soviet retraditionalisation of gender roles in Kazakhstan is frequently associated with Kazakh national identity, as marriage and motherhood have been elevated as of cultural importance in nationalist discourses (Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016). However, ethnic Kazakhs are not the only group subject to such pressures. Although women from Slavic and other non-Turkic origins, like Germans and Koreans may be less restricted by *uyat* (Kabylova, 2022, p.82), this does not mean that these women are not experiencing social pressure to get married in their environment.

One of the possible explanations that Kabylova (2022) offers to explain the overall conservative perceptions towards gender roles in Shymkent is the existence of a large number of ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kazakhstan and Shymkent. She argues that the Shymkent society is also shaped by Uzbek culture, which is often considered as more restrictive and conservative when it comes to women and their position in society. About a fifth of the population in Shymkent is from Uzbek origins, and in total about half a million Uzbeks live in Kazakhstan's South region. While Almaty is also located in the south, this city has a diverse population with different ethnicities, with large numbers of Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and Koreans; these groups would be significantly less conservative than Uzbeks and Kazakhs (Kabylova, 2022, p.82).

However, the Kazakhification of the country has its influence on the other ethnicities and their perceptions in the countries. Senggirbay (2019, p.74) shows how over 90% of Russian Kazakhstanis in his research considered themselves as different from Russians in Russia. These differences were found in qualities that make Kazakhstani Russians different from Russians in Russia, such as women's respect for their husbands. His research concludes that the identity of Russian Kazakhstanis is shaped mostly by the cultural traditions of ethnic Kazakhs. Especially the marriage traditions of the ethnic Kazakhs is what Russian Kazakhstanis describe as 'the factor of their attachment to the culture' (Senggirbay, 2019, p.75; pp.84-85).

This research suggests the emphasis on women's respect for their husbands and the importance of marriage as a social institution are identified as key areas where Russian Kazakhstanis perceive themselves as different from Russians in Russia, aligning more closely with Kazakh cultural values. This trend shows how because of the Kazakhification process also non-Kazakh ethnic groups lead to adopt more traditional views on marriage.

Nevertheless, adding another layer of complexity, Nam (2023) highlights the role of language in shaping gender attitudes, showing that students in Kazakh-medium education tend to hold more traditional views on gender roles compared to those studying in Russian. Furthermore, *uyat* was observed as a regulatory force in Kazakh-medium schools, reinforcing conservative gender expectations, whereas students in Russian-medium classrooms reported greater freedom for women to express opinions and a more egalitarian classroom climate (Nam, 2023, pp. 151, 155–156). These findings illustrate how various factors, ethnicity, cultural integration, and language, intersect to shape gender norms in Kazakhstan, demonstrating that social pressure is experienced differently across different groups and contexts.

The intersectionality of gender norms and social pressure in Kazakhstan reveals a complex and layered reality. While ethnic identity, regional background, and language of instruction all play roles in shaping attitudes toward marriage and gender roles, these factors do not operate in isolation. The north-south divide, the urban-rural contrast, and ethnic differences provide important contextual insights, yet they do not fully determine individual experiences.

Despite these variations, the overarching patriarchal system remains a dominant force, ensuring that nearly all women, regardless of background, experience some level of social pressure to marry. This aligns with Walby's (1990) conceptualisation of patriarchy as a system embedded in multiple structures, including culture, family, and the state, rather than being confined to a single explanatory factor. Ultimately, while Kazakhstan's gender norms are shaped by intersecting influences, the persistent expectation for women to marry underscores the continued strength of patriarchal structures in the country, among all ethnicities.

2.6. Conclusion: Contextual Influences to understand gender roles in Kazakhstan

The historical, political, and social dynamics explored in this chapter illustrate how gender norms in Kazakhstan are shaped by intersecting forces. Soviet policies, while expanding women's roles in education and employment, simultaneously reinforced traditional expectations of motherhood. In the post-Soviet period, both state-driven and societal retraditionalisation processes have further emphasised women's roles as wives and mothers, maintaining patriarchal norms.

While variations exist across ethnic groups, regions, and linguistic communities, the expectation for women to marry and conform to traditional gender roles remains a structural reality, as reflected in Walby's (1990) conceptualisation of patriarchy. These norms are reinforced not only through policy and family expectations but also through cultural narratives and social interactions. To fully grasp how these norms shape women's everyday experiences, the next chapter will introduce the concept of hegemonic femininity, offering a lens to understand how patriarchal ideals are experienced, internalised and resisted among unmarried Kazakhstani women.

3. How social pressure manifests: Hegemonic femininity.

The previous chapters established the broader framework for understanding gender norms and social pressure in Kazakhstan. Chapter 1 outlined the theoretical foundation, drawing on Walby's (1990) concept of patriarchy to explain where patriarchal structures operate, particularly within the household, culture, and state. Chapter 2 provided the socio-cultural context, demonstrating how historical legacies and contemporary retraditionalisation processes have shaped gender expectations. Together, these chapters highlighted that patriarchal norms in Kazakhstan are deeply embedded in both institutional structures and everyday social interactions, sustaining traditional gender roles and reinforcing expectations that women marry and conform to ideals of femininity.

Building on this foundation, the concept of hegemonic femininity, as theorised by Schippers (2007), provides a lens to understand how idealised femininity is constructed in a way that sustains male dominance. Moreover, the concept will help to understand how social pressure on Kazakhstani women manifests itself in society. As will be discussed more in-depth later in this chapter, hegemonic femininity does not only define what is considered 'appropriate' or 'exemplary' behaviour for women, but also functions as a regulatory force, causing women who deviate from these norms to risk facing *uyat*, stigma, and other kinds of social pressure. Thus, this chapter builds on the previous chapters by shifting from where patriarchy operates to how patriarchy is enforced through social pressure, using hegemonic femininity as a framework to explain the regulation and internalisation of gender norms in Kazakhstan.

3.1. Origin of the concept: Gramsci's cultural hegemony

Before examining the concept of hegemonic femininity, it is relevant to understand where this concept comes from. The concept of hegemonic femininity is based on the concept of cultural hegemony²⁴, which was coined by Gramsci, an Italian Marxist who introduced the concept while imprisoned in fascist Italy to explain structures of social control. In Lears' (1985) explanation of Gramsci's ideas on cultural hegemony, he shows how the ruling class in society maintains control not just by force and coercive control, but by shaping the culture so that their values, beliefs, perceptions, norms and sentiments are accepted as the cultural norm; the 'spontaneous' consent of the subordinate class is necessary. The values and beliefs of the ruling class are made to seem natural or common sense to everyone, even to those who are not in power (Lears, 1985, p.568; pp.570-571).

Individuals from the subordinate groups may not actively agree or hold conflicting views with the system, however people tend to tolerate the dominant order due to institutions, such as education, media, or religion, cultural symbols and ideological conditioning that reinforces the dominant culture. Gramsci refers to this process as 'contradictory consciousness' in which Gramsci acknowledges that the subordinate classes may hold conflicting views, based on both their own experiences and the dominant culture's values (Lears, 1985, pp.574-578). Cultural hegemony, then, is a process of continuous negotiation where the ruling class maintains power by constructing a social consensus that supports its interests, and the subordinate classes that accept this dominant culture as the norm, even when this culture is contested.

This dynamic of contradictory consciousness, in which individuals adopt dominant cultural values even when they conflict with personal experiences, is central to understanding how hegemonic gender norms operate. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony can be applied to understand the social construction of gender norms, such as hegemonic masculinity and femininity. These norms reflect dominant understandings of what it means to be male or female in a society. Just as Gramsci describes how the ruling class uses culture to maintain power, hegemonic masculinity and femininity are constructed through similar mechanisms. Norms and

²⁴ Other elaborations on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony: Coutinho, C. N. (2012); Simon, R., & Hall, S. (2002); Femia, J. V. (1987).

values that define gender roles and promote certain behaviour for men and women, are internalised by individuals, often to the benefit of dominant social groups. In this way, the dominant social order influences and shapes gender roles, even when they reproduce inequality between men and women.

3.2 Hegemonic masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was introduced by Connell in the 1980s. Connell (1987) developed the term hegemonic masculinity to describe the dominant form of masculinity within a particular cultural context that legitimises male dominance over women and other subordinated masculinities. This form of hegemonic masculinity does not require all men to embody its traits; on the contrary, few men embody the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, but many collaborate to sustain these ideas (Connell, 1987, pp.183-185).

This dominant form of masculinity is tied to heterosexuality and patriarchal family structures, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Moreover, she argues that “all forms of femininity... are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men” (Connell, 1987, pp.186-187), indicating that masculinity’s dominance depends on a corresponding ideal of femininity. Subordinated forms of masculinity, such as those associated with homosexuality, non-normative gender expressions, or men who do not conform to traditional ideals of strength and authority, are often marginalised and pushed to the background. These (subordinated forms of) masculinities may be more visible in private or marginal spaces rather than in dominant public discourses. For instance, in many contexts, ‘gay masculinity’ or caring, nurturing masculinities are devalued compared to the hegemonic standard. As a result, these alternative masculinities are prevented from gaining recognition and legitimacy, as hegemonic masculinity does.

To make the concept more tangible, an illustration helps clarify the concept. Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed set of traits but is often associated with certain cultural ideals such as physical strength, being emotionally unreachable/stoic, competitive, heterosexual, authoritative, and being a financial provider. These characteristics are not universal but are upheld as aspired and idealised standards through media, socialisation between people, and institutional norms. The traits can thus be dynamic: throughout time and space traits of idealised masculinity may vary. For instance, while physical dominance and assertiveness might be emphasised in one context, financial independence and leadership may be prioritised in another. Men may not always embody these traits, but by engaging in practices that reinforce dominance, authority, and compulsory heterosexuality, they contribute to sustaining the hegemonic model of masculinity.

While few men fully embody this ideal, and it often exists more in media representations or cultural narratives than in everyday life, it remains the standard against which masculinity is measured. This version of masculinity is perceived as ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and ‘desirable’, shaping expectations for how men should behave and reinforcing the idea that deviation from it is undesirable.

3.3. Hegemonic femininity: defining the concept

Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity describes the dominant form of masculinity that legitimises male dominance over both women and subordinated masculinities. However, her framework initially lacked a more elaborate theorisation of how femininities relate and are subordinated to masculinity. Connell acknowledged the existence of multiple femininities, but these were not categorised in a way that reflected their role in sustaining gender hegemony. Schippers (2007) expands on Connell's work by introducing the concept of hegemonic femininity, which explains how femininity functions within the gender hierarchy and men's dominance over women.

For her definition of hegemonic femininity, Schippers slightly adjusted Connell's definition for hegemonic masculinity. She defines hegemonic femininity as: "the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). This definition breaks from Connell's approach by giving femininity an active role in maintaining male dominance rather than treating it as merely subordinate to masculinity.

Furthermore, Schippers (2007) rejects Connell's idea of 'subordinated masculinities' as a distinct category. In Connell's original model, certain men, such as those who are homosexual, 'weak', or passive, were described as having subordinated masculinity. However, Schippers argues that this category is unnecessary because masculinity, by definition, cannot be positioned lower than femininity in the gender hierarchy. Instead, men who fail to meet hegemonic masculinity's expectations are reframed as feminine. This ensures that masculinity always remains dominant over femininity, preventing any possibility of femininity ranking above even the weakest forms of masculinity (Schippers, 2007, p.96). This is why men who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity are not described as 'lesser men' or subordinated masculinities, but are instead labelled as feminised. However, it is important to remember that hegemonic masculinity is subject to change as well. In a later review, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p.829) argue that dominant forms of masculinity are influenced by subordinated masculinities, showing again how hegemonic masculinity (and femininity) and their traits are dynamic.

A key aspect of gender hegemony is that masculinity and femininity are not simply separate identities; they are defined in relation to one another in a complementary and hierarchical manner (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). Hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity must exist together to uphold male dominance and female subordination. Hegemonic masculinity consists of traits such as strength, authority, dominance, and heterosexuality; characteristics that legitimise men's superiority over women. For this hierarchy to function, hegemonic masculinity must be paired with a subordinate and complementary form of femininity. Thus, hegemonic femininity consists of characteristics such as compliance, passivity, nurturance, and physical vulnerability; traits that reinforce and legitimise male dominance (Schippers, 2007, pp. 91; 94-95).

However, Schippers highlights that this does not mean that all women embody hegemonic femininity. Rather, like hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic femininity is an ideal, a cultural norm that dictates how women should behave in relation to men. Women who fail to conform to these ideals can be stigmatised as 'deviant' or undesirable, creating a policing mechanism that reinforces male dominance.

'Pariah' femininities

But which category then includes women who do not conform to the dominant expectations of hegemonic feminism? Schippers solved this issue by introducing a third category, the concept of 'pariah femininities', to describe women who exhibit traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as sexual agency, aggression, or authority (Schippers, 2007, p. 95). These traits threaten the gender order because they disrupt the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity. For this reason, pariah femininities are not just subordinate, they are also culturally 'contaminating' (Schippers, 2007, pp. 95-96).

The term contaminating is used because these traits undermine the clear distinction between hegemonic masculinity and femininity, which is necessary to maintain the gender hierarchy. They challenge the ideal of hegemonic femininity by proving that women can be dominant, have sexual agency, or be physically strong. However, this, in turn, threatens the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity, as it disrupts the notion that only men should embody authority, strength, and control. Moreover, it blurs the gender binary, which depends on a strict separation of the masculine and feminine.

One way to understand this process is by looking at the gendered language used to enforce these categories. Women who display dominance, aggression, or sexual assertiveness are often labelled negatively. For example, authoritative women, or those that display sexual assertiveness, are regularly described with terms as 'bitch' and 'slut', as these women step outside of traditional femininity (Schippers, 2007, p. 95). These words serve as social punishments, discouraging women from embodying masculine traits, as displaying traits as dominance, sexual agency and leadership are usually considered positive male characteristics. Meanwhile, men who fail to meet the expectations of hegemonic masculinity are not merely seen as 'lesser men' but as 'feminised'. Terms such as 'faggot' and 'pussy' are used to insult men who appear weak, passive, or non-heterosexual, showing that negative connotations exist for people of both genders and those who do not meet their hegemonic counterparts, (Schippers, 2007, p. 96).

This policing of gender norms serves a dual function. Firstly, it ensures that masculinity remains superior and retains exclusive control over traits like dominance, strength, and authority. Secondly, it prevents women from encroaching on spaces of male authority, reinforcing their subordinate role in the gender hierarchy. Through these mechanisms, women are discouraged from embodying traits that might challenge men's dominance. This ensures that masculinity remains superior, and that hegemonic femininity remains subordinate yet complementary to masculinity (Schippers, 2007, p. 96).

3.4. Criticism of hegemonic femininity: Paechter's perspective

While Schippers' (2007) refinement of hegemonic femininity provides a valuable framework for understanding how femininity maintains male dominance and is commonly used in literature on this topic, her conceptualisation has faced criticism. Paechter (2018) in particular offers a strong criticism on Schippers' concept of hegemonic feminism, arguing that Schippers' model remains too binary, essentialist, and lacks intersectionality, making it less adaptable to diverse gender expressions.

One of Paechter's main critiques is that Schippers' approach reinforces a strict male/female dichotomy, positioning masculinity and femininity as inherently hierarchical and complementary. This binary structure would not fully account for fluid and non-binary gender expressions that exist outside traditional gender norms. Nevertheless, unlike in some Western contexts where gender roles are increasingly fluid, but still based on the male/female dichotomy, Kazakhstani society (as well) remains deeply structured along binary gender expectations (Peshkova & Thibault, 2022). The state, media, and social institutions actively promote distinct ideals of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Moreover, Paechter also criticises Schippers for treating femininity as a fixed category, arguing that femininity is more context-dependent and should not always be viewed as subordinate to masculinity (Paechter, pp.123-124, 2018); it would be an essentialist approach in which it is always assumed that feminine behaviours are inherently linked to the female body and that femininity must adhere to certain traits, and thus would overlook the lived experiences of women. In the case of Kazakhstan, Paechter's critique of Schippers' fixed categorisation of femininity does not fully apply. Kazakhstani society, particularly within traditional family structures, places a strong emphasis on normative femininity, where expectations of women to marry, motherhood and fulfil caregiving roles are highly valued. In this context, hegemonic femininity serves to maintain the gender order, with women who do not conform to these expectations often facing social pressure and marginalisation. Schippers' concept of hegemonic femininity, as aligned with patriarchy, is useful here because it highlights how the dominant ideal of femininity supports male dominance and the subordination of women, particularly in the context of marriage. The Kazakhstani case demonstrates that femininity can indeed be fixed in a way that aligns with patriarchal values, where non-compliance (such as being unmarried) leads to the perception of women as deviating from the ideal. Therefore, Schippers' framework remains applicable as it reflects the realities of gender relations and power dynamics within this cultural setting. Even in a global context, it remains highly doubtful whether femininity should not be viewed as subordinate, let alone equal, to masculinity.

Another criticism is Schippers' limited attention to intersectionality. Paechter contends that not all women experience femininity in the same way, and that class, race, and cultural background significantly shape how hegemonic femininity operates. While Schippers' framework is useful for examining broad gender hierarchies, it would not sufficiently explain how different women experience power and oppression differently based on socioeconomic, ethnic, or national contexts. Despite these critiques, Schippers' conceptualisation remains particularly useful for studying gender norms in Kazakhstan because it highlights how patriarchal values are not only

imposed by men but are also actively upheld and reproduced by women themselves. This insight aligns closely with this study's findings, which show that many forms of social pressure are exerted by female relatives. Moreover, while intersectionality is important, it is not the primary focus of this research.

3.5. Hegemonic femininity and social pressure in Kazakhstan

The concepts of hegemonic femininity and pariah femininities, as proposed by Schippers (2007), can be observed in Kazakhstani media representations, state discourse, and cultural expectations. According to Arystanbek (2020), femininity in Kazakhstan is not only a social ideal but also a tool for nation-building, where women's roles are linked to preserving national honour and cultural traditions. In this section, I will demonstrate how hegemonic femininity is applied in Kazakhstan by examining how both media and state discourse shape these expectations, based on the works of Arystanbek (2020; 2023).

One clear example of how hegemonic femininity manifests in Kazakhstan is through media representations. In Kazakhstani media discourse, hegemonic femininity is closely tied to national identity, positioning women as guardians of national honour. They are expected to embody moral values and cultural traditions (Arystanbek, 2023, p.302). This framing becomes particularly problematic in the context of sexual violence. Arystanbek (2023) demonstrates in her research how, in online media discourse, women are blamed for the violence they experience. This blame is justified by a moral hierarchy that positions the betrayal of national culture as a greater sin than sexism or misogyny (Arystanbek, 2023, p.313). This demonstrates how hegemonic femininity is applied by holding women responsible for upholding cultural norms, even when they are victims of violence.

Another way hegemonic femininity is applied in Kazakhstan is through state discourse and rhetoric. Arystanbek (2020) argues that state discourse explicitly promotes traditional gender roles by emphasising that it does not wish to "disrupt standards of hegemonic masculinity and femininity and the division of gender roles between men and women". This rhetoric not only legitimises "policing of women's bodies by men" (Arystanbek, 2020, pp. 63-65) but also frames male control as necessary for maintaining social stability. Through such discourse, the state actively reinforces hegemonic femininity by positioning women as subordinate yet essential to maintaining the social order.

In both media and state discourses, the dominant ideal of femininity acts as a regulatory mechanism. It not only 'guides' women's behaviour but also enables moral policing when women deviate from these social expectations. This is especially evident when women are perceived as breaking with traditional norms, whether it is by prioritising career ambitions, displaying sexual agency, or rejecting marriage, this regulatory mechanism contributes to their social stigmatisation and public criticism (Arystanbek, 2020). This aligns with Schippers' concept of pariah femininities, where women displaying traits associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness or sexual independence, are framed as contaminating the social order (Schippers, 2007, pp. 95-96).

The concept of hegemonic femininity is not merely a set of social expectations for women but a mechanism that sustains patriarchal power structures. As Schippers (2007) argues, hegemonic femininity does not exist in isolation but is a crucial part of gender hegemony, ensuring male dominance remains intact by shaping acceptable and deviant forms of femininity. In Kazakhstan, hegemonic femininity shows how social pressure manifests as a system that governs women's behaviour, reinforcing patriarchal norms through family expectations, cultural policing, and the fear of *uyat*.

Walby's (1990) framework provides a way to locate where these mechanisms operate. While patriarchy is embedded in six structures, the household, culture, paid work, the state, sexuality, and violence, this thesis focuses particularly on how hegemonic femininity operates within the family (the structure of the household) to shape women's lived experiences. These structures do not function independently; rather, they interact to enforce a system in which hegemonic femininity keeps women in subordinate yet complementary roles to men, ensuring patriarchy remains uncontested in both public and private life.

Hegemonic femininity in Kazakhstan is not simply about establishing an idealised image of womanhood; it functions as a mechanism to enforce compliance with patriarchal norms. Women are expected to embody traits such as modesty, obedience, domesticity, and marriageability, reinforcing male authority and the traditional family structure. These expectations are not merely personal choices but are upheld through social pressure, ensuring that women themselves participate in sustaining and reproducing patriarchy.

An important way in which hegemonic femininity operates in Kazakhstan is through the expectation of marriage. As my fieldwork research will reveal, the pressure for women to marry is deeply embedded in family dynamics, reflecting Walby's concept of household patriarchy. Various women who remain unmarried into their late twenties or beyond experience being perceived as failures, sometimes on a personal level but regularly also as a disappointment to their families or even to society as a whole. Marriageability appears to be closely tied to social respectability, and an unmarried woman has higher risks of being marginalised within her own family and community. This social requirement is especially actively reinforced by mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives who exert pressure on younger women to conform, demonstrating that women themselves play a key role in enforcing the norms dictated by hegemonic femininity.

One mechanism through which these expectations are traditionally reinforced is *uyat*. *Uyat* can be described as a form to prevent women from deviating from the dominant standards of hegemonic femininity by policing their behaviour and choices. A woman who prioritises career ambitions over family responsibilities, shows openly sexual agency, or openly rejects marriage, risks being labelled as shameful. This might not only bring disgrace upon herself but also upon her family. In this way, *uyat* is commonly understood as a way to ensure women behave in accordance with expected norms through fear of social condemnation, gossip, and exclusion. However, as my fieldwork later reveals, this external function of *uyat* was not strongly reflected in the narratives of the participants. While *uyat* remains a culturally powerful concept, its role in

this study appears to operate more through internalised feelings of shame than through explicit social policing.

Hegemonic femininity also serves to legitimise male control by establishing women's roles as naturally subordinate to men. Husbands, fathers, and male family members are ideally positioned as rightful protectors and decision-makers, while women are traditionally expected to comply with their authority. Where men do not explicitly enforce these norms, women, including (grand)mothers and (grand)mothers-in-law, actively perpetuate them by internalising patriarchal expectations. Through socialisation, these ideals become ingrained as natural and desirable, leading many women to regulate their own behaviour and that of others. This self-enforcement ensures that hegemonic femininity and male dominance are continuously reinforced, even without direct male intervention. Women who conform to these ideals have higher chances of facing social acceptance, family approval, and a sense of belonging, whereas those who resist or fail to meet these expectations might face shame, isolation, and social stigma.

Thus, hegemonic femininity in Kazakhstan functions not only as a set of ideals but as an active system of social pressure. It dictates women's roles and behaviours while simultaneously punishing those who deviate from its expectations. Through marriage norms, cultural mechanisms (like *uyat*), and the legitimisation of male authority, hegemonic femininity reinforces and sustains patriarchal power, ensuring that women remain positioned in a subordinate yet complementary role within Kazakhstani society.

3.6. Concluding the chapter: connecting *how* and *where*

The integration of hegemonic femininity and patriarchal structures is essential for understanding how social pressure both is lived and experienced by unmarried women in Kazakhstan. Hegemonic femininity provides insight into how social pressure operates, such as through rigid expectations, the mechanism of *uyat*, and the policing of women's behaviour by family and community members. It shows that compliance with traditional gender norms is not merely a matter of personal choice but is usually enforced through a system of rewards and punishments that sustain male dominance.

At the same time, Walby's six patriarchal structures clarify where these pressures are embedded. They demonstrate that patriarchal expectations do not exist in isolation but are reinforced through societal institutions. This structural perspective highlights that social pressure is not the beliefs of individuals, but rather a deeply ingrained societal mechanism that upholds gendered power hierarchies.

By combining these perspectives of how and where patriarchy manifests itself, this framework provides the necessary lens through which women's narratives and experiences with social pressure can be analysed. It enables a deeper exploration of how unmarried Kazakhstani women navigate, negotiate, and, at times, resist the pressure to conform. Understanding these dynamics will be relevant in chapter 4, where the voices of unmarried women will illustrate how these theoretical concepts manifest in real-life experiences. The narratives of the women will

contribute to offer a perspective on the different ways in which unmarried women over the age of thirty experience different forms of social pressure in Kazakhstani society.

4. Methodology and results.

To better understand what kinds of social pressure unmarried Kazakhstani women experience throughout their lives, how these women perceive the social status of marriage and the responses of the Kazakhstani society, and how they navigate and deal with social pressure, I have conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with single women over the age of thirty that have never been married. The women lived in Astana or Almaty, with ages ranging between 30-48. Five of the participants were over the age of 40. In Kazakhstan, the average age to marry for women is 25, which is why I chose for women over the age of 30, to make sure that they are considered 'late' to marry by cultural expectations. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and my positionality as a foreign male researcher, I decided to make use of snowball sampling to recruit participants; directly approaching women with the question if they were married and over the age of 30, proved not necessarily a successful strategy.

Moreover, my positionality as a Dutch and male researcher influenced the research process in various ways. For some women, my background caused hesitation; several potential participants questioned whether I, as a foreigner and a man, could truly understand their cultural context, gendered experiences, or reasons for remaining unmarried. Some women were initially cautious about my motives, asking why I was interested in this particular topic, and doubted whether I possessed the cultural sensitivity and empathy for women to interpret their experiences appropriately. This led some women to decline participation. However, other women felt more at ease precisely because I was a foreign outsider. They noted that, as a foreigner, I was unlikely to have any personal connections with their family, which reduced the risk of their stories reaching their families. This created a sense of anonymity and emotional safety that, for some participants, made it easier to speak openly about sensitive matters. A few women also remarked that, as a man unfamiliar with the personal expectations placed on women, I might approach their stories with fewer assumptions or projections, and therefore listen more openly without imposing my own experience. Overall, my positionality influenced both the accessibility of participants and the openness with which they were willing to share their experiences with me. Being a foreign male researcher thus had both its advantages and disadvantages.

All the interviewed women received a higher education degree from a university. Although most women have had previous relationships, they were single at the time of interviewing. All participants originally came from urban areas in Kazakhstan, and, by coincidence, no participants came from south or west Kazakhstan (excluding Almaty, the former capital and biggest city in Kazakhstan)²⁵. Eleven participants were ethnic Kazakhs, three were of Slavic origin, and one was from another ethnic minority. To protect the privacy and anonymity of

²⁵ No participants came originally from the following oblasts (regions): Atyrau, West-Kazakhstan, Mangystau, Kyzylorda, Turkistan, Jambyl, Jetisu, Ulytau

participants, their names have been changed, and specific details about non-Kazakh ethnicities have been omitted. Respondents work in different spheres, such as diplomatic missions, private companies, state institutions and international organisations, and can be considered as financially independent.

Nine of the interviews were conducted in English and six in Russian, and oral consent was requested before audio-recording the interviews. Whether the interviews were conducted in English or Russian might have had some implications for the results, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, during the English-language interviews, some participants found it more difficult to express themselves fully. While they tried to describe personal experiences or specific examples, the meaning and nuance of their stories were at times diminished, as English was their second, third, or even fourth language. To address this, I occasionally asked participants to explain certain concepts or narratives in Russian instead. Secondly, in the Russian-language interviews, the dynamic was affected by my own linguistic limitations. Although my Russian was sufficient to follow and conduct the interviews, it was not always strong enough to grasp subtleties, anticipate responses precisely, or pursue follow-up questions as effectively as in English. As a result, the English interviews tended to offer more detailed and reflective narratives, while the Russian interviews often yielded more direct and concise expressions of experiences and opinions.

The duration of the interviews was between 20 minutes and 1 hour and 20 minutes, but on average lasted around 40/45 minutes. After transcribing and analysing the interviews, I categorised the responses of the participants in four themes: 1) Different forms and actors of social pressure, 2) Perceptions of cultural expectations and social status, 3) Coping with social pressure, and 4) Feelings about and internalisation of social pressure. Within each of these broader categories, I further identified more specific sub themes based on recurring issues and patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives and experiences. These categories and their underlying sub-themes will be discussed and analysed in detail in the following sections.

4.1. Experiences of external social pressure

While discussing the involvement of family members in the participants' love lives and how involvement is perceived, fourteen out of fifteen women interviewed expressed having experienced at least some kind of social pressure from a family member to get married, either in the past or more recently. However, there was considerable variation in how the women perceived this external social pressure. This section will focus on both trends and contrasting responses identified in the interviews concerning the different forms of experienced social pressure, by whom social pressure is exerted, and how these experiences have developed over time for the participants.

Based on the interviews, I categorised social pressure in two groups: external and internal pressure. External social pressure refers to direct comments, judgement, or shaming from family members and others, and can be subdivided in three forms: direct, indirect and guilt-based pressure. Internal social pressure reflects personal, internalised expectations to marry to meet societal norms, even without direct external influences.

4.1.1. Direct, indirect and guilt-based pressure

Several participants described direct and explicit pressure from family members, particularly mothers, who repeatedly told them that marriage was a necessity. These statements were often framed as an expectation rather than a suggestion, and in some cases, marriage was portrayed as an inevitable achievement that must be reached.

One participant shared how her mother was the central figure in applying this direct pressure:

"She was the one. She was the figure that symbolised and applied the most pressure on me in terms of societal pressure. It was her, because her philosophy was you have to be married. It doesn't matter to whom. Even if you get divorced the next day, at least you have ticked the box, you know."

For some, this pressure extended beyond immediate family members to include distant relatives and family friends, creating a sense of collective enforcement of societal norms. Another participant recalled how her extended family repeatedly inquired about her marriage status during any occasion or family event:

"For them, it's like the only question they ask. When we meet once in a while, which happens rarely, the first question is: 'Have you gotten married already?'"

Three participants mentioned how an awkward situation and a (short) intensification of pressure was experienced after the marriage of a younger sibling. They explained that it is uncommon in Kazakhstan to marry earlier than your older sister. And although they did not care themselves if their sibling would marry earlier, there were family members that frowned upon it. A participant described the following situation that occurred at a family event at the time, in relation to the wedding of her younger sister:

"So for the wedding [of my little sister] there was lots of pressure from the extended family. They would say that, oh my God, your sister is already getting married. She's 21, and you're like 27, and you're not getting married, what's wrong..?"

The intensity in which social pressure was applied, varied. Most of the comments that were made in relation to getting married were experienced as relatively lightly by most of the participants. They said they had encountered or still encounter such comments on a regular basis, but did not consider them as very problematic, as they were mostly subtly mentioning that a husband is needed or tried to push them in a non-negative way to start seeing someone. However, some participants also described experiences in which malicious comments were made, specifically said to put significant pressure on them to get married. The participants perceived these comments as hurtful and still clearly remember them. A participant recalled such a moment with her grandmother:

'... when I just turned 30, during breakfast, my grandma showed me two grapes, a fresh one and a shrivelled one. She said that I used to be the fresh grape, wanted

by many, but now that I turned 30, I am turning into the older grape. Grandma said that from now on, men wouldn't want to marry me anymore, and that they will go for the fresh grape instead. I didn't know what to say, you see, it was painful and unnecessary, and I started crying...'

Another form of social pressure that was experienced by the participants can be best described as guilt-based pressure. In contrast to direct pressure, guilt-based pressure is more subtle and manipulative, often positioning marriage as not just a personal choice but a moral obligation towards family members. In these cases, particularly parents, do not frame marriage as something their daughters must do for themselves, but rather as something they must do for their parents' well-being, social status, and emotional fulfilment.

Some of the participants described how their parents pressured them to marry, as the parents were being frowned upon by their neighbours, colleagues, friends, or extended family. Parents' concerns were often linked to how others perceive them, rather than to their daughters' own happiness. In some cases, they even presented themselves as victims of social judgment due to their daughter's unmarried status. Another participant described how her mother expressed disappointment, not because she personally believed her daughter needed to be married, but because of societal expectations:

"I know that my parents aren't happy that I'm not married. My dad would never say it, but my mom told me the neighbours keep asking her [if or why I am not married yet] and are sometimes gossiping... Was there really no one I could try it with? I think it might help my parents, but at the same time, it is my life."

For some women, the most emotionally challenging form of guilt-based pressure came from their parents' fears about aging alone. One participant described an argument with her father, with whom she had recently visited an elderly relative in a care home and returned deeply worried:

"He said, 'You should definitely get married, like, look around and grab a guy', because, you see, we went to visit this auntie of ours, and she was single her entire life. 'She had no kids, and that's why she ended up in an elderly home. There was no one to take care of her!'"

This statement reflects how marriage (and especially the lack of children) can be framed as a form of security for old age for women. But also, other guilt-based pressure arguments were used, such as that the parents wanted to become grandparents, and therefore needed the daughter to get married, in order to get children. Another heard argument was that life would not be fulfilled without a husband, so that marriage was necessary, or that the woman could stop working if she had a husband and children and could spend time on taking care of her family, rather than her career.

While both direct pressure and guilt-based pressure push women toward marriage, their mechanisms and emotional impacts differ. Direct pressure functions through the mechanism of explicitly stating that women must marry, which can usually be confronted and resisted more straightforwardly (as some women reported doing by arguing or avoiding discussions). Nevertheless, several participants, especially ethnic Kazakhs, described how difficult they found it to end up in confrontations with their parents and especially elders, as 'showing respect' through compliance is expected in the Kazakh culture. Guilt-based pressure, on the other hand, which is exerted through emotion manipulation and often framed in the context of marriage being a duty to the family, rather than the woman herself, seems to be more difficult to navigate. Guilt-based pressure tends to operate on a deeper, more subconscious level, playing on the feelings and emotions of the women, making it harder to resist without feeling selfish, ungrateful or ashamed. Standing up for oneself, as is the case with direct pressure, is usually relatively easier than disappointing the emotions of parents, who would be harmed by the single status of the daughter.

Immediate family

The actors exerting pressure that was mentioned the most among the participants, were their mothers, and sometimes their grandmothers. In Kazakhstan grandmothers often play a significant role in raising children and are therefore considered part of the immediate family rather than extended family²⁶. In particular mothers, but also grandmothers, were frequently cited as the main enforcers of social expectations, reinforcing the idea that an unmarried daughter is an incomplete adult. As a participant stated:

"My grandma, she always used to say: 'if you aren't married, you haven't seen the happiness of life.' So yeah, she would walk into any unmarried woman and state that the woman is not happy like that. She didn't yet find the path; she didn't find her happiness."

Mothers and grandmothers were often described as having internalised these expectations themselves, seeing their daughters' unmarried status as a reflection of their own failure as parents. The same participant continued to describe how her mother might feel personal guilt for her daughters' unmarried status:

"My mom is not happy that I'm not married. She never says it outright, but she sometimes mentions it, like, she just feels sad that me and my sister are not married yet. It's not criticism, but it's always there... In Kazakh society it is the parents' obligation to settle down the kids, so, marry the kids etc.. So, I think she also is considering that it is maybe her fault [that we are not married]"

A mentionable observation was that all four women that were ethnically non-Kazakh expressed that their mothers were the main source of social pressure on them to get

²⁶ There are notable cultural differences in how families define *immediate family* / *семья* (*semya*). In some societies, like in the post-Soviet region, grandparents are considered part of the immediate family, contrary to most Western European and Northern American societies, where grandparents are considered extended family / *родственники* (*rodstvenniki*).

married. They described that extended family was usually not deeply involved or exerting notifiable pressure on them.

Extended family

While some participants experienced pressure primarily from their mothers or grandmothers, others found that extended family members were more persistent and direct in enforcing marriage expectations. Aunts, in particular, seemed to take on the role of enforcers of traditional norms. At the question why this is the case, some participants wondered if it might be due to generational expectations that older female relatives should help guide younger women into socially acceptable roles. One participant described the difference between the pressure she received from her immediate family and her extended family:

"My parents were fine... but with my aunts and cousins, yea..., every time I see them, they ask: 'When will you get married? Is there someone in your life? Why don't you have a husband?' They don't even ask about my life or my work, but only about this. I don't even want to talk to them anymore"

This pressure and these kinds of comments are particularly noticeable during family gatherings, where distant relatives, whom participants usually rarely see, felt entitled to inquire about their marital status. Another participant shared her experience at a wedding:

"For my sister's wedding, I felt a lot of pressure, not from my immediate family, but from my distant relatives. They kept asking me if I had a boyfriend, and I felt I had to bring my new boyfriend to the wedding just to stop their questions."

This quote suggests that weddings and social (family) events serve as the main places where familial expectations in relation to marriage are reinforced, particularly by extended relatives who may feel an obligation to uphold traditional family values. It is important to note that the participants usually did not describe such interactions as genuine interest or positive involvement, but rather as interference. Another participant described how extended family members, especially older women, perceived their role as guiding younger women toward marriage:

"Aunts and cousins who got married young think they have achieved something important. They look down on me and try to give me advice, as if I don't know how to live my life. It's frustrating... because they assume their way is the only correct way."

But immediate family and extended family do not usually operate independently from each other. A participant explained how her mom regularly sets up other family members to talk with her, trying to convince her to get married:

"My aunt came up to me and said, 'Soon you will be 25. That's a high age; you need to get married.' And then it turned out my mom had talked to her... Another

time, she had even asked my friend to bring it up with me... because she knew I wouldn't take it well from her directly."

This illustrates how immediate family members, especially mothers, sometimes take active measures to involve their wider network in reinforcing social expectations. But also, that indirect pressure, involving third parties to deliver the message instead of confronting their daughters directly, is sometimes used as a technique to persuade them. The participant of the last quote explained how her mom avoided direct confrontation on this topic with her, as she usually reacts sharply and irritated. Making use of other family members, or even friends, can be a method to try to prevent fights.

4.1.2. How and why does pressure differ between immediate and extended family?

Although the difference between social pressure exerted through immediate and extended family is not always black and white, the narratives of the participants show certain trends, which may be influenced by different factors. The interviews show that, overall, extended family tends to apply more direct and public pressure, particularly during family gatherings. Immediate family shows a less clear pattern, with some mothers and grandmothers being more nuanced, and tending to refrain from confrontations and exerting direct pressure. They make more use of indirect and guilt-based pressure, and more often use emotional arguments, inducing emotions as guilt and concern. However, there have also been clear examples of (grand)parents applying harsh criticism and direct pressure, showing that pressure from immediate family is not unambiguous.

How could we explain this difference? Firstly, the difference might be influenced by emotional proximity between the actors and influence exerted on the women. Social pressure exerted by extended relatives might be explained by having less emotional closeness to the women but having more social investment in maintaining family norms. Based on the interview, the pressure of aunts and older, especially female, cousins seems more judgmental and based on maintaining family reputation. In the meanwhile, when discussing social pressure of immediate family members, terms as concern and worries of the parents were mentioned more often. This might indicate a closer emotional proximity to their (grand-)daughters and a more related to personal responsibility of the parents.

Secondly, a possible explanation might be found in the different views on the expectations of female roles between immediate and extended family members. While mothers and grandmothers may see their (grand-)daughter's marital status as a reflection of their own success as a mother, extended family may pressure younger relatives because they themselves followed traditional paths and expect others to do the same.

Thirdly, an interesting difference can be seen in the public and private nature of pressure. While immediate family tends to pressure their daughters privately, using emotional conversation, guilt-based pressure, or indirect comments, extended family usually apply pressure in social, more public, settings, particularly at weddings and large gatherings, where the expectation to

conform is heightened. This difference in private pressure by immediate family and public pressure by extended family is a clear example of how pressure within Walby's (1990) structure of the family (household) can be exerted in both the private and public sphere, as was illustrated in figure 1 and discussed in 1.4. This division underscores how marriage is not just a personal or familial concern but also a collective social expectation, reinforced at multiple levels within the family network.

4.1.3. Development of social pressure

Part of the interview focused on if and how the women experienced different forms and intensities of social pressure over time. The results show that the experience of social pressure to marry is not static; for many it varies over time, adapting to new personal circumstances, changing family dynamics, and to some degree to broader societal expectations. The narratives of the women show two developments that are worth discussing. Firstly, related to shifting perspectives on marriage as they grew older, and, secondly, an important trend concerns how the external pressure to marry has evolved for different participants.

For many participants, their early twenties especially were marked by strong expectations to get married. Interestingly, many mentioned that the pressure to get married was less evident when they were still studying; some parents prioritised education (and sometimes an initial career) over marriage and supported their daughters to first finish their university program. As one participant described her situation:

“When I was a school student and at university, my parents were very strict with me, in terms of that I had to focus on my studies... If I wouldn't have gotten the government grant, my parents would not have been able to let me go to university. After the fall of the Soviet Union, there were different and difficult times, you know. And then they applied enormous pressure on me to concentrate on my study. Relationships were never a priority for me, nor for my family. And then after I graduated? Exactly, so here it is, your diploma, but where is your husband? Where's your family? Where's your marriage exactly?”

Her experience was shared by several other participants, who also described how their parents allowed them to focus on education first, and sometimes start a career, before they started to apply more serious pressure to get married. This suggests that, while marriage was expected, some women were temporarily shielded from pressure during their studies. Once they completed their education and entered the workplace, the expectation of marriage quickly reappeared.

Although some women in their twenties already had their perceptions on marriage, which were often described with terms as equal partnership, love, shared values, transparency, and equal value, the main reason for not getting married at that time was because they 'simply had not found the right man yet', or as a participant (jokingly) stated:

“A man is not a thing that you can go for with your plastic bag to the store to buy. It doesn't work like that, not even here in Kazakhstan”.

However, some women also described how the early twenties were a period of mental development to develop new perceptions. Especially those who studied abroad. Exposure to different cultural perspectives allowed them to rethink the inevitability of marriage. One participant reflected on this shift:

"I remember being in university, first or second class, before going [abroad], and things changed when I came back. Initially, I had planned in my head: when I am 22/23, I will get married, I will stay; it was a strategy. Then it changed. When I was abroad, living outside, feeling the freedom. I experienced something broader than I had in my view before. In my home city, everyone is basically getting married, aged 22/23, maybe 24/25. That is the norm. This is how I had in my mind how it should be, but then after going abroad, I had more of a sense of freedom and perspective, that I don't have to stay at home and get married. There are other options."

This experience illustrates how exposure to different cultural and social norms enabled some women to question traditional expectations. For these participants, studying abroad offered a sense of personal agency, challenging the notion that marriage was the only or most logical next step after university. The same participant further elaborated on how her perception of marriage evolved:

"Here... local marriage means obligation... But the traditional ways, it is not in my nature. I don't really like it, and that's why I now have another understanding and another kind of view with regards to marriage as then [when I was younger]."

This reflection shows an important distinction between societal expectations and personal aspirations. These participants described how their perspectives on marriage shifted as they grew older. For some, studying abroad or working in different environments exposed them to alternative ways of thinking about marriage, which allowed them to reassess the expectations placed upon them. While marriage remained a preferable option, they increasingly rejected the rigid societal framework in which it was expected to take place. Rather than viewing marriage as an obligatory achievement for social acceptance, these women began to see it as a personal choice; a choice that should align with their values, rather than be dictated by family or tradition. This shift highlights a growing divergence between societal and familial norms on one hand and personal aspirations on the other hand, as women developed their own definitions of marriage and partnership.

None of the interviewed women were against the idea of marriage, and they are still open for getting married. However, they see in their environment what marriage implies according to Kazakhstani norms, and do not accept to marry under these conditions. As one of the participants described:

"I was seriously thinking about all my family members, whether they are happy or not in their marriage, and I couldn't find any couple that is sincerely 'happy' as a couple. I started with the grandparents, and I finished with the more or less recently married cousins. I

couldn't indicate who really is happy. It is so sad, and at the same time, it discourages me from having any relationships, you know. I only see struggling."

Based on the quotes above, it becomes clear that these women are aware of the conditions under which marriage is expected in Kazakhstan. However, they are unwilling to conform to them, especially as they observe that those who married for societal approval and legitimacy, rather than personal fulfilment, often do not find happiness in such unions. In essence, the participants' insights reflect a critical examination of traditional marital expectations in Kazakhstan, a realisation that this type of marriage is not suitable for them, which helped them to develop new visions on a type of marriage that is suitable for them. Following this, these women desire to seek partnerships that align with their personal values and aspirations, rather than conforming to societal pressures that may not lead to genuine happiness.

The other observed trend is in relation to a change in the experience of external pressure. The narratives of the participants show two diverging patterns: one group of women reported experiencing significant pressure in their early twenties, but described how this pressure became less intense over time or even faded away. The other, smaller, group explained that social pressure remained persistent throughout time, that they are still regularly subjected to social pressure to get married, or that pressure even intensified.

For some, pressure faded over time. Several participants explained that their families had come to accept their unmarried status, especially as they showed financial autonomy and personal independence. These women expressed that they no longer felt burdened by familial expectations, in part because they had successfully asserted their autonomy and boundaries.

One participant stated:

"There's no pressure at all. External pressure stopped a long time ago, maybe late 20s, early 30s. Why? Because I fought back. I explained it well, they saw what was going on in my life."

This comment suggests that for some women resistance and being consistently assertive were effective strategies to reduce pressure from family. Also, economic independence of participants appears to play an important role in resisting social pressure. As another participant reacted:

"I can take care of myself, and I've been taking care of myself for many years, I'm financially stable. I have my own flat. I have my career, and I even actually financially support my parents. So, in this regard they cannot really put much pressure on me because I'm kind of like being a grown up person"

This participant also reflected on how she had personally grown more resilient over time:

"The older I get, the more educated I get on certain issues, the more self-confidence I get. And also, self-compassion. Self-love. Before, I could be easily just distracted by other people's opinions about me and take it very personally. Now, I think I am becoming this person who knows who she is."

This indicates that, for some women, the decrease in pressure is not necessarily due to a shift in societal attitudes but rather to their own increased confidence and refusal to conform. In contrast, other participants reported that pressure to marry had not disappeared with time and, in a few cases, it had become stronger as they aged. These women noted that their families, particularly their parents, aunts, and older relatives, remained or became increasingly vocal about marriage as they neared their forties and beyond. A participant expressed how her mother once got upset during a phone call. At the time, she was in her forties already:

"Just marry someone, a construction worker or even an alcoholic would be fine! Anyone!' Can you believe that..? How would that make me happy?!"

This illustrates how, for some women, marriage remained an unresolved expectation, with family members seeing it as the missing piece (usually paired up with getting children) in an otherwise 'successful' life. The example shows how the institution of marriage and its social status in Kazakhstan is deemed by the mother as more important than the values and conditions that her daughter has in mind for marriage.

The experiences of social pressure among unmarried women in Kazakhstan reveal that expectations around marriage do not simply disappear with age, and that they are subject to change. While for some women external pressure fades away, other women successfully resist external social pressure, while others continue to face persistent, and sometimes even more intense expectations. However, these results raise an important question: did the social pressure itself decline, or did the women themselves no longer experience it as social pressure? The distinction is subtle but significant. Several participants described how they had gained more self-confidence, financial stability, and personal agency, which allowed them to assert their independence and push back against pressure from their family. For these women, pressure might have objectively disappeared or reduced, but it might also be that they developed stronger mechanisms to manage it; or a combination of both.

At the same time, other participants described that the pressure from their families remained or even intensified as they aged, suggesting that external expectations persist for some women, regardless of their personal growth or age. This divergence in experiences suggests that social pressure is shaped by both individual factors, such as self-confidence, personal agency, and economic independence, as well as by broader changing familial and societal norms. In the end, this complexity emphasises that social pressure is not just a temporary phase in a woman's life but rather a dynamic force that can evolve over time; either or both influenced by these individual factors or changing norms in the family. Whether pressure fades or persists depends not only on a woman's ability to resist it but also on how her family and society respond to her unmarried status as she becomes older.

4.1.4. Why would women enforce this social pressure?

As just discussed, throughout the interviews, participants overwhelmingly described women, particularly mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, as the primary enforcers of marital expectations. But an important question that remains unanswered up to this point is why women would

enforce this social pressure? While not always openly expressed, the social pressure was often delivered through subtle reminders, family conversations, or remarks about age and timing. These expectations were not always understood as malice or intentionally harmful by respondents, but regularly rather as expressions of concern, responsibility, or duty. Some participants acknowledged that these women, who are pressuring their (grand-)daughters/nieces, likely believed they were helping by reminding them of the 'right path' or by fulfilling what they saw as their maternal role. However, a problematic aspect remains that such comments and questions are often not perceived as 'care', 'concern', or 'responsibility' by the participants. As one woman stated:

"They think they are doing it [asking questions, making comments, showing 'concern', etc.] out of care, but in reality, it's not care - it's pressure."

This reflects a dynamic where older women, having internalised societal expectations themselves, now pass them on, often without recognising or wanting to recognise the emotional toll it may take on the younger generations. Moreover, it shows the discrepancy between assumed intentions by family members and presumed or assumed intentions by the participants.

In the end, the enforcement of these norms by women illustrates a complex negotiation with patriarchy. Rather than being pressured into marriage by men or society, many, especially older women, also reinforce and spread these expectations themselves, often by pushing younger women to marry. This pressure is a way to navigate the social structure in Kazakhstan, in which marriage remains a central pillar of female legitimacy and respectability. And because marriage is deemed so important for many in determining how a woman is perceived in society, women may pressure others to conform as a way to maintain their own place and authority within this system. For a few participants, this (inter-)generational pressure was even seen as a kind of cycle: mothers and aunts, having once faced pressure to marry early, now reproduce the same expectations for the younger generation. One woman argued that marriage is what gave them [the older generations] security and legitimacy in the Kazakhstani society, and therefore wanted the same for the younger women, by enforcing these ideas on them. Instead of rejecting these pressures, women thus help reinforce them, making them active agents in reproducing these norms, even though they may limit their own independence.

However, the fact that women are the primary enforcers of these norms should not be understood as a contradiction of patriarchy. Rather, it reflects how patriarchal power operates differently across the public and private spheres. Within this division, men continue to dominate the public sphere, particularly in terms of cultural authority, political leadership and economic power, while women are made more responsible for upholding patriarchal expectations within the private sphere, especially in the household and family. This structural division results in women being held responsible for regulating other women's behaviour and preserving family honour, particularly in relation to marriage and gender roles. Women are not enforcing these norms because they benefit from them the most, but because they are positioned within the private sphere as the custodians of morality and respectability. In this way, women become

active agents in reproducing patriarchal expectations, even if they lack power over the broader structures that shape them.

4.2. Perceptions of participants on hegemonic femininity

This section examines how participants interpret and experience cultural expectations surrounding femininity in contemporary Kazakhstan. Although idealised behaviour and the position of women (compared to men) was not explicitly described and discussed in the interviews, the participants' comments still revealed certain underlying norms about what constitutes a 'successful' woman, in their experiences. Drawing on the theoretical frame of hegemonic femininity that has been discussed in the third chapter, this section will focus on how cultural expectations for women are perceived through the eyes of the participants in Kazakhstan, how many women stressed the existence of a cultural north-south division in Kazakhstan, and how social status plays a significant role in deciding the legitimacy and respectability of unmarried women.

4.2.1. Cultural expectations and femininity in Kazakhstan

Participants often described societal pressure to marry not only as a family expectation and in the family context but regularly referred to a broader societal context. There was a general acknowledgment among the women, despite them resisting these societal norms, that being married conferred a certain kind of legitimacy. Several women mentioned that once you are married, people treat you differently, usually with more respect, especially in public or professional contexts. A participant described how she feels like her unmarried status is an influence on others, but in a negative context:

"The older I became, or in the higher [professional] position that I came, I feel it more and more. For example, in official meetings, I can see people looking to my hand [for a ring]. Or people underlying that they have a family and that they have to take care of their children or immediately start talking about their husbands... It is interesting, like two years ago, I never thought about this [about how unmarried status influences people]."

"Well, it's again my opinion, but like the officer who is married and has kids, she's considered accomplished... She manages everything: her children, her husband, the household, and the job. Yeah, even if you are [working] in a higher position, you still will be referred to as being in a lower [social] position than her [the married woman with children]. I really didn't get that."

This story captures how cultural expectations surrounding femininity in Kazakhstan can be considered as more relevant than professional achievements. The participant's account illustrates that in many social settings, a woman's marital and maternal status is perceived as a more important marker of success than her career accomplishments. Even within her job, she felt less respected than the woman in a lower rank, due to her position as a married woman and mother. This reinforces the idea that societal legitimacy for women is still closely tied to fulfilling

traditional gender roles, particularly those associated with marriage and motherhood, regardless of a woman's personal aspirations or professional rank.

Although no participant claimed to fully adhere to an idealised image of femininity, they recognised that one exists implicitly: it includes marriage, children, and positions women as central to upholding family values. Their reactions showed that in their experiences, a woman can be legitimised when possessing these traits. Although some women would consider themselves as successful, they noticed how others in society more often would consider them incomplete, or less respectable. As one participant described:

“When I think about my cousins, my aunts, everyone around me—it feels like people see me as someone who is missing something. They ask, ‘how can you be happy without a family?’ They don’t ask about work or travel, they ask why I don’t have a husband.”

There is a discrepancy in what makes a woman ideal, or successful, between the vision of this participant, and to her environment.

A remarkable pattern that could be observed in the interviews was how participants discussed southern Kazakhstan as a symbolic region, associated with more conservative gender norms. Multiple women stated they could not imagine dating or marrying a man from this region, not necessarily because of the men themselves, but due to their families' traditional expectations. One participant explained:

“If I would marry a guy from the South, I’d become a kelin, and then his whole family would control me. You can’t live freely there; the expectations are too strict.”

And she was not alone with such remarks. Various other women explained how they do not want to become a *kelin*, and thus preferably do not date men from southern Kazakhstan, or in few cases even Kazakhs at all. Furthermore, it was mentioned several times how the participants considered the northern oblasts of Kazakhstan as (much) more progressive than southern oblasts. These remarks indicate that there are regional distinctions in how femininity is constructed and perceived. The women specifically mentioned the difference in expectations of how women should behave and engage with their in-laws, compared to northern Kazakhstan. Moreover, southern Kazakhstan, in the participants' narratives, represented more of a traditional and conservative ideal of womanhood, one that also emphasises obedience and does not offer space for 'feminist voices'. Future research is necessary to find out about the exact nuances in the idealisation of femininity between north and south Kazakhstan.

4.2.2. Marriage and social status

Another theme that was frequently brought up throughout the interviews was the close association between marriage and social status. The narratives of the participants revealed a social hierarchy in which women's status was strongly tied to their marital status. In this view, marriage is not merely a personal achievement, but a marker of maturity, respectability, and

social legitimacy. As one participant explained, the absence of a husband overshadowed other accomplishments:

“I don’t feel bad about my life. I have a good job, my own apartment, I travel. But still, people treat me like something is missing. As if all that doesn’t count because I’m not married.”

This perspective was not limited to personal experiences, but some participants also described how family members, especially parents, felt the social consequences of their daughter’s unmarried status. Several women mentioned how they had the feeling that their parents were suffering in social status due to them being single. Social status, however, is sometimes also related to other family members. A participant said that compared to her younger, married sister, she was perceived as lower in the family hierarchy:

“I see how I have less of a status than my middle sister, who’s younger than me, when we look at the [family] hierarchy. But because she’s married and has a husband, and I hear this from my parents a lot, she has a different status... They have different values [ascribed] for us. I’m, like, a teenager still, socially in the family, I’m lower in status just because I’m not married.”

Also, another participant gave her personal view and provided examples of how differences in marital status, and thus social status, can sometimes be observed during family events:

“When you are married, it means that you belong somewhere... And it definitely means that you’re more respected... I did notice at family gatherings, for instance, if there are sisters and one is married and one is not married, then the one who is married, like she’s allowed to just sit at the table with her husband because she’s in the status of a married woman and the other sister can run around and help with the chores, et cetera.”

This symbolic hierarchy was also observed outside the family, in both social and professional settings. Some participants described being evaluated by old classmates, doctors, or colleagues through the lens of their marital status. As one woman explained:

“If you are married, you’re perceived as a whole person. By relatives, by society, by wherever you go. Even if I go to the doctor, they ask me if I have a husband, and then you get this typical look... I often don’t even answer anymore.”

Another woman described how an old classmate during a reunion was ‘worried’ for her not being married, so he tried to set her up with someone to get married:

“Some guy from a government institute here in Kazakhstan, a guy, also my age, who turned up and said that I am old.”

The participant then went temporarily abroad, and the story continued when she returned:

“When I came back to Kazakhstan, I was 31, he was like, ‘you’re already over your thirties’, and he was a religious guy, who was in favour of marrying a second time, so he wanted to convince me to become his second wife. I then just stopped answering his calls and completely distanced myself from him. Now I distance myself from my classmates as well, especially guys. There are no boundaries in the Kazakh society. They directly ask, ‘why are you not married?’ and I always say: ‘as soon as I get married I’ll invite you’.”

These quotes show how social status is closely entwined with marriage in Kazakhstan, and how deeply it is embedded in everyday interactions. This dynamic reflects Schippers’ (2007) concept of hegemonic femininity, in which a part refers to idealised forms of womanhood that uphold gender hierarchies by rewarding conformity and diminishing deviance. In this case, married women who fulfil the roles of wife and mother are positioned at the top of the feminine hierarchy, while unmarried women, no matter how independent, educated, or successful, remain symbolically ‘incomplete.’ The final example suggests that becoming a second wife, even though it is illegal by law, offers prestige and enhanced social status to women, more so than remaining unmarried. That the societal value of marriage may convince women to consent to becoming a second wife, even when illegal, has also been shown in Commercio’s (2020) research on polygynous marriages in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

Even when participants explicitly rejected these values, they were regularly still affected by them, through family expectations, public scrutiny, or informal social rules. This is precisely how hegemonic femininity works: it legitimises certain forms of femininity as normal or desirable, while subtly (and sometimes overtly) devaluing others. It does not require formal enforcement; rather, it is maintained through repeated social interactions, institutional norms, and cultural expectations that continually reproduce a hierarchy of womanhood centred around marriage and motherhood.

4.3. Coping with social pressure: strategies of navigation and resistance

Throughout the interviews, participants described a variety of strategies they used to navigate and manage the social pressure to marry. The coping mechanisms that the women use to deal with it, differed per woman and depended on personality traits, personal circumstances and, logically, family dynamics. The types of strategies ranged from subtle forms of avoidance to more confronting actions; women would use different kinds of strategies, based on the situation and mood they were in. The usage of coping mechanisms to deal with social pressure show that women consciously negotiate and put in active work to assert their autonomy and justify their marital status in a context where marriage remains a significant marker of the success of women. In the upcoming sections the different kinds of coping strategies that were mentioned and discussed in the interviews will be considered.

Shielding strategies

To start off, few women explained how they would make use of other people, whose presence could deflect attention from their unmarried status, or who offer them more space and freedom to express themselves and confront pressure while anticipating less reprisal. One participant described how she persuaded her boyfriend to accompany her to her sister's wedding, even though he was reluctant to attend:

“He didn't want to go because it was too early in our dating stage... But I said, no, you are going. I didn't tell him, but the real reason was that I was freaking out about what relatives would say if I showed up single to my sister's wedding... He was shielding me from unwanted questions, because relatives saw that there was someone by my hand, and that we were dancing; so, there was in the pipeline that we might have our wedding soon.”

In this case, the boyfriend served not just the function of emotional support but was also a strategic tool to avoid difficult questions and uncomfortable situations with family members. On a similar note, a participant mentioned how she told her family during a wedding celebration of a cousin that she seriously started dating someone, even though she was not. This way she could avoid questions by family members and told them to introduce him at a later moment, which never came, as they had 'broken up'. This shielding-strategy does not necessarily require a boyfriend or to be used as a method to avoid questions. Another participant described how her grandfather acted as a protective figure due to their close relation during her youth. She explained how this protection of her grandfather, who was considered the most respected figure in the family, afforded her greater freedom to speak out to other family members.

Avoidance

Alternatively, several women adopted avoidance as a practical strategy, choosing to stay away from family gatherings or social events where intrusive questions about marriage were likely to come up. This avoidance was not always permanent but often related to specific family-events. When asking a woman about when she experienced social pressure, she answered the following:

“Yes, all the weddings, meetings with relatives... I already know what questions they will ask. I might avoid them. I don't feel comfortable there. Especially big events.”

Although she felt like there were some social obligations which she had to attend, she sometimes considered or did avoid them. Some other participants also mentioned that they avoided travelling to their hometowns, where expectations were higher and the questions more direct. In the urban context of Astana or Almaty, they were more anonymous or less confronted to social policing by family members and thus less vulnerable.

Confrontation

Another method to resist social pressure was to confront people more directly. These confrontations could take the form of sharp replies, emotional pushback, or deliberately resisting expectations. One participant described how her irritation had grown over time:

“My mom talks with everyone around me because she thinks she can’t deliver this message herself... I am reacting sharply. I know myself. It’s almost like a resistance—not almost, it is a resistance.”

By confronting family members directly, some participants hoped to discourage future comments or questions about their marital status, assuming that relatives would prefer to avoid conflict or tension within the family. Another participant explained how she addresses her frustrations around questions related to marriage by distant family members in another way:

“When I get these concerns, I usually say: ‘What do you care? Do you envy me? Being that free and travel around and doing whatever I want?’... And then they shut up.”

During the interviews, some participants noted that they were more outspoken or confrontational than their siblings when it came to resisting pressure and speaking out to family members. When asked why they believed this was the case, two women specifically attributed their assertiveness in part to their education in Russian-speaking schools. They stated that this educational environment may have played a factor in encouraging them to express their opinion and stand their ground. This observation may suggest that the effects described by Nam (2023), that girls in Russian-medium schools report greater freedom to express opinions, might extend beyond the classroom and into family dynamics. While not representative, these participants’ reflections point to how language of instruction and educational setting might be an influence on how women later navigate personal boundaries and resist social pressure.

Endurance and acceptance

Not all women resisted or avoided pressure. Some described accepting it as an inevitable part of life; something that they disliked but chose to tolerate rather than fight. These participants often expressed frustration or discomfort but explained that confronting the pressure would only cause further personal stress or conflict with family members. As one woman replied on the question how she feels when family members engage in her relationship status:

“It doesn’t make me feel good. I don’t like to discuss it with them. But I know they’re coming from a place of care, I think... even if it feels like pressure. So, I just let it be.”

For others, this endurance came with emotional cost. The decision not to resist was sometimes less about resignation and more about emotional self-preservation, choosing peace over confrontation. This contrasts with participants who deliberately confronted their relatives to

discourage future remarks. In these cases, avoiding the topic became a kind of opposite strategy; choosing emotional self-preservation over direct resistance.

Financial independence

One of the most consistent themes among women to resist social pressure was financial independence. While this might be seen as a coping mechanism, it is perhaps better understood as a precondition for resistance. Being able to support themselves, and in some cases, even their parents, gave them a stronger foundation allowing the participants to resist social pressure. None of the interviewed participants lived with family at home anymore.

“I am financially stable, I can do what I like, I have a comfortable life, I have my own apartment, I can go to restaurants, buy new stuff, I basically have almost everything I want, you see. I don’t need the financial help of my family. You know, I am not dependent on them, how could they pressure me?”

This financial autonomy of the participants takes away significant leverage families could exert. Unlike in other cases, such as of those women in earlier generations, or young women from lower economic backgrounds, where dependence on parents or the need for a husband's income may have limited women's choices, these participants were not bound by material obligations. Their ability to provide for themselves meant that family members could no longer use economic threats, such as withholding support or cutting off resources, to influence the women's decisions. While family ties and social expectations remained important, and are still used to pressure women, the absence of economic dependency gave these women a degree of freedom that enabled them to make decisions on their own terms.

4.4. Perceiving social pressure: how does it make you feel?

Another part of the interview focused on the emotions perceived social pressure brought up. How do these forms of social pressure make women feel? While many participants described how they coped with familial press to marry, the emotional consequences of this pressure are not less important. Their response showed a wide scala of reactions, ranging from discomfort and guilt to feelings of exclusion and diminished self-worth.

Engagement in the marital status of the participants was often not necessarily considered an issue. However, it was considered problematic when this engagement was perceived as interference or own interest from the family member, and not related to the well-being or care of the woman. The vast majority of the comments were considered in the problematic category. When asked how they feel about it, several respondents described feeling uncomfortable or awkward, when asked about their marital status. The two main reasons that shone through from the interviews were, firstly, when questions about their marital status overshadowed personal or professional achievements. And secondly, is that the women are aware of their social position and do not want to be confronted with it all the time; it is a process they are personally working on, and interference is not appreciated.

“The first question is if I got married. The second question is when I will get married. What happened to: ‘Hello, how are you, how are things going?’, and then I kind of would prefer to go home. For whom am I even coming if they’re only gonna complain?”

And a similar reflection:

“They don’t ask me about my career, how it’s going, or about my personality... It kind of boils me down or diminishes me down to a woman with her reproductive function. Just—no agency, no personality, nothing.”

This reductionist view was perceived by participants as both disrespectful and dismissive, particularly because it ignored their personal growth, independence, and accomplishments. There existed the strong sense that the questions were not asked from a place of concern or well-being but were interpreted by many participants as a form of social control; it raised a feeling for some that no matter how successful a woman is, her value remains incomplete without a husband and children.

4.4.1. Guilt, shame and stigmatisation

Additionally, over a third of the women interviewed acknowledged an internal sense of guilt or shame, particularly in relation to their parents, but sometimes also to strangers or society as a whole. This guilt was not necessarily rooted in their own beliefs, but in their awareness of having failed to meet societal or familial expectations. One woman expressed:

“I am happy with myself, but sometimes I feel slightly ashamed. Like, my mom expected differently from me, and I can see she struggles with it [that I am not married]. I don’t want to feel it, but subconsciously I do, I think.”

Another participant found it more difficult to put her emotions into words but experienced similar feelings, when answering the question on how she feels when family ask about her unmarried status:

“I don’t want to feel guilty about it, but sometimes internally it gives me, not a sense of guilt, but rather a sense of shame... It’s not like real shame, but, as if, you know, I am not doing my duty in a way... We still have these deep-rooted cultural things, which are ingrained in our DNA... I sometimes feel a bit guilty as an adult, as an older adult and daughter.”

This dynamic, where women do not personally view marriage as essential, yet still experience feelings of guilt or shame for not meeting societal and familial expectations, was mentioned by several participants. While not representative, these reflections suggest that the uncomfortable feelings experienced often originated less from personal beliefs and more from an awareness of how others might perceive them.

In this sense, feelings of shame can be understood in relation to the broader process of social stigmatisation. Weiss (2008) distinguishes between *felt stigma* and *enacted stigma*. Felt stigma refers to an internalised sense of shame; when individuals personally accept the negative value judgments imposed by society. Enacted stigma, on the other hand, takes place when individuals encounter negative treatment or disapproval from others, even if they do not personally believe the stigma to be justified (Weiss, 2008, pp.3-4).

In the case of the unmarried women interviewed for this research, by far most did not experience *felt stigma*. These women did not internalise the belief that their unmarried status made them failures or incomplete. However, some women did describe experiences that align with *enacted stigmatisation* and specifically mentioned experiences of feeling stigmatised themselves.

For instance, some participants spoke of being regularly asked about their marital status at family gatherings or by strangers such as taxi drivers, but with a persisting negative connotation. They explained how they sometimes experience feeling sidelined by such people and put away with a negative label; such interaction made the women feel reduced to their relationship status and the social position that is linked to in society. The participant that described that she feels reduced to just a reproductive system, without agency, without personality, is a clear example.

A participant that is in her forties, provided a more symbolic example. She used the phrase *поезд уехал (poezd uekhal)*: the train departed, to describe how her family had seemingly given up hope of her marrying, reinforcing the sense that she had missed a crucial societal achievement. This sense went paired with the feeling of sometimes feeling alienated; a feeling that family members consider her odd and would look at her differently. She mentioned that she was not sure if this was the actual case, but that this is how she experienced it, which shows again the importance of the difference between *felt stigma* and *enacted stigma*, as suggested by Weiss (2008), as felt and experienced feelings may differ.

4.4.2. From external to internal pressure

For some women, social pressure did not end at the boundary of family remarks or public expectations. Instead, it became internalised over time, transforming into a persistent, self-directed sense of inadequacy. One participant poignantly captured this experience by describing herself as a “social loser”:

“I’m quite successful in all other areas of life. Everything else I have. But it feels like personal life—relationships, marriage—is the area that is outside of my control... This is the only sector of my life I really don’t know what to do. Everything that I do doesn’t bring much result.”

This sense of failure was not necessarily rooted in societal judgement alone, but in how deeply ingrained those societal ideals had become. Multiple women described feeling shame or *uyat*

not because of explicit external pressure, but because they began to measure themselves against traditional timelines and ideals. As the participant explained:

“The older I get, the more ashamed I am... In your early 30s, it’s still okay, you can say ‘it might still happen.’ But I’m not 20 anymore, and also not 30. A good share of my life is already over.”

Another participant added:

“I don’t feel myself unhappy only because of that [my unmarried status]. But somehow, it influences my mental state... I don’t know, maybe unconsciously I have this idea that life only counts when you are married... I can see that I have internalised this pressure especially the last two years.”

These reflections indicate a shift: even when explicit pressure from family fades, internalised expectations may develop, especially among participants over the age of 40. What begins as external pressure turns into self-internalised pressure. This development shows how social norms can continue to shape self-perception, even after the external pressure of family decreased. In relation to the manifestation of external pressure, while the concept of *uyat* was expected to play a significant role in the external social pressure unmarried women experience, the narratives suggest otherwise. Rather than functioning as a direct form of external social enforcement, *uyat* appeared primarily as an internalised sense of shame among the participants. Instead of describing explicit external pressure related to *uyat*, women more often spoke about personal feelings of falling short in expectations and disappointment when comparing themselves to societal expectations. This indicates that, although *uyat* remains a powerful cultural notion, its influence in these cases operated more through internalised norms than through explicit social enforcement.

While *uyat* is traditionally understood as a cultural mechanism closely tied to Kazakh (and more broadly Central Asian) traditions and expectations, the ethnic backgrounds of participants may influence how it is experienced. Although the majority of participants in this study were ethnic Kazakhs, a few were of Slavic or other non-Turkic origin. Due to the limited number of non-Kazakh participants, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about differences in the experience of *uyat*. However, it is noteworthy that these non-Kazakh participants did not explicitly refer to *uyat* as a source of external pressure. Still, they described the internalisation of feelings of shame in relation to societal expectations. This suggests that while *uyat* as a cultural concept may resonate more strongly with Kazakh participants, internalised social norms surrounding marriage can affect women across ethnic lines, albeit possibly through different cultural channels.

Conclusion and discussion

This thesis explored how unmarried Kazakhstani women between the ages of 30 and 48 experience and deal with social pressure to marry. While much of the existing literature has focused on married women or more general gender roles in Central Asia, this study aimed to give voice to a group often marginalised or left out of both scholarly and public discourse. By focusing on this demographic, the research has offered insights into how traditional expectations continue to shape women's lives, how women perceive social pressure, especially from their family members, while also highlighting the strategies of navigation, negotiation, and resistance that women employ in the face of these pressures.

The findings reveal that social pressure to marry is not only widespread, but also multi-layered, and shaped by the nature of women's relationships with family members. A main observation is that extended family members are the primary source of direct pressure, often making explicit comments or demands during family gatherings. While immediate family members, especially mothers and grandmothers, are also likely to exert indirect or guilt-based pressure, using emotional and sometimes manipulative appeals, or framing marriage as a moral responsibility towards the family. While not all cases fit neatly into this pattern, this distinction was prominent in the participants' narratives.

The experience of social pressure over time also varied. Some women reported that external pressure had faded over the years, particularly after their late twenties, while others experienced ongoing or even intensified pressure as they aged. Interestingly, several women described how the reduction in external pressure was replaced by a more subtle form of internalised pressure, such as feelings of guilt or shame, despite a diminishing amount of direct confrontation from family members.

In terms of social stigma, most participants rejected the belief that being unmarried made them less successful or valuable. This suggests that while some experienced *enacted stigma*: negative judgment or exclusion from others, they largely did not experience *felt stigma*; the women did not internalise these views of stigmatisation. This distinction, as formulated by Weiss (2008), was particularly helpful in understanding how some women could simultaneously be stigmatised by others and yet maintain a strong sense of self-worth and legitimacy.

The participants' coping strategies were diverse and context and personality dependent. Some employed avoidance or endurance, others relied on confrontation, while others shielded behind third persons. Nearly all women emphasised the importance of being financially independent in resisting the expectation to marry. This suggests that financial autonomy is an important condition to resist social expectations from family members. These strategies illustrate both resilience and agency of women, even within the constraints of prevailing gender norms.

A final, and significant, reflection concerns the broader context of the study. While this thesis focuses on women who have remained unmarried, it is important to acknowledge that for each woman who resisted pressure, many others may have chosen to marry; not necessarily out of personal desire, but to conform to social norms or satisfy family expectations. Their stories,

although not captured here, form part of the same structural and cultural reality. Recognising this helps to place the narratives presented in this thesis within a broader societal framework, where the costs of non-conformity can be high.

These findings reinforce the theoretical framework supporting this study. Walby's (1990) six structures of patriarchy (household, violence, sexuality, paid work, state, and culture) have been relevant and helpful in identifying *where* patriarchy is reproduced in Kazakhstani society. The analysis showed how social pressure to marry is embedded in both private and public domains and plays an important role in the structures of household and culture. In particular, the household emerges as an evident structure in which pressure is enacted through the direct involvement of family members, while the cultural structure manifests itself through societal expectations, shame mechanisms like *uyat*, and the continuing emphasis on marriage as a marker of female success.

At the same time, the concept of hegemonic femininity, as discussed by Schippers (2007), has helped to understand *how* patriarchal gender norms are sustained in everyday practice. This includes the reproduction of norms not only through institutions or formal laws, but also through interpersonal relationships and behavioural expectations. The ideal of the respectable, married woman (ideally with children) was present in nearly every narrative, and participants were repeatedly judged, advised, or criticised based on their deviation from this ideal. Remarkably, many forms of pressure were applied by other women, particularly mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, suggesting that hegemonic femininity is not imposed solely by men, but especially upheld by women themselves in ways that preserve gender hierarchies. Schippers' (2007) framework is therefore particularly useful in explaining how femininity itself plays an active role in sustaining male dominance. As she argues, hegemonic femininity consists of those characteristics deemed womanly that uphold a complementary yet subordinate relationship to hegemonic masculinity, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchy (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). This helps clarify why many forms of social pressure are exerted by women rather than men: by encouraging conformity to this ideal, women contribute to preserving a broader patriarchal order.

Finally, the concept of *uyat* emerged in the theoretical discussion as a culturally specific mechanism embedded within the broader social system that reinforces patriarchal norms. As discussed in chapter 2, *uyat* is often understood as regulating female behaviour through shame, not only in interpersonal contexts such as family life and in the workplace, but also in the political sphere. In this sense, *uyat* is not merely an expression of shame, but a structural mechanism that has the potential to shape women's self-regulation and their behaviour in line with patriarchal gender roles. By integrating Walby's structures with the concept of hegemonic femininity and the cultural logic of *uyat*, this thesis aimed to explore how both the location and the functioning of patriarchy can be understood within the context of contemporary Kazakhstani society.

However, an important reflection concerns the role of *uyat* in the experiences of unmarried women. While the discussion in earlier chapters, especially section 2.4, suggested that *uyat* would act as a central mechanism of external social pressure, the narratives show a different

outcome. Even though I described *uyat* as a tool of external control and public shame, the narratives in this study suggest a more internalised operation. Although participants described examples of direct pressure, this was not commonly expressed through the use of shame. Instead of facing external *uyat*, participants predominantly internalised *uyat*, developing personal feelings of shame in relation to not meeting the traditional ideals of marriage and family life. This finding indicates that *uyat* continues to influence women's lives, but primarily by shaping internal norms and self-perceptions rather than through direct social correction. It also highlights that cultural mechanisms such as *uyat*, although powerful, may manifest differently across contexts and generations, and therefore should not be assumed to function uniformly when analysing lived experiences.

While this thesis provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of unmarried women in Kazakhstan, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that shape the scope and interpretation of the findings. Firstly, the sample consisted exclusively of urban, highly educated women, who are financially independent and have access to wide social networks. Their perspectives, while diverse, cannot be taken as representative of all unmarried women in Kazakhstan. Women living in rural areas, with different educational and socio-economic backgrounds, women living with their family, or who are from the more conservative of Kazakhstan may face distinct challenges and constraints that were not captured in this study. Secondly, the study focused on a relatively small group of 15 participants. Although scholars have no agreement on the minimum number of interviews required that is enough in conducting qualitative research (Baker & Edwards, 2012) this thesis cannot claim to provide a comprehensive or generalisable picture of how all unmarried women experience and navigate social pressure in Kazakhstan. Rather, the findings aim to offer in-depth qualitative insight into the meanings women ascribe to their experiences.

Another limitation is that the study reflects only the views of women who have resisted pressure to marry. As just mentioned, many other women, potentially a much larger group, may have chosen to marry under pressure, even if they did not experience or recognise these as external pressure. Their experiences are not included in this study, which means that the findings mostly represent women who maintained a degree of personal autonomy in the face of social norms. Finally, although this research examines the roles of mothers, grandmothers, and other family members in exerting pressure, their own perspectives were not studied. Including their voices could have provided greater insight into the motivations and generational dynamics behind the reproduction of gender norms. Interviewing those who exert social pressure themselves could offer valuable insights into their motivations to exert pressure and sustain gender norms.

Nevertheless, the findings of this thesis provide important insights into the ways in which social pressure operates in the lives of unmarried Kazakhstan women, and how gender norms are reinforced, negotiated, and resisted in Kazakhstan. The pressure to marry, which is often exerted through familial relationships, and particularly by women themselves, shows that patriarchal control is not limited to formal institutions. Rather than being imposed through institutions such as state policy, education systems, or religious authority, patriarchal

expectations are sustained in everyday life through family conversations, emotional appeals, and collective ideals of womanhood.

This confirms that gender roles are not static but negotiated and enforced within dynamic social relations, and that concepts such as hegemonic femininity and *uyat* are central in understanding how these roles persist. By focusing on unmarried women, a group often overlooked in public discourse, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of femininity, agency, and ways society influences individuals to conform to expected norms and behaviours in post-Soviet Central Asia.

At the same time, many questions remain unanswered, suggesting that there is plenty of research to conduct still. One particularly important direction would be to explore the experiences of women who did marry under pressure. Future research could examine how these women perceive their marriages later in life, how they reflect on the pressure they experienced, and whether they find fulfilment or regret in their decision. This would offer a fuller picture of how women navigate social norms, not only through resistance, but also through adaptation or acceptance.

Secondly, this thesis has concentrated on women's experiences, while *uyat* and gender norms also play a role in the lives of men. Although their pressure may take different forms, it would be valuable to examine how men experience expectations around marriage, family honour, and appropriate behaviour, and how they may contribute to the reproduction of gendered norms. Moreover, future research could more explicitly focus on rural women. All participants in this thesis lived in urban areas, and several referred to perceived differences between urban and rural gender norms. Understanding how unmarried women in rural areas experience social pressure would help to nuance our understanding of how class, geography, and tradition intersect.

Another research idea lies in the frequent references participants made to regional distinctions within Kazakhstan, particularly the perception that southern regions are more conservative than northern ones. A comparative study between women in northern and southern Kazakhstan could deepen our understanding of how regional cultures influence gender norms and social pressure. Finally, future research might also consider how language and cultural environment shape experiences of pressure and shame. As suggested in 2.5, Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking contexts may reflect different understandings and expressions of *uyat* and gender roles. Investigating these differences could reveal how intersecting cultural identities influence women's experiences across Kazakhstan's regions. As the wide variety of suggestions show there are plenty of plans remaining, and more research is evidently needed.

To conclude, this thesis has offered a detailed and layered account of how unmarried women aged 30-48 in Kazakhstan experience and navigate social pressure to marry. By bringing together the voices of these women, theoretical insights such as patriarchy and hegemonic femininity, and cultural specificities such as *uyat*, it attempted to understand not only where patriarchal expectations are upheld, but also how they manifest and are reproduced. The

openness and willingness with which these women shared their stories offered valuable insights into the social pressure they experience; insights I would not have been able to access otherwise. At the end of the interviews, the women were asked whether life could be fulfilled without a husband. And like with all other questions, the responses varied from a plain 'no' to a straight out 'yes', all for different reasons. However, despite differences in experiences, ways of coping with social pressure, and whether a husband is seen as essential to a fulfilled life, the following quote stuck with me, and captured a sentiment that I think all interviewed women could agree on:

"Happiness is the goal, not marriage"

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